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# Babiniku: what lies behind the virtual performance. Contesting gender norms through technology and Japanese theatre.

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## **Abstract**

This research paper focuses on ethnographic fieldwork to understand the logic of action and representations specific to Japanese men who deploy virtual female characters, notably called *babiniku*, for the purpose of creating entertainment content. The logic of *babiniku* comparisons with Japanese theatre is explored to demonstrate that portraying oneself as a “cute girl” (*bishōjo*) character is a tactic for defining oneself against dominant norms and developing an alternative model of identification for men. By researching virtual cross-dressing practices, this paper attempts to shine a light on the contemporary issues connected to technology in Japan.

**Key words** *babiniku*, VTuber, Japanese theatre, cross-dressing, performance, *kawai*, masculinity

## **Introduction**

Since 2016, people in Japan have been creating virtual characters online and entertaining content on websites such as YouTube. They are called *virtual YouTubers* (VTubers), 2D or 3D computer-generated characters with an anime appearance moved with motion capture technology used in games. There are two ways of becoming a VTuber: 1) by using virtual reality setup and motion tracking devices, individuals can incarnate their characters in virtual environments; 2) by using a webcam and a motion tracking software, individuals can track their facial (and sometimes hand) movements that are transcribed on their character. Then, the VTuber films themselves and uploads their content on video broadcasting websites such as YouTube or NicoNico. Here are just a few characteristics that researchers attribute to VTubers: have an anime and manga appearance (Matsushita 2018: 181); enhance the individual and an extension for entertainment (AO 2018: 37); a digital *kigurumi*<sup>i</sup> (*dejitaru kigurumi*) (Kobayashi 2018: 42). The desire to become a fictional character is not unusual, as Japan has a history of dancing in masks (*nō* theatre) and *kigurumi*, traditionally seen as a

form of desire for transformation (Uminekozawa 2018: 58). One year after VTubers came into existence, at the end of 2017, a VTuber boom took place as motion capture technology had become more accessible, and the YouTube culture has taken root, making it easier for individual (*kojin*) VTubers<sup>ii</sup> to engage in the activity (Hirota 2018a: 48–49). But who are those virtual entertainers? Todoki Uka, a female who uses a *bishōnen* (cute boy) avatar, notes:

In some cases, people who have existed for a long time, such as *boku*,<sup>iii</sup> have come to the fore. There are also “a necromancer who manifests the *bishōjo* [cute girl] idea as a substitute for oneself;” “a former male *bishōjo* who realized their transexual desire after watching a *kojin* VTuber for the first time;” “a woman who wants to throw away the flesh warship that has been stained by others and become an electronic life-form that will not get its feelings hurt;” “a father trying to get back his lost daughter as an electronic life-form.” (2018: 61)

In the VTuber world, women and men can become fictional cute girl characters, just as they can become fictional boy characters. Some VTubers are men who take on cute appearances, talk in high-pitched voices, choose kitsch outfits for their virtual characters, and imitate the playfulness and immaturity of young girls. Those men with a cute girly virtual appearance are called *babiniku* バ美肉 amongst VTubers, originating back in 2018. The abbreviation stands for *bācharu bishōjo juniku* virtual *bishōjo* incarnation). *Bishōjo* are feminine-looking, cute characters typically found in anime and manga (Jin-Shiow 2015). Although *bishōjo* is often translated as “beautiful girl” characters, a more appropriate term would be “cute [*kawaiī*] girl,” a character that emerged from the consumption of men “across gender/genre boundaries and appropriating *shōjo* manga<sup>iv</sup> and anime” (Galbraith 2015: 22). While the term *babiniku* is not gendered, it implies that the person is open about their *naka no hito* (the person inside), such as a middle-aged man, a brother, etc (Editorial Department 2018: 38). Although there are also a few female VTubers who call themselves *babiniku*, I focus on Japanese men who use this term.

In this research paper I investigated *babiniku* by studying their practices through the discourse and prism of the theatre arts—*kabuki* and *ningyō jōruri* (puppet theatre)—from which they claim to draw inspiration. Actively adjusting their claim to their action by

developing aesthetics, practices, and social interactions that are reminiscent of those traditional theater arts. Three people, a journalist, a folklorist, and a researcher, argued that the virtual phenomenon stems from traditional Japanese theatre arts. The journalist Hirota Minoru, the representative director of Panora<sup>v</sup> involved in several VTuber activities, ranging from interviews to organization of *babiniku* events in Japan, mentioned that *babiniku* evolved from *onnagata*, male actors impersonating women's roles in *kabuki* (2018b). According to Hatanaka Akihiro, a folklorist, VTubers' popularity results from a combination of *ningyō jōruri*, 3D computer-generated characters, and cutting edge-technology (2019: 73). Similarly, Shirai Akihiko, director of GREE VR Studio Laboratory and a research and development (R&D) researcher, explained that “VTubers became a new form of *jōruri*<sup>vi</sup> [...] Just as the narrator of *jōruri* recites a story, users take advantage of the VTuber avatar to recite and narrate a story” (Shirai 2020). *Babiniku* also emphasize similarities between their practice and *kabuki* or *ningyō jōruri*. Nem, a self-proclaimed first individual (*kojin*) VTuber, has been the most vocal about aspects of *babiniku* culture and its similarities to Japanese theatre. According to Nem, as with *ningyō jōruri*, the audience “work together with the VTuber to create the virtual *bishōjo*” (2018). During an NHK show *Nehorin Pahorin: Babiniku Ojisan* (*babiniku* middle-aged man), Nem mentioned that just like during a puppet show, the audience does not think, “look, a middle-aged man,” when looking at the puppeteers manipulating beautiful feminine puppets.

To understand *babiniku* we must study their practices through the prism of the theatre arts from which they and researchers claim to stem. I investigate how those men create “new” forms of masculinity and identity, challenging existing gender norms through technology and *bishōjo* characters. Based on gathered ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, surveys, and semi-structured interviews gathered from fifty-one informants collected for my master's degree thesis from December 2019 until June 2021, I investigate the idea that *babiniku* want to escape the constraint of hegemonic masculinity while using the image of the *babiniku* as *onnagata* and the puppeteers. First, I discuss ways in which *babiniku* draw inspiration from traditional theatre. Then, I focus on three aspects: the movements (*kata*), the gaps, and the erotic dimension. Finally, I conclude with the contesting nature of the virtual cross-dressing.

### **Japanese theatre, anime, and virtual idols**

Japanese puppet theatre is called *ningyō jōruri* or *bunraku*. *Ningyō* (puppets) *jōruri* (narration) originated from the conjunction of two art forms: storytellers and marionettes. Japan specialist Jean-Jacques Tschudin explains that the theatre consists of three elements: (1) dramatic recitation of text by a *tayū* (narrator) separate from the puppet, who narrates and interprets the text, (2) musical accompaniment with a shamisen, (3) and puppet manipulation (2011). According to Frank Proschan, the audience sees the puppets perform acts and the living human beings manipulating them, leading to the audience oscillating between perceiving the “the stage figures as illusions and perceiving them as real” (1981: 548). According to Jan Kott and Boleslaw Taborski, the puppet theatre is one of illusion and anti-illusion. The authors explained that the anti-illusion consists of revealing the puppeteers, narrator, and musician, while the illusion is the puppet that repeats human-like gestures (1976: 103).

*Kabuki* originated from the verb *kabuku* (to lean, to slant) as is interpreted as “avant-garde,” “bizarre,” “eccentric,” or “decadent.” According to Japanese theatre scholar Andrew Tsubaki, *kabuki* was in the hands of amateurs in its beginning and was invented by Izumo no Okuni, a shrine priestess, who developed an extravagant and provocative *onna kabuki* (female *kabuki*) in the early 17th century (2001: 3, 9). Gradually, *kabuki* experienced a number of incidents with the *bakufu* (military government) as it “ran so blatantly counter to the social and moral principles espoused by the Tokugawa government” (Shively, 2001: 33). As Shively mentioned, the *bakufu* first prohibited women’s *kabuki*, to prevent any disturbance of law and order and it led to the development of female impersonators (*onnagata*) often played by young male prostitutes and thus leading to even more disruption of public policy. However, the prostitution did not stop.<sup>vii</sup> According to Furukawa Makoto and Angus Lockyer, the *kabuki* actors were *kagama* (male prostitutes) (1994: 106). The authors explained that *kagama* is “said to be based on gender differentiation. The beauty of the *kagama* was compared to that of a courtesan: it trespassed on the heterosexual group” (1994: 100).

*Kabuki* and *ningyō jōruri* have been deployed as theoretical frameworks to analyze recent trends in Japanese virtual technologies and animation. In their article about vocaloids, Louise H. Jackson and Mike Dines used the notion of illusion, which is inherent to the puppet theatre, as a precursor to vocaloid holograms, such as Hatsune Miku, and they used it as a framework “to read and understand the development of vocaloids and their associated avatar” (2016: 175). Fukuoka Toshihiro, professor at Digital Hollywood University, explained that Hatsune

Miku is part of a Japanese culture that attaches souls to lifeless objects (2020). According to him, a *ningyō jōruri* performance breathes life into inanimate figures, similar to Hatsune Miku, as the virtual idol is not animate due to the fact that it is a created character that is animated through technology.

In *The Anime Paradox, Patterns and Practices Through the Lens of Traditional Japanese Theatre*, Stevie Suan focused on the “mixture of reality and unrealism” typical in the Japanese performance arts and anime (2013). Moreover, Suan discussed the viewer’s ability to invest in the presented spectacle as if it were real, echoed in Nem’s statement that the audience “work together with the VTuber to create the virtual *bishōjo*” (2018). Cody Poulton explained, in his article about puppets and robots, that recent technological developments “reflect a fascination with the techniques of animation and simulation in Japan that go at least as far back as the puppets of the seventeenth-century theatres of Osaka” (2014: 281). Moreover, according to Poulton, just like traditional performance arts, contemporary robotics and computer-generated media are preoccupied with creating virtual realities (2014: 290). Although only the few individuals presented in the introduction discussed VTubers and *babiniku* in relation to traditional theatre, anime and virtual idol researchers have been using Japanese theatre as a framework to understand technological and anime related trends in Japan. In the following section I want to discuss two similarities between *babiniku*, *kabuki* and *ningyō jōruri* that I develop further in the article.

### **Comparing forms: *babiniku* and Edo theatre**

“The culture of *ningyō jōruri kuroko*<sup>viii</sup> is one of the foundations of virtual *bishōjo*,” as I was told by my informants. Regarding *kabuki*, they mentioned that “*onnagata* and *bunraku* have various ‘character types’ that the audiences can identify by their appearance. The same is true for *babiniku*, as the audience can identify types such as ‘academic *bishōjo*’ or ‘cat-eared *bishōjo*’ by appearance.” In this sub-chapter, I expand on two points of comparison between the virtual cuties and traditional theatre of the Edo period: the “appearing as” (*mitate*) quality and the codified movements.

According to David Waterhouse, *mitate* means “witnessing with one’s own eyes” (1997, 29). Timothy T. Clark mentioned that *mitate* can be understood as “to link one thing to another” and that *mitate* has been manifested itself for the most part in the visual form of *mitate-e* (*mitate* pictures) (1997: 7). David R. Bell noted that *mitate* refers to artistic devices such as

“parody” or “allusion,” incorporating allusive playfulness to pictures, poems, and wordplay (2016: 88-89). Shirane Haruo explained *mitate* as a visual transposition of seeing *x* as *y* (Shirane 2013). In a book about *mitate* and aesthetic strategies, Alfred Haft explained that *mitate* is a method for “confronting and reinterpreting seemingly fixed cultural hierarchies” by drawing on culturally recognizable signs (Haft 2012: 96–177). Amongst *babiniku*, *mitate* takes on the meaning of technique of “appearing as” *bishōjo*. It evokes imagining the virtual character that does not exist “physically” as if it were real, and perceiving a man as a virtual *bishōjo*, thus, creating a temporary illusion of a *bishōjo* by metamorphosing and transforming into a virtual cutie. In the previously mentioned NHK broadcast, Nem said that *babiniku* appear as *bishōjo* on the stage: “There is a culture of *mitate*, where you feel something and is not there as something that is. I think that *babiniku* is the same kind of Japanese culture.” During an interview Nem explained that:

*Mitate* = culture of imagination, culture to be another existence. It is also similar to *ningyō jōruri*. It is just technology, no difference at all. 2D, 3D, dolls, make-up, anything. Doll → (*mitate*) → *bishōjo*. Men → (*mitate*) → *bishōjo*.

In order to impart to lifeless virtual puppets various emotions to appear as (*mitate*) a *bishōjo*, my informants use technology. They represent that which does not exist by performing and acting out fictional cuties. According to Anzai Tetsuo, professor and theatre director, “the basis of acting technique is metamorphosis, transformation, or even transubstantiation” (Kishi et al. 2006). He further noted that metamorphosis and transformation are not only in the roots of the Japanese theater but are still used in the creation of plays. The metamorphosis capacity of *onnagata* to appear as women on the stage and puppeteers’ transformation of inanimate puppets into living characters are similar to *babiniku*. And, as Nem mentioned, that same transformative quality is found amongst *babiniku* when those men appear as (*mitate*) their desired, ideal persona—*bishōjo*.

To understand the creation and use of desired identities, I introduce the *ningyō jōruri* and *onnagata* in terms of narrative expressive mediums. For puppets to perform gestures and appear as living creatures, puppeteers have developed a number of codified movements called *kata*. In a book about traditional Japanese theatre, Karen Brazell mentioned that there are two types of patterns: *furi* are created to evoke human movements, and *kata* are poses that

could, for example, accent the beauty of a woman's kimono (1998: 306-307). Just as with the puppet theatre, *onnagata* uses visual cues to represent the roles they play, such as *kata*. Ozaki Yoseharu explained that because of the *kata* that portrays femininity as the ideal female beauty, the actor "can continue to act however old he becomes" (2006, 14). Since the 18th century, *onnagata* imitated other *onnagata* and further refined the art of artificial aesthetics. In *Beautiful Boys/Outlaw Bodies, Devising Kabuki Female-Likeness*, Katherine Mezur that *onnagata* aim beyond what is real to create an illusion of sensuality; however, they articulate their performance based on strict *kata* (2005). *Kata* enables actors to transcend their physical appearance and present the illusion of femininity, an artificially constructed simulacrum. Through this performance, *onnagata* questioned the system of differences based on the binary separation of sexes as they transgressed "the boundary between the masculine and the feminine genders" (Takakuwa 1996: 220).

To construct an attractive character with a strong appeal, *babiniku* develop their *kata*, or movements, inspired by *kawai* found in *anime*, idol groups, and girls, adapted to the virtual stage. My informants told me that "*babiniku* have 'kawai move' that is *kata*. Just as there are *kata* in *onnagata* and *bunraku*." They further added that "some *kata* of *bishōjo* express certain thoughts and emotions as symbols," however, "the main source [of *babiniku kata*] can be traced back to the traditional performing arts type [*kabuki* and *ningyō jōruri*]." My informants were also quick to note that *babiniku* is an extension of the "homo sociality [*homosōsharu*] of *kabuki onnagata*." Other informants told me that, amongst *babiniku*, there is "homosexual-like feeling [*homo-tekina kankaku*]," "homoerotic [*homoerotikku*]," "male homosexuality, *kagama*, and *otoko no ko*."<sup>ix</sup> Nine participants out of fifty-one told me that there are similarities between *kagama* and *babiniku*. However, they noted that it is only a limited community that will spread in the future as the virtual reality sex industry develops. Moreover, they insist that the difference between *kagama* and themselves is that the latter is virtual; "the actual act of selling and the act of performing are two different things," one informant told me. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the erotic element of *babiniku* activity. I explore *babiniku kata* and the erotic aspect in the following sections.

### ***Babiniku's kata: codified movements on screen***

The cuteness is performed in terms of *kata*, an element that becomes a tactic when combined with the cute design and clothes, as it "makes people who see her [their *bishōjo* character] feel attraction and joy," as *babiniku* said. In order for the tactic to work, participants



remarked that “you should act normally and *kawai*.” *Babiniku* pay attention to their attitude, body posture, carefully analysing and reproducing *bishōjo* movements. They mentioned that to achieve gestures that are “more symbolic than real life,” *babiniku* turn towards anime for inspiration. They “mix favourite elements from the *bishōjo* I have seen in anime” and “heroines in the various manga” to “satisfy my desire to metamorphose” and “meet the expectations of my listeners,” participants clarified. *Babiniku* refer to other VTuber for their *kawai* moves, just like contemporary *onnagata* refer to past actors for feminine gestures.

The importance of *kawai* movements has been also discussed amongst researchers in the game industry. During a CEDEC conference, ebi tec labo, a company that studies cute movements of girls, explained that *kawai* movements come from the actor and the character image they portray (2020). According to them, simply reproducing physical humans’ *kawai* movement as 3D characters is not sufficient and might appear bizarre. As for *babiniku*, they must adapt theirs to the technology they are employing, creating a repertoire of gestures. Amongst *babiniku*, the *kawai* move (*kawai mūbu*) is *babiniku*’s *kata* practiced with diligence. The term implies the *kawai* movement of feminine characters and methods to look cute in virtual and digital environments as those avatars. There are several rules: (1) for elegant movements, “move like you are in oil;” (2) “start and end movements slowly;” (3) “do not follow real girl movements, but *bishōjo* manga/anime moves;” (4) “optimize movements for a *kawai* avatar;” (5) “exaggerate movements;” (6) “move as small and round as possible;” (7) “be aware of the curves of your body;” (8) “wave my hand;” (9) “put your weight on one leg a little when you stand;” and (10) “raise my legs, twist my waist, and do a peace sign.” Nem explained that *kawai* moves are very similar to *onnagata*. More specific movements include making big gestures with hands, waving at the audience, lifting one leg while twisting the body, bringing hands closer to the face, swaying the skirt side to side, and taking the typical *uchimata* pose (standing with feet facing inside), the epitome of feminine elegance. Omoikane noted that the “*kawai* move or changes in the voice are not an imitation of real women, but an attempt to get closer to their ideal [of *bishōjo*].”

Since 2D *babiniku* (those who use a webcam to motion-track their movements instead of using a virtual reality setup with full body tracking) cannot reproduce the majority of previously stated *kata*, they focus on face *kata*. *Babiniku* work on “eye contact,” “teasing,” “winking,” “looking up slightly and smiling,” “looking up and down,” and “learned the art of acting/performing” or “seducing with the gaze.” In fact, the term *engi* (acting, performing)

originated from theatre and often came up in *babiniku* answers when they talked about their performance of *kawai bishōjo*, stressing the parallel between Japanese traditional themselves. The most common *kawai* expressions found on *babiniku* faces are (O.O)<sup>x</sup> and (>.<).<sup>xi</sup> Participants specified several carefully crafted head movements to appear *kawai*: “shaking my head from side to side,” “looking startled,” “nudging the face or head with the hand like a cat,” and “tilting your head slightly.” Other *kata* are “softening the voice” and paying attention to the inflection and tone. Although the presented behaviour seems to comply with norms, the *kawai* moves enable VTubers to construct their identity as a form of entertaining camouflage, claiming that the *kawai* move is an “atmosphere [*funiki*]” and a “way of life [*iki sama*].”

Moving cute is not something that happens overnight. As with puppets, it takes puppeteers years of training before aspiring to create dolls with souls (Scott 2012: 56–60), it takes hardship to perfect the *babiniku kata*. The notion of to *persevere* (*ganbaru*), implying continuous self-development and improvement in daily life, is found amongst *babiniku*. I often found *babiniku* mentioning the word *effort* (*doryoku*). *Babiniku* noted, “I work hard to make my voice *kawai*,” “I work hard to behave in a feminine manner,” “I make an effort to get closer to my ideal,” “I have tried as hard as possible to perfect my voice and technique,” “it takes a lot of effort to increase the number of viewers,” and finally, “hard work pays off.” Despite the playfulness of the activity, it is taken seriously by *babiniku* who put in the effort to appear *kawai* to their audience and seduce them.

### **Strategies of seduction with the digital *ero***

According to Julie A. Iezzi, the core of Okuni’s *kabuki* were “the erotic dances, brothel scenes, *nō* parodies, references to contemporary events, and cross-gender performances” (2018: 113). Out of fifty-one participants, thirteen confessed to adding erotic (*ero*) elements to their broadcasts, such as “sexy outfits,” “throw kisses,” “show underwear and lick things,” “taking *risqué* photos.” Moreover, my informants told me that “there is something erotic about *babiniku*” and they mentioned that “*onnagata* had erotic factor for Edo people strongly restricted by government. VTubers sometimes have erotic factors for people physically restricted by social distance.” To seduce their audiences, *babiniku* remarked that they “learn the technique of whispering with ASMR,<sup>xii</sup>” “soften the voice,” work on “eye contact and/or teasing,” “wear a bikini,” “let you lick my shoes,” “showing my panties,” “making sexually suggestive movements,” “give sexual excitement with illustrations” (for example, using

suggestive clothes), “throw kisses,” and “pretend to hold hands with you.” Some innocently say embarrassing (*hazukashī*) phrases asked by the audience during broadcasts. For instance, the audience asked the VTuber to say, “*onī-chan*, I am sad ... give me a big hug!” (said in a younger sister’s voice).” Out of fifty-one participants, fourteen show their panties, by accident, on as a fan service. *Babiniku* who show their panties by accident explain that “it is just a coincidence.” They insist that when wearing a skirt, “it is important to move your legs without showing panties.” Those who show them on purpose mentioned that it “is promotionally convenient” and “increases the value of our character content.”

Some *babiniku* remarked that they show their panties to “make my listener happy” and “as a fan service.” “Fan service” is essential because “it is the secret to popularity.” Russel Keith, a scholar of Japanese studies, explained that panty shots, glimpses of breasts, or leg spreads are “random and gratuitous display[s] of a series of anticipated” gestures found in anime or manga as part of the character experience (2008: 107). He further mentions that fan service celebrates “the freedom of the glimpse,” not anything inherently perverse, as they are 2D characters, solely the act of glimpsing for the sake of glimpsing (Russell 2008: 107–8). *Babiniku* mentioned that fan service “satisfies your own need for approval by provoking a reaction.” In fact, panty photos are called *panchira* and are part of the fanservice experience. However, unlike physical photos that require equipment, sleuth, and time, VTuber fans just have to take a screenshot of a video. Panties have been considered sacred, magical objects that some show and others collect. VTuber fans collect, take screenshots, and upload images of them online as GIFs or static images with VTuber’s face next to panties.

Eros is a game that “symbolically disassembles the everydayness” by immersing in the moment (Allison 1996: 158). When seeing *babiniku*’s panties, a viewer said, “I don’t feel guilty even if I am bulging here.” Others reply to new viewers, “don’t worry, *ojisan* will take care of you.... Come on, relax.” One *babiniku* explained that “*babiniku* sexual stuff is a kind of dirty joke. If he and the audience are both males, such dirty jokes are not unusual.” Moreover, my informants told me that “it is easier to be accepted when you talk about it [erotism] as *babiniku* than when a normal man does (assuming) that there is some level of trust.” Similarly, in Okuni’s *kabuki*, the eroticism referred to parody and derision (Costineanu 1994, 230). With *babiniku*, innuendos are used to question endless notions of the authentic and the adulterated, of truth and illusion.

### **Homoerotic interactions between cute girls**

It is not uncommon for fans to see *babiniku* flirt with one another on their screens. As my informants told me, those interactions can be considered homoerotic or part of the “homosocial princess [*hime*] culture” that “fans like.” Those flirtatious and friendly interactions are called *tētē*. My informants explained that *tētē* means “precious;” it is Internet slang for *tōtoi* (precious). According to Nozawa Shunsuke (2020), the fan art by Nakane Nata is said to be the etymological origin of *tētē* and features the relation between two *Nijisanji* VTubers, with a Goku-looking viewer affectively responds to the relation between the two characters using the term *tētē*. “From listeners side, it is common for otaku to look for these things [*tētē* inducing behavior],” as *babiniku* remarked. From the *babiniku* perspective, due to the activity’s virtual nature, they “show their feelings by kissing or hugging each other.” One *babiniku* remarked that affectionate interactions are similar to sending a “heart emoji during a game” (when someone does well during the game or as a token of support). Kissing between *babiniku* evokes a “sweet feeling as it is called sugar [*osatō*],”<sup>xiii</sup> as one participant noted. Even those who hesitate to act *tētē* “lose their brakes due to the virtual nature of the avatar,” as one *babiniku* mentioned. To receive *tētē* comments, *babiniku* pat each other’s hair, hug or even kiss “because it is precious [*tōtoi kara*].” According to participants, it is “very normal to exchange kisses between virtual *bishōjo*.” Since *tētē* is said “in praise of them [*babiniku*], especially when they make a speech or gesture that you like,” *babiniku* are pleased to know that the “other person is *kawai* and likes us,” resulting in satisfaction of approval.

Participants claimed that the homoerotic play amongst *babiniku* is derived from “a culture of *otoko no ko* in reality.” In 2018, this type of play amongst *ojisan* and their desire to become the most *kawai* VTubers were deemed hell (*jigoku*) (Editorial Department 2018). This flirtatious behavior is not homosexual between men, but “it is considered lesbian [*yuri*],”<sup>xiv</sup> as *babiniku* explained. The logic behind considering *babiniku* flirtatious behavior *yuri* is because “the character is still a female character even if it is a *babiniku*,” as participants claimed. *Babiniku* remarked that they feel *tōtoi* enacting those *bishōjo-to-bishōjo* interactions, and the audience finds them *kawai*. Furthermore, similar to idols, “fans dislike a relationship between men and women,” thus, *babiniku* resort to *yuri* and flirtatious interactions “to become popular” and “increase the number of subscribers,” because “fans want it [*yuri* behavior],” participants clarified.

As with everything up until now, *babiniku* do not take their *yuri* behaviour seriously: flirting is a joke (*jōdan*), as they told me. Participants are aware that they are flirting amongst men; however, they “enjoy making fun of *yuri*” and find such behaviour amusing as it makes the content “more interesting.” In those interactions, sexual preferences and “gender ambivalence is not simply tolerated but actually admired” by the viewers (McLelland 2000: 47). As one participant claimed, “most of them [*babiniku*] enjoy it as entertainment.” *Babiniku* engage in *yuri* interactions hoping for *tētē* praise comments, because gender and sexuality do not matter “as long as a result is *kawai*,” as *babiniku* remarked. Moreover, those homoerotic interactions are read as demonstrating the *kawai* skills of the *babiniku* in the virtual spaces and not commenting on their sexual preferences. According to participants, categories like heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual are “irrelevant” in the virtual realm. They explained that those categories are not appropriate for VTubers “because there are no physical limitations,” because, as one gave an example, “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 is different, to begin with.” Furthermore, *babiniku* claimed that “VTubers are perceived as virtual individuals, apart from their sexuality.”

However, according to my informants, consciously or unconsciously, there is no LGBTQ+ discourse or queer activism behind *babiniku* actions. Moreover, it may seem contradictory that *babiniku* may be reluctant to tackle issues related to gender and sexual identities due to their activity’s transgressive nature. However, this is a part of their strategy. By refusing to acknowledge the lines that separate individuals based on assigned sex and sexuality, they break the logic that shapes society. Due to the nature of *babiniku* (a masculine *tamashī* inside a feminine body), using labels is meaningless, according to them. To fight the dominant system’s tendency to categorize individuals using straight, homosexual, man, or woman terms, *babiniku* simply avoid this vocabulary. They turn themselves into undefined creatures, into souls going from vessel to vessel, always gender fluid.

### **The “gap” as a form of play with audience’s expectations**

Showing male hands and using male pronouns and male voices while being a cute *bishōjo* dressed in frills is done in the name of *gap moe*. *Moe* means “to bud” and a pun on the homonym “to burn.” In the *The Otaku Encyclopedia*, Galbraith and Schodt explained that it is used amongst otaku to describe the feeling of “getting fired up for budding young beauties” (2014: 154), i.e., being attracted to fictional characters. *Gap moe* (*gyappu moe*) is a form of

*moe* that occurs when there is a gap between two characteristics. For instance, gap *moe* is commonly used amongst idols as fans are delighted and surprised by the produced “unexpectedness,” leading them to sharing and talking about this “discovery,” leading to a fan community (Saijo, Kiuchi, and Ueda 2016: 237). Informants told me that it the gap *moe* is akin to the *onnagata* gap: “*kabuki onnagata* are ‘men inside’ but through performing [*enjiru*] they become women.” Amongst the *babiniku* it would be using the *bishōjo* character and their male voice, calling themselves middle-aged *bishōjo* characters, or even showing their male bodies next to their virtual characters.

The gap can also manifest itself in the form of pronouns. *Babiniku* often use neutral or feminine language, such as *watashi* (I), to reinforce the illusion of being a *bishōjo*. However, some use masculine pronouns *ore* (I) and *boku* (I). This disjunction between the *kawai* appearance and male language has the allure of gap *moe*. Even when *babiniku* “show the gap between you and the *bishōjo*” and “make people aware that I am a man,” it is done “in a friendly or joking manner,” as participants note. One stresses that being a *babiniku* implies being a man with a feminine avatar, and “the real charm [*miriyoku*] is to keep the soul intact.” My informants tell me that *bokukko* or *orekko*<sup>xv</sup> cultures influenced them. Both terms describe boyish and “charming” female characters who use *boku* or *ore* pronouns. Moreover, they further remark that there is a niche of fans who find this “character setting” appealing and use it to win over their audience. Others mention that they “are embarrassed to be female; some say it as a joke, and some like to play female characters with a male tone.”

Amongst my informants, gap *moe* is a strategy. They mix male physique and *kawai*, appear fictional yet show their hands, and incarnate a positive image yet reference *ojisan*. As one of my informants told me, a gap *moe* would be “the gap between the old man on the inside and the *bishōjo* on the outside.” The “gap” created by *babiniku* is an ironic strategy. As Agnès Giard explained during a lecture at the University of Geneva, with irony, otaku criticize a value system of which they pretend to reproduce the most retrograde clichés (2020). The contrast, as Giard said, is a technique used to question notions of true and false, authentic and adulterated, sincerity and lies, truth and illusion. And *babiniku* play with that. According to my participants, due to the *moe* element, certain people find attractive the unexpected and surprising dissonance of the gap. *Babiniku* explained that the “unpredictability” created by the gap “makes a character more fun or *moe*.” In this section, I present two most common gap

*moe* elements I discovered during my ethnographic fieldwork: the vocal and the character type.

First, in the case of the real (non-transformed male) voice, there are two types of relationships between the *gawa* and the VTuber: the boost type (*būsuto-gata*) and the gap type (*gyappu-gata*) (Oga 2018: 65). The boosted type is when the visual appearance and the voice are coherent. The gap type is when a dissonance between the male voice and the *bishōjo* character occurs. This “unpredictability” makes the character more “fun,” according to participants. Using one’s male voice is called “one’s natural voice [*jigoe*]” and fourteen participants out of fifty-one resolve to this solution. Participants brought up Nekomasu as an example because the *kawai* fox girl talked with a male voice. Moreover, they clarified that *jigoe* is a way to “play with my soul.” However, *babiniku* are not the only ones who enjoy the contrast between the cute appearance and the male voice. My informants told me that the gap is “charming,” and some viewers prefer the “unexpectedness of an *ojisan* voice coming out of a *bishōjo*.” They further mentioned that “the male voice does not destroy the image of a *bishōjo*,” and it is “natural” to broadcast with a male voice since “the person inside is a male.”

Second, the gap *moe* can be found amongst *babiniku* naming. Eight out of fifty-one participants, in total contradiction with their cute appearances, amused themselves by adding the term *ojisan* next to *babiniku* and calling themselves *babiniku ojisan*. This is where the rejection of prescribed hegemonic norms blooms. The term *ojisan* translates as “uncle,” “grandpa,” “old man,” or “pappy,” and, according to *babiniku*, it has “negative connotations.” According to Shoji Kaori 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 (2011). The term *ojisan* is synonymous with middle-aged salarymen who held a lifelong white-collar job, a figure that collapsed after the bubble of the 1990s, allowing for other forms of masculinity to emerge. Although most VTubers are young, they brand themselves with this word, creating a gap between the *kawai* avatar and the man behind it.

Japanese writer and social commentator Mitadera Kei wrote in a blog that some people cannot stand “the harshness of the way society looks at ‘males,’” thus, turning to VR technology and VTubers for a brief relief (2018). He continued: “men are aware of the negative aspects of their sexuality,” and *ojisan* gather in VR to express their *kawai* spirit freed from their physical bodies. According to Mitadera, men do not only wish to be *kawai*

but also to erase the negative connotations associated with their existence. They want to be “forgiven” and “accepted as a harmful being.” This is further echoed in my informants’ discourse, when they maintained that *ojisan* are “the target of ridicule and discrimination.” Moreover, they added that there is “a lot of stress in the world,” and men “want to wear *kawai* avatars to erase the negative.” By negative, they imply the negative connotations associated with *ojisan* and being a man in Japan.

Could the gap *moe* character type be a tactic to peel off men’s negative image? Knowing that those who belong to older generations are seen as responsible for the downturn and are “incompetent and pressured,” as one *babiniku* told me. The *ojisan* is a “self-deprecating cultural term,” as my informant told me. They add *ojisan* “to ridicule the fact that such an actor is playing a *bishōjo* character” and a form of “self-mockery towards oneself in real life,” as my informants further explained. However, at the same time, the “self-sacrificing humour” is a form of “desire for approval that is appealing even though it is self-mocking,” as my participants mentioned. Furthermore, the gap *moe* between the *bishōjo* and *ojisan* provokes a feeling of “immorality [amongst viewers] because they know it is an *ojisan*, but they like him because he is *kawai*,” as one participant mentioned. For the audience, knowing that the *bishōjo* is an *ojisan* encourages conversation and creates a bond between them and the *babiniku*, as I am told.

As my informant tells me, the *babiniku ojisan* is “an interesting way of self-expression.” In *otaku* culture, as one of my informants explained, “*ojisan* are the antithesis of *bishōjo*” and creates a “powerful gap” not possible in real life. As we have seen throughout this sub-chapter, “gaps” are attractive. Even if they brand themselves *ojisan*, *babiniku* emphasize that “even an *ojisan* can be *kawai*!” As one participant claimed, “I am an *ojisan*, and I look so *kawai*.” Another added that the *babiniku ojisan* character type stresses “the change from a man to a *bishōjo*.” Thus, the term “is a reminder that anyone can be a *kawai* avatar.” *Babiniku ojisan* is a strategy, enabling those who do not fit society’s approved masculinity model to reconfigure the framework and tackle social exclusion.

### **Virtual cross-dressing and masculinity**

My informants told me that while they are similar to *onnagata*, the latter were born from the *bakufu* restrictions while *babiniku* were born from the “longing and hope to be *kawai* and attractive,” resulting in a “liberation from a society that forces us to act masculine.” This



liberation happens through technology that enables the incarnation of cute *bishōjo* characters. Furthermore, eight informants out of fifty-one voiced the opinion that *babiniku*, just like *ningyō jōruri* and *kabuki* criticized the Tokugawa regime, critique contemporary Japanese society. As my informants claimed, *babiniku* is a form of “rebellion against masculine symbols” that are still present in contemporary society. *Babiniku* create desired identities and find alternatives to dominant masculine norms by engaging in performative gender fluidity and appropriating *kawai* codes that are commonly associated with feminine, sensual *bishōjo* characters. *Onnagata*, through their sensuality and male sex, “transgresses the boundary between the masculine and the feminine genders” (Takakuwa 1996: 220). Similarly, the erotic interactions that take place amongst *babiniku* or with their audience are not considered to be between men but amongst *bishōjo* characters. In fact, *babiniku* are Sedgwick’s “n-dimensional space” (1995: 16), in which masculinity and femininity intersect, more specifically in the form of gap *moe*, in which my informants play with gender expectations.

To achieve the epitome of *kawai*, *babiniku* cite different *bishōjo* elements, creating a mix between the virtual and the physical, between what can be seen and what is kept secret. *Babiniku* and *onnagata* strive for stylized femininity rather than a copy-and-paste image from the real world. According to Keene, *onnagata* is a “rejection of reality in favour of an unearthly, stylized beauty that can dazzle audiences into believing that an old man with a heavily powdered face is a miracle of feminine loveliness” (1978: 62). The statement also applies to *babiniku*, as the audience believes that a man, an *ojisan*, with their *kawai* clothes and *kata*, is the epitome of *kawai*. With *babiniku*, it is the creation of self “as an object, for attention and consumption, is also the creation of the self as an object of desire” (Burton 2020, 40). Amongst *babiniku*, the *kawai* move is a constructed practice structured by rules, created to appear as (*mitate*) a cute girl. Just as with *onnagata*, there is nothing “natural” about the *babiniku* performance. As a group, they construct, develop, and perfect their own “*kawai* move” to seduce their listeners.

Through the gender performance of characters, my informants dismiss and challenge the hegemonic masculine societal roles expected of them. *Babiniku* are aware of the *cliché* they reproduce, and the virtual character is an “act,” as *babiniku* clarified. Thus, when *babiniku* return to their daily roles as students or workers, they are no longer involved in *kawai kata*. Participants mentioned that they are the same person staging different roles according to the context and complying with requirements. The question that comes to mind is, what are those

rigid expectations that *babiniku* subvert? Out of fifty-one participants, eighteen expressed that being a man is difficult in Japan, and “adult males are oppressed,” one participant claimed. *Babiniku* remarked that “old-fashioned ideas are still present in Japan” and that men and women are “forced to act masculine or feminine.” *Babiniku* is “a reaction to that,” another participant added. Men want “to get away from the expectations” and “free themselves from being male” because they are “tired of being a man” and “cannot express myself in a feminine way,” as participants specified. My informants acknowledged that “older men are incompetent and pressured and young men have to respond to them” and “being masculine in Japanese society is a heavy responsibility, and the majority of men cannot fulfill the requirements.” One *babiniku* enumerated the difficulties: “for example, if you do not work hard, if you do not get ahead, if you do not earn money, many women will not look at you, and that is difficult,” all of which, although beyond the scope of this article, were discussed by Imai (2018) and result from the socio-economic crisis that has lingered for 30 years.

Becoming *babiniku* enables those who do not fit society’s approved model of masculinity to reconfigure the framework and tackle social exclusion by experiencing the freedom of a *bishōjo*. My informants told me they “want to start a *kawai* revolution” that “goes beyond the gender barrier,” as being a *babiniku* “transcends the gender barrier” and “reaffirms your value as a human being regardless of gender.” They also claimed that with *kawai* they are “trying to break down the barriers between men and women and reach a new level.” For my informants, being a *babiniku* is a “revolution that anyone can be who they want to be,” “a new way for men to express themselves,” “a liberation of men from their gender roles,” as participants claimed. While reinforcing certain *kawai* and feminine cliché attributed to *bishōjo* characters, these men play with existing hegemonic gender norms without fully overturning them.

## Conclusion

This research paper is just one approach to understanding and reading *babiniku* and I do not claim that that *babiniku* are part of a historical cultural traditional, rather, I present a legitimizing discourse that certain *babiniku* develop to elevate and justify their practice. *Babiniku* use technology to transform themselves into virtual cuties and create an illusion of *bishōjo*. However, as with *ningyō jōruri*, the audience is conscious that they are watching a man perform a virtual character. *Babiniku* concern themselves with making aesthetic and artistic impressions on the viewers to grow their popularity. By using technology, movements, and other elements, my informants became *kawai* characters, each living as their “ideal self.”

To portray the illusion, *babiniku* tap into the common knowledge of visual and physical elements surrounding *bishōjo*. Different characters are used strategically to satisfy the desire for approval, protection, and recognition and to be considered *kawai* even if you are an *ojisan*. The *kawai* moves enable *babiniku* to construct their identity as a form of entertaining camouflage. To challenge the norms of masculinity, *babiniku* reproduce a notion of beauty based on the stereotypical *kawai* aesthetic. By developing discursive and performative strategies that associate *babiniku* behaviour with that of traditional Japanese arts, my informants develop particular visual aesthetics and a complex system of virtual social interactions that take place across different platforms. By becoming *babiniku*, participants are thinking through characters and technology. In fact, technology becomes a strategy to form a community around a common interest in creating alternative forms of masculinity.

Understanding men's engagement with virtual characters might allow us to shine a light on virtual soothing practices developed by its participants. Becoming *babiniku* enables those who do not fit society's hegemonic model of masculinity to engage in gender performance. By challenging dominant norms of masculinity, *babiniku* reproduce a notion of beauty based on what is essential to them: *kawai*. My informants claimed that becoming *bishōjo* is a tactic to peel off men's negative image, rebel against masculine symbols, and play while ignoring the rest of society completely. By rejecting the no-longer functional for them notions of manhood, my participants engage in a virtual activity that allows for vulnerability and desirability. Lurking behind the *cliché kawai* beauties is the desire to find alternatives to dominant masculine norms by engaging in performative gender fluidity and appropriating *kawai* codes that are commonly associated with feminine *bishōjo* characters.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> *Kigurumi* is defined as a “cartoon-character costume” (Occhi 2012, 110). Can also refer to individuals who dress up as *bishōjo* characters, creating costumes and masks that completely cover their bodies.

<sup>ii</sup> VTuber not associated with or produced by VTuber-related companies.

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<sup>iii</sup> *Boku* is a male “I” pronoun.

<sup>iv</sup> *Shōjo* manga is content traditionally created for young girls. However, since the 1970s, a growing number of male readers turned towards *shōjo* manga, looking for alternatives to hegemonic norms of masculinity.

<sup>v</sup> A journal specializing in virtual reality news.

<sup>vi</sup> Although the term “puppet” was not mentioned, Shirai Akihiko was showing images of *ningyō jōruri* when talking about *jōruri*.

<sup>vii</sup> As Garry Leupp explained (1997), during the Tokugawa period, the so-called homosexual behaviour between men could be found in brothels and kabuki theatre. It has become a common part of social life and heterosexual relationships, such as marriage, were compatible with men’s passion for boys.

<sup>viii</sup> Men dressed in black assist with operating stage sets.

<sup>ix</sup> *Otoko no ko* is a play on words, as the Chinese character for child in the homophonous term *boy* is replaced with the character for *daughter*, creating the new meaning of *boy daughter*. It is used to describe men who adopt culturally feminine gender expression through crossdressing and makeup. *Otoko no ko* and *babiniku* embody the *shōjo*, or *bishōjo*. Both practices engage in the blurring of boundaries that results in gender fluidity. By modeling their performance after *bishōjo* characters and not real women, *otoko no ko* and *babiniku* bear similarities to each other. However, there are differences between *otoko no ko* and *babiniku*: the first is embedded in the physical reality, and the latter is virtual. For more on *otoko no ko* see Sharon Kinsella *Otoko no ko Manga and New Wave Crossdressing in the 2000s: A Two-Dimensional to Three-Dimensional Male Subculture* (2020) and *Cuteness, josō, and the need to appeal: otoko no ko in male subculture in 2010s Japan* (2020).

<sup>x</sup> (O.O) implies that the character cannot close their eyes because they are surprised.

<sup>xi</sup> (>.<) means the character cannot open their eyes for some reason and to express crying or distress.

<sup>xii</sup> ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) are videos that trigger a tingly sensation in the sculpt through whispering and other auditory technics.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sugar (*osatō*) implies a “lover” and is used “when two people who are tremendously close to each other declare themselves partners.”

<sup>xiv</sup> *Yuri* is a girl’s love genre of manga and anime.

<sup>xv</sup> *Bokukko* and *orekko* implies a woman or a feminine character who uses the masculine first person pronouns *boku* or *ore*. The Chinese character for child *ko* is replaced with the character for *daughter* (similarly to *otoko no ko*), creating the meaning of *boku daughter* or *ore daughter*.