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Becoming a Virtual Cutie: Digital Cross-Dressing in Japan

Abstract

There is a predominance for cute characters among Japanese virtual YouTubers (VTubers). Men who publicly use feminine avatars to conduct online entertainment are called *babiniku* in Japan. This research paper investigates whether embodying cute avatars impacts males' perception of self. Examining the process leading some online performers to turn into outwardly feminine characters, we address the reasons why *babiniku* reproduce gender stereotypes. Our presumption is that such role-play is part of a strategy with purposes yet to be deciphered. We deployed quantitative and qualitative methods, such as survey and semi structured interviews, to collect first-hand testimonies from 24 *babiniku* participants. This article contributes to an existing literature about digital gender swapping with avatars and Japanese cross-dressing from an anthropological perspective. As stressed by the *babiniku* who took part in this research, digital cross-dressing enables them to create a world where they can indulge in fancy and fantasy. All together with their fans, *babiniku* build a notion of femininity that allows users to act and live outside of societal pressures.

1 Introduction

A cute anime girl talks to her audience on YouTube. In her first video, released December 2, 2016, she introduces herself as Kizuna AI. Artificial intelligence (AI) can also be read as *ai*, which means "love" in Japanese. She asks her fans to think of her as a virtual YouTuber or VTuber. Coining the term "VTuber," she explains that she started her YouTube channel because she is different from humans. Following Kizuna AI, a growing number of people started using 2D or 3D computer-generated characters with an anime-like appearance and became digital celebrities in Japan. According to Userlocal (2020), a technology venture company specializing in big data analysis, there are over 13,000 VTubers in Japan as of November 9, 2020. The Website only shows VTubers who have registered; thus, the numbers might be higher. The top 10 is occupied by "beautiful girls" (*bishōjo*), a type of character found in anime, games, and manga. *Bishōjo* look young, act cute, have big eyes, delicate eyebrows, long hair, and a teenager's slender body (Jin-Shiow, 2015: p. 112). However, *bishōjo* do not only dominate the VTubers industry in Japan: they also account for a significant trend of digital cross-dressing. In fact, there is a subculture movement of male VTubers who use the "beautiful girl" characters for their VTuber activities. They call themselves *babiniku*. *Babiniku* is an abbreviation of "*bācharu bishōjo juniku*," meaning virtual *bishōjo* incarnation and refers to a male who uses a girly avatar to broadcast online content (Editorial Department, 2018). As of 2021, 62 VTubers registered *babiniku* (Userlocal, 2021) openly display their so-called "true identity" (that of a male) while taking on a feminine, cute appearance.

Our research paper focuses on *babiniku*. The number of total participants for this study is 24. Given that the number of registered *babiniku* is of 62, the 24 participants represent 38.7%. We created a Google Forms survey that was sent to the *babiniku* population. The 24 participants

represent the individuals who accepted to participate in our survey. Quantitative data was collected using the survey and used as a starting point for a series of semi structured interviews. Based on first-hand testimonies, and survey results, this paper investigates personal motivations and socio-cultural implications behind the digital cross-dressing practice in Japan. Our purpose is to research, through the prism of the discourse deployed by informants, the *babiniku* activity as a collective expression formed to find an alternative to the hegemonic gender norms in Japan. As we explain further in this study, our participants expressed that becoming *babiniku* allows them to question and free themselves from hegemonic models of manhood, such as a reliable breadwinner, that are still present in the contemporary Japanese society. Although there is a number of alternative forms of masculinity, the dominant cultural ideal premised on a specific ideology of heterosexuality of provider is present and exerts pressure to conform to it on all men (Dasgupta, 2005).

Japan offers a privileged field to study the impact of technologies and the effects of the embodiment of cute digital characters on males' perception of self. By investigating men's engagement with cute media characters in Japan from an anthropological perspective, our research contributes to an existing field of literature on digital gender swapping with avatars and Japanese cross-dressing practices. As we demonstrate in the literature review section of this introduction, the topic of digital identities is predominated by Euro-American case studies. As Xu, Donnar, and Kishore (2021) note in their article, Asian entertainment tech-industries are often overlooked in favor of Western-centered works. Within the Asian landscape, Japan has an especially vibrant media landscape that offers a privileged ground for researching human interactions with media-based characters. By moving our research field towards Japan, we put greater attention on local cultural diversities that go beyond the Western frameworks. To carry out this study, it is necessary to consider the following characteristic elements of this phenomenon: the popularity of *bishōjo* characters and the motivations of male VTubers. Before diving into-investigation, this research paper briefly examines the technology behind VTubers, the meaning and origins of the word *babiniku,* the cross-dressing phenomenon in Japan, and the scientific literature related to swapping genders with avatars.

1.1 Technologies of incarnation

Rebirth as a VTuber character is sometimes described as the process of restarting life as an "ideal self" (Todoki, 2018) or living another layer as a virtual character (Hirota, 2018a).
There are three aspects to becoming a VTuber: (1) character creation tools and software programs; (2) motion caption technology; and (3) broadcasting platforms.

Regarding character creation tools, VTubers skilled in computer design use 3D programs (Blender,[1] Maya,[2] etc.) to create custom models from scratch. VRoid[3] and Live2D[4] are simpler solutions. VRoid provides bare male and female models, as well as blank cloth templates, allowing users to draw hair, texture, and adjust visual characteristics. Live2D generates animated 2D anime-style characters, previously designed in digital art software, and separates them into layers which are then rigged. Simple character customization tools, such as VKatsu[5]

[1] https://www.blender.org/
[2] https://www.autodesk.com/products/maya/overview
[3] https://vroid.com/en
[4] https://www.live2d.com/en/
[5] http://vkatsu.jp/

and CustomCast,[6] are also popular among VTubers. With both programs, users choose between a male or female body before customizing their characters in the applications.

Motion capture systems can be divided into the following categories: (1) facial motion capture; (2) virtual reality (VR) trackers; (3) and mocap suit. (1) Face trackers use Webcam to track user's head and face movements, offering a degree of customization. For example, it is possible to program special expressions with hotkeys. (2) With VR trackers, different levels of motion capture are provided based on the type of head-mounted display (HMD) and trackers. For example, apart from the HMD and controllers, some track eye and lip movements. (3) Mocap suits (motion capture suit), wearable devices that record body movements, are common among companies developing VTubers.

VTubers broadcast their content online. YouTube is a video and live-streaming platform where the audience can interact in real-time through the chat feature. NicoNico Douga[7] is the most popular video-sharing website in Japan. Unlike with YouTube videos, NicoNico users can embed and overlay comments onto the video feed, giving viewers a sense of "sharing the viewing experience virtually" (Hamasaki, Takeda and Nishimura, 2008). VTubers also use SHOWROOM[8] and Mirrativ,[9] two Japanese live-streaming services. REALITY[10] is a "for avatar only" (Shirai, 2019) live entertainment platform in which VTubers create their characters, live-stream content, and monetize interactions. VTubers also broadcast their content from virtual environments such as Cluster[11] (conference and event platform), VRChat[12] (massively multiplayer online social platform), and Virtual Cast[13] (live communication platform).

1.2 *Babiniku* and cross-dressing phenomena in Japan

The term *babiniku* was said to be coined on June 6, 2018, when four *babiniku* met during the broadcast "Virtual *Bishōjo* Self-Incarnation Uncle Girls' Club One Night Werewolf" (Hirota, 2018b). Magrona, a participant from that event, explained that the desire to become a *kawaī bishōjo* (cute "beautiful girl") had nothing to do with the desire to be feminized in the physical world (Toshi, 2018). Usually translated as cute, *kawaī* means adorable and lovable. It can be attributed to a living being and/or object (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi, 2010). *Kawaī* is composed of two ideograms, *ka* (possible) and *ai* (love), meaning "to be cute is to be lovable" (Galbraith, 2016: p. 235). *Kawaī* is said to act as a release from adult sociocultural responsibilities (White, 1993: p. 126). When transformed into a form of play, it can produce a kind, gentle, and powerful youth culture (Yano, 2009: p. 686). According to Kinsella's *Cuties in Japan*, cute is a "rebellion or refusal to cooperate with established social values and realities" because cuteness idolizes childhood and individual freedom that cannot be achieved or attained as an adult in Japanese society (1995: p. 243).

Individuals who cross-dress as *bishōjo* or *shōjo* (young girl) characters are known as *otoko no ko* in Japan. *Otoko no ko* is a play on words as the Chinese character for "child" with the homophonous term "boy" replaced with the character for "daughter," creating the new meaning of "boy daughter." According to Kinsella (2020a: p. 40), in the 21st century, male cross-

[6] https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=jp.customcast.cc2&hl=en_US&gl=US
[7] https://www.nicovideo.jp/
[8] https://www.showroom-live.com/
[9] https://www.mirrativ.com/
[10] https://reality.inc/
[11] https://cluster.mu/
[12] https://vrchat.com
[13] https://virtualcast.jp/

dressing gained traction in Japan, stemming from male interest in *shōjo* culture, gaming cuteness, and the otaku subculture that encompassed those elements. In the early 2000s, the slang term *otoko no ko* was used for the first time in the dating simulation game community and then to identify the cross-dressing culture. In other words, *otoko no ko* went from manga and screen media and stepped into the physical world. According to Kinsella (2020b), this is a notable social phenomenon as men negotiate alternative ways of being in Japan.

In contrast to *otoko no ko*, who operate in the physical realm, *babiniku* self-transform in the virtual. Dale explains that some Japanese men seek to embody the position of the *shōjo* (young girl character) because its "unformed state of *kawaīsa* (cuteness) allows for a seemingly infinite power for transformation" (2019: p. 326–27). In a short study conducted at the beginning of 2020, a group of surveyed *babiniku* explained that they chose a *bishōjo* character because they wanted to feel desired and loved, as well as be released from one's physical gender identity and social norms (Bredikhina, 2020). As a matter of fact, by interacting with manga and anime characters, individuals engage in a "celebration of possibilities of living life otherwise" (Galbraith, 2019: p. 7). Following this approach, we examine the individual and societal context that drives some men to create *bishōjo* avatars.

1.3 Swapping gender with avatars

A specific digital character's gender can entail practical benefits for the player (Lou et al., 2013; Martey et al., 2014). Gender swapping is not unusual in online and virtual environments and online multi-player games (DiGiuseppe and Nardi, 2007; Matviyenko, 2010). In Japan, for example, the word *nekama* (a pun on net-*okama* or Internet-transvestite) is used when a male user represents himself as female without disclosing his male identity. Some men become *nekama* for tactics in video games because the feminine gender entails practical benefits for the plays (Asai, 2009). Overall, users swap genders to experience a different identity without having repercussions on the physical body (Jenson et al., 2015: pp. 16), sometimes transgressing (Hodson and Livingstone, 2017) or not challenging (Todd, 2021) the mainstream notions of gender. Research has shown that users would often create idealized visual representations based on the current standards of attractiveness (Dunn and Guadagno, 2012). Moreover, users are often judged by their digital bodies (Nowak, 2004) as the visual appearance of the virtual character determines social interactions online (Banakou and Chorianopoulos, 2010). Thus, when selecting their character, users anticipate potential social interactions that could be shared among individuals as a form of symbolic code (Salazar, 2009).

Avatars are an idealized representation of users' actual selves (Sung et al., 2011). Moreover, photorealistic avatars have a greater impact on users' behaviors than non-photorealistic avatars (Waltemate et al., 2018). However, while users prefer anthropomorphic virtual representations, they tend to enhance their digital bodies (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). In addition, the users' visual attractiveness can impact their confidence and behavior (Messinger et al., 2008; Yee and Bailenson, 2007). Previous research has also shown that users find feminine avatars more attractive than masculine ones (Nowak, 2004). When it comes to male users interacting with other players as feminine avatars, research has shown that these men are not more likely to engage in stereotypically female acts than those who played male characters (Huh and Williams, 2009). Other scholars mention that men playing as female avatars tend to ask for help from other players more than men playing as male avatars (Lehdonvirta et al., 2012).

Social gender interactions and behaviors in the virtual worlds have often been considered part of social norms in the physical world (Consalvo and Harper, 2009). Digital character practices

are continuous and embedded in existing cultural practices (Miller and Slater, 2001). Anthropology is situated to investigate the negotiation of gender identities in online and offline interactions (Wilson and Peterson, 2002). As Agre and Shuler (1997) note, focusing on the online identity behavior fails to consider that social identities are continuous across various types of media.

We presented research about how feminine-looking avatars impact male users' behavior in the literature review. However, many of those studies adopt a socio-cognitive approach to demonstrate the impact of cute characters on male behavior. Also, most of the research comes from Western fieldwork. Relatively little is known about the underlying processes and reasons for which more and more men voluntarily adopt a disruptive practice of digital cross-dressing in Japan. We expand and build upon the above discussed academic publications. Our article attempts to fill this knowledge gap by examining the relationship between the *babiniku* persona and their male users from an anthropological perspective.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Ethics

This article raises sensitive issues like the transgender performances of VTubers and their image as popular online influencers. Therefore, we were careful while carrying on the quantitative and qualitative research, as the VTubers were personally involved in different stages of the study. We communicated with VTubers who were known as *babiniku*. The premises and protocol of this study was in accordance with ethical concerns. We only interacted with VTubers who made their "real identity" public (the notion of realness shall be questioned).

To guarantee the safe conduct of this research and ensure that there would not be a negative impact on the participants, the following ethical concerns were considered: (1) anonymity; (2) confidentiality; and (3) informed consent. In accordance with guidelines sent to the VTuber participants, we aimed at providing reliable and fair information. Before engaging in the research, the VTubers were informed of the following aspects of the study (refer to the sections 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4):

2.2 Anonymity

Anonymity guarantees that the real name of the VTuber was never asked. In addition, the artist name of the VTuber was never mentioned concerning outcomes (unless the VTuber provided their consent).

2.3 Confidentiality

Regarding confidentiality, VTubers' personal information was not released. The study aimed at collecting VTuber narratives related to their identity. Therefore, we ensured that informants provided information that could not cause harm.

Interviews were conducted through e-mails and Google forms. This enabled participants to reflect on their answer. They were informed that they were able to modify their answers during the inquiry.

2.4 Informed consent

Participants were informed in advance of the intended use of the study, title, date of article release, and homepage of publication. We ensured that participants were aware of and consented to the information that had been obtained. This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the Ethics Advisory Board of "Emotional Machines: The Technological Transformation of Intimacy in Japan" (EMTECH), which approved the protocol. All subjects gave written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.5 Quantitative and qualitative data

Quantitative data was collected and used as a starting point for a series of semi structured interviews. We designed a Likert scale survey and open-question survey using Google Forms. The form was sent to *babiniku* VTubers, who were found by searching on Twitter using #babibiku. Participants were contacted via direct message (DM).

In Google Forms, users create and share a survey URL. The answers are only visible and accessible to the creator of the Google survey. Participants can neither view answers nor names of those who answered the survey. The survey took place between November 19 and November 25, 2020. The data was anonymized. As soon as the collection of data was over, the Google Forms survey's collected information was removed from the cloud and stored on a local hard disk with proper security like password protections. The destruction date of the data was January 1, 2021. Participants were notified that they could withdraw their data at any time by e-mailing the experiment's principal investigator.

Once the Google Forms survey was completed and answers collected, volunteer participants (those who agreed for an interview) were confronted with quantitative data, which allowed them the opportunity to review and/or refine their replies. This qualitative data provided a better understanding of participants' perceptions and practices related to VTubing performances. Thurs, it offered an insightful range of circumstances that account for digital cross-dressing. Supplementary questions were sent as a different Google Forms open-ended questions survey. The surveys and results were checked for missing answers or abnormalities.

3 Data

3.1 Participants

A total of 24 participants replied to the survey (ages 15-19, 4.2%; ages 20-24, 20.8%; ages 25-29, 33.30%; ages 30-34, 29.20%; ages 35-39, 8.3%; ages 40-44, 4.2%). Most participants (45.8%) began their VTuber activities in 2019. Others started in 2020 (37.5%), 2018 (12.5%), and 2017 (4.2%). Most participants used a Webcam (66.7%). Others (12.5%) used HMD with trackers or a Webcam and HMD (20.8%).

Figure 1 shows that most participants act as a virtual *bishōjo* VTuber once per week. A few (4.2%) spend five, six, or seven days per week acting in their virtual world. Figure 2 illustrates the number of hours or minutes per session as a virtual *bishōjo*. Most (62.4%) spend one to three hours per *bishōjo* session. A few spend less than one hour or more than 3 hours per virtual session.

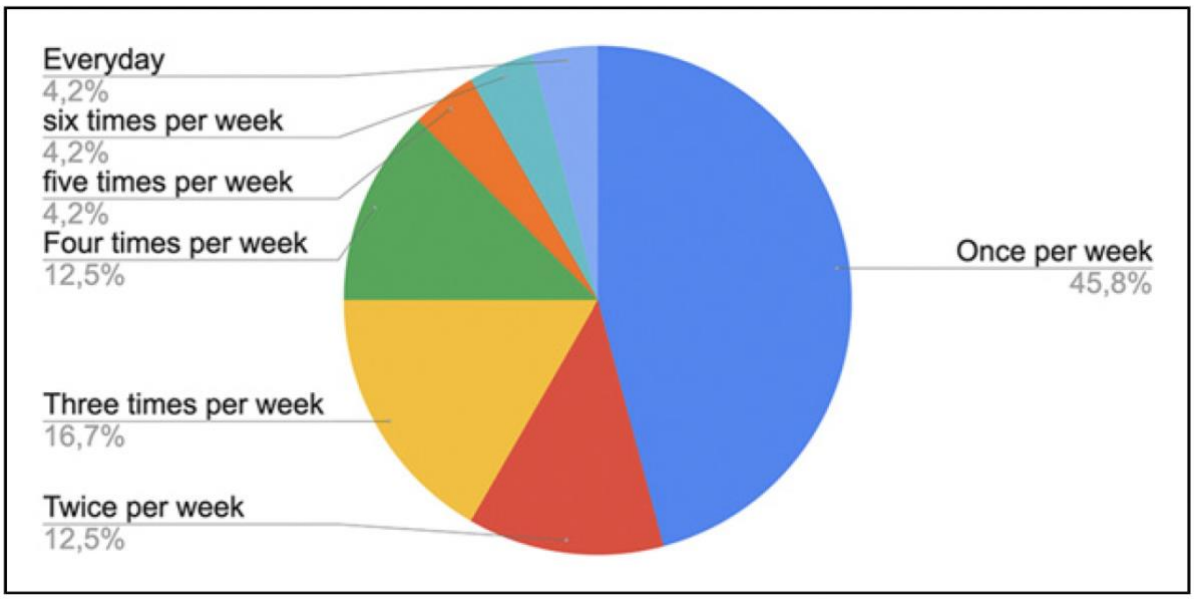

Figure 1. The number of times per week participants act as a virtual *bishōjo*.

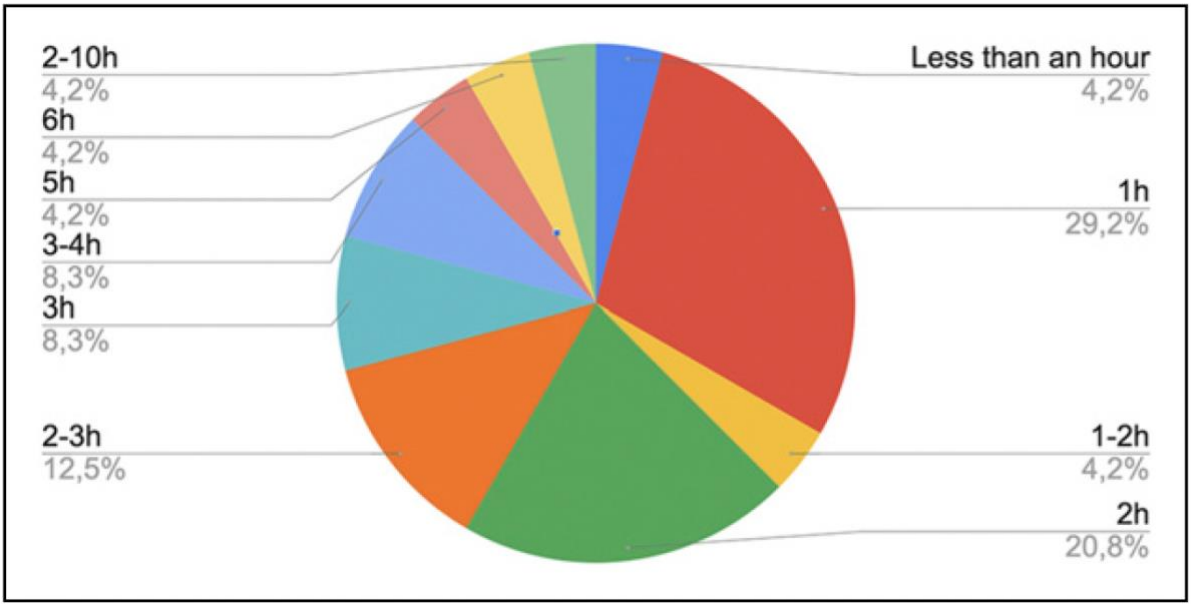

Figure 2. The number of hours participants spend per session as a virtual *bishōjo*.

3.2 Survey data

Regarding the Likert scale 5-point system (Table 1) data, participants were neutral (mean 3.13) in their responses to whether they became a virtual *bishōjo* to understand what it implies to be a biological woman. Participants created a virtual *bishōjo* because they were seeking popularity (mean 3.29). Participants almost strongly agreed (mean 4.33) that they act cuter as a virtual *bishōjo*. On the contrary, participants disagreed (mean 1.83) that they move like a man when in character.

Participants agreed that they use a voice changer to acquire a female voice (mean 3.92) and use female words and language (mean 3.54). If participants use their own voice, they do not

specifically talk differently (mean 2.75). Moreover, participants disagreed regarding occasionally creating a disruption by using male words and language (mean 1.92).

Participants tend to agree that their virtual *bishōjo* allows them to talk as a character full of energy and youthful confidence (mean 3.54), which are elements found in *bishōjo* characters from manga or anime. However, participants were neutral in their answer regarding whether or not they talk like a shy or immature individual (mean 3.00), which are also traits seen in many manga or games portraying cute girls.

Participants do not agree or disagree that their virtual *bishōjo* is different from their daily life (mean 3.08). However, they agree that their virtual personality corresponds to what they would like to be: more confident, happier, funnier, and more energetic (mean 4.00). It also appears that participants do not find it tiring or difficult to be a *kawaī* virtual *bishōjo* (mean 1.96) and do not feel pressure to act more *kawaī* (mean 2.38). Participants did not begin to act as a virtual *bishōjo* in their daily life (mean 2.71). However, participants admitted to seeing changes in their daily behaviors (mean 3.70).

Participants expressed an almost neutral opinion regarding whether they faced challenges in returning to their physical bodies after being a virtual *bishōjo* (mean 2.79). Participants agreed that they would prefer to stay a virtual *bishōjo* in their everyday life (mean 4.13). Discussing their virtual existence with friends or family could be taboo (mean 3.42). Some participants felt ashamed about being a VTuber (mean 2.63).

Participants did not demonstrate specific feelings regarding whether being a virtual *bishōjo* made them feel disappointed that they were not *kawaī* enough in their daily life (mean 3.17). Moreover, participants expressed that they do not struggle with their real body (mean 2.25). Participants did not express desires to change their physical appearance due to the influence of being a *bishōjo* (mean 2.88). Being a virtual *bishōjo* does not make them feel more attractive in their daily lives (mean 2.79). Furthermore, participants do not spend more time as a virtual *bishōjo* because they dislike their physical appearance (mean 2.63). To conclude, being a virtual *bishōjo* is not motivated by the rejection of the real body. According to participants, the feminine avatar gives an individual a greater level of confidence (mean 3.54).

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
I created a *bishōjo* avatar because I want to know what it feels like to be a woman.	25%	8.3%	16.7%	29.2%	20.8%	3.13
I created a *bishōjo* avatar because I want to be a popular VTuber (and because *bishōjo* VTubers are the most popular).	20.85%	8.3%	12.5%	37.5%	20.85%	3.29
When I become a virtual *bishōjo*, I act cuter.	4.2%	4.2%	4.2%	29.2%	58.2%	4.33
When I become a virtual *bishōjo,* I move like a man.	50%	25%	20.8%	0%	4.2%	1.83
When I become a virtual *bishōjo*, I use a voice changer to have a female voice.	16.7%	4.2%	8.3%	13%	58.3%	3.92
When I become a virtual *bishōjo,* I use my own voice, but I talk differently.	25%	16.6%	29.2%	17%	13%	2.75

When I become a virtual *bishōjo*, I use female words and language.	4.2%	16.7%	20.8%	37.5%	20.8%	3.54
When I become a virtual *bishōjo,* I like to create disruption by using, from times to times, male words, and language.	40.7%	18.5%	37.1%	3.7%	0%	1.92
When I become a virtual *bishōjo*, I talk like someone who is full of energy and youthful confidence.	13%	4.2%	20.8%	41.7%	20.8%	3.54
When I become a virtual *bishōjo,* I talk like someone who is shy or immature like a baby.	16.7%	20.8%	20.8%	29.2%	13%	3.0
My virtual *bishōjo* personality is different from my everyday personality.	16.7%	16.6%	25%	25%	16.7%	3.08
My virtual *bishōjo* personality corresponds to what I would like to be: more confident, happier, funnier, more energetic.	0%	4.2%	33.3%	29.2%	33.3%	4.0
It is mentally tiring/difficult for me to be a *kawaī* virtual *bishōjo*.	50%	29.2%	4.2%	8.3%	8.3%	1.96
I feel pressure to act more *kawaii*.	29.2%	33.3%	8.3%	29.2%	0%	2.38
I started to act like a virtual *bishōjo* in my daily life.	25%	20.8%	16.7%	37.5%	0%	2.71
I've seen a change in my daily behavior since I became a *bishōjo*.	13%	8.3%	13%	45.8%	20.8%	3.7
It is mentally challenging for me to go back to my physical body after being a virtual *bishōjo*.	16.6%	29.2%	29.2%	8.3%	17%	2.79
I would like to stay a *bishōjo* in my everyday life.	4.2%	4.2%	16.6%	25%	50%	4.13
I cannot talk about my virtual *bishōjo* existence to my friends and family.	4.2%	16.7%	33.3%	25%	20.8%	3.42
I am ashamed of being a *bishōjo* VTuber because it is considered as perverted.	25%	29.2%	8.3%	33.3%	4.2%	2.63
Being a virtual *bishōjo* made me more disappointed that I'm not *kawaī* enough in my daily life.	16.7%	20.8%	17%	20.8%	25%	3.17
I struggle because my *bishōjo* body does not match my physical body.	33.3%	37.5%	8.4%	13%	8.3%	2.25
I would like to change my physical body because I'm not happy with it (due to the influence of being a *bishōjo*).	20.8%	20.8%	16.8%	33.3%	8.3%	2.88
Being a virtual *bishōjo* made me feel more attractive in my daily life.	20.8%	20.8%	25.1%	25%	8.3%	2.79
I spend more time as a *bishōjo* because I'm less happy with my physical appearance.	20.8%	16.7%	45.8%	13%	4%	2.63
Being a virtual *bishōjo* gave me more confidence in my daily life.	0%	8.3%	41.7%	37.5%	13%	3.54

Table 1. Likert scale 5-point system data results.

4 Discussions

Overall, the gathered data shows that being a *babiniku* gave participants more confidence (mean 3.54). However, we have yet to unravel in what way becoming a virtual *bishōjo* contributes to a perception of self. Our discussions emulate the first-hand data collection that we gathered. The collected ethnographic testimonies from informants tend to promote *babiniku*'s activity as a display of cute imagery that challenges hegemonic masculinity. It is crucial to note that we are aware that *babiniku* create a community based on a discourse of opposition to dominant gender norms. To understand *babiniku*, we aim to analyze the words and concepts they mobilize to legitimize their practice.

4.1 Socializing as a bishōjo

First, we will present that cute *bishōjo* avatars are used to socialize and create a community or a following on a social networking service (SNS) without showing a physical face. Next, the study will demonstrate that avatars are used to gain popularity and display success based on interview responses from the first and second rounds of our surveys. Original Japanese transcripts can be found by consulting supplementary materials.

Participants explained that being a *bishōjo* is useful when live-streaming on YouTube or posting on Twitter. One participant stated that "I wanted to do some introductory activities in the area [VTuber]; thus, I thought that having a feminine appearance would be the best solution to get attention." Another participant created a *bishōjo* character because it was the best outlet to promote themselves, explaining that they became a *babiniku* "because I want people to know about me on the Internet." Using an English neologism, one participant poetically said that the goal is "to get more people to heart me." This answer could have two meanings. First, the heart-shaped button represents "likes" on Twitter and YouTube, implying that they want to gain popularity. Second, the heart illustrates a desire to ignite attachment. As all participants confirmed, creating a *bishōjo* avatar is the best way to activate a network and gain attention, if not affection, from others.

Thus, acting as a *bishōjo* improves popularity because of the character's conceptual attributes. According to informants, the avatar is someone "that you will want to protect" and her behaviors "make people smile." Others further mentioned that the *kawaī* nature of the character "makes people who see her feel attraction and joy" because she shows emotions and bodily responses like "heartbeats, a throbbing heart, and warmth in the chest." As participants explained, being a *babiniku* is the easiest way to become successful on social media due to *kawaī* qualities: young, a range of facial expressions (e.g., smiling, pouting, wide eyes), hair styles (long hair), and fashionable clothes (a princess dress). The feminine visual elements construct an attractive character with a strong appeal. Some participants created their avatar as a fictitious girlfriend. One participant noted that the avatar was "based on my previous experience in manga, anime, and games … I have shaped my own ideal girl."

Nevertheless, VTubers are aware that this ideal is a stereotypical image of femininity, which is why they use the term *bishōjo* when talking about their avatar. It encapsulates the notion of artificiality, which users want to convey during their performances. The goal is not to become a woman, rather, to embody *kawaī*. This desire is similar to *otoko no ko*, as their primary goal is to achieve aesthetic transformation. Paramount to our understanding of *babiniku* discourse, Kinsella quotes an *otoko no ko* who would "question whether cuteness is necessarily a quality of girls. Perhaps there is another cuteness, which is male cuteness" presuming that *otoko no ko* is, above all, a desire for *kawaī* that is not associated with women (2020a: p. 50). Through

accessories, make-up, and girlish clothes, *otoko no ko* transform into *bishōjo* personas, just like *babiniku* create, design, and voice virtual cuties to incarnate *bishōjo*. This leads us to question how individuals are shaped, patterned, and constricted by cultural norms.

Could becoming a *bishōjo* be regarded as an outlet to criticize gender roles? The *shōjo* figure represents unattainable freedom detached from the productive and reproductive sphere of society (Dale, 2019: p. 326). As for *babiniku*, their activity is often stirred by the desire to disconnect from social expectations, as noted by one participant who stated, "I felt that the true me was different from the real-world me. I wanted a place to release my soul (true) self, free of ties." Based on informants' testimonies, *babiniku* consciously use images of femininity and artificiality because they can liberate themselves by looking and acting cute.

When men engage with content that was not initially designed for them, they cross gender and genre lines and "express sexuality with, between, and through characters" (Galbraith 2019: p. 47). While maybe *babiniku* are not re-negotiating the feminine norms of *kawaī*, they are certainly finding an alternative to what is dominantly understood as being a man. Since *babiniku* aim to feel "cherished," their VTuber performance is a pretext to go beyond the limits of the masculine "role," allowing for vulnerability, dependability, or desirability. Some participants shared that they want to "look fragile" and be "taken care of." As one of them phrased it, "I am a human who wants to be protected, but that is not allowed in reality. I think I can express *kawaī* by using the image of a character that I want to protect." According to informants, when they become *bishōjo*, they can "turn off this adult thing [having to act like a grown-up] that I endure in my daily life." The *babiniku* discourse points to a desire to resign from the expected role of a strong, responsible, powerful male. Participants want to perform the opposite role, to indulge in silly, cozy, fancy, and romantic activities. Thanks to their feminine avatars, VTubers feel less pressure to conform to traditional gender norms and release their guilt. As one of them confirmed, "A beautiful girl tends to be forgiven… Even if she fails."

4.2 *Bishōjo* as an outlet

It might appear contradictory that VTubers reproduce sexist stereotypes when performing as their feminine character. This is, in fact, a challenge to the norms of masculinity. As mentioned in their surveys, *babiniku* are aware of these *clichés.* However, they aim to mimic the standards of feminine seduction, especially those promoted in the popular culture of anime, manga, and idol groups. When asked if they use "tricks" to seduce their audience, participants answered that they "soften the voice," work on "eye contact and/or teasing," "learn the technique of whispering in ears," and "make conscious efforts to strike sensational poses." Some mentioned that they "learned the art of acting or seducing with the gaze," using a word ("acting, performing," *engi*) that originates from performance arts.

Although it appears to comply with norms, the *kawaī* "act" enables VTubers to construct their identity as a form of entertaining camouflage. In Japanese society, where social pressure is high, *babiniku* are left with a narrow space of freedom to question, in their ambiguous way, the prescribed model of manhood. It appears that being a man is becoming difficult in the context of economic crisis. As one participant stated, "I think this is because the reality in Japan is terrible."

To explore this economic analysis, it is necessary to discuss the prolonged recession dating to the 1990s. After the economic bubble collapsed, the nation's growth stalled (Ohno, 2017). Japan now faces precarious employment opportunities, low wages, and limited social support. Japanese male workers experience income insecurity, as well as a sense of failure if they cannot

pretend to be the strong, reliable breadwinners expected by society. In sharp contrast with this lingering malaise (Shibata, 2020) and lost confidence, the enchanted realm of *kawaī* characters functions as a resource for positive feedback, love, and support. As one informant explained, "men have a less positive image in Japan nowadays. We just feel that *bishōjo* is attractive and could change our image." Another participant further mentioned that men choose feminine avatars "because the image of 'men working to sustain their families' is still strong in Japan… The image of a man's life becomes 'work'… As a result, it is easy to give an image of failure." Throughout our ethnographic fieldwork, our informants constantly stated that they use *bishōjo* as a reference model of behavior to construct, within a female character's virtual existence, their expression of masculinity.

As we continued our research, we were faced with a question based on our analysis of the *babiniku* discourse: could becoming a *bishōjo* be a tactic to peel off the negative image of men, particularly those who belong to older generations who are seen as responsible for the downturn? Our informants told us that "there is no denying that old men in Japan are the target of ridicule and discrimination." As if by coincidence, *babiniku* sometimes refer to themselves as *ojisan*, which translates to "uncle," "grandpa," "old man," or "pappy." Although most VTubers are young, they brand themselves with this word that has a negative connotation. *Ojisan* is synonymous with middle-aged salarymen who held a lifelong white-collar job. However, this figure collapsed along with the bubble of the 1990s, allowing for other forms of masculinity to emerge (Dasgupta, 2009).

According to Shoji (2011) the *ojisan* used to serve as an important figure in the home and workplace and it is associated with negative traits like arrogance, uselessness, and egoism. Moreover, the term implies that an individual is a pervert and indulges in misogynistic practices. Here, "old" mirrors marginalized deviance and diminished entity. This word is perceived negatively by the population; therefore, when *babiniku* stamp themselves as *ojisan*, it creates a gap between the *kawaī* avatar and the man behind it: Beauty and the Beast (Nakayama, 2018). This strategy is, of course, part of a creative process that enables those who do not fit society's approved model of masculinity to reconfigure the framework and tackle social exclusion. As one participant confirmed "I am an *ojisan* … Yet I'm cute. Despite my cute character, I feel that, as a man, I am able to talk about masculine topics (including sexual topics)." Some fans might find it appealing that a man is behind the *bishōjo*. For example, "There are people who say they feel safe to like you because they know you are a man on the inside."

4.3 Impact on daily life

Babiniku informants said that they gain confidence through attention and the love of their fans. However, they have not noticed a great impact on their daily behavior. It appears that the character is a pretext to forfeit expected obligations as constantly mentioned to us by our participants. Moreover, becoming a *babiniku* results in more praise than found in their daily lives as a man. One participant noted, "I do not get a lot of praise in reality. Maybe it is because of the affirmation…It is a little more positive." These feelings can lead to improved self-perceptions and assertiveness. Most *babiniku* shared that their activities resulted in confidence ("I feel more positive") and fulfillment ("I am doing something productive… More than the days when I was just consuming and doing nothing"). Generally, the *kawaī* performance had an overall positive impact on the *babiniku* ("I believe it has had a positive impact on me. I have learned how to improve my self-esteem").

The literature review section of this paper mentioned that avatars can modify users' daily behaviors. However, our study did not notice the same pattern among *babiniku*. Most *babiniku*

answered "not really" or "nothing in particular." Other replies given to us by our informants included answers such as "doesn't affect my normal behavior," "doesn't affect my daily activities," and "no major change in my normal behavior… I have been practicing more feminine songs to sing." According to one participant, this is because their "virtual and real existence are completely separate."

As participants often tell it, fantasy and reality cannot be confused because individuals adopt different roles for different audiences. When *babiniku* play their *kawaī* role for their fans, they try to achieve a "sincere" performance. As one participant stated, the goal is to be "more in character" and foster a positive impression. However, when *babiniku* assume their daily duties as employees, students, sons, husbands, or neighbors, they are no less involved in these performances. *Babiniku* stage different roles according to the context and in compliance with its requirements.

Being aware that the *kawaī* character is one role in life, *babiniku* consider their selves as "acts." This leads participants to state that their "general" personality stays intact, noting, "It does not make a big difference because I am doing it with my inner personality intact." As one participant explained, role play is like exploring how clothes or make-up influence behavior. For example, individuals may wear casual clothes to relax. This mirrors avatars, which are available in different versions. As one informant further told us, "But still, all of them are models of [a unique character] … It is not like I am changing identities."

Based on gathered testimonies, avatars do not impact "who they are." On the contrary, the avatar is something they created to express themselves or, as they phrased it, "deliver" or "broadcast" (*haishin*) an aspect of their personality. According to the participants, the *kawaī* avatar is "delivering me as I normally am" and the performance is "something fun to deliver." The entertainment may increase during the performance, as noted by one participant who stated, "I am looking for jokes that I can use in my delivery." Here, the *babiniku* find it more appropriate to discuss their performance in terms of content and creation. As the content attracts people, the users gain confidence. In discussing his VTuber activities, one participant stated, "It does not affect me directly… But I feel relieved or satisfied by acting as a VTuber… It is fulfilling."

4.4 Constructed performance

As reflected in the collected survey answers, the sexual identity of *babiniku* is not impacted by a feminine avatar. The *bishōjo* performance is a constructed practice structured by rules, which keeps the user conscious of the artificial aspect of gender. Users stressed the difference between *bishōjo* as a feminine gender performance and biological females, stating, "it is not so much 'women' as '*bishōjo*'. Fictitious *bishōjo* are different from the flesh and bones of women." In other words, users do not deal with a physical body, akin to *otoko no ko* who also reference *bishōjo* and not females in their cross-dressing practice. However, the digital body is used to send messages. For instance, *babiniku* use techniques to provide a seductive image to their fans. Our informants told us "I learned the technique/art of acting or seducing with my gaze" or "I began to study and use cute movements and cute dialogue." The practice of *babiniku* requires training. "I'm trying to refine my cute moves to attract them [fans] further." Many *babiniku* also insist on the entertaining dimension of their "shows." One of them said: "It is like falling in love as an act, but for entertainment. It is a virtual love story. I think of the method as stories, situation voices, and cute role play."

As previously discussed, *babiniku* are virtual entertainers and streamers with an appetite for success. They pay attention to their fans' desires, constructing a *bishōjo* that meets demands through accepted movements, talk, or behaviors. One participant explained it in terms of "enjoyable play." "I believe that YouTube viewers are basically people who don't have the opportunity to play or want to discover new things to play. The cute look and voice are a way to get viewers interested in the game. In order for me to be a supportive presence, I need to meet these issues. In other words, I need to continue to provide a fun time… Play that you cannot normally play with… And new games." Technology is a part of the props that *babiniku* use to "play" or "produce" themselves (Goffman, 1959). One participant stated they use "good face tracking technology (iPhone face tracking, PerfectSync II) … A voice changer (DAW III) … Feminine and calm vocal technique and speech" to appear *kawaī*. Others agree that voice changers and role play (using language with women in mind) are important. However, not all *babiniku* use voice changers. Nevertheless, although voice changers are used, there is little room left to doubt whether or not a man is behind the character due to the term *babiniku* and the fact that the transformed voice never resembles that of a biological female, nor is it the purpose. Using a voice changer is a tactic to sound more *kawaī* and *babiniku* use the voice to "play a *bishōjo* character." As our informants told us, they use "voice changer because it makes my voice sound more *kawaī*" as a tactic to metamorphose into a *bishōjo* by "getting closer to the ideal I want to portray."

The appearance of *kawaī* can be achieved through movements, voice, and eye contact. Studying and imitating cute VTuber movements are techniques used by *babiniku* to improve role play. It takes a collaborative effort to create a convincing, attractive performance. To achieve excellence, some *babiniku* make facial expressions or movements that the software is unable to transcribe. Therefore, the audience must feel rather than visualize the expression. One informant told us: "I try to do gestures that I think are cute, even if they are not recognized by the camera. I try to make my *kawaī* as cute as possible. The actions I am doing now can be seen in my voice and attitude." Voice, facial and body tracking, and voice changers are elements incorporated by *babiniku* (along with digital costumes and sets). Through this complex system of interactions, users can, in cooperation with their audience and other VTubers, construct their virtual gender identity.

4.5 Challenging the dominant norm

Through their activity as *babiniku*, VTubers question the notions of what it is to be a "man" or "woman." One participant stated, "I feel closer. I can learn how they [women] feel." Performing as a beautiful girl improved their understanding of what women are expected to do to comply with gender norms. "I think it is easier for me to look at women objectively," stated one participant. "I have become more familiar with women," confirmed another user. *Babiniku* activity also helps users feel attractive or "lovely," which, as a man, is unusual. "It is a strange, puzzling feeling … It makes me slightly glad, as ordinary women feel," said one participant. Another stated, "It is fun to play around with saying lines that arouse [men's] desire." Nearly all participants agreed that they enjoyed being desirable, stating it is "very fun," "good," "simply delightful," and provides a "sense of affirmation."

Babiniku feel that being cute is "no problem." Their will to express masculinity by acting as "beautiful girls" allows VTubers to contribute to societal shifts in Japan. As mentioned previously, since the bubble collapse, men have felt alienated from the dominant masculinity discourse. As a result, *babiniku*, and others such as *otoko no ko,* deploy *kawaī* imagery initially created for girls to develop alternative ways of being. However, in contrast to the lavish exhibition of *kawaī* attitudes, *babiniku* often refuse to involve themselves in "debates" on

gender identity. When asked if their activity is a way to reassert their value as men, participants replied that it "has nothing to do with gender." Statements included that the activity "reaffirms my value as a person, not a man" and "it is a way to reaffirm your own value as a human being, regardless of gender, whether male or female." "The activity of VTubers is something that transcends the gender barrier," noted one participant. For nearly all the *babiniku* who answered the survey, it seems "pointless" to analyze performances through the prism of gender. "I believe that there are beings who can inspire regardless of gender. I believe that being a beautiful girl just makes you easy to treat… Friendly and lovable. It is easier to be liked. This is the advantage of being a beautiful girl. By being a *bishōjo* yourself, you can encourage people to be more energetic."

So how exactly do *babiniku* challenge the norm? As one participant said, "In the V world, there are no physical limitations. These categories do not fit." By this they imply that categories like heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual become less relevant in the virtual realm. Another added that it is important to "think of VTubers apart from their sexuality." It may seem contradictory that *babiniku*, who indulge in *kawaī* in opposition to the norms of masculinity, may be reluctant to tackle issues related to gender and sexual identities. However, this is a part of their strategy. By refusing to acknowledge the existence of the lines that separate individuals according to assigned sex or partners, they break the logic of the norm that shapes society. Their strategy is more efficient because it is based on the complete rejection of conventional wisdom regarding different bodies, sex, and genders. As one *babiniku* suggested, such contingencies or "differences" should not be considered real. In one of the statements, an informant challenged the norm by saying "I think some people can be heterosexual in the real world but be homosexual in the virtual world. Also, the story gets even more complicated when real and virtual sex are different to begin with."

Indeed, is the character clearer if we attempt to define the sexuality of a digital character who defines itself as a masculine soul inside a feminine body? As a VTuber demonstrated, acting as beautiful girls makes it "meaningless to use labels and words like man, woman, straight, or homosexual." To fight the power mechanism of labels, *babiniku* avoid vocabulary used as a tool by the dominant system of representation. Turning into undefined creatures that use a body double to multiply the complexities and ambiguities of human desire, the *babiniku* challenge dominant norms of sexuality and gender by overturning roles and having fun with stereotypes.

5 Conclusion

Building on a survey conducted in the *babiniku* community, we bring to light original aspects of the digital cross-dressing phenomenon in Japan. Through new media technologies and avatars, *babiniku* enter a parallel life where they can realize some dimensions of their hidden being and express themselves differently from social norms. According to the study, being a virtual *bishōjo* is a positive experience for participants. Being successful, they can recover self-esteem. Acting childish, cute, and wild, they can alleviate the burden placed on adults. Thus, *babiniku* practice can be understood as an agency to relieve stress and free oneself from social constraints.

Furthermore, as we could see, becoming a *babiniku* offered surveyed participants the ability to "rethink" fundamental issues of life (i.e., social interactions, gender codes, and body). While the *babiniku* appearance might seem stereotypical, taking part in the digital role-play enables participants to distance themselves from the social expectations related to men, and dominant masculinity. Users perform outside established gender narratives to consciously produce and craft a notion of femininity that is not based on biological females. Instead, their femininity is

fabricated out of beautiful characters found in media, allowing them to act and live outside of societal pressures experienced in their daily lives.

6 Contribution

Our research, combining different anthropological methods, using first-hand testimonies and critically analyzing them, contributes to an existing field investigating the transgressive nature of men's engagement with cute media characters. First, according to Galbraith (2019: p. 22-23), men who felt alienated from the so-called male culture found opportunity to reconsider masculinity in the media that is the girl's comic genre, thus critiquing dominant masculinity. Second, according to Iida (2004: p. 69), men's "feminine" aesthetics can be deployed to distance oneself from hegemonic masculinity and perform gender identity strategically. Third, the distancing from dominant norms and the attempt to negotiate alternative ways of being in Japan is further discussed by Kinsella (2020a, 2020b) in her articles about *otoko no ko* presented in this paper.

We acknowledge that our paper goes beyond the *babiniku* activity and contributes to an existing body of literature that puts forward the argument that the deployment of *kawaī* or feminine aesthetics by men is done to challenge and find an alternative to prescribed gender roles. Nevertheless, this paper varies from existing research about cross-dressing in the avatar world, as it has a specific geographic perspective (Japan) and focuses on a specific demographic (*babiniku*). This paper may serve as a foundation for future research in the sector of Japanese virtual cross-dressing practices, contributing to our understanding of cute avatars' impact on users' perceptions of self in their daily lives.

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