

## **Research Question**

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 is referring 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 July of 2015 and picked up pace in December when a book titled “Genderless Danshi” was released. Genderless danshi are young men who are choosing to shop and dress without regard to gender labels on clothing, follow a strict skincare regimen, and even wear make-up. This does not mean either that they are only dressing in a manner regarded as feminine. Although they may be wearing women’s clothing, genderless danshi fashion is different from cross dressing. What defines these youth’s fashion choices as genderless is that the clothes 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>1</sup>

What I hope to find out through my research is what are the subversive implications of “Genderless Danshi” to the traditional gender norms in Japan and how do they problematize and challenge these norms. Just how 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. The usual career path for men involved getting a job in a large Japanese corporation right after

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<sup>1</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/).

college and becoming what is known as a salaryman, representing what is known as “hegemonic” masculinity. Although this lifestyle is considered normative, it is also paired with a tired and frumpy image. 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 their fashion choices. But what are the limitations to these implications and new image of masculinity that is desired by these young men?

Despite this expected 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 my topic, I will also 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. And compared to a female’s reaction to a genderless danshi, how might a man’s reaction differ. For example, do Japanese men think genderless danshi to be creepy or strange because of their dedication to their beauty routines? By exploring the public relations of genderless danshi, I can also reexamine whether their goal of reshaping Japanese masculinity is effective through a female fanbase. Does the respect of young teenage girls, in turn, gain the respect of men as well? In order to understand this topic further, I will also 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 like “unisex” or “androgynous”.

## **Methodology**

For this topic of genderless danshi, I think it is important to research the fundamentals of gender and masculinity. Doing so will give me a solid base to use as comparison to genderless danshi's actions and style of dress to hegemonic masculinity ideals. Since masculinity is expectedly performed differently by culture, I should also research the history of Japanese masculinity and how it relates to fashion. For example, if the history of Japanese masculinity and fashion shows that there was more or less a smaller divide between genders, than that may allude to reasons for the emergence of genderless danshi as well as the assimilation of these elements in normal men's fashion. Extreme fashion subcultures are prominent in Japan. They are not regarded as trends as a whole, but they do have trends that go through each subculture separately, just as there are trends that rotate in normal mainstream fashion. Finally, it is important to look back at gender performance in society and the challenges of this in Japanese society. Japan is a country where rules are strictly abided by, almost painfully so, and breaking off from the normal actions or duties that a person would normally apply oneself to can sometimes create more negative consequences than what is intended. By essentially, breaking away from gender roles in fashion, genderless danshi are not only breaking rules on gender performativity but also challenging traditional obedience to the societal system.

## **Masculinity**

The first thing to note when discussing masculinity is that it “does not exist except in contrast with femininity.”<sup>2</sup> Without the idea that there is gender situation based on the qualities and characteristics of women, then similarly there would be no concept of a masculine man.

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<sup>2</sup> Connell, Raewyn W. *Masculinities*. Polity Press, 1995. Print. Pg. 67

Raewyn Connell in her book *Masculinities*, describes four types of masculinities and states that not only is defining these masculinities important but also recognizing relations between them. These four types in order of social hierarchy are hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity gains power in society through the use of force and “supports gender inequality.”<sup>3</sup> Complicit masculinity describes men who benefit from the system of hegemonic masculinity but do not actively take part in it or endorse it. Subordinate masculinity describes men who face oppression because of the definition of hegemonic masculinity, most often homosexuals. Marginalized masculinities refer to men that are dominant in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race.

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 portray. Furthermore, in order to create a new masculinity, one would need to be aware of the preexisting masculinities and their societal implications and impacts. Where does this new masculinity fit in the social order of prementioned masculinities, or is it outside the bounds of it? Through their choice of clothing, I believe that genderless danshi want to not only create a new masculinity but too totally oppose traditional hegemonic masculinity by merging the normative ideas of masculinity and femininity. C. J. Pascoe, in her book *Dude, You're a Fag*, in which she studies the method of validation of masculinities in high schools notes that although hegemonic masculinities are rarely present in men, states that all masculinities benefit from the “patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from overall subordination of women.”<sup>4</sup> If the youth participating in this fashion subculture consider the fashion genderless, are they an

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<sup>3</sup> Pascoe, C J. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. Print. Pg. 7

<sup>4</sup> Connell. *Masculinities*. Pg. 79

exception of the patriarchal dividend? The matter of their sex most likely outweighs how they create their gender identity through fashion and keeps them in the brackets of the patriarchal dividend. Examining the prevalent aspects of masculinity in Japan will also help determine the public's reaction to the genderless danshi's goals.

### **History of Japanese Masculinity in Fashion**

The history of men's fashion in Japan plays an important role in the emergence of genderless danshi as a subculture. During the "Heian Court (794-1185), the art of matching colours was especially important in men's and women's dress".<sup>5</sup> Then, during the Tokugawa period, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, colors on men's clothing depicted what social class he was in, where certain colors such as white and purple were prohibited to the lower classes.<sup>6</sup> During the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taisho (1912-1926) periods, European-style clothing was introduced to Japan and essentially changed the expression of self through clothing. This phenomenon leads Masafumi Monden to ask if clothing is performing a particular role in society and if so, can this role "be used to show acceptance, conformity to, and refusal to social expectations of gender".<sup>7</sup>

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 common laws that are put in place, usually making no exception for them even 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

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<sup>5</sup> Monden, Masafumi. Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Print. Pg. 4

<sup>6</sup> Theodore, De Bary William, et al. Sources of Japanese Tradition. 1600 to 2000. Columbia University Press, 2005. Print. Pg. 13

<sup>7</sup> Monden. Japanese Fashion Cultures. Pg. 5

out in one's fashion sense or even in one's mannerisms. For this reason, style and men's fashion is 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>8</sup> The business suit however is seen less of a fashion choice and more of a requirement.

In Monden's research, he examines three popular men's fashion magazines in Japan, *Popeye*, *Men's non-no*, and *Fineboys*. In this research, he observes that although the magazines targeted audience are heterosexual males, the magazines consistently feature over 60 percent of their content related to fashion with the remaining space devoted to lifestyle. This can suggest that an interest in fashion is not regarded as a feminine quality in Japan. Furthermore, the descriptions used for some of the men's fashion in these magazines and other ads, specifically by the brand MILK, use adjectives typically associated with feminine defined features. In Monden's view, *kawaii* (cute) culture has already been assimilated into men's fashion. Because of this, it seems difficult to draw the line on what is exactly a genderless style as opposed to normal men's fashion that has adopted *kawaii* elements.

### **Performative Challenge to Gender Norms**

The theory of gender performativity, made by Judith Butler, carries great relevance to gendered fashions. 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

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<sup>8</sup> Monden. Japanese Fashion Cultures. Pg. 24

correctly”.<sup>9</sup> This means that gender is created and perpetuated by what society decides are acceptable practices for masculine men and feminine women. Through this theory, we can also bring into discussion the idea of “doing gender”.<sup>10</sup> To do gender is apply oneself to the normative gender roles and displays of society. These roles include “socially guided...activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’”.<sup>11</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.

The boys that are a part of the 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. If so, how are genderless danshi “doing gender” that is undefined within the bounds of masculine and feminine natures? 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 gender as an emergent feature of social situations”.<sup>12</sup> This means that we do not place the definitions of gender on the individual themselves but how their gender display fits into society as a whole. Since there are two traditional gender roles, we try to place men as masculine and women as feminine. Genderless danshi are purposefully trying to avoid these limiting definitions in their gender displays through fashion. With that in mind, how do their actions fit into the normal masculine gender roles in Japan? The genderless danshi’s goal to create a new masculinity challenges people, when trying to figure out where to place them on a scale of masculinity and femininity. s

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<sup>9</sup> Monden. Japanese Fashion Cultures. Pg. 6

<sup>10</sup> West, Candace, and Don H Zimmerman. “Doing Gender.” *Doing Gender*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 1987, pp. 125–151. pg. 126

<sup>11</sup> West. Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 126

<sup>12</sup> West. Zimmerman. *Doing Gender*. Pg. 126

## Primary Sources

Because the topic of genderless dashi is has only just appeared in main stream media in the past two years or so my primary sources are for the majority in Japanese. I will use magazines to compare normal Japanese men's fashion to the fashion of genderless danshi. I can also use magazine sources in order to note kawaii influences into Japanese men's fashion as well compare reader reactions to these styles to reactions of the styles worn by genderless danshi. Because I am researching a very new fashion subculture, social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter will be very important as primary sources. Similarly, there is no numerical or statistical data to be observed of these subculture as of now.

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 often use Instagram to hold live question and answer session for their fans. On YouTube, I can use interviews and tv program appearances. Additionally, many genderless danshi have their own channels where they post make up tutorials and other behind the scenes glances at 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 these subculture, Yūtarō, has a published book in which he talks about his skin care routines, clothing style, and other beauty regimes. Through these resources, I can compare and contrast genderless danshi to themselves as well as sources that feature normal men's fashion and make inferences based on the many sources.

