

VIRTUAL FASHION AND IDENTITY IN JAPAN: COUNTERCULTURE IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL TRANSPARENCY

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This chapter investigates *babiniku* fashion practices in Japan as a kind of countercultural action. *Babiniku* are a group of virtual YouTubers (VTubers). VTubers are known to be entertainers using 3D or 2D computer-generated avatars to create online content without exposing their physical features to public scrutiny. *Babiniku* are typically male VTubers who “incarnate” feminine characters for online performance activities. The most popular ones adopt a “cute” (*kawaii*) appearance and wear girly outfits, seemingly conforming to stereotypical gender norms and expectations. Ambivalent as it may be, fashion plays a significant role in *babiniku* VTubers’ strategy. We hypothesize that animating and customizing feminine avatars enable certain men to reshape their identity and challenge social expectations related to self-presentation. Virtual bodies and fashion can be deployed as resources to play with gender norms and elude the contemporary imperatives of authentic self-modeling. This study is based on long-term participant observation and key-informant interviews since November 2019. A virtual fashion shop was opened on the Japanese website Booth to investigate fashion consumption and creation in May 2020. We also surveyed 24 Japanese VTubers using a feminine avatar for the purposes of this paper.

Keywords: virtual fashion, gender performance, VTuber, *babiniku*, Japan

1. Introduction

“It is not always easy to determine when and where the body begins and when its various components cease to be part of the human being” (Hoeyer 2010, 67). For example, to what extent is the avatar part of identity? What role do digital clothes play in the construction of self? In Japan, creating virtual clothes for virtual bodies

is part of a rising phenomenon known as virtual YouTubers (VTubers). Originating in 2016, VTubers are 2D or 3D computer-generated characters animated by motion capture and used for engaging in entertainment content, such as streaming, on video-sharing websites, and applications. Being a VTuber implies three elements: (1) using a virtual body in contrast to the physical one; (2) having a storyline set in the virtual space; (3) expressing one's personality through characters (Akatsuki 2018, 115).

At the end of 2017, a VTuber boom took place as technology became more accessible (Hirota 2018, 48–49), making it easier for individual (個人 *kojin*) VTubers—i.e., those not affiliated with a company—to engage in the activity. Currently, more than 20,000 VTubers are registered in Japan (User Local 2022).¹ When one looks at the most popular VTubers on YouTube, it is apparent that they look like attractive anime-like characters wearing enticing outfits. According to Hirota Minoru,² the managing director of the Panora news website that focuses on virtual reality, most VTubers have a “pretty” or “cute girl” character (美少女 *bishōjo*)³ appearance and target a predominantly male audience (Hirota 2018, 51). By just looking at a VTuber, one can never be sure who is behind the virtual character. Regardless of gender, age, education, marital status, occupation, sexual orientation, or health, they usually wrap themselves in mystery and hide their body behind a filter, some even changing their voice with a vocoder.

Among the anonymous VTubers, however, some are self-proclaimed *babiniku*. Although they have a “cute girl” appearance, the person behind the virtual character is often a man. The term *babiniku*, which derives from the Japanese phrase *bācharu bishōjo juniku* (バーチャル美少女受肉, “virtual pretty girl incarnation”), originated in 2018 and refers to VTubers (who are typically male, although the term is not gendered) incarnating a cute girl in the virtual world (Editorial Department 2018). VTubers who call themselves *babiniku* use the term in their social media descriptions and present themselves as such during live streams. Their audience refers to them by their VTuber username, but also calls them *babiniku*. As such, *babiniku* is a term that a particular community of VTubers use to distinguish themselves from other VTubers. However, their activities are similar to mainstream VTubers: they live-stream, upload videos, post on social media, interact with fans, etc. It may seem strange that these men may voluntarily expose their digital alter-ego to

¹ User Local is a technology venture company specializing in artificial intelligence and big data analysis. They provide reports of the estimated number of VTubers.

² In this chapter, we adopt the Japanese naming order (i.e., family name – given name).

³ According to Patrick W. Galbraith, *bishōjo* is a “pretty” or a “cute” girl although the literal translation is “beautiful girl” (Galbraith and Schodt 2014, 8).

the potential negative reactions associated with the term.⁴ But the very fact that they deliberately put themselves in this delicate situation, by hinting at the fact that the young feminine-looking avatar may very well be that of a male human, is far from innocent.

By creating a gap between what they look like and what they are, some *babiniku*, notably those this study deals with, trouble the binary understanding of gender. They act “as if” they are lovely heroines, but the way they showcase their true nature as performers and puppeteers draws attention to a discrepancy that they deliberately, or even conspicuously, emphasize. Virtual fashion appears to be one of the most efficient means to accentuate this disparity between the overly charming avatar and the “person inside” (中の人 *naka no hito*). As a matter of fact, *babiniku*’s strategy of presenting themselves as *bishōjo* to garner fans heavily relies on the gaudy and alluring display of cuteness achieved through customized digital clothes, accessories, jewels, hats, socks, wings, or shoes.

The fashion observed during live streams or video uploads may seem compliant with gender norms, but in this article, we highlight that those performances are a strategy put forward by *babiniku* on purpose. Building on long-term participant observation of the *babiniku* community and key-informant interviews, we hypothesize that becoming a cute character with a feminine body is a resource enabling certain men to reshape their identity and challenge social expectations related to self-presentation. We acknowledge that not all *babiniku* VTubers dress and behave cutely. This paper focuses, however, on those who indulge in such aesthetics, that is, the overwhelming majority of *babiniku*, as can be seen on the VTuber ranking website (User Local 2024). Both in July 2023, at the time of writing this chapter, and in June 2024, at the time of editing the manuscript, the top 10 of the most popular *babiniku* with most views and fans listed on the website confirms the fact that the ones with the highest number of followers share very similar characteristics: child-like face, neotenic features (big eyes, little nose), furry ears (cat or rabbit), fairy look, and princess attire. Exploring the reasons why *babiniku* turn themselves into entertaining clichés, we intend to provide insights into the motives and reasons underlying these gender performances.

This inquiry has been part of one of the author’s (L. Bredikhina) M.A. and Ph.D. ethnographic research projects on *babiniku* since November 2019. In the early stages of the research, she designed a 3D character and acquired the necessary hardware and software skills to actively participate in *babiniku* streams

⁴ At the time of writing this chapter, one of the suggestions that automatically pops up in the Google search bar, when one types the keyword *babiniku* in Japanese, is “disgusting” (気持ち悪い *kimochiwarui*). Since Google autocomplete predictions reflect real searches that have been done on Google, it can be said that currently among the most common searches related to *babiniku* involve the feeling of disgust.

both as a viewer (commenting in the chat, posting screenshots of the videos on Twitter, rebranded as X in June 2023, and sending virtual gifts and donations) and as a VTuber streamer (creating her own YouTube channel and participating in VTuber collaborations). To further understand the creation and acquisition of virtual bodies, she volunteered during Virtual Market (バーチャルマーケット *Bācharu Māketto*), where creators can sell, among other things, virtual bodies and fashion items. She also opened a virtual fashion shop on the Japanese website Booth⁵ in May 2020 to investigate fashion consumption and creation. She designed and sold clothes following fashion trends (according to trending outfits on Twitter) and consumer demands (VTubers commissioned outfits from the author). As part of the research process, the authors of this study further created a short film titled *Can't Stop 'Me' Anymore* and screened it during the digital conference *Desired Identities: New Technology-based Metamorphosis in Japan* in June 2020.⁶ The film presented a synthetic parade of people who changed into characters, reflecting the aspirations and creativity of those involved in social networks.

For this study, we also conducted a survey and questioned 24 Japanese *babiniku*. The informants were recruited on Twitter, where they stated in their profile bio and/or during live streams that they identify as *babiniku*. a Google Form open-ended and close-ended question survey was sent to those *babiniku* to which they replied anonymously. The chosen *babiniku* displayed interest in virtual fashion by uploading new outfit videos and photos to Twitter and YouTube. In addition, nine virtual fashion designers, one *babiniku* fashion influencer, and two critics who write about VTubers, virtual worlds, and virtual fashion, were interviewed on Twitter using direct messaging. Yamano Hiroki, a VTuber researcher, was also interviewed in the same manner. Finally, we also extensively reviewed original publications, such as Japanese VTubers' self-published novels and manifestos, as well as photos posted by *babiniku*. We also conducted participant observation while attending online fashion shows, immersing in virtual worlds, and watching *babiniku* live-streams. We analyzed public posts on Twitter that featured VTuber fashion outfits on two occasions. The first was from January 2020 until May 2021 during the author's (L. Bredikhina) MA thesis research. The second occasion was from mid-April to mid-May 2023 for this study. To do so, on both occasions, hashtags #VTuber, #VRoid, #バーチャルファッション ("virtual fashion"), and #VRoidのテクスチャ ("VRoid texture") were used to search for images and virtual fashion designers. We also analyzed the prices, styles, and types of outfits sold on Booth using hashtags #VTuber and #VRoid. This study is also informed by information

⁵ Booth is a Japanese website for selling various contents.

⁶ The conference was organized by the ERC-funded research project "Emotional Machines: The Technological Transformation of Intimacy in Japan" in cooperation with the Department of Research and Higher Education of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

collected from 51 *babiniku* (using in-depth interviews, surveys, and participant observation) during one year and a half of immersive fieldwork for the author's (L. Bredikhina) M.A. thesis.

In this study, through long term ethnographic immersion, we provide "thick descriptions" and account "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures" (Geertz 2008, 314) of the *babiniku* fashion culture. Building on the above-presented data, our aim is to present *babiniku*'s virtual grooming, dressing, toileting, and luring activity as a collective strategy to disrupt patriarchal ideology in Japan. Previous research has demonstrated that through avatars, individuals support and subvert hegemonic gender norms (Hodson and Livingstone 2017), making the virtual realm a crucial space for gender and identity research. As is explained further in this study, our participants expressed that by becoming appealing anime-like characters and indulging in dressing up, they could question and temporarily free themselves from the breadwinner model of manhood which still prevails in contemporary Japanese society (Bredikhina and Giard 2022). Borrowing Deborah Cameron's words that cute fashion "is a rebellion with frills on" (Cameron 2006), we would like to demonstrate that the *babiniku* VTubers use virtual cuteness as a soft form of dissidence.

In this chapter, we will first address the theoretical dimensions related to the construction of identity through the use of a feminine-presenting avatar. The following question will be raised: When *babiniku* craft a stereotyped appearance and act feminine, to what extent do they play "fake"? As will be shown, their performances tend to subvert the traditional dichotomy between "real self" (the person operating the avatar) and "mediated self" (the role played via the avatar). We will subsequently delve into virtual clothes' production methods, handcrafting, and networking activities enabling VTubers to display new garb and, thus, get public attention. The marketing, sales channels, and the intricate culture of events, such as fashion shows and pop-up stores, will also be studied as part of an economy revolving around gender roles. In the ensuing part, we will describe virtual attires as a collective celebration and countercultural action site, enabling participants to assess one's own identity and get validated by others, while deconstructing the culturally approved notion of masculinity. Finally, we will put forward the idea that while virtual clothes seemingly reinforce gender stereotypes, it is a form of "camouflage" rather than the expression of a misogynistic view towards women. Exploring *babiniku*'s discourses, this chapter will reveal how they use digital design as a tool to make visible "real identities" while, at the same time, questioning the "be yourself" culture.

2. Mediated identity, a theoretical approach

To understand how *babiniku* engage and construct their identity, it is important to state first that their performance cannot be separated from the avatar they animate to attract and entertain their fans. Is this character the embodiment of a mediated identity, and if so, how do *babiniku* relate to it?

Before investigating, it is important to sum up the theories and conceptual tools surrounding the notion of mediated identity. In his seminal article "On Face-Work," Erving Goffman (1955, 213) noted, "Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants." According to Goffman, the performance of identity, dubbed "face-work," is grounded on the "image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." In other words, we have to make a good showing and act appropriately (consistent with our face) to ensure that interactions with "other participants" can smoothly follow the standardized rituals. We take on a role, but we must also respect the roles played by others; otherwise, social relationships will be impossible.

Building on Goffman's theatrical metaphor, many scholars developed the performance paradigm in various directions, such as emotional labor studies (Hochschild 2003 [1983]), gender/queer studies (Butler 1990), or game studies (Triclot 2011). The idea that role-playing has the power to make visible some gaps, the gap between actor and role, for example, induced some scholars to highlight the potentially disruptive nature of performances. As noted by Jean Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies* (1983, 155), "We could say of women that someone else is hidden inside and is mocking us." People enacting fictional characters (enacting women, for example) can dismantle or distort the codes (gender codes, in our case) through exaggeration or excess. Pushing the simulation to its limits is a very efficient way to resist norms since it brings to light the discrepancies between what is shown and what is hidden. In other words, it is not because a mediated identity complies with norms that it is not disruptive. On the contrary, the more it mimics norms, the more this "fatal game" (Baudrillard 1983) can express irony and effect transgression.

Many scholars working on digital technologies place an emphasis on the dynamic potential of the tactics used by avatar users. As shown by Matviyenko (2010), having a digital body and evolving in online environments has multiple implications on identity, enabling "gender-swapping" and avatar customization. Visual appearance is essential for digital spaces as users are judged based on their looks (Nowak 2004). This look can be an asset. For example, a male player could choose a feminine character because the avatar's appearance entails practical in-game benefits (Huh and Williams 2009; Martey et al. 2014). The virtual body can also be used to stage an "ideal identity" stirring its efficiency from the very fact that it is incarnated by a fictional character.

According to Suan (2021), VTubers express selfhood through anime-type codified movements and expressions which emphasize the artificiality of their performance. Many VTubers agree with this. According to one pioneer of the VTuber community, Todoki Uka, avatars “often act as our ‘ideal self,’ that is the ‘self we want to be,’ the ‘self we want to show,’ and the ‘real me’” (Todoki 2018, 61). Virtual Girl Nem, a *babniku* and self-proclaimed “metaverse evangelist,” shares the same opinion. Nem claims that digital bodies empower individuals to “become who you want to be,” “create the person you want to be,” “wear the person you want to be” (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 135–137). Becoming your ideal self is achieved through masquerade, cute attitudes, and girlish clothes. It may seem somehow contradictory to materialize the so-called “true self” using a stereotyped character, but, as Sone (2014, 203) explains in an article about performance, the dichotomy between a factitious, “false” outside and a personal, “authentic” inside is not relevant, especially in the field of contemporary Japanese subculture where people playfully alternate “faces” according to circumstances.

These notions of theatricality and distancing can also be found in Namba’s (2018) article. He analyses the VTuber practice through the lens of the “tree-layer theory” (三層理論 *sansō riron*). According to Namba, the viewer is communicating with the “media-person,” that is, not the “person” themselves, but the layering of the three elements: (1) the “person” (パーソン *pāson*), i.e., the human operating the character; (2) the “persona” (ペルソナ *perusona*) of the fictional character; and (3) the “fictional character” (キャラクター *kyarakutā*). These layers make it possible to introduce uncertainty and ambiguity in the staging of the self (Namba 2018, 121).

Higuchi (2023) pushes this analysis even further. Noting that “acting mistakes” (演じそこない *enji sokonai*), that is, engaging in behavior that contradicts the appearance or the “setting” of the character, occur during long live-streams or are made deliberately by VTubers, Higuchi (2023) proposes to incorporate the notion of “shadow” (シャドウ *shadou*) into the three-layer theory. “Shadow” accounts for those “manifestations of the inner surfaces” as shortcuts to gaining viewers’ affection (Higuchi 2023, 89). In response to Namba’s theory, Yamano Hiroki (2022), a philosophical researcher who has extensively written about VTubers, proposes “moderate independent theory” (穏健な独立説 *onken na dokuritsu setsu*)⁷ to account for the independent existence of the VTuber from an identity perspective, without having to juggle between the binary opposition of the “fictional character” (フィクショナルキャラクター *fikushonaru kyarakutā*) and the “human streamer” (生身の配信者 *namami no haishinsha*). In his later article, Yamano (2023b) further develops his theory and proposes approaching the

⁷ In his recent article, Yamano (2023a) changed the name of the theory to “moderate non-reductionist theory” (穏健な非還元説 *onken na hikangen setsu*).

VTuber existence as a multi-layered make-believe practice created within the fictional spaces of VTubers along with their viewers.

As can be seen from this brief review, many scholars involved in the research on the VTuber phenomenon argue that the main characteristic of VTubers' practices is the use of discrepancy as a resource to create mediated identities. Such identities enable VTubers to initiate encounters of a new kind, that is, encounters challenging the binary dichotomies between body and avatar or between the real person and the fictional character. Although the avatar may seem blatantly "fake," it can convey a sense of authentic presence because many things "leak" (voluntarily or not) through the gaps, hinting at hidden realities. As Umezawa (2023, 10–11) underlines, the more a VTuber conceal themselves behind a character, the more intensely viewers listen. What makes a VTubers identity more "personal" (私的な *shiteki na*) is their vocal style, their speech patterns, their ability to convey specific emotions or to deliver messages through breath, words, or movements, but also their presentation techniques, and the character background (Kirinuki Chan'neru 2023, 21). With new possibilities of the performance of self, VTubers are perceived as tools that enhance the individual by making them "virtual" (AO 2018, 37).

However, giving shape to the so-called "yourself" in the virtual realm is not a naïve activity detached from the physical world. Avatar practices in digital realms hint at pre-existing, offline cultural phenomenon (Miller and Slater 2001). Thus, according to Kondo (2022), it is essential to consider the virtual/digital and the space outside of it, given that existing gender roles and discourses influence the choice of the virtual identity and are specific to a time in history. In other words, the virtual "self" is not separated from the physical space "self" as the virtual identity is "a self-transformed from the real self" (Miyake 2022, 29).

A recent publication about Japanese virtual culture that mentions *babiniku* (Roquet 2022), conducted without ethnographic fieldwork, fails to understand the latent motivations and possibilities offered by virtual cross-dressing by focusing solely on presenting the "macho" and "masculine" side of the virtual practices in Japan. Similarly, most of the articles introduced above do not unravel existing socio-cultural contexts and influences negotiated within the virtual practice of creating items of fashion and bodies. Moreover, when it comes to research about *babiniku* or VTubers, almost none has been conducted from an ethnographic perspective. This study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by examining the relationship between virtual fashion and *babiniku* VTubers' maneuvering.

3. How to create virtual clothes: the fashion craftsmanship

We previously presented different theories related to mediated identities. Creating such identities online involves craftsmanship. Little is known concerning the

design, manufacturing, and marketing of virtual clothes. The *babiniku* this study focuses on are men who identify as *babiniku*, create their own virtual characters, and clothe them by making or purchasing outfits. When they craft their characters, they do not do so from scratch, rather, they often customize a dummy base provided by the app they are using. It is important here to note that the avatar's body resembles that of a schematic puppet (Hatanaka 2019, 73). Investing in an original and tailor-made body would be worthless since VTubers' avatars are not destined to be used naked as the VTubers work on platforms with strict rules prohibiting nudity. The virtual body being very similar to the one of a dress-dup doll, what makes an avatar stand-out are the fashion outfits and accessories.

Clothes and accessories—paramount to the virtual existence as they convey the VTuber's personality—require the utmost care. As informants explain, “the appeal of the *babiniku* relies heavily on the character's appearance,” and “having a *kawaii* look can be an advantage,” enabling the VTubers to “become famous,” but also to socialize, network, and create a community. Digital fashion opens up a world of possibilities. Given its importance, we must begin by investigating the creative process. We aim not to provide an exhaustive list of all VTuber-related fashion events or technologies but rather a general overview of existing practices to familiarize the reader with this culture.

To start with: virtual outfits can be created by the *babiniku* themselves, bought, commissioned, or given by fans. The conception stage entails deciding on the general outlines of the outfit. During the second phase of the design process, the articles of clothing have to be manufactured on a computer. a VTuber can take care of the whole process alone but it is quite complex and time-consuming. Regarding digital tools, it requires software skills that only a minority manages to master: out of our 24 *babiniku* informants, only 9 could engineer digital fashion pieces themselves. The common tools used to create clothes are, in increasing order of complexity: Photoshop, VRoid, Live2DCubism, Blender, and Unity. Photoshop is used to design clothes for 2D and 3D models, which are then imported into Live2D or VRoid.⁸ While Live2D allows animating 2D illustrations of the character, VRoid, a 3D modelling tool, proposes to the user a ready-made 3D model whose parameters can be adjusted and then dressed up using a blank clothing template (Ito 2020). Although such software are supposed to be beginners-friendly, the results are often disappointing when the user does not have an advanced level of experience. a solution that enables complete freedom of design is a mix between Blender, Unity, Maya, and Marvelous Design.⁹ These programs are, however, even

⁸ Simple character customization tools, such as VKatsu and CustomCast, are also popular as users can choose from a stock library, including hair, clothes, and accessories.

⁹ Blender and Maya are 3D computer graphics software tools, Unity is a game engine, and Marvelous Design is a program for making 3D clothes.

more challenging to master. Therefore, beginners have a “hard time” (苦勞 *kurō*), as some VTubers that we surveyed put it.

A simpler (but sometimes expensive) solution is to hire a fashion creator. Those who commission the outfit provide references or describe the general idea of what they want. The designer then creates a draft outfit, fits them onto the VTuber's model, and adjusts where necessary.¹⁰ The most sought-after fashion creators are those designing 3D models. To make themselves known, they mention on X that they design “VRoid texture” (VRoid のテクスチャ *VRoid no tekusucha*) and create dedicated pages to their art on the VRoid Hub service (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 140). According to the fashion designers we interviewed for this study, the workload of an outfit creation ranges from six hours (for a 2D dress) to one month (for a 3D outfit). Those who want a unique design can directly contact their favorite creator or look for one on websites such as Coconala¹¹ under the hashtag #VRoid in the category “VTuber Illustration & Modeling.” For a custom outfit (the clothes, shoes, accessories) made by a designer specifically for a VTuber as a commission, “the price varies between \$60 and \$300,” as virtual fashion designer Julico tells us. a simple custom-made dress (without shoes and accessories) can retail for around \$40. There is a high demand for virtual fashion designers. Four out of nine fashion designers we interviewed claim they are requested to make a new outfit every month, usually season-related costumes, or a fantasy game inspired accoutrement. Examples of virtual outfits designed by a virtual fashion designer are provided in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Virtual outfits designed by Julico, a virtual fashion designer
(Source: Julico)¹²

¹⁰ The technology behind VRoid makes it easier to purchase outfits online and try them on the virtual body. Live2D requires, in contrast, for clothes to be drawn for the character. That is why on Booth we find VRoid outfits and models, while items sold for Live2D are often original characters fully clothed or just clothed bodies without heads.

¹¹ Coconala is a skill marketplace website.

¹² Julico gave us permission to reproduce images of her virtual outfits. From left to right: gothic

According to Asada Kadura, a freelance writer and editor of news related to the VTubers and the metaverse, the most popular looks evolve over time, but as of 2023, they are a blouse with lots of ribbons and a flared knee-length skirt, oversized parkas or coats, loafers or boots. Those garment pieces are part of two clothing styles: the “landmine style” (地雷系 *jiraikei*) and the “mass-produced style” (量産型 *ryōsangata*) as Asada informs us. He further explains, “mass-produced style” is a slang term that refers to flirty and cute *prêt-à-porter* garments, while the “landmine style” has similar aesthetics but gives off a darker, cute, and poisonous feel. In an interview, Yamano tells us that Japan’s VTuber aesthetic is “particularly rooted in the pop culture of manga and video games. In many cases, illustrators who draw cute girls in the anime and manga industry create avatars for VTubers. These avatars often contain numerous elements associated with the ‘cute girl’ archetype, such as hairstyle, hair color, or eye color, easily recognizable as *kawaii*.” He further explains that high school students are often the protagonists of Japanese anime series. Sailor uniforms (navy blouse, pleated skirt, bow tie, and socks) are often worn by protagonists. Similarly, Yamano explains that the same outfits are popular among VTubers, as “Japan’s ‘VTuber culture’ is particularly rooted in the ‘2D culture’ of anime, manga, and gaming. The influence of how characters are depicted in anime and manga is significant.”

Those who do not dispose of the necessary income to hire a designer or do not have the required skill set to create their clothes buy them online. There is a huge demand and an economic space for virtual fashion (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 252). Booth is a popular website where many virtual clothing designers have launched their clothing lines at a relatively low price. As of June 2024, garments are usually sold between \$1 and \$30.¹³ Some VRoid texture makers open shops on Booth and promote them on their X accounts. Users can also scroll virtual fashion catalogues, such as VCODE. Those who have a 2D body and use Live2D can turn to VTern, a website for VTubers, where you can find Vmee, a VTuber clothing specialty shop, where many accessories and fashion items are sold. Specific streaming applications, such as REALITY, also provide users with in-app fashion catalogues, virtual bodies, and streaming services to “broadcast their virtual selves from anywhere” (Shirai 2019).

Due to the popularity of virtual fashion, a growing number of events are being held in virtual spaces, such as *Virtual Fashion Mall* (opened from August 20 to September 3, 2022) and *Carat Vmall* (open several times a year for a few hours since 2022), which enabled fashion designers to exhibit and sell their clothes to

rose, cross, and bat witch dress; dress in six colors inspired by *furisode* (a long-sleeved formal kimono); white lolita dress with frill lace lolita skirt.

¹³ The following are some price examples as of June 2024: satin dress: \$5, school uniform: \$4, princess attire: \$12, landmine-style outfit: \$7, bunny girl outfit: \$6, maid outfit: \$10.

visitors in VRChat.¹⁴ Fashion shows are also organized online to foster fashion creativity, allowing creators to present their new designs worn by famous VTubers or VRChat users. During *Virtual Collection VRoid Stage* in April 2020, designers presented their VCollections made for VRoid bodies. The event occurred in VRChat as a live show hosted by a commentator. On December 20, 2020, and on January 3, 2021, *VRoid Fashion Festa*, a live stream of a virtual fashion runway and sale event held by volunteers, took place with the goal of “connecting people who want to find clothes that fit them” (Yagiko 2020). In December 2021, Maruyama Keita (a fashion designer) and Sayumi Guji (who supervises fashion magazines and movies) were part of the jury of the virtual contest *Avatar Award 2021*.¹⁵ During the contest, Virtual Girl Nem walked the runway: “I was very nervous, but I used my *kawaii* moves,¹⁶ which I have trained by living a full life in the Metaverse, to show off my model walk” (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 257). It is not uncommon for VTubers with a 3D body to model in fashion shows or do the opening acts of such shows.¹⁷ In 2023, the fourth edition of *Virtual Music Fashion SHOW*, a VRoid fashion show inspired by VTuber original songs that enabled VTubers and fans to get to know each other, took place (Yuteru 2023).

The craze for virtual fashion has spread into the physical world. Jumping on the popularity wagon, brands and fashion malls create digital items of their clothing (finalbeta 2019). The Japanese government has also taken an interest in the growing virtual fashion industry. In June 2023, the laws related to intellectual property were revised to include digital and virtual spaces and make it possible to fight against counterfeited goods such as digital copies of real clothes and accessories (Jiji Press 2023). With virtual fashion gaining attention and developing its own culture, we must investigate the identity deployment possibilities offered by virtual bodies. Having briefly presented a non-exhaustive list of the virtual, specifically VTuber fashion craftsmanship, we want to discuss the importance of clothing as a state of communal festivities and why it seemingly complies with gender norms.

¹⁴ VRChat is an online virtual world platform where users interact through 3D avatars in virtual worlds, designed primarily for virtual reality headsets but also accessible on PCs, gamepads, and Android devices.

¹⁵ This was the second edition, the first award took place in 2020 with Kizuna AI winning the first prize. The latest edition will take place in 2024.

¹⁶ “*Kawaii* moves” (かわいいムーブ *kawaii mūbu*) is a common term among Japanese users of the social virtual reality platform VRChat. It was originally used to describe the cute attitudes and poses of female characters from manga or anime (Bredikhina 2022).

¹⁷ For example, the VTuber and singer Elfa opened the *Virtual Fashion Collection ‘Voyage’ 2022 Winter* (Kanan 2023).

4. Virtual clothes as a site for collective celebration and action

Once the avatar has been created and clothed, it must be shared to exist. To continue the demonstration, we must now explore virtual celebrations and rituals surrounding the digital body. Such is the importance of the virtual look that when Shiro (a historical figure in the VTuber community) released her first photo essay in 2019, the main topic was fashion. The book featured portraits depicting Shiro's full costume, accompanied by personal comments on her different outfits, lifestyles, and philosophy. The book's overall message was: "When you are praised, you can feel that your existence, actions, and achievements are recognized. You can accept yourself and grow" (Shiro 2019, 13). As Shiro often points out in her interviews and publishing, virtual clothes are the best way to receive "compliments" or "praise" (褒めてもらおう *homete morau*). Similarly, most of the *babiniku* VTubers adopt a so-called "lovable" appearance and emphasize its cuteness with girly outfits to become socially desirable. Their characters are also designed to suggest vulnerability: as our informants explain, they want to "be protected," "be cherished," "look fragile," and be "taken care of."

Consequently, many *babiniku* acquire an entire wardrobe. Out of the 24 surveyed *babiniku*, 14 informants (58.3%) have less than 10 outfits and 10 informants (41.7%) have more than 10 outfits. One *babiniku* has up to 42 different outfits for their virtual character. Some even pretend they cannot quantify the number of their outfits, briefly stating it is "a lot." Having a number of "cute" outfits, needless to say, perfectly matches the stereotypical belief that women love shopping. Since their goal is to get more viewers, and "more people to heart me," as one informant states poetically, strict compliance with gender roles is required. Their performance depends on their ability to appear as if they were a pretty girl, with all the correlated qualities—coquetry, frivolity, fragility, mischief, and whimsicality—which are conspicuously showcased during the live streams.

To deepen connectedness with their fans, *babiniku* also use clothes to create the illusion of proximity. It should be pointed out here that having a YouTube channel to upload content is insufficient: many *babiniku* create X accounts for their virtual characters to post daily news or simply talk with their audience. Many also communicate daily on YouTube, wearing clothes specifically designed to create a sense of emotional closeness. Hurutsuki (a writer, journalist, and VTuber information community manager) explained to us in an interview that when VTubers give a daily rendezvous, they "wear regular clothes to foster a feeling of familiarity with their audience." To make it look even more intimate, they sometimes wear pajamas (as if the viewers were sharing the same living space), swimsuits (by reference to the romantic trope of summer holidays with a girlfriend), or traditional clothing (strongly associated with the idea of a married couple). The different styles are variations around the same virtual body. Virtual Girl Nem

explains in an interview that one of the authors of this chapter (L. Bredikhina) moderated: "There is a childish me, a mature me, a strong me, a weak me. I use them separately in different situations" (Ben K 2020).

Another way of appealing to fans is the shared enjoyment of "unveiling" (披露 目 *hirome*) a new outfit. Staging each "change of clothes" (着せ替え *kisekae*) as an offering to their fans, VTubers (not only *babiniku*) announce the event in advance, posting teasers a couple of weeks prior to the unveiling on X, then sending out little hints and clues to create a buzz. One informant illustrates this by saying, "I have made a new costume, and I am going to show it off!" The VTuber then provides a time, date, and link for the audience to join the broadcast. A special stream is usually dedicated to showcasing the costume, usually designed following important events or seasons within the year's cycle. For instance, Halloween, Christmas, New Year, and Valentine's Day are planned as special events. Announcing a new model for the VTuber's birthday is also popular since it correlates the change of clothes with the positive idea of a fresh start. Launching a new outfit is even more important to celebrate milestone anniversaries, such as the "debut anniversary" to commemorate the first six months or the first year following the "birth" of the avatar. Along with their fans, VTubers take every opportunity to celebrate a new beginning. Achieving a certain number of subscribers is also a pretext for an exciting announcement. A typical online post is as follows: "I have got a new costume to show off! I finally got 1,000 subscribers on my YouTube channel, so I made an original costume to celebrate! Thanks to all the followers!" VTubers also update their outfits for romantic summer festivals, such as Tanabata (七夕, "Evening of the seventh"), with fireworks and parades originating in a legendary love story.

One might wonder if clothes are created to please the fans, thus following the fans' *kawaii* expectations and resulting in stereotypically cute and feminine garments. It is, however, nearly impossible to establish a clear separation between *babiniku* VTubers and their fans. Pleasure is shared, up to the point where fans can design virtual clothes as tokens of support or gifts to their favorite VTuber, working day and night on the dynamic behavior of virtual silk ribbons fluttering around a glossy virtual lace gown. Fans usually wait with anticipation for the release of a new garment: "I think they are happy to see me when I show off my new outfit. I am also happy to have a fresh new look," says one informant. Another one explains that "everyone likes to see new models." The change of clothes operates as a ritual, providing those who watch it with the feeling of a new departure in life. As Shiro (2019, 22) states in her book, clothes "make me feel like a different person," adding that she "noticed a new side of herself thanks to the various costumes." According to her, "every human should try reborn themselves into various 'selves' every day" (Shiro 2019, 22). As can be seen from the quotes, the fans and the *babiniku* collaborate to construct a fiction where all people can

become somebody else: the VTuber (who is a male adult) can turn into a flirtatious young girl and the viewer (who may feel alone) can make as if the character was a girlfriend, a confident, or a roommate.

The miniskirts, prominent breasts, or crop tops showcased by VTubers are sometimes perceived, however, as derogative to women. Since 2018, Japanese self-proclaimed feminists and academics regularly criticize the eroticized appearance of VTubers, arguing that their stereotyped display of cuteness is a form of sexism (Senda 2018; Potato 2020; Ito 2021). In September 2021, a video featuring VTuber Tojou Rinka was removed due to pressure from a women's rights group. Tojou is a VTuber working for a company known as VASE, which was granted permission by the police to develop public safety video content in the VTuber's home city of Matsudo. In August, Ito Toshiko (2021), a Chiba Prefectural Assembly member, wrote on her blog that the VTuber's appearance was disrespectful to women since the avatar had a short skirt and was showing belly and navel. Several days later, the Alliance of Feminist Representatives (全国フェミニスト議員連盟 Zenkoku Feminisuto Giin Renmei) (2021) sent an open letter to those concerned asking to remove the video due to its depiction of girls as sexual objects and promotion of prejudice based on stereotypical roles of women. It could be easily argued that the VTubers' appearance reinforces negative conceptions of femininity (restricting women to be vain, irresponsible, and lovesome). If we were to apply the same straightforward approach to *babiniku*, however, it would fail to capture the intricacies of their game plan.

To understand the ambivalent nature of their performance, we must now exploit the concept of identity deployment as a form of strategic action conducted by the VTubers and their fans to create a tight-knit community led by a strong taste for fiction and anonymity.

5. Negotiating identity by hiding behind the clichés

Playing on the conventional image of attractive maidens, *babiniku* VTubers do not challenge gender norms; not openly at least. Building on the idea that gender performance is often ambivalent (Butler 1996; MacNeal 1999; Van den Berg 2021), we argue that the stereotyped parade of cuteness is a kind of "camouflage" rather than the expression of misogyny. The camouflage of *babiniku* consists of exaggerating the traits of a stylized and codified girly figure borrowed from anime and manga culture. Their goal is not to change sex. As one informant highlights, "I do not want to become a woman, I want to become a virtual *bishōjo*." For *babiniku*, as we are told, the "*bishōjo* is the embodiment of *kawaii*" and relates to what they call an "ideal" (理想 *risō*), in complete contradiction to a "real female" (生身の女性 *namami no jousei*). We thus propose to think of those hyper-cute and feminine

representations as a “camouflage.” By using the *bishōjo* appearance, they blend in with the surroundings of a Japanese society where characters, notably cute girls, are ubiquitous (Galbraith 2019).

“I am learning every day how to move in a cute way,” tells us one informant, adding that this work is done to “show that the character exists and is alive.” *Babiniku* train their movements, but also their vocal cords, up to the point where their performance becomes spectacular. Displaying what Baudrillard (1983, 28) would call “a dizzying over-multiplication of formal qualities,” they conceal themselves behind the *clichés* and propel their audience in a world filled with parodic humor. Because their shows are openly based on simulation, and because they make it obvious that they are men “acting (excessively) cute,” as one informant says, the very theatrical nature of their activities engage viewers to see the parallels between fiction and reality. *Babiniku*’s performance is a *mise en abyme* of social scripts, demonstrating that such scripts are nothing but a laughable scenography.

Being “excessively pretty”, *babiniku* VTubers have been compared to Japanese transvestites known as *otoko no ko* (男の娘, literally “male-daughters”) (Bredikhina and Giard 2022). Although some *babiniku* oppose this comparison, they do share some enlightening similarities with *otoko no ko*, who also take inspiration from *bishōjo*: their goal is not to turn themselves into real women but into fictitious *kawaii* characters (Kinsella 2020a, 50). According to Kinsella (2020b, 449), by self-transforming into cuties, these men negotiate new ways of being in Japan. While *babiniku* and *otoko no ko* differ (virtual/physical world, digital anonymity and effacement/flesh and bone appearance with real face), both strive to become ideal icons and to subvert gender norms. As Miyazaki (2023, 124–125) notes, the male-to-female cross-dressing has become a prevalent theme in social and mainstream media, mirroring a growing dissent related to the conventional notion of masculinities. It appears that the social phenomenon of *otoko no ko*, just as the *babiniku* trend, reflects a more profound and broader tendency to believe that “in this difficult [economic] environment, society has no mercy for men” (Suzuki 2013).

Our *babiniku* informants confirm this. Since the 1990s bubble burst, in the context of the financial crisis affecting the labor market, men, expected to hang on and keep going, find an alternative to prescribed masculine codes by transforming themselves into anime-like characters. “Being a man in Japanese society carries significant responsibilities. While it may come with benefits, it cannot be said that most men in today’s society meet these requirements,” we are told. One informant points out, “There are pressures that men feel. For example, I think the fact that many women will not even look at you unless you work seriously, get promoted, and earn money is a severe issue (but nobody talks about it).” As others explain, “Old ideas are deeply rooted in Japan,” leading them to become *bishōjo* in order

"to escape from expectations" and "to release themselves from being a man." When they perform as girly characters, "men are not required to be masculine" and it enables some to "release stress." One informant even claims that he feels "oppressed by society." Another confirms: "I cannot feel liberated unless I become a *bishōjo*."

The premise of a *babiniku* is that men can temporarily turn into characters and enjoy life without having to comply with dominant standards. Those who engage in the *babiniku* activity often want to "acquire the body and clothing of a pretty girl, as a means to liberate their oppressed identity or explore gender swapping within their everyday lives," as Yamano tells us in an interview. The expression "oppressed identity" may sound hyperbolic, if not overly dramatic, but, as many of our *babiniku* informants put it, powerful pressure is exerted on Japanese men to meet standards that are now out of reach: men are expected to support a family but "the inability to find stable employment is a major obstacle to marriage" (Kawamura 2013, 39). Men whose annual income stays below 5 million yen (approximately \$35,000) are unlikely to marry (Meiji Yasuda Research Institute 2023).¹⁸ According to a 2019 Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare survey, only 9% of Japanese men in their twenties and 44% in their thirties can earn this amount (Doda 2022).¹⁹

The overall trend is that of marriages declining, reaching the lowest figures since the Second World War.²⁰ Insecure and underpaid contract work leaves the Japanese lonely: they remain single. "More than a quarter of people in their 30s, 25.4 % of women and 26.5 % of men, said in a survey that they have no wish to get married, according to the Cabinet Office's 2022 white paper on gender equality" (Matsuyama 2022). Japan's economic downturn was a severe blow for men who learned that if they studied hard and were loyal to a company, they would succeed in life and be able to marry. Now trapped in so-called dead-end jobs, with no career opportunity, unable to find a wife, and unable to build assets for retirement, they strive to maintain livelihoods. "A poor economy has led to the collapse of patriarchy" (Kawamura 2013, 38) and, indeed, it has also fostered an ecosystem where a phenomenon such as *babiniku* could emerge, whose culture relies on the effacement of self and corporate masculinity.

¹⁸ According to a survey conducted by Meiji Yasuda Research Institute (2023) on 7,453 people across Japan, aged 18 to 54, most women (61.8%) seek a marriage partner with an annual income of minimum 5 million yen (approx. \$35,000).

¹⁹ According to the latest edition of the "Average Annual Salary Ranking" published by Doda (2022), the average annual income is 3.6 million yen for men in their twenties and 4.7 million yen for men in their thirties.

²⁰ The last demographic statistics, published online in 2024 by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, show that, in 2023, the number of marriages fell by 6% (compared to the previous year) to 474,717, making it the first time in the postwar era the figure has fallen below 500,000.

In the alternative worlds where *babiniku* operate, interactions are based on certain unwritten guidelines preventing people from talking about personal details, such as their work, salary, achievements, home, or romantic status. Anonymity provides a safe space to the VTubers and their fans, a space which, just like the maid cafes, as described by Galbraith (2017, 31), enables participants to carefully avoid the “normative standards that would make them failures.” Social platforms offer a place “separate from the outside world, just as the roles that are played here are separate from gender roles,” as Galbraith (2017, 31) says. In these digital shelters, which are sometimes designed to look like cozy tea rooms, some *babiniku* VTubers dress up in maid uniforms and act as if they were welcoming clients, sometimes going as far as calling them “master” (like maids are supposed to do). Fans themselves use pseudonyms and enjoy a role-play centered around the unattainable figure of their cute idol. It is a game based on blurring the boundaries not between femininity and masculinity but between fiction and reality. To play this game, *babiniku* wear costumes designed to suggest fantasy. As the Japanese virtual designer Julico stated in our interview, a fluffy 3D princess dress should not be considered a marker of femininity but rather as a uniform: “It is not about the role of the girl; it is about her profession.” One informant confirms that “becoming a *babiniku* will likely change the concept of gender.” He further explains that, as of now, people are understood to be either man or woman. With virtual *bishōjo*, this binary is no longer evident (Matsu’ura 2022). According to him, this is possible because *babiniku* identify as a *bishōjo* and not a man or a woman online. Another tells us that *babiniku* “will be a revolution in the virtual world as it will serve as an entrance to providing another type of content that transcends gender barriers.”

Julico started designing virtual clothes in May 2020 and became famous for modeling extravagant ball gowns covered with ribbons. She states that such garments are self-concealment tools: “Some people may want to hide behind a dream or a fictional figure.” In her book, Shiro (2019, 22–27) devotes two chapters to her closet, conveying a similar message. Entitled “I love you! Clothes” and “I love it even more! Clothes,” these chapters invite the reader to turn themselves into a character and to experiment with what Shiro (2019) calls “reincarnation.” It would be easy to conclude here that the *babiniku* phenomenon is a way to “escape reality” through fake identities and virtual bodies. The cute esthetics so highly prized by the community means much more, however, than the need for a sweet and comfortable delusion: it also delivers a provocative statement against the “real” world seen as negative and stagnant. According to Winge (2008, 58), the cute esthetics is a form of “visual resistance” to the order and roots deep in the Japanese history of countercultures.

As Kinsella (1995, 250) points out: “The contemporary associations of social disaffection or social rebellion with childishness began during the students’

movement at the end of the 1960s.” Enacting immaturity and cuteness are part of a strategy similar to the ones already well investigated by researchers specialized in Japanese subcultures (Dale 2019), such as Lolita fashion (Kawamura 2013): behind the glitter is a very nihilistic element (Younker 2012, 100) and cute masquerade often hides a firm rejection of hegemonic gender and ideological models (Monden 2015, 126). One informant echoes this thought: “In modern society, no one can be an adult anymore. Everyone must accept that they are ‘immature’ forever [...]. In such a society, ‘immaturity has its own value.’”

According to Holographic (2020), a tandem of Japanese scholars deeply involved in the VTuber scene, male VTubers and fans want to withdraw from a performance-driven system designed to encourage competition: “Colloquial sentences such as ‘men must be strong’ and ‘the value of a woman is youth and beauty’ are hurting today’s Japanese youth.” Born after the bubble burst, Millennials and Zoomers cannot relate to the values of their parents and focus on having fun in the here and now, with little incentive to commit themselves to a romantic relationship (since they will not be financially able to maintain a married life) nor to a professional long-term goal (since the recession makes all effort futile). “Avatars are making it possible for them to design another figure,” says Holographic (2020).

6. Conclusion

In most modern societies, where each individual must ensure success through self-management and self-fulfillment (Ehrenberg 2010, 116), people share selfies online to display their authenticity (even if fabricated) and acquire visibility, thus contributing to privacy loss. By reaction, VTubers and their fans change themselves into fictitious beings, use pseudonyms, talk through voice changers, and act like videogame characters. In contrast to the dominant ideal of transparency and its corollary, global surveillance, this masquerading movement values not openness but secrecy, not reality but artificiality. To make this artificiality even more apparent, the term that *babiniku* VTubers use to describe their practice, i.e., *babiniku*, indirectly unfolds a backstage detail about their sex, preventing misunderstandings. It favors a mediatic spectacle where appearing in a stereotypical manner becomes part of an “ironical strategy” (Baudrillard 1983), a patently false decoy. Online “parallel lives,” as our informants put it, make it thus possible for them to get free from social masks. Namba (2021) notes that digital fashion is a “self-expression without a physical body.” With the spread of smartphones and the Internet, it has become easier to “wear” a 2D or 3D character on social networking websites, live as a “new” version of oneself, and satisfy one’s need for approval (Nyalra and Ohisashiburi 2020, 4). Fake as it may seem, their culture, like a mirror, reflects a society perceived as fallacious, unfair, and deceitful. Recession-stricken Japan

seems to offer nothing but a future filled with unattainable promises. Against the background of a society often presented as “precarious” (Allison 2013), the virtual realm appears to be the best place where to restart the system.

Amid the economic crisis affecting traditional values and norms, *babiniku* and their fans build a liminal world based on different rules. This phenomenon could be compared to a counterculture rooted in anonymity, secrecy, and opacity. Thanks to virtual characters, individuals can temporarily deviate from their prescribed gender roles and escape the obligation to singularize themselves. The staging of their digital “persona” enables them to build new forms of sociability based not on oneness and transparency but on simulation and concealment. As the French philosopher Annie Dufourmantelle (2015, 109) explains, “Transparency is not truth.” As such, it would be inaccurate to think that the virtual identities of VTubers are less genuine or less legitimate than the physical world ones. On the contrary, such ritualized embodiments are “an existence in themselves” (Yamano 2022, 263) and the only way to escape “the panoptic space of the social” (Dufourmantelle 2015, 101). Without parallel lives, without secrets, without clothes and disguises, nobody can fully explore themselves. As Virtual Girl Nem puts it in her song “Heart Cosplay” (ココロコスプレ *Kokoro Kosupure*): “Today I will be in the screen / a secret that I cannot tell about / [...] In the world of my dreams / My heart is aching maybe for real.”

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