

GENDERLESS *DANSHI* PHENOMENON AND GENDER IDENTITY IN JAPAN

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Abstract: Genderless *danshi* is a term for Japanese boys and young men participating in a subculture named genderless-*kei* that engaged in fashion. This study describes why some Japanese boys and young men chose to be genderless *danshi* and their effect on gender identity in the youth. Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs and Butler's gender performativity theory are used in this literature study, which employs a qualitative paradigm and a sociological method. The results show that the reason being genderless *danshi* was the thought that everyone has the right to express themselves through fashion without gendered dress borders. As for effect, compared to stereotypical males, certain Japanese boys and young men tend to have a substantially more open attitude toward feminine concerns like fashion and beauty consumption. This phenomenon demonstrates how Butler's theories on gender are essentially performative and rely on collective performance.

Keywords: gender, genderless, fashion, Japanese youth, identity

INTRODUCTION

Genderless is a condition where a person does not define him/herself as biologically male or female. They present themselves free from gender norms, for example, in how they dress. Several ethnic groups have traditional genderless beliefs, including Indonesia, with the Bissu from the Bugis tribe. Bissu is a term for biologically male people with the highest spiritual position in the Bugis tribe, which is considered neither male nor female but representative of the entire gender spectrum (Prasetyo, 2022; Stables, 2021).

Meanwhile, genderless *danshi* is a term for Japanese boys and young men who participate in a subculture named genderless-*kei*¹ that has inspired many Japanese youngsters. This fast-spreading subculture is engaged in fashion, where its members use fashion as an effort to oppose the rules where clothes are only classified for both types of biological gender. They use fashion because they believe it is the fastest way to reach a greater audience. In this subculture, there is no gender limitation for its member, be they a boy or a girl; they can express their identities any way they want. Though, in the entertainment world, they usually express it through fashion because they believe that fashion is the fastest way to reach a greater audience. In Japan, boys and young men are the ones who mostly do it. Their slender body, cute face, and relatively natural make-up are standard features usually seen in their appearance. This genderless *danshi* appearance differs from the Bissu, who tend to dress themselves in brightly colored clothes and make-up. It also differs from the drag queen or female impersonator, whose apparel purposefully shows outlandish, often vulgar, and exaggerated stereotypes of womanhood (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017).

The development of genderless-*kei* on several social media platforms, such as Instagram, has become a means for genderless *danshi* to express themselves and for the public to learn more about genderless in Japan. This concept can be seen through uploading photos of how

¹ Kei in Japanese means "system".

they dress and interact with their followers. Their daily life displayed through social media is also related to how genderless *danshi* express themselves.

The ones considered "normal" people tend to think genderless *danshi* is part of the LGBT community because of their genderless way of dressing. However, *genderless-kei* has nothing to do with sexual orientation. It seems that this view is caused by the concept of gender in Japan, which focuses on the performativity of gender rather than their biological gender so that factors in how to dress and behave towards others can influence one's view of an individual (Snyder, 2010).

According to Masafumi Monden (2011), some of the genderless men in Japan stated that Japanese society generally places clear limits on the appearance and sexuality of an individual. One's appearance does not determine one's sexuality, and one's sexuality does not determine how someone has to get dressed. However, some state that being genderless can open their minds more broadly when accepting other sexualities. Regardless of the concept of dress and sexuality, this genderless way of dressing is a fashion where one can be free to determine the type of clothing they want to wear regardless of gender.

The genderless *danshi* phenomenon in Japan raises questions; why do they choose to dress genderlessly, and how this phenomenon affects the Japanese youth? Therefore, this paper describes why some Japanese boys and young men chose to be genderless *danshi* and their effect on gender identity in the youth.

METHODS

This literature research has a qualitative paradigm with a sociological approach. Data was obtained by observing 4 Instagram accounts of genderless *danshi*, in which the owners proclaimed themselves genderless, had more than 1,000 followers, and had fewer provocative photos. Less provocative means that those photos do not contain nudity when it serves as the data corpus. Those accounts are mentioned below.

1. @chippai_lenin
2. @waga_mama_simizu
3. @misakiishida666
4. @yu.e6937557

The data taken is in the form of photo uploads, captions of these photos, and comments on the photos in their Instagram accounts. Then, the data were analyzed using Maslow's concept of the hierarchy of needs to find out why they became genderless *danshi*. In addition, Butler's theory of gender performativity is used to determine the effect of the prevalence of genderless *danshi* that appears on social media on the gender identity of Japanese youth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After doing some analysis, it is known that why some Japanese boys and young men chose to be genderless *danshi* can be classified into two points. They are: 1) the desire to be able to express themselves, regardless of society's views; and 2) the hope that their community can develop more and be more accepted by society. As for effect, compared to stereotypical males, some Japanese boys and young men tend to be more open toward feminine concerns like fashion and beauty consumption.

The Reasons

Gendered clothing is viewed differently in modern society. However, wearing men's clothing is generally considered more socially acceptable for a woman than vice versa, for women have "penis envy". However, Butler (1990) observes that An individual's biology does not determine

their fate, and biological jealousy in childhood does not influence future adult decisions. Therefore, the Japanese boys and young men who feel they can not accept the gendered clothing chose to be genderless *danshi*.

Social media, like Instagram, promotes meaningful interactions with others and can also be used to develop fashion trends. Fashion items are often flaunted on Instagram as a form of social capital. According to Field (Hickman, Ozuem, & Okoya, 2018), the more people who share a common outlook with others, the higher their social capital. Therefore, it can be argued that sharing fashion on social media generates social capital. Consequently, it could be argued that a large amount of the online discussion about fashion is focused on accumulating 'likes' and followers rather than on equality and trend forecasting (Hickman et al., 2018). The same goes for the accounts which became this paper's data source. Those accounts each have 1,000-4,500 followers with various backgrounds, but all seem to encourage this genderless *danshi* to keep doing whatever they are doing now. These followers that constantly encourage them have brought out hopes for the genderless *danshi* to be more accepted by society. These reasons are in line with Maslow as one of the humanistic psychologists who generally agree that people are goal-oriented, creative, and share a desire to be happy (McCadden Jr., 2015).

The Effect

Gender identity refers to defining oneself as a woman or a male. This identity is a critical component of one's self-concept. Gender identity is the personal and internal understanding of femininity or masculinity as manifested via identification, personality, and conduct. Visual language or symbols such as clothing are used to perform and continuously negotiate an individual's sexual and gender identity. Gender identification refers to an individual's inner feelings and self-awareness of masculine and female qualities (Akdemir, 2018). When we connect this statement with why genderless *danshi* choose to show themselves the way they do, we can say that compared to stereotypical males, some Japanese boys and young men tend to be more open toward feminine concerns like fashion and beauty consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

Fashion has evolved throughout time. It symbolizes freedom of choice for those resistant to traditionalism's confines, just like the genderless *danshi*. In a sense, clothing has evolved into an identification tool that establishes the symbolic borders between individuals. Fashion and clothing are outward manifestations; this industry uses clothing to construct and communicate cultural, social, and gender identities. The person's identity is embodied in the body by clothing and fashion, be it the rich, the minorities, or the genderless. Therefore, it can affect "normal" people that often engage with the genderless *danshi*, and that like to oppose the rules where clothes are only classified for both types of biological gender to become one. Furthermore, from this research, it can be said that the genderless *danshi* phenomenon demonstrates how Butler's theories on gender are essentially performative and rely on collective performance.

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