

GENDERLESS DANSHI:  
AN EMERGING FORCE AGAINST  
JAPAN'S HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY?

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## **Genderless Danshi:**

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#### **Introduction**

Seeing youth explore different subcultures of alternative fashion is not so uncommon in Japan. Specifically, in the famous Harajuku area of Tokyo, these subcultures are often carried out to the extremes. The fashion subcultures stemming from Harajuku are sometimes used as a way of making a statement against an aspect of Japanese society that a person does not agree with. One such fashion identity that has emerged recently is a trend called “Genderless Danshi”, where danshi refers to the male youth, particularly high school age through the mid-twenties. The term first started being used as a hashtag on Japanese twitter in April of 2015 and picked up pace in December when a book titled “Genderless Danshi” was released.<sup>1</sup> Since the book’s release, a few main figures have popped up as leaders and forerunners in the genderless danshi trend.

Genderless danshi are young men who choose to shop and dress without regard to gender labels on clothing, follow a strict skincare regimen, and even wear make-up as part of their daily routine. This does not necessarily mean that they are only dressing in a manner regarded as feminine. Although they may be wearing women’s clothing, genderless danshi’s fashion is different from cross dressing. What defines these youth’s fashion choices as genderless is that the clothes that they wear are not considered either feminine or masculine. In Japanese media, they are described as achieving beauty through fashion that is beyond the walls of gender.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> @\_Amane\_A\_. “ジェンダーレス男子ってどこからジェンダーレスなの！？” *Twitter*, 8 Apr 2015, 4:22 a.m., [https://twitter.com/\\_Amane\\_A\\_/status/585764671115788288](https://twitter.com/_Amane_A_/status/585764671115788288).

<sup>2</sup> “What Is Genderless Danshi!? What You Need to Know about the New Cool Guy.” CREMA RSS, 21 Sept. 2015, [cremaa.com/news/339/](http://cremaa.com/news/339/).

Since the trend first appeared on Twitter, a few idols, famous for their genderless danshi style have emerged as the main figures in the subculture. Some of these boys, who will be brought up again in my research, are Yūtarō, popular for his *yurufuwa*, or loose fitting, style of dress; Toman Sasaki, a member of the boy band XOX; and Kondoyōhdi, a model, musician, and designer of the genderless fashion brand, DING. In recent years, these young men have become extremely popular on social media, often appearing on variety shows or as reader models in magazines or holding live Q&A's on their social media accounts.



Figure 1 From left to right: Yūtarō, Toman, and Kondoyōhdi.<sup>3</sup>

What I hope to find out through my research is what are the subversive implications and limitations of “Genderless Danshi” to the traditional gender norms in Japan and how do they problematize and challenge these norms. Genderless danshi have already made the conscious decision to create themselves within this identity despite possible backlash, thus, it is not a question of whether or not they can live this lifestyle fully, but rather the effectiveness of their fashion choices that represent an alternative masculinity of challenging traditional masculinity

<sup>3</sup>@aaaaao\_e. “kami no ke kitta no!”. *Twitter*, 17 April, 2018, 4:37 a.m. [twitter.com/aaaaao\\_e/status/986207044389629953](https://twitter.com/aaaaao_e/status/986207044389629953). kondoyohdi. Photo of Kondoyohdi. *Instagram*, 24 February, 2018. [www.instagram.com/p/BfknSV8lnDF/?hl=ja&taken-by=kondoyohdi.\\_sweatm](https://www.instagram.com/p/BfknSV8lnDF/?hl=ja&taken-by=kondoyohdi._sweatm). Photo of Toman. *Instagram*, 16 November, 2017. [www.instagram.com/p/BbjFhnjA4IS/?hl=ja&taken-by=\\_sweatm](https://www.instagram.com/p/BbjFhnjA4IS/?hl=ja&taken-by=_sweatm).

norms in society. Just as previous fashion subcultures tried to tackle a societal problem from the inside out, I want to know what kind of message genderless danshi are trying to portray and which specific issues that Japanese society currently faces that concerns them the most. Fashion subcultures are a reflection of the current economic, social, cultural, and political factors at play in a society and I look into how this recent fashion trend is a reflection of changing perspectives on sexuality and gender identity among Japan's youth.<sup>4</sup>

The usual career path for men has involved getting a job in a large Japanese corporation right after graduating from college and becoming what is known as a salaryman. This position of society can be regarded as the model for "hegemonic" masculinity in Japan. Although this lifestyle is considered normative, it is also paired with a tired and frumpy image. Nevertheless, Japan's strong patriarchal norms in society make it hard to split off from the usual career path without facing criticism and doubts from peers. Rather than completely eliminating masculinity, these young boys are trying to transform what it means to be masculine and how gender is expressed through fashion choices by creating a new masculinity in Japan. Through fashion and lifestyle genderless danshi believe that their image can create a national discord against the faltering image of the salaryman.

Despite anticipated social criticism when speaking out against cultural norms, genderless danshi are extremely popular on Instagram and Twitter, with most of their fanbase consisting of teenage girls. In order to more thoroughly explore this topic, I ask why teenage girls are choosing to idolize these public genderless danshi figures rather than a traditionally more masculine public figure or even other women in similar positions of fame. My research uses public surveys and online publications that are aimed at different demographics of women in

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<sup>4</sup> Kawamura, Yuniya. *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2012.

order to gather and analyze women's general impressions of genderless danshi and related trends. In addition to women's reactions and thoughts, I examine how a man's reaction may differ and what that means for the implications of the genderless danshi subculture. For example, do Japanese men think genderless danshi are creepy or strange because of their dedication to their beauty routines or are they respected because of their spotlight in the woman's gaze? By comparing and contrasting the reactions of other young men and women to genderless danshi, I can also reexamine whether their goal of reshaping Japanese masculinity is effective or not. Does the respect of young teenage girls, in turn, gain the respect of men as well? In order to understand this topic further, I delve into what it means to be considered masculine, specifically in Japan as well as attempting to define what exactly "genderless" means and how it differs from other fashion defining terms such as "unisex" or "androgynous".

## **Methods**

Because the topic of genderless dashi has only just appeared in mainstream media in the past two years the majority of my primary sources are in Japanese. Also because of the recent nature of this topic, there is little to no quantitative data on it, such as approximately how many boys are involved or interested in the genderless subculture. Rather, I use surveys from audiences about their opinions of genderless danshi and preferences. Instead I focus on qualitative analysis, mainly discourse analysis, looking at texts and its contents, and textual analysis, using recorded or multimedia messages. I use magazines to compare traditional Japanese men's fashion and current men's fashion trends to the styles used by genderless danshi. I also use magazine sources and brand concepts in order to note kawaii influences in Japanese men's fashion as well as compare reader reactions to these styles to reactions of the styles worn by genderless danshi.

Most of the boys at the forefront of the genderless danshi subculture gained attention and fame through their ability to gather “likes” on social media. They tend to maintain a highly visible virtual presence to share their looks and coordinates with fans which allowed me to follow any changes to their style and trends within the genderless subculture during my research period. Because of this, social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter will be very important as primary sources. They often use Instagram to hold live question and answer sessions for their fans. On YouTube, I use interviews and tv program appearances to assess not just genderless danshi’s responses but also audience and interviewers’ reactions to their responses. Additionally, many genderless danshi have their own channels where they post make-up tutorials and other behind the scenes vlogs of their daily life. Although it is totally not out of the media’s eye, there is nevertheless a more private and personal feel to these videos, which are homemade and ruggedly edited compared to the majority of their Instagram content. Finally, one of the main leaders of this subculture, Yūtarō, has a published book in which he talks about his skin care routines, clothing style, and other beauty regimes. Using these resources, I compare and contrast genderless danshi to themselves and other sources that feature traditional men’s fashion and make inferences based on the available sources.

In my first chapter, in order to portray the importance of the emergence of genderless danshi I must first briefly go over the history of subcultures and fashion in Japan as well as the history of masculinity in Japan. This chapter will set a base for how previous fashion subcultures in Japan have formed and reacted in a changing Japanese society. I will describe the different relationships between masculinities and explain how these relationships interact in Japan. In particular, my analysis illuminates how Japan’s salaryman masculinity has been constructed as the hegemonic masculinity and how the dominant status is currently challenged

and threatened in accordance with changing social and economic circumstances. Based on portrayals of men's fashion in media such as magazines and television, one can see that a having a sense for fashion is not considered a feminine feature. Men's fashion has even adopted and adapted to *kawaii* trends that are widespread in Japanese fashion.<sup>5</sup>

In the second chapter, I will be calling on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to question the effectiveness of the genderless danshi's fashion choices as a method of rebellion against hegemonic masculinity in Japan. This chapter will bring up limitations to their power that question and challenge the traditional gender binary in regards to their privileged position as public figures and performers rather than traditional figures in a society. I will discuss the concept of doing gender brought up by Candace West and Don H Zimmerman and how this concept pertains to genderless danshi.<sup>6</sup> Their representation in media gives them a larger allowance to step outside the bounds of a traditionally rule abiding society. Chapter two will also go into further detail about representations of genderless danshi in media. Specifically, they are most often featured in magazines, on social media, and make appearances on television variety shows. I will also discuss the public reaction to genderless danshi as public figures and compare these reactions to their ability to influence and question whether these are helpful towards their goal of creating a new masculinity in Japan.

Finally, I will conclude by discussing the limitations and implications of genderless danshi and go further into previously discussed topics such as the gender performativity theory. Because the majority of genderless danshi are talent figures and idols the fashion subculture may not fit into traditional Japanese way of life. Additionally, because the role of a genderless danshi

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<sup>5</sup> Although the word "*kawaii*" directly translates to "cute", *kawaii* culture in Japan is more than just "cute". The Japanese quality of cuteness can be better described as "ultra-adorable" and is often represented as a child-like cuteness using elements such as bows and pastel colors.

<sup>6</sup> West, Candace, and Don H Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Doing Gender*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1987.

holding a following of young teenage girls still follows traditional roles of masculine power, the effectiveness of the gender-bent fashion scene would be less than intended. Lastly, I will question if a genderless fashion is even possible in a society where people are conditioned from a young age to make associations and assumptions about gender and identity. Although a genderless danshi may want to appear to be free from gender associations, whether or not he is perceived as such is a different reality. Differing perceptions of genderless danshi have the ability to affect their ability of changing images of masculinity on a societal level.



## Chapter One

### History of Masculinity and Fashion in Japan

#### Relationships between masculinities

It is important to examine the power relations and societal structure of the different categories of masculinity in order to gain a perspective on the “new masculinity” that genderless danshi want to perform. Furthermore, in order to create a new masculinity, one would need to be aware of the preexisting expressions of masculinity and their societal implications and impacts. Where would a new masculinity fit into the social order of prementioned expressions of masculinity, or is it outside the bounds of it? Through their clothing choices, I believe that genderless danshi want to not only create a new masculinity but also to oppose traditional hegemonic masculinity by merging the normative ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Raewyn Connell in her book *Masculinities*, describes four types of masculinities, stating that not only is defining these masculinities important but also recognizing relations between them. In a society, there are competing and sometimes contradicting forms of masculinity. These four types in order of social hierarchy are hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is placed at the top of the hierarchy and gains power in society through the use of force and “supports gender inequality.”<sup>7</sup> It is considered the ideal and the norm, and although it can be fluid and have differences depending on time and place, hegemonic masculinity always exemplifies patriarchal legitimacy and dominance. Complicit masculinity describes the gender expression of men who benefit from the system of hegemonic masculinity but do not directly take part in it or endorse it. Subordinate masculinity applies to the oppression of men that identify or are perceived as homosexual by society.

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<sup>7</sup> Pascoe, C J. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Print. Pg. 7

Because “gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” subordinate masculinities are placed at the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy. Marginalized masculinities refer to men that are dominant in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race. In this case, race and class relations are an “integral part of the dynamic between masculinities”. There is an obvious hierarchical structure between these masculinities where hegemonic masculinity is placed at the top, highly idealized, but often unattainable and unrealistic for many men.

### **Traditional and hegemonic masculinity in Japan**

Between the 1960’s and 1980’s Japan’s economy experienced considerable growth. During this time, the modern Japanese businessman, or salaryman (*sarariiman*), became the driving force in Japan’s economy. Working endlessly, these salarymen were the bread winners for the family, showed unwavering loyalty to their company, and became the ideal image of masculinity in Japan. Although the term salaryman is hard to define, Romit Dasgupta explains it as:

salaried white-collar male employees of private-sector organizations, typically characterized by such features as life-time employment, seniority-based salary indexing and promotions, and a generally paternalistic concern for the employee on the part of the company in return for steady, diligent loyalty to the organization.<sup>8</sup>

This definition is often paired with stereotypical images of a salaryman such as a traditional black business suit with a white shirt, nights out drinking with one’s colleagues and general endless exhaustion.

At first, these white-collar employees expressed unwavering company loyalty in exchange for life-time employment. Japanese society is tightly held together by rigid rules and

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<sup>8</sup> Dasgupta, Romit. "Creating Corporate Warriors" in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie, Morris Low (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) 118.

an expected standard path of life that a person typically follows. In the 1990's Japan's booming economy came to an abrupt halt, prompting many companies to drop the system of life-time employment, creating widespread feelings of instability and loss of security. This, Yuniya Kawamura believes, led to "countless repercussions on society [and] is the root of the transformations that had ripple effects throughout Japanese society."<sup>9</sup> Despite this crash and continued lack of security in a company, the modern Japanese man is still expected to follow a similar career path.

New forms of masculinities, separate from Connell's hegemonic masculinity scale, have recently started emerging in public discourse but they often carry a negative connotation. For example, *sōshokukei danshi* or herbivorous men and *ikumēn*, a man that wants to help raise his children, are two such terms that, while the emergence of them may point towards a shift in gender consciousness of young men on the meaning of Japanese masculinity, the negativity surrounding them may point towards a greater resistance to that shift. In recent years, the ideal image of a diligent and self-sacrificing salaryman has been lost to a generation of men who were raised primarily by their mothers and did not see strong parental connections growing up because of the lack of family involvement necessary for a salaryman to retain his position in a company. This new generation of men is referred to as *sōshokukei danshi*; the term coined in 2006 by journalist Fukasawa Maki and reintroduced in 2008 by women's *non-no* magazine.<sup>10</sup> This term describes young men who are unaggressive in pursuing romantic relationships and seem to lack interest in doing so. They are also characterized by a lack of motivation in searching for employment and lack of interest in pursuing so-called "manly" activities, "such as drinking

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<sup>9</sup> Kawamura, Yuniya. *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*. Berg, 2012. p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> NEDETH, Barbara. *Masculinities in Japan: Discovering the shifting gender boundaries of contemporary Japan*. Olomouc, 2014 [cit. 2018-01-27]. Diploma thesis. Palacký University in Olomouc, Faculty of Philosophy. Mgr. Ivona Barešová, Ph.D. pg. 49-50.

alcohol with colleagues or buying a car.”<sup>11</sup> The term *sōshokukei danshi* carries a media-prescribed negative connotation because of misinterpretations with Fukasawa’s original description, which focused on positive changes correlating with young men and their deeper connection to their hometown.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare founded the Ikumen Project, a movement working to encourage fathers to take paternity leave, their goal being that by 2020 13% of men in the workforce will take paternity leave, where in 2005 the rate was 2.65%.<sup>13</sup> However, in 2016, the rate of working men that took paternity leave was still only measured at 3.16% making the Ikumen Project largely unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup> The word *ikumen* is a play on the Japanese word for cool (male), *ikemen*, implying that creating a new tradition of taking time off of work to be an active part of the family is cool.

### **Relationship between fashion and masculinity**

In Japan, how people look and dress are unrelated to a person’s sexual orientation or sexual identity and the two are generally not associated with or influenced by each other.<sup>15</sup> Even Japan’s *kawaii* trends, a seemingly feminine look to the Western eye, appear in men’s fashion, most often among youthful fashion cultures using motifs such as ruffles and bows. Because of the lack of association between male sexuality and fashion in Japan, there is an abundance of fashion magazines marketed towards different age groups and demographics of men available. Men’s fashion magazines in Japan, in contrast to their Western counterparts that feature only 30 percent fashion content in ‘lifestyle’ magazines, are remarkable in that 60 to 70 percent of the

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<sup>11</sup> NEDETH, Barbara. *Masculinities in Japan*. Pg. 51.

<sup>12</sup> NEDETH, Barbara. *Masculinities in Japan*. Pg. 49-53.

<sup>13</sup> Ikumen Project Purpose.” Ikumen Project, Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, [ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/project/concept/](http://ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp/project/concept/).

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. “2016 Data Survey on Employment Equality”. 2017. pg 14.

<sup>15</sup> Rich, Motoko. “With Manicures and Makeup, Japan's 'Genderless' Blur Line Between Pink and Blue.” *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 2017.

magazine's contents are focused on fashion.<sup>16</sup> This implies that in Japan, a heightened sense of fashion is not necessarily considered a feminine quality. Choosing to approach the subject of Japan's masculinity in terms of fashion means I can examine how men in Japan express their gender identity through their outward appearances, something that is public and open for judgement and criticism from onlookers. Because a sense of fashion in men is not associated with sexuality or femininity, I believe that this allows me to accurately and effectively distinguish how a genderless *danshi's* version of masculinity differs from other forms of masculinity seen in Japan because of the lack of overlap in discourse regarding sexuality and femininity.

### **Short background of men's fashion in Japan in regards to masculinity**

As mentioned earlier, because of the prevalence of men's fashion magazines on the market in Japan one cannot make the assumption that having a sense of fashion is in any way equivalent to not being considered masculine. Some of the more popular magazines are *Mens non-no*, *Fineboys*, and *Popeye*, each one catering to a specific demographic of men and circulated 108,750; 86,725; and 94,333 magazines respectively in 2016-2017.<sup>17</sup> These magazines contain surprising parallels to female fashion magazines, containing advice on fashion and coordinates, as well as diet and skincare advice, and suggestions for accessorizing.<sup>18</sup>

Japan's men's fashion magazines also featured articles where different women would judge or rate certain trends or aspects of an outfit. The use of females as a deciding factor or whether or not a men's coordinate is fashionable or not suggests the high importance that the

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<sup>16</sup> Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. pg. 25

<sup>17</sup> JMPA Magazine Data: *Dansei Life Design*. Survey period: 1 October 2016 to 30 September 2017. Available at <https://www.j-magazine.or.jp/user/data/magdata/1/2/4#4>

<sup>18</sup> Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures*. Pg. 1

women's gaze holds on a man's fashion style. In fact, a show segment titled *Mannequin Five*, aired in 2012, featured members of the boy-band, Arashi, who chose their own outfits and competed against each other on who could create the best one, usually to the theme of a first date. Their chosen outfits were put on display and women around the country voted on the best coordinate. After the segment gained massive popularity, the final episodes allowed men's votes from Japan as well as from overseas to be cast. With the new addition of a male gaze as voters of the contest, the members of Arashi were at a loss as to what strategy they should use in dressing themselves.<sup>19</sup> This addition to the show along with the use of female criticisms and opinions that either reject or accept a current trend in men's fashion magazines further shows how important the female gaze is to men's fashion choices in Japan.




In Japan, men's fashion is usually shown as an expression of conformity to Japan's gender roles. People tend to adhere strictly to rules and unwritten, but still influential, social expectations that are put in place, usually making no exception for them even if it is actually a more beneficial or more efficient route to take. Because of this, most men do not stray too far from mainstream fashion. After college, men are required to wear business suits to work and it is customary to not stand out in one's fashion sense or even in one's mannerisms. For this reason, style and men's fashion are associated with young men who are not yet considered salarymen and therefore have the time to pursue it. Alternatively, because Japanese culture is "a culture where pecuniary strength and status equals masculinity, the business suit is therefore a supremely potent source of male sexual appeal" and the idealized symbol of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Adams. (2016, December 22). *ひみつの嵐ちゃん！* 2012年4月12日 120412 マネキンファイブ春の特別編. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHR8rF4i2sY&t=6976s>.

<sup>20</sup> Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures*. Pg. 24.

**Acceptable**  
Clothing Styles for Men

			
Navy suits are acceptable.	Gray suits are acceptable.	Brown and khaki-colored suits are acceptable.	Solid black suits with a lighter colored tie are acceptable.
			
Pinstriped/chalk striped suits are acceptable.	Double-breasted suits are acceptable.	Three piece suits are acceptable.	Non matching jacket and pants are acceptable.
			
Conservative dress shirts are acceptable.	Shirts with simple patterns are acceptable.	Short-sleeved dress shirts are acceptable.	Lighter colored ties are suitable for darker suits.

**Unacceptable**  
Clothing Styles for Men

			
Solid black suits with a black or dark tie are unacceptable.	Shirts un-tucked are not professional & unacceptable.	Oversized suits are not professional & unacceptable.	Vests alone (no jacket) are unacceptable.

An example of a company's uniform policy in Japan.<sup>21</sup>

The business suit however is seen less as a fashion choice and as something more like a requirement, perhaps due to the fact that it is representative of hegemonic masculinity in Japan. This meaning implies that it has become the norm and is considered the standard against other possibilities for men's fashion. For this reason, the business suit is not evaluated or discussed in terms of fashion. Even when it is featured in sections of men's fashion magazines, the suit is still written about with an eye for practicality and is seen as a necessity. In the August 2017 issue of *Men's non-no*, there is a four-page section showcasing functional suits that offer a cool feeling during the summer months.<sup>22</sup> Each one is measured on a six-point star shaped scale measuring coolness (in terms of heat), how fast it dries sweat, if it's machine-washable, crease-resistance,

<sup>21</sup> "Dress Code." Aeonet, [www.aeonet.com/life-at-aeon/dress-code/](http://www.aeonet.com/life-at-aeon/dress-code/).

<sup>22</sup> Namekata, Jun. "Yamamoto Ryosuke no mainichi 'ryōkansūtsu'shugi.'" *Men's non-no*. Aug. 2017: 134-37. Print.

stretch, and water-resistance. All of these points are connected to the practicality of the suit and not to the visual aesthetic, and each of the suits are modeled in a no-nonsense sort of way against a plain blue background. The style of the article reflects the attitude of practicality and function that is pictured by the suits and furthers the idea that the suit is not a fashion item but a required uniform.

### **History of Japanese fashion cultures and implied meanings**

Fashion serves as a connector between different sexualities and gender expressions including hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. The use of fashion here allows these concepts to be expressed, challenged, and negotiated. The ideas that are expressed using fashion are often reproduced and reflected in people's daily life. This is made clear when considering the relationships between fashion and various subcultural activities in Japan such as how wide spread *kawaii* culture has become, which began as a trend in fashion but now is a nationwide selling point for anything and everything in the Japanese market, and Harajuku, the main neighborhood of Tokyo where youth subcultures are born and movements of change are transformed into unique and eye-catching fashion trends. Furthermore, genderless danshi use the link between fashion and masculinity expressions, rather than another creative outlet, as a method to proclaim their challenges. Genderless danshi are a result of the commonly-held belief among youth that fashion has the power to change society.

The recent genderless danshi subculture, like previous Harajuku based fashion subcultures, is a rebellion against current social norms in Japan. Genderless danshi are "rejecting traditional gender rules to create a new genderless standard of beauty" and in turn, rejecting Japan's traditional and hegemonic form of masculinity.<sup>23</sup> Since the 1990's recession, Japanese

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<sup>23</sup> Clarke, Ashley. "Genderless Kei: Harajuku's Online Fashion Revival." i-D, 23 Feb. 2016, i-d.vice.com/en\_au/article/8xn7pp/genderless-kei-harajukus-online-fashion-revival.



street fashions have abandoned the restrictive nature of a traditionally conformist society in exchange for expressive fashions used to construct opinions of a new generation.<sup>24</sup> These fashions were born from the minds of youth, unlike everyday fashions introduced by big name designers and brands with trends in mind. Street fashions and subcultures were meant to break the trends.<sup>25</sup>

As with most Tokyo-born street fashions, the *kawaii* factor holds high importance. *Kawaii* themes are deeply rooted in Japanese culture and anything categorized as such can easily become a trending item in Japanese fashion subcultures. While *kawaii* is typically thought of as a feminine quality, many *kawaii* aspects have become assimilated into men's fashion. Details like bows, ruffles, and pastel colorways are all items that have begun to trend in men's fashion subcultures. Furthermore, the descriptions used for some of the men's fashion in these magazines and other advertisements use adjectives typically associated with feminine defined features. Because of this, it is difficult to draw the line between genderless styles as opposed to the dominant men's fashion that has adopted *kawaii* elements.

### **How do genderless danshi fit into this model of hegemonic fashion**

The boys who are part of genderless danshi subculture seem to be highly aware of the normative gender performativity of Japanese men and their gender display, specifically through the lifestyle of salarymen. In interviews, genderless danshi, such as Toman and Kondoyohdi, have stated that they are purposefully trying to avoid these limiting definitions in their gender

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<sup>24</sup> Kawamura, Yuniya. Fashioning Japanese Subcultures. Berg, 2012. Pg. 32.

<sup>25</sup> One of the most recognizable and earliest forms of street fashion were the Kogal girls, which led to many other branch-off styles, collectively known as gyaaru. They were often seen wearing updated, fashion-ized versions of Japan's traditional school uniforms paired with slouchy socks. The outfits were meant to emphasize their new, trendy lifestyles and to distinguish their looks from their mothers', which up until the mid-1960's was largely similar. Because this trend featured a resistance to authority and a break off of conformist ideals, Kogal was generally associated with negative press from mainstream media.

displays through fashion.<sup>26</sup> They are challenging perceptions of gender performativity with their fashion styles, which from a viewer's immediate glance, cannot be instantly put on either end of the scale of masculinity and femininity.

With the emergence of *kawaii* elements being used in men's fashion, brands such as MILKBOY, a brand whose products reflect a younger boyish image, have gained attention and popularity. But MILKBOY markets towards the eternal seventeen-year-old, a far cry from the suited-up salarymen that make up the majority of the displays of hegemonic masculinity in Japan. The suit carries a heavy image of powerful masculinity and does not make room for the style choices of genderless danshi. Following the usual career path, young men would not be allowed much space for the self-expression that genderless danshi styles call for.

Despite this, many of the most popular genderless danshi gained their fame starting out as reader models in some of Japan's prementioned men's fashion magazines. Their knowledge of skin care and general fashion sense attracted the attention of these magazines. Additionally, they are often featured on variety shows where they are interviewed on their beauty, diet, and shopping habits. More often than not however, they end up being ridiculed or made part of a joke based on their response to a routine that they follow or the current outfit they are wearing.

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<sup>26</sup>Rich, Motoko. "With Manicures and Makeup". Robertson, Jennifer. "Exploring Japan's 'Genderless' Subculture." CNN, 16 Jan. 2018, [www.cnn.com/style/article/genderless-kei-fashion-japan/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/style/article/genderless-kei-fashion-japan/index.html).

## Chapter 2

### Genderless Danshi as Performers and Public Reaction

#### Introduction

Genderless danshi are purposefully trying to avoid the limiting definitions of gender and furthermore, of masculinity and femininity in their gender displays through fashion by creating a habitual set of behaviors that would traditionally be considered feminine, such as the use of cosmetics and an extensive skin-care routine, and then incorporating those actions into a genderless fashion display. All the while, they maintain the firm mindset that they are male, and furthermore, that they are masculine. With that in mind, how do their actions fit into or oppose the current dominant masculine gender roles in Japan? The genderless danshi's goal to create a new masculinity within the current hierarchy challenges their audience's perceptions, making it difficult to try and determine where their style should be placed on a scale of masculinity and femininity. Depending on their actions and gender displays, genderless danshi's efforts to create a meaningful and untraditional masculinity will result in a subversive gender performance. This chapter will explain concepts such as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Candace West and Don Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender", along with Francine Deutsch's opposing concept of "undoing gender" to discuss how genderless danshi fit into the framework of Japan's traditional gender norms.

#### Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity

The theory of gender performativity, made by Judith Butler, carries great relevance to gendered fashions because it is reliant on a consistent gender performance through fashion. The theory states that "gender...is not a stable fact but something we imagine and construct [as well as] a collective performance that is designed primarily to sustain the legitimacy of

heterosexuality, punishing those who fail to perform their 'gender' roles correctly".<sup>27</sup> This means that gender is created and perpetuated by what society decides are acceptable practices for masculine men and feminine women but nevertheless, can be challenged by those who choose to perform differently. Furthermore, gender as a performance can change between time and societies and normative gender displays and the collective performance may vary among cultures and generations. It is created and perpetuated by what society decides is acceptable and then perpetuated by an individual's imitation and adherence to these presupposed gender rules. The gender performance that an individual performs is created and constructed through their repetitive and continuous societally gendered actions and behaviors.<sup>28</sup> Despite the difficulty to subvert gender performance norms, Butler's theory implies that it is possible for an individual to do so, if their performance is repetitive and both adheres to and abandons gender roles.<sup>29</sup>

Because the theory of gender performance is reliant upon a stable and repetitive set of actions, an individual cannot just perform a new set of actions on any given day and create a new gender identity for themselves.<sup>30</sup> The commodification and deliberate treatment of gender would imply that gender and its performativity is a conscious choice when in fact, gender presupposes one's gender performance. Gender is more often than not something that is shaped because of predisposed and ingrained concepts of societal gender norms. Because of the construction of gender in society, Butler's performative theory implies that although it is extremely difficult for an individual to purposefully subvert society's gender relations and construct one's own gendered self separately from traditional ideals, it still allows for the possibility of subversive

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<sup>27</sup> Monden. Japanese Fashion Cultures. Pg. 5-6. See Judith Butler, 'Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions', in S. Salih and J. Butler (eds), *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2004 [1990]), p. 114

<sup>28</sup> Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." Routledge, 1990. P. 179

<sup>29</sup> Kotz, Liz, and Judith Butler. "The Body You Want." *Artforum*, Nov. 1992.  
<http://faculty.ucr.edu/~ewkotz/texts/Kotz-1992-Artforum-ButlerInt.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Kotz, Liz, and Judith Butler. "The Body You Want."

gender roles. The theory suggests that gender norms that are socially determined should be performed by individuals in order to remain in those norms. This action of “appearing as being” is what Butler refers to as masquerade, which one hand suggests that all “being” is up to the appearance, and on the other hand, may imply that “being” subverts “appearing”.<sup>31</sup> This implication opens up the door to the possibility of individuals challenging and subverting socially-determined gender norms.

### **Doing and Undoing Gender**

Through Butler’s theory of gender performativity, we can also bring into discussion Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s idea of “doing gender”.<sup>32</sup> To do gender is to apply oneself to the normative gender roles and displays that persist in a society. These roles include “socially guided...activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’”.<sup>33</sup> By doing gender, one is also applying themselves to the collective gender performance that is displayed in society whether they mean to or not. Because of previously perpetuated standards of following gender roles “the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production.”<sup>34</sup> So while an individual’s gender displays are optional, it is more than likely that their actions will fall into representative masculine or feminine ideals because they do not have the option of whether they are seen as male or female by others and thus, they are “engaging in behaviors at the risk of gender assessment.”<sup>35</sup> And so, West and Zimmerman argue that doing gender is unavoidable “because of social consequences of sex-category membership: the allocation of power and

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, Judith. “Gender Trouble”

<sup>32</sup> West, Candace, and Don H Zimmerman. “Doing Gender” *Doing Gender*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1987, pp. 125–151. pg. 126

<sup>33</sup> West, Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 126

<sup>34</sup> West, Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 126

<sup>35</sup> West, Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 136

resources not only in the domestic, economic, and political domains but also in the broad arena of interpersonal relations.”<sup>36</sup> In any situation a person’s actions and behaviors can be considered leaning towards a gendered identity.

West and Zimmerman point out that although “it is individuals who ‘do’ gender”, because of the presence of others when going about one’s daily activities, “we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations”.<sup>37</sup> The meaning of gender is not static but emerges out of social intention itself and the placement of how gender display fits into society as a whole. Since there are two traditional gender roles, the audience automatically tries to place men as masculine and women as feminine. Individuals are perceived by others through a gendered lens, despite their own intentions.

Francine Deutsch states that if “doing gender” implies that gender can be constructed, so then it can also be deconstructed, which she calls “undoing gender”.<sup>38</sup> Because “doing gender” means to conform to society’s gender conventions, so therefore there must be a way to separate oneself from conformities. She proposes that “we reserve the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase ‘undoing gender’ to refer to social interactions that reduce gender differences.”<sup>39</sup> So, in situations where gender roles are reinforced, an individual is “doing gender”. Actions regarded as “undoing gender” would refer to ones that threaten gender stereotypes. Additionally, Deutsch suggests not only examining gender inequality but also to examine “the conditions under which gender is irrelevant in social interactions... how the structural (institutional) and interactional levels might work together to

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<sup>36</sup> West, Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 145

<sup>37</sup> West, Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 126

<sup>38</sup> Deutsch, Francine M. “Undoing Gender.” *Gender & Society*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2007, pp. 106–127. pg. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Deutsch, Francine M. “Undoing Gender.” pg. 122.

produce change, and interaction as the site of change.”<sup>40</sup> Upon examining how genderless danshi fit into Deutsch’s additional observations, I will describe how their actions and appearances are either conforming to or resisting Japan’s current normative gender displays and how they are doing and undoing genders.

### **Genderless Danshi Within the Gender Framework**

With these gender theories in mind, it is important to ask the question, what are genderless danshi doing (or undoing) within this framework? The boys that are a part of the genderless danshi fashion subculture seem to be highly aware of the hegemonic gender performativity of Japanese men and their gender display, specifically the lifestyle and overpowering existence of the salaryman.<sup>41</sup> If so, the genderless danshi’s actions are a method of resistance and subversion against normative gender display in Japanese society today. Their actions specifically target the image of hegemonic masculinity in Japan by using fashion and cosmetics to create a rebellion through fashion against Japan’s traditional masculinity and ideal role in society for young men. Some of these actions I discuss are the use of genderless clothing styles or wearing both men’s and women’s, make-up use, skin care rituals, as well as their roles as performers, models, and idols that directly contradict the traditional path to corporate salaried-work.

How are genderless danshi “undoing gender” that is undefined within the bounds of masculine and feminine natures? Most importantly, genderless danshi tend to shop without regard to gender labels or traditionally gendered colors. Yūtarō, a popular 19-year-old model and shop staff at a used clothing store in the Harajuku district, says in his book, “It’s Me” (*Boku dayo*) that he focuses on shape and color to create his signature genderless look. He uses a loose

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<sup>40</sup> Deutsch, Francine M. “Undoing Gender.” pg. 114.

<sup>41</sup> Rich, Motoko. “With Manicures and Makeup”

(*yurui*) shape and states that “my key colors are white, black, red, and of course pink. There’s a lot of reasons I wear colorful clothing but If I had to say it in a word, it’s because it makes me happy. I especially love pink and red.”<sup>42</sup> Later in the book he describes his love of using black and white in monotone coordinates. While the use of monotone colors can be attributed to conforming to the standards of a modest society, his loose silhouette rather than a tailored one in addition to his frequent use of bright colors such as pink, a color traditionally associated with femininity, rules out the possibility of his fashion as subject to “doing gender”. This is because he is purposefully attempting to create a genderless image by using aspects of fashion that are not typically associated with traditional men’s fashion. Thus, he is presenting himself to be appearing different from what he is being and in doing so, is subverting traditional behaviors and standards that are regarded as “doing gender”.

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<sup>42</sup> Yutaro. *Boku dayo*. [It’s Me]. Gakken Plus Co. 2016. Online. pg. 49.





服を着る時、僕が一番意識しているのは、ゆったり、だぼ〜としたシルエット。体のラインをひろわない服は、性別を意識させないうえに、なによりそのバランスが可愛い。小顔効果もあるし、実用的な面でも最高なんです。

Figure 2: "Nothing is cuter than the balance of clothes that hide the body shape. Plus, (the loose-fitted silhouette) makes it hard to determine gender"<sup>43</sup>

In the caption beneath Figure 2, Yūtarō implies in his statement that because loose-fitted clothing creates a silhouette that makes gender hard to distinguish, therefore he could categorize his clothing style as genderless. Furthermore, the use of his color schemes, particularly his use of pink, goes directly against traditional actions of hegemonic masculinity in Japan. In a society where tailored black and navy business suits of salarymen are considered the peak of sexual appeal, Yūtarō's clothing choices produce a stark contradiction to the norms. Yūtarō is "undoing gender" by creating a dichotomy between traditional hegemonic men's fashion in Japan and the

<sup>43</sup> Yutaro. Boku dayo. [It's Me]. Gakken Plus Co. 2016. Online. pg. 25

youth's notion of expressing oneself regardless of gender labeling. Genderless danshi believe that through interactions between these two sectors, Japan's youth has the power to use fashion as a way to incite change and appeal to others to create their own sense of individuality. The practices followed by genderless danshi are confined to individual idiosyncrasy but through practice, can influence public perception of gender.

Kondoyodhi, a J-pop singer regarded as "the male answer to Kyaru Pamyu Pamyu", is the producer of the highly successful clothing brand, DING.<sup>44</sup> The brand produces items that are marketed as genderless and, for the most part, are styled using both male and female models. His brand is sold under the same parent company that sells merchandise from the popular store WEGO, one of the biggest retailers of Harajuku trends in Japan and highly influential of youth buying choices, and is often featured in store branches. Now, DING has a physical store in the LaFloret mall in the center of Harajuku, a six-floor mall that caters to female wearers of fashion subcultures born out of the Harajuku district. Because of the wide success of his genderless brand, the popularity and visibility of his store has the opportunity to create societal change in ideals of gender norms and actions of gender display. The establishment of a genderless store in a predominantly women's clothing mall is a start in addressing and accepting changes in public gender perception but by itself, it is incapable of creating widespread change.

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<sup>44</sup> Clarke, Ashley. (2016, Feb 23). Genderless kei: Harajuku's online fashion revival. Retrieved from <https://i-d.vice.com>



Figure 3: An advertisement showing Kondoyohdi's recent collection [Slapstick Morning] becoming available in WEGO, a popular store among youth in Japan.<sup>45</sup>

### Genderless Danshi as Performers

Because genderless danshi are for the most part highly visible models, idols, and musical performers, their gender identity is highly reliant on their audience's perception of them. As such, they do not typically follow the standard life path of the traditional Japanese man. Toman Sasaki, a 23-year old model and member of the band XOX, regularly appears on television programs or as a guest at events. Kondoyodhi, a popular J-pop performer, also makes guest appearances on television variety shows or brand events. Both of them are also often participating in photoshoots to promote their fashion and products. Toman and Kondoyodhi have separated themselves from the hegemonic practices of Japanese society, which allows them more freedom and the option to play with traditional masculinities as performers of gender. Their careers as genderless performers mean they can play with their image more than what may be

<sup>45</sup> DING 2016 Summer/Spring Collection. WEGO. 2016 March 16. <http://www.wego.jp/information/2016/03/ding-3.html>

acceptable for a typical salaryman. Since their careers are built off of their image as genderless danshi and visual icons they are actually encouraged to push the bounds of normative and gendered fashion rules. In this way they are also given more influence over trends, both socially and visually, among followers, usually youth.

What is also unique about their position in society is that they are highly visible as public figures and are highly susceptible to public criticism and opinion. The consistency of their gendered performance and whether that performance is considered genderless is up to the audience's perception. In certain aspects, a genderless danshi's actions and gender performance through their fashion can be considered to be "undoing gender". Genderless danshi's fanbases are highly gendered, consisting of mostly teenage girls. Because of this, the performance that a genderless danshi gives is for the most part, received by young females.

### **Representation in the Media**

Depending on the news source or type of publication, genderless danshi are represented in a variety of ways in the media. They are active on most popular social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube and use these spaces to post their fashion styles, makeup tutorials, shots from recent photoshoots, and host Q&A's for their followers. Idols like Toman, Yoshiaki, Kondoyodhi, and Yappi have hundreds of thousands of followers across their accounts and Ryuchell, known for his colorful genderless look that resembles American 80's fashion, has over 2 million followers. In their self-created online portfolios, although their hairstyles and fashion styles are often changing, they portray themselves as continuously performing the same genderless role that they place on themselves.

In a variety show, they might be asked questions about their beauty habits and routines, usually eliciting shocked gasps from the audience. They are often interviewed in segments in

variety television shows or the host of the show brings up the topic of their appearance in discussions and reactions are surveyed. Because most of Japan's variety television humor is made up of bantering and mockery, the interviews are also usually conducted in this manner. In an interview with Kondoyodhi during a segment he is wearing a strawberry patterned shirt. The host makes a comment at the beginning that guys do not usually wear a pattern such as that and if he were to wear it, he would look like a strawberry farmer. The interview is centered around Kondoyodhi's appearance such as his weight, make up, and manicured nails. Throughout these remarks, the host continues to ask a female panelist on her opinions of his fashion and qualities of a man that do not fit the typical gender performance of masculinity.<sup>46</sup> The action of asking the female panelist these types of questions goes to further prove that Japanese men value the female gaze and opinion as an important aspect of what is determined to be masculine or representative of how the hegemonic masculinity should appear.

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<sup>46</sup> Hruby. (2016, Aug 24). 【こんどうようぢ】ジェンダーレス VS 志田未来. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11tb9z47t7E>



Figure 4: Kondoyodhi appearing on a variety show.<sup>47</sup>

## Fanbase

The fanbase of genderless danshi consists of mostly young women between their teens and mid-twenties. In a survey posted by Yoshiaki on his Instagram story, he asked his followers to respond if they were male or female. Over 80 percent of respondents answered that they were female. In a video published by the New York Times in January 2017, Toman and his band, XOX, are shown making an appearance at the popular clothing store, WEGO. The crowd is exclusively young women. Some are holding up signs and balloons with Toman's name printed on them and some are even shown crying.<sup>48</sup> Genderless danshi's fans are most likely a majority female because as Toman puts it "Women appreciate men who are more sensitive to beauty".<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Hruby. (2016, Aug 24). 【こんどうようぢ】ジェンダーレス VS 志田未来.

<sup>48</sup> Rich, Motoko. "With Manicures and Makeup"

<sup>49</sup> Rich, Motoko. "With Manicures and Makeup"

If beauty or a higher sense of beauty in men is what young women appear to be more attracted to, then how does this affect other young men's opinion of genderless danshi and how does it affect their own gender performance? In an article posted to the website *Men's Up*, a website aimed at helping single men in their twenties and thirties improve their charm, they look at Toman and Yūtarō as examples of young men following the trend to be beautiful. They mention four shared points between the two that should be followed in order to be popular with women. These points are: clear skin, a thin body frame, a high awareness of beauty, and an aspect of androgyny.<sup>50</sup> One might expect that because genderless danshi are challenging the current hierarchy of masculinity in Japan, that some men in Japan would argue that they are diminishing the value of manliness in Japan but in fact, according to this article, men are recognizing that women are sensitive to men who are aware of the public's gaze, once again proving the importance of the female gaze. Because of the appearance of genderless danshi in men's magazines as well, although their appearance resists cultural norms and traditional displays of gender, men are respectful because of their ability to gain admiration from women. This relationship represents how, in this situation, genderless danshi are embodying a complicit masculinity. They are being featured in magazines that cater to a heterosexual male audience and are being shown as the ideal and desired form of male beauty and fashion sense in these magazines sections.

### **Reactions in the Media**

In May 2016, in a segment titled *Straight Pitch Interview Separated by Generation*, Oricon News asked the question: "What do you think of genderless danshi?". In this segment, an interviewer asked men and women of varying ages for their opinions on genderless danshi. All

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<sup>50</sup> "What is Genderless Danshi? Become Popular like Toman and Yūtarō". *Men's Up*. <http://mens-up.jp/yuutaroukunkamigatahulaltsushon>



respondents responded positively with one man in his 50's saying, "I have nothing against boys wearing make-up" and a woman in her 40's saying that "It's nice that you are free to want to be beautiful".<sup>51</sup> Reactions such as these reflect the possibility of Japan's changing ideas on gender displays and expressions of gender identity. The gender performance that genderless danshi engage in is seen as a trend of the changing times and therefore, it is hard to find public opinions that express direct disapproval of the genderless fashions. Despite this, some genderless danshi have stated in interviews that they are often insulted privately by peers at school or by older generations because of their make-up use and fashion choices.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 5: A woman in her sixties is asked about her opinion of genderless danshi.<sup>53</sup>

However, another survey suggests that they are accepted only as an aesthetic feature in youth culture. A survey taken in January 2017 asked whether or not women in their twenties were interested in having a romantic relationship with a genderless danshi. From the results of

<sup>51</sup> "What Do You Think of Genderless Danshi? The Wide Majority of Voices on the Street Say It's Fine." Oricon News, 27 May 2016, [www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/](http://www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/).

<sup>52</sup> Clarke, Ashley. "Genderless Kei: Harajuku's Online Fashion Revival." Rich, Motoko. "With Manicures and Makeup"

<sup>53</sup> Oricon News, 27 May 2016, [www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/](http://www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/).



this survey, only 15 percent said they would date a genderless danshi, while 52 percent said they were not interested and another 30 percent said that they had no preference.<sup>54</sup> In general, the responses from the group who were interested said that the genderless danshi's high sense of beauty would enhance their own and that conversations would be fun because they would have things in common, such as fashion and beauty, to talk about. Responses from the group that was uninterested said that they were fine with genderless danshi as friends but did not want to date someone that was more beautiful than them.<sup>55</sup> This survey suggests that although women are drawn in by the beauty and fashion of a genderless danshi, they believe that they are better kept to the realm of visual aesthetics. In the process of "undoing gender", genderless danshi are also threatening women's own femininity. In the *Straight Pitch Interview Separated by Generation*, one teenage girl stated that the beauty awareness of genderless danshi is high that she is worried that her femininity will decrease.<sup>56</sup>

This chapter explores multiple theories surrounding gender performance and how genderless danshi are performing within those theories. Within the realm of these ideas, I determine that genderless danshi's style and actions are a way of "undoing gender" because of their purposeful actions to resist Japan's traditional norms of gender display that target the life of the salaryman. However, their positions as performers in Japanese society allows them more privilege to be able to do this. Their position as male leaders at the head of a primarily young female fanbase also creates a traditional and patriarchal structure that has the possibility to limit the effects of their fashion choices, which I will further discuss in the next chapter. I also discussed how reactions to genderless danshi's actions differ depending on different

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<sup>54</sup> "Would you date a genderless danshi". Sekirara Zexy. 18 January, 2017. <https://zexy.net/contents/lovenews/article.php?d=20170118>

<sup>55</sup> "Would you date a genderless danshi". Sekirara Zexy.

<sup>56</sup> Oricon News, 27 May 2016, [www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/](http://www.oricon.co.jp/news/2072410/full/).

demographics, such as gender and age as well as examined the differences in reactions of young women based on their opinions of genderless danshi as just people or a possible love interest. These surveys and interviews revealed that the general public finds genderless danshi's style interesting as a social phenomenon in youth culture but that their position is still very much on the fringes of tolerability.

In my final chapter, I will be assessing these opinions to make conclusions on the implications and limitations of the genderless danshi style in Japan's modern society. To do so, Connell's hierarchy of masculinities will be examined and reevaluated to better match the structure of Japanese society rather than a Western one. The genderless danshi's goal to reconstruct this hierarchy and create a "new masculinity" challenges current social norms surrounding gender display and I will be discussing the effectiveness of the genderless danshi's methods as well as considering any complications that they may face. My conclusions will be constructed from my own analysis of genderless danshi's actions and behaviors as well as considering if genderless is even possible.

## Chapter 3

### Implications and Limitations

#### What is a “new masculinity”.

Toman Sasaki states in an interview that “genderless danshi are group of people who defy what it means to be masculine or feminine.”<sup>57</sup> If that is so, then one could also say that the genderless danshi’s purpose is to create a new category of masculinity through his fashion and lifestyle. In these terms, a genderless danshi’s idea of what a new masculinity would comprise of would ideally blend traditional feminine and masculine traits, both visually and characteristically. A new masculinity would aim to diminish the power and dominance of hegemonic masculinity but not overtake it. Genderless danshi believe that hegemonic masculinity in Japan is harmful to society and the position of it at the top of a hierarchy is also harmful to constructing one’s own individual self. If a new masculinity was formed that took the place of hegemonic masculinity in society, not only would it create a new ideal, thus going against the original goal of the genderless danshi, but because of the transformative nature of hegemonic masculinities across space and time, a new masculinity would simply be an altered form of hegemony. On an individual level, the goal of a genderless danshi is to construct a masculinity that allows room for true self-expression, regardless of stereotypes surrounding traditional expressions of gender display and encourage others to freely express themselves. On a societal level, an idea of a new version of masculinity is hard to imagine. Any sort of lasting change would also require structural reforms along with it. If this goal was achieved, almost certainly it would not threaten the position of hegemonic masculinity on the hierarchy of masculinities because of the permanence and flexibility of hegemony in society.

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<sup>57</sup> Rich, Motoko. “With Manicures and Makeup”

Japan is a country where rules are strictly abided by, almost painfully so, and breaking off from the actions or duties that a person would traditionally apply oneself to can sometimes end up creating more negative consequences than what is intended.<sup>58</sup> By breaking away from gender roles in fashion, genderless danshi are not only breaking the rules regarding gender performativity but they are also challenging traditional obedience to the societal system. In doing so, the new masculinity that they are presenting is one that pushes for a separation from traditional rule following and one that allows for more flexibility and acceptance of alternative masculinities.

### **Genderless Danshi and Masculinity Hierarchy**

I mention Japan's rigid and conforming culture in order to articulate where genderless danshi fit into the hierarchy of masculinities presented by Connell. Again, the hierarchy creates an order of dominant masculinities in society, starting with hegemonic, followed by complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities. I have already discussed the patriarchal prominence of hegemonic masculinity and its relationships with other masculinities so here, I will place the hierarchy in the context of a Japanese society.

The problem with Connell's hierarchy is that the positions are static and restricting, and a more reflective of experiences in a Western society rather than a Japanese one. Japan is a primarily homogeneous society with minimal, albeit increasing, issues in terms race relations. What might be a better measure to use as a scale of social status would be employment status. While not directly related to lack of employment, people that identify as *otaku* might more accurately represent Japan's marginalized masculinity.<sup>59</sup> *Otaku* along with NEET's, a young

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<sup>58</sup> Rich, Motoko. "With Manicures and Makeup"

<sup>59</sup> *Otaku* is the term applied to people that carry an active interest in manga and anime, quite often to the point of obsession. The term is generally associated with negative connotations and is sometimes used as an insult.

person that is classified as “Not in Education, Employment, or Training”, and freeters; people who work only part-time and seasonal jobs rather than finding full-time employment, are all groups in Japan associated with unemployment or lack of full-time and thus, salaryman status.<sup>60</sup> Because of their dissociation with Japan’s salaryman, they cannot fit into hegemonic society in Japan.

Connell’s theory is also limiting to the types of men and masculinities that can exist in a society. Using her structure, there is no category where genderless danshi are accurately portrayed. It is clear that genderless danshi are not a part of the hegemonic category. In addition, due to the restrictiveness of Connell’s hierarchy it is still unclear as to where they stand in relation to other masculinities in Japan. To create a clear picture of where I believe they stand and how their “new masculinity” would be placed in regards to these relationships I will first explain how genderless danshi do not fit into Connell’s prescribed categories. Because of the lack of association between fashion and sexuality as well as the influential positions in pop culture media that genderless danshi often hold, as a whole, they would not be considered a part of the subordinate masculinities. Their position as a subordinate masculinity would only apply if they had publicly announced that they identified as homosexual and would not be affected by their fashion and make up choices. Genderless danshi that live in the public view/sphere can be put in a higher social class because some are idols or models. This does not apply to all genderless danshi, only highly visible ones.

Their goal of creating a new masculinity is likely in response to the dominance and dissatisfaction of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, they neither participate in the hegemonic

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, Kaitlyn. “Stagnant Youth: the NEET, Freeter, and Hikikomori Phenomena.” Post Bubble Culture, 22 Apr. 2015, [postbubbleculture.blogs.wm.edu/2015/04/05/stagnant-youth-the-neet-freeter-and-hikikomori-phenomena/](http://postbubbleculture.blogs.wm.edu/2015/04/05/stagnant-youth-the-neet-freeter-and-hikikomori-phenomena/).

status of masculinity nor do they endorse it. Rather, they are trying to reconstruct it. Although their current status places them in the gender hierarchy of masculinities, because of the recent nature of this trend it is difficult to predict how this might change. Being placed on the scale as complicit, could however be a limitation to their power as speakers against hegemonic masculinity. Although, their aim is to reconstruct the scale, because they still benefit from the societal structure it is hard to create a legitimate argument against what is actually a system in their favor.

Because of this argument and my previous statement that while their actions of cosmetic use, detailed skin care routines, and general disregard to gender labels on clothing can be marked as actions towards “undoing gender”, their role as patriarchal figures as the head or leader of a wide fanbase of teenage girls can be marked as “doing gender”, I believe that genderless danshi cannot be placed within Connell’s restrictive and static hierarchy. Genderless danshi, as popular idols and social media gurus, are in a position where their efforts and abilities to subvert and challenge traditional gender roles are actually encouraged by their fanbase which forms because they do not fit the mold of what is considered traditional masculinity. Although their fanbase perpetuates their status and allows them benefits in Japanese societies as idols, because of their activity and intentional subversion of gender, they are not complicit.

Perhaps a better term to use if one wanted to examine the relationship between hegemonic masculinities and a genderless danshi’s masculinity could be resistant. Although they are unable to escape the fact that they are beneficiaries of their status as men in a society, they are also aware of the damaging effects of the power and dominance that the societal ideal of a hegemonic masculinity holds over society and actively oppose it. A resistant masculinity is one that like Toman states, subverts gender by defying what it means to be masculine. It is

opposed to the patriarchal dominance of hegemony but rather than trying to overtake it, a resistant masculinity would use its position to decrease the supposed legitimacy of hegemony to create room for the self-expression of the self beyond the bounds of gender. In a position of resistant masculinity, rather than taking the benefits of hegemony in society and supporting it like complicit masculinities, an individual can use their position that is beneficial to hegemonic masculinity to create credibility in their subversion and opposition to gender norms and displays in society.

### **Limitations**

If the youth participating in this fashion subculture consider the fashion genderless, are they an exception of the patriarchal dividend? The matter of their sex most likely outweighs how they create their gender identity through fashion and keeps them within the brackets of the patriarchal dividend. Although their fashion display is self-titled as genderless, they are still visibly male and as Toman puts it, “I can confidently say that I’m a man”.<sup>61</sup> However, Toman also states that he does not believe gender is really necessary and that he is simply dressing in a style that he feels suits him and he feels comfortable in.

Genderless danshi are for the most part trying to fashion their gender expression separately from their own gender identity. Because the structure of the fanbase consists of almost entirely teenage girls, their role as idols creates a traditionally gendered hierarchical relationship, which could be categorized as a set of actions that are “doing gender”. This relationship is one where the man is unintentionally holding power and influence over a group of girls. Looking at this structure, one can see that the choices of idols such as Toman and Kondoyodhi have the power to affect young females’ own actions and decisions, much like in a

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<sup>61</sup> Rich, Motoko. “With Manicures and Makeup”

patriarchal relationship. The highly gendered fanbase structure prohibits genderless danshi from escaping the patriarchal dividend completely.

Japan's strict societal pressure to take the standard career path as a salaryman does not allow much room for nonconformity. Conservative business attire that permits little to no bending of the rules or differentiation is required at most companies. Companies strict dress codes exclude the average salaryman and mean that the young men participating in the genderless fashion trend tend to be idols, models, students and hosts at various host clubs in Kabuki-chō.<sup>62</sup> The possibility of an average salaryman being able to participate in genderless fashion or stray from the normative trends surrounding the salaryman culture is slim and his opportunities to create a nontraditional gender identity would be limited. Extended overtime hours at work and expected obligations after hours does not necessarily allow for the construction of a consistent and nonhegemonic gender performance. Whether they want to or not, salarymen are not in a position to resist “doing gender” or to challenge traditional expressions of masculinity within Japan's corporate environment.

Outside of the workplace, family and home social structures also retain strong traditional and paternal values. Even Ryūchell, seen as the representative genderless danshi with 2.8 million followers across his social media platforms, stated recently that now that his wife is expecting a child, he wants to make his image more masculine in order to prepare for fatherhood and to fit the mold of a traditional fatherly image for his new child.<sup>63</sup> In a recent statement on a social media and networking app, LINE, Ryūchell told his fans that “now that he is going to

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<sup>62</sup> Host clubs, a major part of night-time entertainment in major cities in Japan, are where female customers pay a premium to make conversation and drink with attractive, young men. The hosts are charismatic and their role is to flirt with the customer and encourage them to purchase drinks at the club to increase sales as well as to make the customer feel as if they are loved in order to create long-term customers.

<sup>63</sup> “Changes due to pregnancy. Genderless Danshi shows his manly side” Yahoo! Japan. 14 Feb, 2018. <https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/article?a=20180214-00010002-jisin-ent>



become a father, he has a responsibility to hold”.<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates that although Ryūchell is in a position where he is able to create a genderless performance, he believes that in order to properly excel at his new patriarchal role, he needs to revert back to traditional standards of masculinity.

However, in contrast, he also states that he wants to take a break from work to help raise the child in its infancy because he believes that being an active father is important to the child’s growth. His two contradicting opinions on proper fatherhood in Japan imply that there is most likely some disparity on current gender roles and norms and how they should be applied in society. Ryūchell’s gender performance, as he ages and starts taking on traditional roles, is showing conflicting opinions and beliefs on what he originally presented and created his self-image off of. The difference in his responses regarding fatherhood could point towards the possibility that tradition in Japan is strong and rigorously followed and while some factors of that can be challenged, such as fashion and parenting styles, perhaps other factors are harder to change, such a society’s image of an ideal patriarchal figure.

A common feature that genderless danshi share is their thinness. Toman, who is 5 ft 4 in, weighs just 84 pounds while Kondoyodhi weighs 117 pounds at 5 ft 7 in.<sup>65</sup> The subject of their body aesthetics as thin and delicate is one that allows them to play with the silhouette of their fashion as well as create a less traditionally masculine image. Yūtarō’s loose silhouette that he utilizes for his look also requires a slim figure in order to present that genderless appearance that he is trying to achieve. With this in mind, something to consider would be the possibility of whether or not someone could participate if they did not fit the typical thin image that most

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<sup>64</sup> “Changes due to pregnancy” Yahoo! Japan.

<sup>65</sup> “Did you know Genderless Danshi ‘Toman’ only weighs 84 pounds?” Naver Matome. 2 Dec, 2017. Hruby. (2016, Aug 24). 【こんどうようぢ】ジェンダーレス vs 志田未来.

genderless danshi appear to fit. In an interview, Kondoyodhi stated that he wanted to become “macho” or more muscular which was instantly responded to with a round of laughter and comments pointing out how thin he was.<sup>66</sup> Not only would his thin and genderless image lose some of its appeal and power but because genderless danshi are labeled as such because their sense of beauty tends to stray away from traditional masculine features, but his overall genderless image would be juxtaposed because of the contrast between hegemonic values of the body and the fashion and makeup that he wears. Because of this, a small frame is one that lessens the masculine image and allows for an easier time at a genderless performance.

### **Is Genderless Even Possible?**

Genderless danshi may label themselves and their fashion as genderless but ultimately, when it comes to fashion, most of how the clothes are seen is up to the audience. No matter if the one performing has managed to escape the binds of preconceived gender notions, the audience, on the other hand, will most likely have not. Most people when observing an individual and their behavior, automatically try to place an individual’s gender identity or performance on extreme ends of the gender scale. Gender is such a highly ingrained concept and society and similarly, masculine and feminine traits themselves are applied to almost any performance, large and small. Because of this, it is only natural for an individual to, on first glance, automatically try and associate a person with as male or female or with feminine or masculine traits. Furthermore, in order to create a genderless image, genderless danshi are using typically feminine elements of beauty like the use of make-up and combining them with the male body. Individually, these elements can still be perceived as gendered and it is up to the viewer to decide what gives the strongest impression of conformity to a gender identity.

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<sup>66</sup> Hruby. (2016, Aug 24). 【こんどうようぢ】ジェンダーレス VS 志田未来.

### What is actually being accomplished?

As previously stated, structural changes in public spaces such as the workplace or schools would also be needed combined with societal changes, like the establishment of DING, in order to begin the social process necessary for long-term changes in attitudes regarding societal gender roles and gender displays. Kashiwanoha Middle School opening in April 2018 in Chiba Prefecture has created a new uniform policy that may contribute to structural changes that Deutsch would argue is important to the reconstruction of gender roles and displays in society. Traditional school uniforms in Japan dictate that girls must wear a skirt, a sailor-style top and a ribbon around the neck, while boys are required to wear slacks and a straight-collared button-up jacket called a *gakuran*. In consideration for LGBT students as well as wanting to allow students to choose their gender identity freely, the new middle school has chosen to nix the traditionally gendered uniforms and has opted to use a gender-neutral blazer instead.<sup>67</sup> Starting in the new school year, students will also be free to choose whether they want to wear slacks or a skirt, and a necktie or a chest ribbon, regardless of gender.<sup>68</sup> This announcement was made just a month after Taiyo Middle School in Kanagawa Prefecture announced that in order to “eliminate gender differentiation in uniforms” girls would now be able to choose freely between wearing a skirt or pants as part of their uniform.<sup>69</sup> This school also uses blazers for both the girls and boys uniform rather than gendered sailor tops and *gakuran*.

Students at these middle schools are being given the chance to construct their gender identity and display through new rules towards school uniforms allowing gender neutrality in

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<sup>67</sup> Mahha, Kishomatsu. “Male students wearing a skirt and neck ribbon deemed OK. In consideration for LGBT, a middle school in Chiba Prefecture is creating ‘a uniform both men and women are free to choose’” Net Lab. ITMedia. 8 Feb, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Baseel, Casey. “Japanese public school to allow male students to wear skirts, chest ribbons as part of uniform” SoraNews24. 9 Feb, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Baseel, Casey. “Japanese middle school promotes long pants to full-uniform status for girls, equal with skirts” SoraNews24. 9 Jan, 2018.

school. Traditional highly gendered school uniforms create gender hierarchy in the classroom by presupposing gender identity of students. These new guidelines help to deconstruct the gender hierarchy that is present in schools by permitting gender divergence. The recent effort by these middle schools in Japan to create a gender-neutral uniform to allow for ease of learning and participation in the classroom as well as the acceptance of alternate gender identities is a start in creating structural and material changes that Deutsch argues is required in accordance with social changes in perception to result in the transformation to current social gender construction.

It would be wrong to assume that the structural changes taking places at these schools are occurring because of genderless danshi. Rather, the introduction of neutral school uniforms is occurring in tandem with the emergence of genderless danshi, serving as evidence of Japan's changing tolerance and acceptance towards alternative masculinities and gender identities as well as evolving societal ideals among youth and a reconsideration of perceptions on gender norms. Recent changes in perceptions have allowed genderless danshi to gain popularity and given them room to challenge current gender norms as well as recognition of their subversive gender performances.

Japan is a nation that not only displays a strong hold on traditional values and customs but also places high value on modernity and global innovation. Traditions as strong as Japan's take more time and effort to change than just recent fashion trends but it is evident that the rise in popularity of genderless danshi points towards a society that is ready to let go of potentially harmful traditional practices. The salaryman image is idealized and glorified and yet most young men are nervous about the prospect of actually becoming the societally-desired image of masculinity and in the future, becoming exhausting and overworked. Although the power that genderless danshi may be limited by the scope of their reach to primarily female youth, today's

youth value fashion as a way to show true expression of themselves and as a way to resist societal norms in Japan.<sup>70</sup> Changes in fashion might seem like a small and unassuming aspect of culture and unable to create significant changes, but it is clear from the national recognition of many genderless danshi and recent uniform changes that Japan's youth are looking to pushing the country forward in terms of acceptance of differences in gender expression.

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<sup>70</sup> Robertson, Jennifer. "Exploring Japan's 'Genderless' Subculture."

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