Redefining Hegemonic Masculinities through Self-Care Practices: Japanese *Soshokukei* Masculinities

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Japanese men in their 20s negotiate Soshokukei masculinity(ties) characterized by their self-absorbed, self-disciplined, or self-care practices as the hegemonic form of masculinity in the 21st century, which marks an oppositional shift from the previous and longstanding ideal of 'salaryman' masculinity in Japan. Through the analysis of interviews with 13 Japanese men living in urban spaces (Osaka and Tokyo) in their 20s, i.e., the Soshokukei generation, I demonstrate they redefine their sense of manhood by engaging in self-care practices, particularly skincare and fitness. The discourse of Japanese masculinity has centered on the salaryman hegemonic figure, characterized by their strong work ethic, loyalty, and life-long dedication to corporations. Yet since the fall of their heroic masculinity around the 1990s, young Japanese men are argued to abandon these salaryman's ideality. Then, in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of one's self-caring lifestyle. Yet, Japanese young men embodying this new form of masculinity were already considered to be interested in such lifestyles, which entail aesthetics and health. Thus, this thesis is significant as it 1) demonstrates the current outlook of Soshokukei masculinity since the 2000s, which also implicates potential changes since the pandemic, and 2) analyzes actual accounts of young Japanese men which were missing in previous studies. This thesis contributes to the global masculinity studies established by Austrian sociologist Raewyn Connell and Japanese masculinity studies led by Romit Dasgupta (2000, 2003, 2009, 2010), Futoshi Taga (2002, 2005, 2018), and Tomoko Hidaka (2010) but also to the new conceptualization of Soshokukei masculinity, or broadly, self/body management masculinity by Masahiro Morioka (2011), Steven Chen (2012), Justin Charlebois (2013, 2017), and Laura Miller (2003). By situating my thesis in the theorization of aesthetics and feminization of male bodies in consumer culture, I showed the

implication of their new existence in images, possibly termed as "men-as-images," which has not been the case historically. Finally, this thesis is one attempt to work with Connell's publication (2014) "Margin becoming centre: for a world-centred rethinking of masculinities" where she reflects on her previous theorization of masculinity and critiques the unidirectional flow of knowledge produced in the metropole institution. With the agenda of the world-centered rethinking of masculinities, I do not simply explore this culturally specific form of masculinity but show how THE (totalizing) hegemonic masculinity has become "pluralized" masculinities within the same socio-cultural space of Japan and at the intersection of its local/global interactions. (399 words)

Keywords

masculinity, salaryman, Soshokukei, aesthetics, feminization of male bodies, self-care, self-management

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:
Body of thesis (all chapters excluding acknowledgements, references, appendix, etc):

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1. Introduction

In the late 1990s Japan, in the midst of economic turmoil, I was born. I was born the minute my dad arrived at the hospital. I kept waiting for him from the very beginning. But he did not come to my kindergarten events. Nor did he come to any of my and my siblings' sports festivals or choir competitions during the 12 years of my school life throughout. He never came to any of my commemorative graduation ceremonies, either. When I was born, I waited for him, and he came yet his ongoing absence gradually became the norm, and I did not feel any pain or resentment.

My family functioned without the presence of what kept it functioning. When I was a student in Japan, my dad left home before I woke up and returned home after I fell asleep. When he came back home from work, he was quiet so that he wouldn't wake us up. He did not belong to (his) home; yet he still kept his silence, observing the practices in that space. Being a 'salaryman' in the 1990s and 2010s meant he did not "own" a home. He belonged to his company rather than to our "home." My family looked at him from a distance. We knew he is still a breadwinner, a main financial provider for our family, but his presence at home was too little for us to know how to communicate with him. Reading refrained scholarly articles written by a third person on the tarnished images of salaryman, especially in the 1990s, I can finally make sense of the awkwardness pervading our family.

This is a brief but emotionally laden story for me. It was this personal tie with my Dad that has made me sympathetic with him or salaryman in general and burgeoned my scholarly interests in the field of masculinities studies. Yet, my stance toward the concept of masculinity is accompanied by ambivalence. Daily news reports on middle-aged Japanese men, sexually harassing high school girls or trickling young women into the highly exploited pornography

industry, made me question the longstanding silence about uncontested, unmarked, or undiagnosed specificities of those men, with the help of feminist scholarship that eventually gave birth to the field of critical masculinity studies. That is the departure for my scholarly journey investigating masculinities.

My goal through this paper is to contribute to masculinity studies by analyzing the recent practices of young men in Japan, which is called 'soshokukei' masculinity, a Japanese term that is translated into English as "herbivore." My personal story reflects the salaryman's physical and emotional exhaustion heightened during the economic downturns in the 1990s that led to the reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity in the 2010s. The salaryman figure in Japanese is often known and called "kigyo-senshi" (corporate warriors) and its history shall be traced back to the post second world war time where their figure was considered heroic (Dasgupta, 2000, 2003, 2009, 2017; Taga, 2005) and explored up to the current moment with a focus on its crisis and replacement by herbivore masculinity in the 21st century.

In this paper, I want to explore how Japanese men in their 20s negotiate Soshokukei masculinity(ties) characterized by their self-absorbed, self-disciplined, or self-care practices as the hegemonic form of masculinity in the 21st century, which marks an oppositional shift from the previous and longstanding ideal of 'salaryman' masculinity in Japan. Through the analysis of interviews with 13 Japanese men living in urban spaces (Osaka and Tokyo) in their 20s, i.e., the Soshokukei *generation*, I demonstrate they redefine their sense of manhood by engaging in practices associated with self-care/self or body management.

The concept of self-care has been even more highlighted in the public discourse since the Covid-19; yet Japanese men are already argued to engage in individualistic or self-absorbed practices (Chen, 2012; Morioka, 2011; Miller, 2003; Dasgupta, 2010; Charlebois, 2013, 2017). I

shall contend that these technologies of self-care entail practices of corporeal aesthetics, or framed broadly, careful body/self-management, which were previously associated with nonhegemonic/subordinate forms of masculinity as the interests directed toward the "self" have been largely considered "feminine" in relation to the male embodiment.

Chapter 2 will be dedicated to theoretical framework with three key concepts, Connell's masculinity, Soshokukei and feminization/aesthetics. Chapter 3 discusses the social context behind the conceptualization of Japanese masculinities. Chapter 4 and 5 presents about the analysis of my interviewees' accounts on their self-management practices and the implications thereof for their relationships with older salaryman and (heterosexual) women.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, I will first introduce the theoretical framework I will situate my thesis in and introduce key concepts for my thesis.

2.1 Connell's Masculinity Studies

The Australian sociologist R. W. Connell, a pioneer of critical masculinity studies, introduced the concept of "hegemonic form of masculinity" that explains the justification of a particular group of men's dominant position in society while legitimizing the subordination of women and other groups of marginalized men (Connell, 1987). Connell (1995) also discussed non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. These subordinate forms of masculinity are a form of masculinity that is imagined the opposite of hegemonic masculinity due to their 'effeminate' or emotional qualities. Hegemonic masculinity at the same time is argued to work by subordinating women in addition to other forms of manhood who do not fit the hegemonic scheme, such as working-class non-white masculinity in the US. Hegemonic masculinity can be embodied by a small number of men in society, yet it is normative in so far as it is looked up to as the dominant desire for men to achieve. Hegemonic masculinity in any given social-cultural moment is the most desirable way to be a man and "required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

A few years later, though, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) published the article "Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept" where they reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity, specifically in terms of space, proposing to rethink the geography of masculinities from local, regional and global levels. I find this attention to geography and the three different layers or scales proposed beneficial in situating my analysis of Soshokukei

masculinity as an attempt to reformulate and organize these concepts of masculinities. I especially contend that Soshokukei masculinity exists at the nexus between regional (Japanese men residing in urban spaces in Japan) and global levels (neoliberal globalized corporate culture), which requires a move that in my judgement is missing yet even from the recent 'generation' of masculinity studies outside of the metropole and welcomed by Connell (2014) as a desirable move of decolonization.

When I first envisioned analyzing Japanese masculinities, my ideas were nebulous. I knew that the concept of masculinity and femininity have been longitudinally explored by scholars like Justin Charlebois (2013, 2017) or Romit Dasgupta (2000, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2013). I also knew that when I talked with my non-Japanese friends, they often raised this image of salaryman as one that they often associate with "Japan", pointing out how they wear these black suits, chronically tired from overwork but work as a group in a very disciplined yet harmonious way. Yet, in my head, this is not the *only* image of Japan after having spent the whole 18 years in this country. Though this image is accurate to some extent, especially in comparison with that of other countries, I know many of male friends do neither work long hours nor like the idea of "groups."

Since the initial conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, the singularity or uniformity of hegemonic masculinity has been contested many times. In 2014, Connell published the article "Margin becoming centre: for a world-centred rethinking of masculinities" to point out the coloniality of knowledge about manhood and its inexplicable tie with the coloniality of the analytical category of masculinity itself. In this article, she claims that our urgent task is not to locate a new model of masculinity that should be again globally applicable but adapt "a new approach to understanding the making of masculinities" (Connell, 2014, p. 227), which consists

in rethinking the particular forms of masculinity from the margin, not from the center/metropole (predominantly from the US and European context). Drawing on the idea of bell hooks' margin center model, Connell discusses the coloniality of gender (and gender research) and a form of masculinity that often holds colonial power of knowledge over the global North.

In response to the various contestations against the Euro-American English speaking centered masculinity categories, I hope my analysis of non-metropole masculinity destabilizes universalizing tendencies of hegemonic and other nonhegemonic or subordinate forms of masculinities and its whole unidirectional circulation of knowledge itself exposed by Connell in 2014. At the same time, I want to emphasize that this criticism is made potentially possible by Connell's dynamic approach to the concept: "Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting." (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). To echo her statement, I want to demonstrate the impossibility of locating a single globally/transnationally coherent or applicable category by showing the cultural or regional specificity which Soshokukei form of masculinity exhibit through young urban Japanese men's Soshokukei practices, when located within the country's economic and cultural changes since WWII. My analysis, in the name of a dynamic approach, will entail two key points. Firstly, although I demonstrate that the discourse of masculinity often posits the fall of salaryman as an anticipation of the rise of Soshokukei masculinity, this transition (if it has been finalized ever) has not been smooth or linear but often overlapping with each other; it is mutually compatible and constitutive. Second, this messy transition substantiates Connell's (2014) call for understanding the *plurality* of hegemonic masculinities in critical masculinity studies.

It is this multiplicity of the meaning of Soshokukei masculinity that I find very (confusing yet) useful in showing the heterogeneity of masculinity(nities). Simultaneously, I see this confusion (though it is highly implicational) around the meanings of Soshokukei mirroring the way Japanese scholars have somewhat uncritically applied the concept of hegemonic masculinity to this figure of salaryman, which again ended up intensifying the fixation of the meanings attached to its hegemony-ness – even if one can see this adoption as an act of attempting to connect with their Western masculinity studies scholars.

Here, I want to recall, Connell's adoption of hooks' margin/center theory, who calls for the responsibility of the researchers in the metropole to move OUT of "the 'centre' of the global economy" dominating the "international arena of knowledge production." (Connell, 2014, p. 217). I interpret this act of "moving out" as an invitation for people in the metropole to not only physically move out and carry out fieldwork on the margin (as that could easily reiterate the unidirectionality) but to acknowledge, at least, the fact that they exist in an institution that normalizes the unidirectional flow of knowledge and symbolic power over people at the margin. I see my interest in masculinity as a humble attempt to unsettle the direction of the knowledge economy. I have therefore come to the understanding that my task is not simply to write 'about' this culturally specific form of masculinity, which has not yet been in the consciousness of scholars in the metropole, but rather to explore how 'THE' (totalizing) hegemonic masculinity has transformed into the plural of masculini(ties) within the same socio-cultural space of Japan but at the intersection of its local/global interactions.

Though I know Connell herself comes from an English-speaking academic institution, I still find her continuous reformations of her terms and self-critique (even if it is solicited by people at the margin) of her initial conceptualizations of masculinity worthy of acknowledgment.

That is why I refer to her and adapt her concepts of hegemonic/subordinate masculinities and build my argument for plurality on this form of Japanese masculinity called Soshokukei, scholarly as well as popular discourse circulating in Japan but not outside the country. Although Connell (1995, 2000, 2005, 2014) refers to the salaryman's masculinity numerous times in her work as a representational "example" of hegemonic masculinity which she conceptualized. Though I appreciate her reference to Dasgupta's research that identifies the actual salaryman's "changing" outlook, I wonder if this repeated reference to "salaryman" itself is the essentialization, reduction, and abstraction of Japanese masculinity. Moreover, it is important to note, that the term "salaryman" has an extremely specific connotation: disciplined behavior, life-long loyalty to corporations, and devotion to work over life, as demonstrated by prominent work such as Anne Allison (1994) or Dasgupta (2000, 2003, 2009), which also referred to the salaryman masculinity before the 1990s. Thus, I argue that salaryman, apart from its literal meaning referring to white-collar middle-class workers, seem to mark their generation around 1990s; salaryman in scholarly masculinity discourse refers to Japanese men mostly before the 1990s where the economic recessions made Japan no longer an economic superpower, especially under the US gaze. This is why I call for the necessity of using a new term that can mark the generational shift from salaryman *generation* to the Soshokukei generation in urban spaces. Thus, I think writing about Soshokukei masculinity in Western academia is a way to not simply reprimand the fragmented reference to Japanese masculinity (reduced to the salaryman icon), but rather to "critically" work together toward Connell's (2014) agenda of creating "a world-centered rethinking of masculinities" (to echo her article's title) by:

1. Bringing the term Soshokukei into the Anglo-Western masculinity discourse and to emphasize its difference and changing outlook of Japanese masculinity due to the country's changing social-cultural context

2. Delineating and analyzing Soshokukei generation's particular practices which reiterates their differences from (and resistance to) the previous salaryman's generation, resulting in a multiplicity of hegemonic forms.

2.2 Soshokukei

In this section, I will define Soshokukei masculinity and the significance of the concept in my thesis. The section is organized by two key points; the first point refers to Soshokukei in terms of its generational marker and the second point refers to these Japanese men's individualistic and self-absorbed behaviors.

First, I believe Michel Foucault's genealogical approach is effective in situating my literature in the pool of Japanese scholarship and Japanese/Western masculinity studies. In David Howarth's reading, Foucault proposes two types of approaches to discourse: archaeology and genealogy. The former reveals "rules of formation that structure discourses" (Howarth, 2000, p. 49), while the latter concerns the "historical emergence of discursive formations with a view to exploring possibilities that are excluded by the exercise of power and systems of domination" (Howarth, 2000, p. 49).

The genealogical approach to the discourse of Soshokukei tells us about its implicit meanings and the significance of using the term. The term, Soshokukei was coined by Maki Fukasawa in her book called Soshoku Danshi Sedai: Heisei Danshi Zukan (2009) (translated as Herbivore Men Generation: Pictorial Book of Men of *Heisei* Era). She is an editor of several magazines and professor in the Economic Department at Dokkyo University, teaching classes on

media, culture, and gender. First, the title of the book constructs the term Soshokukei as generational one (Herbivore Men "Generation."). Next, the term naming the genre of the book, *Zukan* is usually used to refer to a pictorial book of animals or insects, which again implicates the emergence of the generation as if that of a whole new "species", while indirectly, underscoring the humanness and normalcy of the older generation. Third, the value of humanness is further complicated throughout the book when Soshokukei men are discussed in a way that articulates their differences from the previous *Oyaji* generation since the term ovaii is a slightly derogatory Japanese term referring to 'old men', while still siding with the latter. She says, "I will introduce you to the outlook of these emerging young men who are very poorly perceived by women and *Oyaji* (Fukasawa, 2009, p. 6)." She seems to place herself in a position who is familiar with both generations yet identifying with the older generation who is dismissive toward young men due to their feminized demeanors (Fukasawa, 2009, p. 4). Thus, I want to underscore that the onset of the term Soshokukei already contained the implications of "young men" or "youth" (regardless of their descriptive behaviors or much-attached characteristics) within an unfavorable frame.

The concept has been adopted since Fukasawa's first conceptualization of the term. A gender studies scholar in Japan, Justin Charlebois (2013), for instance, claims that Soshokukei is "oppositional" to its predecessor, i.e., the figure of salaryman. Also, Dasgupta's numerous articles from 2000 through 2010, and the research by Tomoko Hidaka (2010) and Taga (2005, 2018) reiterates the 1990s as the country's turning point which anticipates the fall of salaryman masculinity as a singular absolute icon of manhood. Furthermore, Soshokukei as a marker of "youth" is further articulated by the nationwide decline of marriage and childbirth rate.

Thus, for this thesis, I decided to interview young working-age men in their 20s, who were born during or after the economic recession in 1990s. This reorganization is crucial because Soshokukei has always had the connotation of the young people's perceived disidentification with the previous generation of the salaryman figure, which also insinuates their specific individual sexual behaviors or consumption practices distinguish the former generation from the latter one.

To summarize, I will use Soshokukei as the central category of my investigation because I consider it is as a broad and canonical term that can subsume diversified forms of Japanese masculinities since the economic downturn starting in 1990s and one that has emerged in contrast to 'salaryman' (Chen, 2012; Charlebois, 2013), indicating the shift (or at least a change) to a new ideal form of masculinity amongst the urban youth.

2.3 Aesthetics and Feminization of Male Bodies

Another key concept is aesthetics and feminization of (male) bodies implicated in the Soshokukei masculinity. First, mass culture and consumption have largely been associated with femininity, while high art/culture and production are considered a masculine domain (Huyssen 1986). (Heterosexual) men are in control of producing aesthetic objects; they are also capable of producing and portraying the other, i.e. women in a particular manner. Thus, aesthetics is deeply linked with the construction of femininity which has been manifested through female bodies in images.

Celia Lury (1995) says, "A newly emerging orthodoxy in which the identification of 'the feminine,' 'feminine identity' and 'femininity' is coming to replace (rather than supplement) the investigation of the category 'woman'" (Lury, 1995, pp. 42-43). Lury argues the emergent agenda of identifying what is feminine rather than what is woman or who is woman. I interpret this new

focus as suggestive of the possibility that these young Japanese men in Soshokukei generation, though they are not "women," can embody what has long been considered "feminine/" Furthermore, according to Sue Thornham (2007), aesthetics or images are constructed in terms of the viewers', historically men's gaze or their fantasies (p. 41). Thus, those who are portrayed in images can never be subjects but remain as objects, which are often associated with death, immobility, or fetish (p. 30, 34 quoted in Pollock, 1988, p. 50). The objects' passive position is also fixed because of their structural inaccessibility to the broader system of production of images, even broadly, the production of knowledge. Thornham talks about aesthetics in terms of how these images are created so that they can give viewers pleasure (pp. 29-30). Thus, these images, while being circulated, have the power to serve and please a large number of people at a time. In the context of Soshokukei, these Japanese men are then the ones who give pleasure to viewers. As Miller (2003) says these young men's self-care practices emerged, corresponding to the changing desire of heterosexual women, the "viewers" here refer to hetero women who receive the pleasurable views.

I consider that these scholars' claims above make sense the feminization of male bodies in the Soshokukei discourse. In this discourse, these young Japanese men, who are (supposed to be) historically positioned as viewers and knowledge producers at the same time, are rendered "the object" of their own beautifying activities. Soshokukei is a term that is meant to categorize and objectify young men; the narrators are older men and women who want the young men to be "more manly" or "masculine" according to Fukasawa, who coined this term to convey the public sentiment upon the young men around the time of Fukasawa's publication (2009). Masahiro Morioka (2011) argues that Soshokukei men (which I define as men who were born after the economic recession in the 1990s) are interested in corporeal aesthetics; he portrays them as

highly conscious of their hairstyle and accessories, fashionable, less violent, girly (p. 1), shy, slender, and weak... (p. 16). Furthermore, I argue that these Soshokukei young Japanese men are further feminized through the process of being portrayed, presented to be looked at, and so objectified, which is indirectly an act of the process of feminization, in addition to the actual narrative around these young men becoming feminine.

Meanwhile, it is important to remember that Laura Miller (2003) says that young men's feminization practices can work precisely from within a heteronormative ideology in that their beautification process is motivated by the current (heterosexual) female desire for their ideal partner. In this sense, though, men's beautification is just another way of appealing to women which ends up intensifying heteronormativity. However, I argue that claiming that their motivation only serves women's needs seems reductionist. For example, the (sub)cultural aesthetics of "Kawaii", translated as "cuteness" in English, can make sense of their feminization process more, too. This aesthetics connotate small, childlike, adorable, genuine, weak features, which have been one of the common themes found in Japanese popular cultural products, such as "cute" themed toys, clothes, and food, which are now popular also globally (Kinsella, 1995; Allison, 2003). Sharon Kinsella (1995) says, "cuteness romanticized childhood in relation to adulthood" (p. 241) that is characterized by its "self-discipline, responsibility," "severe conditions," (p. 251); all of them are requirements for becoming responsible adults, essentially, epitomizing the "salaryman" figure for men. Starting in 2015, Japanese government has employed this cultural theme to promote the country's image associated with products such as manga, anime, games, fashion, called "Cool Japan Strategy" to further strengthen the ties between Japan and other countries in terms of economics, culture, and diplomacy (Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Conference, 2015). The research by Miller (2003), Kinsella (1995), and

Allison (2003) all seems to indicate that the aesthetization and feminization of Japanese people's everyday life itself is not only the product of the modern global consumerist culture but also is propelled by the country-specific notion propagated in consumer society.

I have noticed that, though, much literature has analyzed media advertisement concerning beauty practices or portrayal of men engaging in beautification, without the actual accounts of Japanese men. Moreover, Miller (2003), Chen (2012), and Charlebois (2013, 2017) all have claimed that men's motivation to beautify themselves is the disidentification with the older generation but there is hardly any account of how the disidentification in Japan 2022. Do they still view that their daily practices are feminized as well as opposed to the previous salaryman? Also, does this feminization of male bodies tell anything about their relationship with (heterosexual) women? What does it mean for them to be "looked at" and talked about for their feminization of looks, demeanors, and lifestyles? I believe identifying hegemonic masculine characteristics is best done by collecting actual accounts of Japanese men. I wish to answer these questions by first asking how Japanese men think of the Soshokukei label, followed by the investigation of the accounts of their lifestyles.

3. Social Context of Masculinities

In this section, I will talk about the elements of the country's economic situation that allowed salaryman masculinity to arise and remain the most dominant form. Then I will delineate the changes that have allowed multiple masculine forms to emerge – which is what "Soshokukei" encapsulates.

3.1 The Dominance and Singularity of Salaryman

The academic discourse around masculinity in Japan often centers around the identification of a "hegemonic" form of masculinity. Among Japanese scholars, such as Futoshi Taga, the first Japanese scholar who completed his studies in masculinity studies (Dasgupta, 2009, p. 89), the figure of the salaryman has been considered the "hegemonic" masculine icon. Scholarly discussions on Japanese masculinities especially since the rise of salaryman as a singular heroic figure cannot be done without a close analysis of Japan's economic change since WWII, which Dasgupta (2003) sees as a huge shift from militaristic to corporate masculinity.

The salaryman masculinity reflects the country's economic landscape. The 1960s - 1980s in Japan is known as the period of "economic miracle" after the surrender in 1945 where the whole country was devastated. Under the national agenda of reconstructing the economy, an "archetypal citizen" (Mackie, 2002, pp. 200-229), the salaryman figure was created. Salaryman is now known to be the ideal form of masculinity, "hegemonic" masculinity, as repeatedly referred to by Connell herself as well (Connell, 1995) until the 2010s.

Salaryman is often known as "kigyo-senshi" (corporate warriors) characterized by their strong work ethics, self-sacrifice, loyalty, diligence, and continuous devotion to corporations (Chen, 2012; Charlebois, 2013, 2017). In return, they receive permanent lifetime employment, seniority-based wages, and automatic sand systematic promotions (Dasgupta, 2000, 2003, 2009;

Chen, 2012). Salaryman symbolizes the country's post-war economic growth and symbolic high virtue. This Japanese morality persistent through more than a century was then condensed in salaryman's bodies, resulting in the country's Gross National Product (GNP) being ranked only second after the US in 1968, allowing Japan to be recognized as an economic superpower by the international community.

At the same time, the division of labor has been instrumentalized in a way that allows for the singularity of salaryman and the country's economic growth. The nation encouraged Japanese men and women to engage in marital relationships and with that to assume strictly separated gender roles: salaryman and *sengyo-shufu,* professional/full-time housewives (Charlebois, 2013, 2017). Charlebois (2013) calls this wife's role "emphasized femininity" (by borrowing it from Connell, 1987, p. 188) as they are to complement each other and together, collectively sediment the salaryman's hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, salaryman is also known as "breadwinners" (translated as men of pillar) who earn money for their families (Dasgupta, 2009; Charlebois, 2013). In fact, the professional housewives/salaryman pairing is recent in Japan. This division originated from the 19th industrial revolution in the UK and was not widely accepted in Japanese society before WWII. Women were considered the important labor force; they were not even expected to assume childrearing roles either (Yamada, 2013). Gradually, though, the division of labor was accepted and necessitated in the country through the so-called post-war economic miracle and made desirable especially through the influence of mass media featuring Western households normalizing the ideology of complementarity, the gendered division of labor. (Yamada, 2013) In this way, salaryman singularity is not an independent phenomenon; salaryman and their housewives' have been made mutually constitutive.

However, the 1990s saw the unstable and ever-changing masculinity even for the salaryman, who used to be the "hegemonic" ideal masculine figure. Salaryman, a bearer of economic miracle, gradually disappeared in the so-called "lost decade" of the 1990s. My father lived in the turbulent period of the 1990s –2000s as a salaryman. The turbulence began by the bursting of the bubble economy in the 1980s through the plummet of land and stock prices and bankruptcies of corporations (Dasgupta, 2009, 2010). Followingly, the economic presence of Japan became no longer a threat to the world, especially to the US (Dasgupta, 2010).

Accordingly, the previous heroic images of hardworking salaryman have also faded away. Dasgupta (2009) and Chen (2012) argue that pre-1990s salaryman has been stigmatized by popular media portrayal. Constantly exhausted, sweaty salaryman became the target of mockery (Chen, 2012) and the symbol of failure. They were portrayed as quite the opposite of heroic images previously affixed to their authority, power of seduction, and intellect (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003; Chen, 2012).

Globally, the end of the 20th century saw a major political and ideological shift from Soviet-Union communism to US neoliberal capitalism (Dasgupta, 2010). The US neoliberalism accelerated individualism and overemphasized one's "choice" or "responsibility" and based off of the idea that agency and freedom in private companies as well as minimum governmental intervention is the best way to stimulate economic growth (Nancy Hooyman et al., 1995; Johanna Bockman, 2013; David Hursh, 2005). For Japan, as Dasgupta (2010) and Nana Okura Gagné (2018) argue, the 1990s is considered the period of retreat and defeat of the Japanese-style economy and its absorption into the US-neoliberal and individual-oriented corporate cultures. Specifically, Japanese work culture is characterized by its permanent work and seniority-based wages while US-neoliberal work is supposedly based on a performance-based merit system

(Dasgupta, 2010; Gagné, 2018). By 2001, many corporations adopted the latter system which allowed workers immediate promotions and reduced labor costs (Gagné, 2018). The implication of salaryman has changed from ones with high devotion and life-long loyalty to companies and groups to individuals capable of self-management.

3.2 Formulation of Soshokukei

The recession in the 1990s significantly affected the lives of young people, leading to *enjo-kosai* ("compensated dating" where young women offer companionship or sexual services for money) and youth crimes (Dasgupta, 2009). The ideal social contract pairing salaryman and housewives is no longer the norm; many men have begun to abandon their marriage, or even if they marry, they give up having children (Dasgupta, 2010). The increasing number of unmarried couples, the growing trend of late marriages, and the declining fertility of married couples have become national problems (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2004). Also, many young people began to choose part-time jobs or jobs that do not guarantee lifetime employment or systematic promotions (Taga, 2018). This way, young people started to view salaryman's lifestyle, despite the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1995) previously guaranteeing their permanent stable employment and symbolic authority, and high social status, as no longer desirable or ideal. In other words, this lifestyle was simply not available to the young generation from the 1990s. More and more young men have begun to look for other non-standard options such as "free-ters" (translated as part-time workers), which is contrasted to salaryman's employment, i.e. permanent full-time workers (Taga, 2018).

Even after the defeat of Japanese style work culture, Japan has never enjoyed the economic prosperity like in the bubble in the 1980s. The Lehman Shock in 2008 in the United States severally damaged the Japanese economy and drew the country into recession again,

though Japan had been in the process of recovery. In the 2010s, Japan's standing in the international economy continued to decline, partly due to the Great East Earthquake as well as the steady declining population caused by the falling birthrate and aging population. This way, the bursting of the "bubble economy" has become the turning point of Japanese economy – forcing the country to adjust to the new global economic order of neoliberalism. As a result, the 1990s, which is widely known as so-called “the lost decade,” can be extended to include the prolonged recession in the 2000s and termed as “the lost two decades.” (Kim et al., 2010).

Young men in Soshokukei generation embody the neoliberal capitalist economy, as it not only shapes a corporate organizational structure but can discipline one’s everyday lifestyle. With the changes in workstyle, (white collar) workers began to dress in a way that meets the different needs of the changing society to express their “cool” or “healthy” image (Dasgupta, 2010, p. 2). Dasgupta (2010) particularly shows how salaryman’s (defined as white-collar workers broadly here) representation has changed particularly as they inhabit a neoliberal lifestyle. Globally as well, Connell and Wood (2005) analyze neoliberal corporate masculinity by reflecting practices concerning one’s level of self-management through bodily performances especially among working young men in developed nations.

Yet, here I want to note that the term “salaryman” cannot escape from its linguistic significance as a one-of-a-kind symbol of pre-1990s Japanese corporate culture that was preceded and defeated by neoliberal US-style work cultures. Thus, my research on Japanese masculinity focuses on young men’s lifestyles broadly, not limited to (salary)men’s workstyles, because Japanese masculinity is no longer shaped by men’s excessive “companyism” (Gagné, 2018) manifested by salaryman. This, however, does not mean that I exclude the interviewees’ accounts of their careers; rather, I wish to view their accounts of their life and work as a seamless

continuation. In other words, I am more interested in seeing how their lifestyle tells us about what they think of themselves, others, and their work altogether.

3.3 Soshokukei in Academic Discourse

In academia, in the wake of the so-called 'lost decade' in the 1990s, many scholars see that Japanese masculinities are now diversified, mainly due to the collapse of this singular hegemonic icon of the salaryman (Charlebois, 2013; Kumagai, 2015; Aoyama, 2015). There have been various "labels" which note diversified masculinities that illuminate peculiarities of their lifestyle especially in comparison to salaryman, which includes men with part-time employment, so called "*free-ter*" (which is often contrasted to salaryman who work full-time), *hikikomori* (who close themselves to their room often in their parent's house), *ni-to* (who rely on their parents' subsistence), *otaku* (who consume animes and mangas on a regular basis) and netouyo (those who exist on the Internet where they make exclusionist remarks against women or ethnic minorities), *ikumen* (men who actively participates in child-rearing). (Kumagai, 2015; Hidaka, 2010; Taga, 2018; Chen, 2012; Charlebois, 2013; Aoyama, 2015; Saito, 1998; Okada, 1996; Galbraith, 2019). Especially around this time, much literature on masculinities in Japan has been interested in Japanese young men's increasing introverted tendency, social isolation, and escapism. Keichi Kumagai (2015) argues that diversified masculinities (Soshokukei, otaku, and netouyo in his analysis) are connected by the common theme of symbolic introversion and the absence (exclusion) of others. Manabu Minami (2014) points out the young men's socially isolated tendency and escapism from romantic relationships, politics and consumption. Reijiro Aoyama (2015) analyzes young men's transnational mobility as an attempt to physically escape from salaryman's rigorous corporate-centered life. Despite the difference in specific meanings, I want to emphasize, along with some scholars above, that these diversified masculinities on the

basis of their behaviors from 1990 onward are characterized by their introversion and self-absorption.

Out of these diversified masculinities, I would like to pay attention to the Soshokukei form due to its generational connotation, which marks the shift of diversified masculinities since the 1990s and their potentiality of diverse masculinities among young men in the future. To start, I consider Morioka's publication “Soshokukei Danshi no Gensho Gaku" (Phenomenology of Herbivore Men) (2011) the first academic article that made academic communities aware of the term and implicated the potentiality of its scholarly significance. By using the term “Soshokukei” which is descriptive of young men’s passivity to form a relationship, marriage, and childbirth, he takes an affirmative attitude toward Soshokukei men who are becoming more equalizing or benign to women and due to this symbolic softness or gentleness. According to him, Soshokukei men are also characterized by their high level of consciousness toward fashion or hairstyle. In Morioka’s understanding, though, Soshokukei masculinity (men) was still regarded as the minority and only refers to a personality type rather than the changing persona of Japanese men as a group particular to this generation. I see his reference to young men’s symbolic passivity can also illuminate the country’s ongoing big political issues – their refrained political participation, exemplified as the low voting rates among youth (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2009).

Meanwhile, Chen (2012) approaches the term Soshokukei from the perspective of young men’s lifestyle rather than their behaviors concerning their sexual/romantic preferences and instead analyzes the change in the country’s economic landscape from post-war to the contemporary period, i.e., to the 2010s. He focuses on Soshokukei men in terms of their (relatively frugal, due to the economic recessions during the 1990s-2010s to echo lost two

decades) consumption practices by analyzing secondary sources, such as popular magazines, which proclaim to target young Soshokukei men. He lists a range of practices, such as body grooming, shopping, cooking, sewing, manga, taking leisurely walks, eating fine desserts, slimming treatments, day spas, facials, and eyebrow grooming practices (Miller, 2003; Chen, 2012) -- which he sees as all “feminized” activities (2012). He also equates these practices to these of metrosexuals in the West (Chen, 2012, p. 284). Although he talks in a way that Soshokukei related practices, such as makeup or cooking, as new or unusual thus reserved for those who “choose” to take on this particular lifestyle, his attention to young men’s self-absorbed behaviors especially corporeal aesthetics had been well documented by other scholars since the 2000s, such as Tomoko Iino (2013), Miller (2003), Dasgupta (2010). For example, Dasgupta (2010), a prominent scholar who has been conducting a longitudinal analysis on salaryman’s masculinity, views the changing outlook of emerging salaryman’s consciousness of bodily performances, health, and beauty in Japan’s neoliberal global economy. His attention to Japanese men’s individualized consumption practices concerning their health and beauty go along with Chen’s media analysis of magazines targeting Soshokukei men. Iino (2013) added her analysis of the popularity of Soshokukei men’s discourse in terms of their consumption practices. Her analysis is based on interviews with workers in the beauty industry including beauty salons and discusses young men’s beauty- and fashion-related behaviors. Similar to other scholars, she also describes Soshokukei young men as feminized men who also appear to be androgenous, who have lost their traditional "masculine" interests in hobbies and tastes, who are reluctant to fall in love, and who are inquisitive about beauty and enjoy their own fashionable lives (Iino, 2013, p. 84). Miller (2003) has analyzed advertisements of several practices, including estute salon, hair removal, eyebrow, body piercing and tatoos, and skin tanning. Though her research has been

done before the term Soshokukei was coined, her claim that young men's new beautification practice signals their resistance to salaryman's singular hegemonic masculinity.

This Soshokukei academic discourse, or broadly discourse of male beautification practices, has gradually revealed deeper complexities of hegemonic masculinities in Japan as well as their relationship with (heterosexual) women than what it seems. Chen's attention to young men's practices is expounded and critiqued by Charlebois (2013, 2017), a prominent scholar in gender studies investigating Japanese masculinities and femininities. He acknowledges *Soshokukei* men are "heterogenous, fluid, relational," thus the term is not only a description of specific behaviors (Charlebois, 2013, p. 95-96). Meanwhile, Charlebois (2013, 2017) particularly critiques Morioka, Chen, and the general public's affirmative attitude toward sexually passive Soshokukei men for being symbolically tender, kind, egalitarian especially in relation to their presumed partners, heterosexual women. Charlebois agrees that these young men are in "opposition" to the embodiment of previous ideal living, salaryman, thought he cannot conclude that Soshokukei men are becoming more egalitarian or democratic toward women. Particularly, Charlebois (2013, 2017) analyzes the discussions, such as the one by Megumi Ushikubo (2008) and Fukasawa (2009) that contributed to the earlier proliferation of terms in the public as well as in scholarly discourses, such as Chen (2012) and Morioka (2011). He considers Soshokukei young men to be more interested in interpersonal relationships or individual-oriented practices than work-centered lifestyle (Charlebois, 2017, p. 177), which I also consider the most evident distinction between salaryman and Soshokukei men. He argues that Soshokukei men's consumption practices including narcissistic body management or self-absorption (p. 177) are for them to resist the salaryman's persistent masculine competition in public space/workspace. I see that Charlebois's greatest contribution to the study of Soshokukei masculinity is that he

recognizes its potentiality of plurality, which inspired me to analyze their pluralized practices concerning self-care or self-management. Meanwhile, the question whether Japanese men who exercise Soshokukei masculinities are becoming more egalitarian is left unanswered.

Based on the literature on Japanese masculinities studies, I will raise two gaps which my thesis aims to address. First, almost none of the literature on salaryman/Soshokukei masculinities, such as by Dasgupta (2000, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2013), Morioka (2011), Charlebois (2013, 2017), and Chen (2012), is based on ethnographic interviews with Japanese men whom they write about. Rather, this group of literature used secondary sources, such as popular media coverage and cited other academic papers – or a very limited number of interviewees with no rationale for their choice provided. Also, none of the literature reflects the account of young Japanese men themselves. Though I understand these scholars' primary aims are to analyze the *discourse* of a form of masculinity, rather than a set of actual *practices* the Japanese men claim to engage in, I argue there is a need of adding literature that can meaningfully reflect on, contest, and complicate what the media/scholars said about Soshokukei men's practices.

Second, Japanese masculinities keenly reflect temporal economic landscapes, which indicates the importance of investigating the young men's lifestyle under the current Covid-19 pandemic. I argue, in agreement with Dasgupta (2010), that the emergent analysis of men's consumption practices including corporeal aesthetics is due to neoliberal globalization which emphasizes the expectation regarding men's individualistic self-responsibility for their outward bodily performances which are seen to prove their health and wellness (Charlebois, 2013, 2017; Dasgupta, 2010). Along the same trajectory of logic, we must observe that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the global economy. Japan's economy has been on a gradual recovery mode since 2012, such as decreasing unemployment rate, due to a dramatic monetary relaxation

(Wakatabe, 2019), the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus in 2019 has caused a significant economic slowdown. GDP growth rates have also fallen sharply in countries around the world: real GDP growth rates in Japan are expected to further decline more than in previous oil shocks and the Lehman Shock -- comparable to the impact of the two world wars and the Great Depression (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2021). Yet what is particular in its effects is that the pandemic has not only affected the larger economy but the very micro-lifestyle of individuals. I want to explore therefore how these pandemic-related rules along with the changes in the Japanese market due to the pandemic, can facilitate Soshokukei men's "self-absorbed" behaviors pointed out by the existing literature. For example, have self-absorbed behaviors been intensified by the stay-home order which promotes minimizing physical and social contact with others? In my understanding, the restrictions must have accelerated the popularity of the self-absorption practices of Soshokukei.

4. Soshokukei Self/Body-Management

In this chapter, I will analyze the interviewee's account of their practices specifically associated with bodily performances or corporeal aesthetics.

4.1 Methodology

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 Japanese men who live in urban spaces based on the redefinition and reorganization of the term *Soshokukei* as a generational identification; these men are in their 20s and born during/after the 1990s. I specifically chose to interview Japanese men in their twenties in the urban spaces of Osaka and Tokyo. These are the cities where youth (working-age adults) flows in and youth culture flourishes due to better employment opportunities and infrastructure as well as a large number of recreational facilities conglomerated (Ministry of Internal affairs and Communications, 2015).

Specifically, I conducted phone call interviews via LINE (a messenger application popular in Japan) with 7 people living in Tokyo, the capital of Japan, and 6 people from Osaka, the second largest city, to find out what they think of practices associated with Soshokukei masculinity and what they say they actually do. I did not specify my interviews by social class, jobs, or educational status as I am interested in exploring the changing landscape of hegemonic masculinities in urban Japan. I used snowball samplings; I first contacted my friends who were born, raised in Japan, also went to the same high school with me or who is in my neighborhood. My interviews, including follow-up interviews, were conducted in April-June in 2022. I have asked interviewees what they think of the Soshokukei and asked how they think of the scholars' descriptions of Soshokukei practices concerning their appearances, such as skin care. (Please refer to the actual questions in the appendix). I also did some follow-up interviews as some of my interviews did not have enough time on the first occasion. Each interview lasted at least 60

minutes; the longest interviews lasted 115 minutes. The total word counts in my interview transcript is 31872 words in Japanese (around 15000 words if translated in English).

I initially reached out to 20 individuals in total. I have done two group interviews; the first four people are placed into one group and the next three in another group, and all the subsequent interviews are done individually. This mismatch of focus groups and one-on-one arrangement was due to time constraints I had for the thesis project. For my thesis, I had to exclude the two group interviews because that format can change the dynamics between the interviewees and the researcher, which needs to be distinguished from individual interviews. I decided to focus on analyzing only the individual interviews. Thus, I will take 13 individual interviews into consideration for my thesis project. The participants wanted to be called pseudonyms, which are as follows: Makoto, Yu, Haruki, Mao, Soushi, Dai, Hiroto, Nobu, Ren, Taiki, Naoki, Kazu, Kei (See Appendix 2). Out of 13 individuals, Soushi is the only one completing master's degree (in natural science) and Taiki is the only one doing a bachelor's degree (in economics). The rest are employed.

The demographics of my interviewees are highly influenced by the background I grew up in. I grew up in Osaka, a highly populated town with a population of 8,788,905 (Osaka Prefectural Government, 2022). However, I went to a private middle and high school for 6 years in the northern part of Osaka, which I consider a formative period when I made most of my current Japanese friends. Most of my interviewees also come from this school. My interviewees are also in their 20s, graduated from university, currently either working or continuing their higher education. It is important to note that all my interviewees are college-educated or still in college, including those who work for one of the top companies around the world.

It is important to note that my interviews were conducted in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic which must have significantly shaped their lifestyle in a different way than before. Rather than seeing it as an obstacle, I see this confinement as full of implications regarding their decisions or emotional responses to the practices allowed within the various mobility restrictions under the pandemic. Their negotiation with stay-home protocols (though Japan has never undergone lockdowns) must have been limited but positioned them to choose more easily what they really wanted to do, closer to the home, which eventually came out as their new daily practices. At the same time, I think further research on the same topic will be necessary and important later to mitigate the fact that the interviewees' answers were influenced by the immediate presence of the pandemic-related discourse and protocols circulated normalized must-do behaviors during this time which may change their perception and/or practices of ideal masculinity.

In terms of our discussion about the aim of my research, it is important to interpret it in terms of positionality. The first mention of my academic home in the introduction "doing a master's degree in gender studies" is important to think about. First, not only do I come from an academic institution, but I am also doing a master's level study which is actually not common in Japan. In my country, master's students are treated as "different" from "normal" students who would get jobs after completing their bachelor's degrees. As discussed, out of all my interviewees, only one is completing a master's degree (also in a hard science field); others are either completing their bachelor's degree or starting to work as a Shakaijin. Thus, I may have been easily perceived as an 'unusual' character in the eyes of my interviewees.

Second, doing a master's in an English-speaking institution puts me in a hugely privileged position, especially in a country where the ability to speak English fluently is already

associated with one's high social and economic status. According to the EF English Proficiency Index, Japan is placed 78 out of 112 countries and has consistently been considered a country with a "low English proficiency" level. (EF Education First, 2022). Thus, doing a master's degree in English-speaking academia brought me mixed feelings.

Third, I understand the topic I'm dealing with does not imply any major ethical issues regarding the participants' faces, but the fact that I am asking for their important time when they are in their transitional years with no monetary compensation offered was the point that made me rethink my positionality. As a woman who does masculinity studies, I'm extremely aware of the power existing between me and Japanese men in a country where various forms of misogyny are called out but have not been sufficiently addressed (McLaren, 2019; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021). Yet, I was also able to feel the country's continuous corporate systems that made *shakaijin* men struggle. Japanese men in their early 20s are very busy. Finding time to conduct interviews with them was difficult and made me humble in the interviewees' recruiting process (especially as someone who has never been in the Japanese workforce as a full-time worker). A new graduate who works for corporations in their first year is called *Shakaijin,* directly translated as "society's person" but usually meaning "working adults". The *Shakaijin* year is usually foundational and hectic. For example, Dai answered my interviews on the way back home, telling me how his bosses scolded him for something that he did not do. Ren also shared a similar story; his friends often have some time when they meet to complain to each other about their bosses and corporate systems outside their workplace – at work their bosses are enjoying absolute power and defying them is simply not an option. I learned that earning a stable income or just securing a job itself means they are learning to step back and be silent about things that may not be normalized. These comments simply made me much more appreciative of their willingness to participate.

Fourth, masculinity is often talked about in terms of the level of toxicity against women (Connell, 2000), but in a country where masculinity has been associated with loyalty and self-sacrifice as exhibited by the samurai and salaryman (corporate warriors), their outlook is more complicated and nuanced than what I know of the West or how they would be routinely seen from the metropole. Particularly, I argue that generational pressure affects the construction of their masculinity, not only their relationship with women. During the interviews, I felt I would not be able to handle the pressure as a Japanese man, even now, especially in corporate settings.

Especially, those who responded to my request to carry out an interview are members of a very specific group of people in that they were willing, with no hesitation, to talk to me: a woman, one with a master's degree, and most importantly, one with English skills. When I asked one of my interviewees, Dai, if I could reach out to his friend, he hesitatingly replied, “I don’t think they will agree to be interviewed, though. They are the ones who would probably do not like this sort of “interviews” or would see you only as one of their sexual or romantic interests.” The first part of the reply implies that my interviewee sees the interview as a formal situation, which he associates with ‘senior man’ and not a woman, and thinks, based on his knowledge of his friend, that it would not be accepted by his friend. The second reason mentioned is rich in great implications and contradictions regarding what “Soshokukei” men are. My participant raised a risk of transgressing the gendered line about what is acceptable between (hetero) men and women. In other words, he does not think that his friend was willing to find himself comfortably outside of exclusively homo social spaces – unlike him. The fact that the twenty men could accept my request for an interview and interact with me with no apparent display of difficulty on the topic of their masculinity says much about their willingness to abandon well-established rigid homo social spaces salient in the formation of salaryman masculinity.

Similarly, my perceived gender should have greatly influenced the participants' answers. Although my interviews never mentioned anything that can be highly controversial or harmful to women, structurally, they can still be the perpetrators of inflicting a certain level of violence upon women's bodies. The most urgent and evident "violence", corresponding to Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) appeal for taking women's agency into account, would be the Japanese pornography industry (as discussed earlier). In other words, there is a limit to the extent to which they can talk to me because of my perceived gender. At any point of the interview there can be the gendered dilemma of being a "good" man for women, this time, to me even if in a non-typical role, versus treating themselves with "self-care" in the form of pleasuring themselves by consuming pornography, which may cross their mind during the interview.

4.2 Unfeminization of Mens' Bodily Practices

Before going to the main analysis of the interviews, I need to reflect on how men's bodily practices have come to be unfeminized. Consumption has often been associated with the construction of femininity while masculinity is positioned as the production of commodities and knowledge. Lury (1996/2011), quoting Mike Featherstone (1991), argues how a new emerging middle class is characterized by their pursuit of liberated lifestyles which concerns their hedonistic practices. The new middle class constructs a lifestyle that concerns their "self-improvement and self-expression" (Lury, 2011, p. 96). Their pursuit of "pleasure" mirrors the old bourgeoise whose life was constrained by the "morality of duty, reserve, modesty, restraints..." (p. 96). The old bourgeoise, whom I interpret as salaryman in this context, did not have the luxury to spend their time and money on their self-grooming practices; their identity is determined by their dedication to corporations or the family to which they belong. Thus, the care for "the self" was secondary to that for others. Especially, Japanese young men have become

apprehensive of inheriting salaryman's lifestyles due to the recessions and gradual mockery of this figure especially in media as "unhealthy" or "uncool" (Dasgupta, 2010).

Also, as the term "mobile privatization," a concept developed by Raymond Willams in 1974, suggests, domestic life has been reorganized in a way that one can access other spaces and various lifestyles with the development of mass media (Lury, 2011, p. 97). Especially, social media has also allowed them to participate in "prosumption" culture (p. 101-102) where consumers themselves consume commodities but also utilize themselves or their self-images as "products" to disseminate certain messages. Anyone – being viewed and objectified -- can enter the realm which has long been associated with femininity. The mass media, especially social media, facilitated the normalization of feminized male bodies in that they are viewed and thus expected to care their outward appearances.

While the feminization of male bodies has been accepted as a logical consequence of consumer culture as Lury (2011) and others have argued, I consider this beautification has more specific or conspicuous characteristics in East Asian or Japanese culture. First of all, Chen (2012) and Charlebois (2013) discuss around Asian "soft masculinity", who define it as the embodiment of gender-neutral (androgynous) expressions, such as traditional Japanese male performances of Kabuki or the more recent popularity of young men's music groups, specific to East Asian masculinity. Kabuki, an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is a Japanese traditional theatrical performance that originated in the Edo period (UNESCO, 2008). Kabuki player is usually a man with a glamorous costume who himself plays men and women's role; the whole performance consists of the performer's monotone singing/speaking with the traditional instruments' accompaniment.

Second, this classical gender-neutral gender embodiment has been commodified in the form of various men's idol groups. Especially, with the emergence of Korean idol groups' popularity, the East Asian beauty standard has been noticeable and accepted around the world. In Japan, just like Korean idol groups, young men's music groups are popular as they are considered in a particularly respected way as the Japanese term "bishonen" (beautiful boys) or "bidanshi" (handsome men) indicates (Charlebois, 2013, p. 95, 2017, p. 169).

Thus, the unfeminization of men's bodily aesthetics entails young men's resistance to salaryman's unwariness of their health/self-care prompted by the post-war economic hardship as well as the effect of consumerism on their life in neoliberal globalization in the 21st century.

4.3 Daily Routine: Face and Body

This section is dedicated to the analysis of Japanese men's daily routines raised by many of my interviews. I specifically divided the section into two parts: practices concerning face and body. For the first part, I focus on the practice of skincare generally and the second consists of the young men's accounts of their fitness, exercise, and body-making broadly.

The first section analyzes what interviewees say they do as self-grooming practices to confirm or contest Chen's (2012) analysis of Soshokukei men's practices. Chen raised practices concerning corporeal aesthetics concerning their appearances. Each practice is often talked about but the most agreed practice in my interviews was the daily skincare routine. This section focuses on their accounts of face/skincare practices.

In Japan, skincare practices are often associated with the maintenance of smooth and pale skin. The history of skincare can be traced back to the pre-war, pre-westernization period of Japan. In Japan, especially the preference for lighter skin has always been a trend but particularly in an aesthetic sense. Hiroshi Wagatsuma (1967) states that there was already an idea in the

Heian era (794 AD-1185) that viewed lighter skin as the embodiment of ideal feminine beauty while darker skin was seen as ugly. Eric Li et al. (2008) states that in the Edo period (1603-1867), women had a routine of wearing white powder on their skin (quoted in Kim & Lee, 2017). Lighter skin was once a symbol of one's higher status, which privileged them to keep them from outdoor labor and getting tanned. Thus, the process of maintaining white skin requires one's diligent and conscious "care," Though white skin color is not employed in Japan to serve as an official tool for segregation as was the case in the US, light skin is often associated with bodily capital in the form of aesthetic beauty. More and more East Asians put money into skin whitening products according to the ideal feminine beauty of lighter skin (Ashikari, 2005; Russell, 2017; Dixon & Telles, 2017). Glenn Evelyn Nakano (2009) and others argue that lighter skin allows one to access more social networks (social capital), honor and reputation (symbolic capital), well-paying jobs (economic capital), and idealized beauty (bodily capital) (Dixon & Telles, 2017).

Then how has Japanese men been able to escape from this longstanding association of pale/white skin with femininity? Kawano Saeko et al (2021) argues, paleness of skin, skincare more broadly, signifies a different thing than the mere "femininity" long attached to women. Kawano et al (2021) says, referring to Norbert Elias's (1996/2010) concept of "civilizing process," that these care practices are important for the making of organized and cared face/body desired in society. I see that this desirability of civilized bodies is further intensified through neoliberal consumer cultures. I argue that a reason why Japanese men can now disrupt the feminine icon of white/pale skin is that the pale skin is considered a result of one's strenuous "efforts" and daily "care" as was historically the case in the country. What is notable in this period, however, is that the paleness of skin, even if one does not look "pale" at birth, can be

attained through one's high level of care and self/body management competence which is rather promoted in contemporary neoliberalism. Thus, the paleness of skin, for Japanese men, cannot be readily classified as a feminine attribute, but it rather works to enhance their individual value in contemporary society. I see this is how skincare practices are now de-feminized.

Interviewees agree that these skincare practices are now becoming more normalized in 2022. An interview Taiki's answer suggests the recent normality of skincare practices. He said:

I have a skincare issue (skin allergy). I suffered a lot when I was little. Also, when I was in junior high school, I had to bring a bottle of skin lotion to prevent my skin from getting dry out after swimming classes. I was afraid I may get mocked because no one else was doing it... but I think it's quite normal now. When I go stay at my friend's house, I see them using a lotion.

Taiki contends he has been taking additional care of his skin due to his personal chronic skin condition. His particular skin condition evokes what is perceived "normal" skin by other students in junior high school around 2012 – based on his age. His skincare routine seemed not normative back in his high school, or at least, it was not talked about among his peers, highlighting the normality of "uncaring" a while ago, but also speaking to the recently emerging normality of "caring" right now, at the moment of speaking to me as an adult in 2021. It reinforces Chen's article (2012) that identifies the moment of emerging self-grooming practices observed among young people, new back then. I also assume that the pandemic has given these men more time and space for focusing on their needs rather than on what others think about oneself, making care-practices acceptable in their own eyes now.

Meanwhile, some informants are still concerned about not only their personal needs, but also their performance in their workplace. For example, Kei said that he uses a whole skincare routine lineup including skin cleanser, toner, and moisturizer. He said:

I want to do everything perfectly... especially as a recent new graduate, I see it as a first step that makes my career.

Kei's words clarify the ambiguous femininity attached to skincare practices. He sees practicing skincare may contribute to high performance at work. It looks like he feminizes his body with skincare at first glance. However, by improving his looks, he rather reinforces and reenacts his masculinity in the workplace. In this sense, skin care may be becoming a representative masculine, rather than feminine, practice due to its close association with their desirable workspace persona. Similarly, Mao and Hiroto say that they began to take care of their skin in their first year of employment when they became Shakaijin.

This self-disciplined behavior is twofold. On the one hand, it seems as though the participants' commitment to their skincare practices is voluntary. On the other hand, however, these practices are more prompted by the company's expectations imposed on them in their "shakaijin", to be seen as a fully-fledged adult. Interestingly, though, the company's expectations are not directly expressed to themselves but mediated by the colleagues' behaviors. Mao, Hiroto, and Kei all confirmed that they started to take care of their skins (in the form of skincare) when they perceived others starting to do it.

Despite the affirmative attitude toward skincare, there is still ambiguity left regarding the (de)feminization of corporeal aesthetics. None of them explicitly said that they do skincare for

some explicitly or indirectly understood “aesthetics reason.” However, the historical root of skincare, especially in pursuit of white skin especially among women, conflated with neoliberal globalization which calls for sophisticated bodily performances (Dasgupta, 2010) tells us that they should have become more concerned about their appearances in some sense than before. This also goes along with the very initial notion of Soshokukei as “feminized men” as they are entering the domain previously reserved only for women.

However, they never talked about skincare with eagerness or see it as voluntary. For example, Yu and Haruki said that they started to do skincare because of their mother and girlfriends, respectively. I think ascribing their motivations to close female figures still implicate their silent admittance or ambivalence of skincare as gendered and feminized practices. Thus, though skincare is part of many interviewees’ lives, I sense that skincare beauty is still a feminine domain that men are not comfortable engaging with or definitely not relaxed to talk about in semi-public context such as a research interview. Their reason for starting skincare practices is largely explained as required treatment of pimples in their teenage years; yet the talk about skincare has not been common among men back then according to Makoto. Thus, their motivation for skincare practices is because of its function rather than its aesthetics consequence itself.

While some of them think that the pandemic has given them time to care for themselves, others say they have become nonchalant about that care. For example, Nobu said that he used to care about his skin a lot and carefully chose skincare products, but now he is not using any. I asked him the reason and he replied:

Using no skincare products and washing my face just with water makes my skin good enough. I feel the most refreshed when using just water.

No skincare usage can usually mean one's "uncare" about the skin, but, in fact, Nobu's 'uncare' does imply full attention or analysis of his own skin to come to the conclusion that its condition may allow him to find out what works for him the best. While at the same time, making the reasoning more complex, Nobu also said:

I just started to care less about my body since the pandemic. I don't have to expose myself to others and don't need to improve my appearance.

This statement implies that others' gaze plays an important role in motivating him to improve his body. Yet I wonder if this could signal his active uncare rather than drifting along accompanied by the pandemic. He said that he spends more time attuning to his needs rather than to that of others, in line with Dasgupta's (2010) observation about Soshokukei men. I see this very act of apparent "uncaredness" itself spares them more time for their needs, which overall enhanced their quality of life.

In other words, I argue this is exactly what the plurality or complexity of Soshokukei masculinity consists of. This also echoes the newly emerging youth whose lifestyle hinges on flexibility over fixity of the self. Miller (2003) says, "male engagement with beauty work not only challenges conventional gender constructions, it also contends with traditional notions about the malleability of the self" (p. 49). Though this part is organized by a specific aspect of their daily practices endorsed by many of my interviewees, skincare, I do not intend to emphasize that

everyone practices the same things in the same way. Rather, I argue that there is a great variation in what participants do actually concerning their bodily aesthetics, even this one practice of skincare. If they do not care about one element/body part, they may still practice other kinds of practices, while stressing a part of their "multiple forms of identity and unbelonging." (Lury, 2011, p. 192)

I shall take "makeup" as an example. In Japanese, *meiku* (directly translated as "makeup") refers to more of an active form of skincare, where one goes through more noticeable visual change with products that enhance their skin or keep it clean but that add changes to their eyes, eyebrows, or lips. When I asked Japanese men if they do practices that beautify their looks, most of them refused that they do makeup. For example, Makoto said:

> Hmm, I don't do makeups hahaha. But I also don't judge those who do it though.

His laugh somewhat indicated his doubt as to why I ask this question based on the assumption that I should know that makeup is not considered something normal. In fact, he, or none of my interviewees, say that they do makeup, as they still think it is not normal. Yet, they also admit that they are not in a position to judge others for doing this practice. Makeup – though it was outright rejected by salaryman, *Oyaji*, to borrow Fukasawa's (2009) term – is somewhat accepted by young men as one kind of practice. I consider that this acceptance toward certain practices can also be marked as a change from salaryman. This acceptance can derive from the young men's first entry into a feminized sphere through skincare. It looks like their initiation of beautification practices allows them to become more understanding toward those who do more visually noticeable makeups. In other words, a certain practice, skincare in this context, allows

others to practice diverse beautification practices, including makeup, calling for pluralized conceptualization as hegemonic masculine(ities).

However, as their different reactions toward makeup and skincare show, I notice that there is still a difference between practicing it on their own and watching other people doing it. For example, there seems to be a standard way of living that society expects the younger generation to follow. Skincare is one of the practices that my interviewees felt that they can do but to enhance their skin's health. Certain practices are rendered acceptable, while others are not. Chen (2012)'s analysis of beautification practice included makeup (which I interpreted as making more visually noticeable changes to their faces, especially when going out); yet this did not seem to be yet considered wholly an unfeminized practice. However, as I stated earlier, fellow young men's willingness to support, or at least acceptance toward a variety of practices that others may engage in, shows the necessity for pluralized form: hegemonic masculinities.

The other important body/self-grooming practice raised by my interviewees several times concerns their physical fitness. Exercise, or more broadly, sports is one of the fields widely discussed in masculinity studies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Thus, it seems that physical fitness, classically masculine practices of masculinity, can be discussed in contrast to skincare practices which are especially associated with femininity. Yet, I include the pursuit of physical fitness into my analysis because Soshokukei is broadly defined as a high level of self-consciousness and self-management, which is not limited to beautifying or aesthetics practices and is contrasted to the ideal figure of the salaryman which signifies the lack of care toward self over others.

When physical strength is raised in the masculinity discourse, it is often discussed closely with active participation in competitions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Light & Kirk, 2000,

Burgess et al., 2003). However, I argue that my interviewees' interests in exercising do not derive from their competitiveness against others but rather their pursuit of good health. Meanwhile, the emphasis on health is also not a new phenomenon, though it has been highlighted since the pandemic. These individualized practices associated with "health" are exactly bound with the notion of "what is right" in the contemporary society (Lury, 2011): "(individual) taste is not the result of individual choices but is socially patterned in particular ways" (Lury, 2011, p. 90), which is the exact reflection of marketers' intentions in the consumer culture (Chen, 2012). These strategies are now concerned with a "healthy body" for the urban middle-class.

First, I will briefly follow the trajectory of national discourse around health and physical fitness which would contextualize my interviewees' accounts. From the 1990s onward, salaryman has begun to be represented in the media with their unhealthy looks accentuated, for instance, as "sweaty, fat, unproductive middle-aged salaryman" (Dasgupta, 2010, p. 3). This national heightened consciousness toward health and fitness can be reflected in the Japanese policies made in the 2000s, such as "kenko-nippon 21" (translated as "health-Japan 21"), which included the aim to reduce the number of people diagnosed with metabolic syndrome. (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2012). Especially in 2005, the popular media discourse around "metabolic syndrome," one of the popular cardiovascular diseases back then, was increasingly observed. Takuya Tsujiuchi (2012) says the popular media discourse on metabolic syndrome (often referred to as "metabo" in Japanese) has overemphasized the risk of becoming obesity and simply looking "fat." Moreover, the target of this discourse in the media was predominantly middle-aged men who were portrayed as fat and ugly, which I see, is reminiscent of salaryman's deteriorating images. The discourse of *metabo,* which I am also familiar with, has, according to

Tsujiuchi (2012), accelerated the Japanese people's consciousness toward "healthy look." Since then, also, numerous products have been advertised and claimed as necessities for attainment of health, which are all known as "healthy-boom" (Tsujiuchi, 2012).

In 2021, the discourse on health has been more observed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet the popularity of fitness centers/gyms was already rising even before the pandemic. The number of fitness centers across Japan has increased from 4946 in 2016 to 6188 in 2019 as well as the customers of the centers have been also on the rise (Fitness Business, 2021).

In the same way, many interviews have also agreed that they were already taking care of their health in the form of exercising or something similar. Mao, working for a globally famous transnational company, said that he had been consistently doing exercise even before the pandemic. He said:

I feel very good. I was a soccer team member in high school, or I also grew up in a town filled with much nature, so I am used to moving around. I feel disgusted when I don't move my body.

I asked him if he has a set of goals, and he replied:

I am hoping to be healthier. I do not try to be a bodybuilder or something. I consider exercising just like sleeping. I do this as a normal part of my life. I have never thought about the reason for doing it actually..."

Reo also shared a similar sentiment as he feels kimochi-warui (disgusted or uncomfortable) if he does not move his body. Interestingly, their motivation for exercise is highly influenced by their

rigid and disciplined high school life. Japanese high schools (or at least the high school which he and I went to) are notoriously known for their long binding hours at school; their classes started early in the morning around 8 am including occasional club practices before followed by (almost mandatory) club activities that lasted until around 6 pm. Wolfram Manzenreiter (2013) says, "Ever since modern sport found its institutional homeland within Japan's educational system, the male body has been appropriated as the expressive medium of maleness" and men's practice of nurturing their physique has also been considered the nurturing of their spirit (p. 218). From my interviews and the quote, schools seem to play an important role in nurturing Japanese men's later life especially in the domain of sports.

Besides, they express disgust toward physical immobility. Soccer and rugby are sports where they compete against others; the opponents' presence is highly important. Yet as Ren's comments imply, they seem to be more attuned to their body and health than competing against others. The pandemic certainly limits their mobility, doing sports with others may not be realistic but the very motivation to do exercise seems more to do with their physical and emotional response than others' perceptions. I find Manzenreiter (2013)'s differentiation of competition-oriented mainstream sports from more casual lifestyle sports (which can be done at local gyms) useful for analyzing my interviewees' accounts here. The latter is characterized by its "physical qualities that are rather gender-neutral, inviting more diversity and individuality, as they offer participants more freedom in finding self-esteem and accomplishment at their own level of competence and comfort without bearing the pressure of competitive team sports" (p. 219). Though, they are taught to exercise their competitiveness during their high school life, their current fitness style does not center competitive sports but rather are self-concerned. Apart from

the difficulty in finding the common time with their friends for playing sports together, I find MO's attempt to normalize physical exercises symbolic of this Soshokukei generation.

Another interviewee, Naoki, who is also a *shakaijin* in Osaka said,

When I was a college student (in Japan) I was working at a senior care center where I had to take care of elderly people. There, I saw many old people had gone through...like... tragedy... I didn't want to be like them.

By tragedy, he meant that they could not move their bodies flexibly enough or saw some people suffering from chronic and acute pains. Naoki's motivation for exercising is future-oriented but retroactive. He foresees his potential future by observing the bodies of old people who manifest the country's past situations when they were of working age. Old people in the current time, presumably in their 70s or 80s, used to be salaryman back in the 1960s-1980s; they were made to commit to a more diligent work style than young men may do now. Whether they were salaryman or not, general Japanese men's lifestyle was shaped by the economic situation under the country's regime of the dramatic economic reform. Naoki perceived these old people with some pity, though salaryman used to be ideal, healthy, or more precisely "heroic," before the 1980s, prior to the burst of bubble economy. I argue that this congruency between his views and actual images of salaryman back then implies unsustainability of salaryman's lifestyle he learns. Though their ongoing physical immobility or inflexibility may be simply due to their age, Naoki's perception of their unhealthy bodies implies infelicitous consequences of temporarily celebrated salaryman's life back then.

While some started to exercise since the pandemic, Yu said that he lost motivation for exercising since the pandemic. He admits that he is highly conscious about his body. He engages in many combat sports such as karate, judo, and boxing. He also goes to the gym four times a week. He said:

Training all the body parts requires at least four days. If I go less, I have an imbalance in muscles across his body parts. Each day has a different menu and goal on body parts I want to focus on training. But since the pandemic I actually lost motivation. I used to make friends at the gym – a gym is a good place to make friends. Before the pandemic we were meeting people, but now I don't. So I lost motivation to try to look good. I feel like I cared more about my appearance and worked harder on my training.

His awareness implies the significance of others' gaze in motivating him to exercise more. This idea of "body to be seen" echoes the Michel Maffesoli 's (1991, p. 18-19) quote regarding the aesthetization of bodies, "...the body is being constructed only in order to be seen; it is theatralized (sic) to the highest degree" (quoted in Lury, 2011, p. 203). The Covid-19 physically shuts off the presence of others from our lives, disrupting one's everyday life. Yu's body are suddenly rendered invisible to others.

Furthermore, not only is Yu's body to be seen but also that who sees his body is important. He continued:

I watch YouTube videos of someone eating while I also eat. It gives me an appetite. I wanted to weight more because I know many Japanese men look slim and small. You know, when I gained

weight and looked big, I feel like a lot of American male friends also started to talk to me. I feel like I was viewed as "men."

Here, Yu still not only associates a muscular body with "manliness," which is contrasted to the physique of Soshokukei, a slender young man, described by Morioka (Morioka, 2011), but also positions Western (Anglo Saxon) men as the manifestation of masculine ideality. Mark McLelland (2003)'s research shows how Japanese women's fascination toward white men (and Japanese gay men) mirrors the women's dissatisfactions with Japanese straight men, as quoted: "a 'rhetorical mirror' in which exaggerated images of white male superiority are meant to reflect back the supposed deficiencies of Japanese men (p. 2). She attributes women's dissatisfaction to Japanese straight men's "'feudalistic' attitudes, infantile, spoiled personalities and inferior physique" (p.1) which unqualified themselves from becoming "inadequate partners for the modern, cosmopolitan Japanese woman" (p. 1)**.** I was again reminded of the fact that Yu is talking to me, a perceived heterosexual woman, who can serve as a judge evaluating his (interviewees') level of manliness, even if I do not mean to come off as such, (and more importantly, he sees that the term Soshokukei is mainly used by Japanese women). Yu's efforts of performing or aligning himself with white men's manliness through physical fitness seems to be, at the same time, the disidentification with how "standard" Japanese men are often deemed especially by media or Japanese women: particularly, "inferior physique" to echo the McLelland's (2003) conceptualization.

However, is the object of disgust expressed by women, particularly "feudalism" not more associated with the salaryman's masculinity than this Soshokukei generation? What does Yu's rapport with white men's masculinity mean? I argue this is the ongoing ambiguity of

Soshokukei masculinity. Instead of endorsing Japanese Soshokukei masculinity, which I see he belongs to, Yu, instead, decides to identify with another form of masculinity which potentially disgraces the former. I think he primarily tries out or perform white men's masculinity in this consumer culture which allows him to attain certain physique and friendship (Lury, 2011), rather than fully becoming the one. This again underscores Soshokukei men's multiple and flexible identity. Though Soshokukei seems to have overcome negative images attached to salaryman, it seems that Yu still senses that Japanese men embody part of salaryman masculinity, such as feudalism or inferior physique. To resolve this, he is embodying other masculinity and temporary escaping from stigmas still attached to Japanese men's bodies.

Some interviews' answers pointed to the new conceptualization of physical fitness and health. Kazu said:

I like going out and taking photos outside. I began taking photos when I was in high school and started to like them. I also like walking outside, looking around at the scenery – it is like a daily routine and nothing special for me.

His wellness centers on his individualized hobbies which he started even before the pandemic. When I asked him if he had to change his hobbies since the pandemic, he said that he was already doing what he liked, so he did not see the change extremely difficult. Kei continued:

On holidays and in my free time, I spend a lot of time looking at Twitter and Instagram, and I don't have time to talk to myself. We are always connected to others. Also, by looking at Twitter and Instagram, we tend to compare ourselves with others: school grades, the presence of

partners, children, job offers, income, etc. I take a walk without my cell phone, and I feel like I can ignore the tendency to compare with others and genuinely face my honest feelings. This is my time for self-reflection, mindfulness...

He also told me about his thoughtful account in regard to why he likes walking as his hobby. Walking for him is not only a time for relaxing but also for self-talking or self-reflection. At the same time, though, his attempt to disconnect from the online sphere shows his efforts to self-discipline himself. His answers also do suggest that it is not easy to get disconnected from technology, but his existing hobby helps him do it. Needless to say, his answers also show the normalized necessity of finding his individualized lifestyle which is necessitated by neoliberalism. He said that even after the pandemic situation gets better, he is willing to continue this hobby.

To conclude this chapter, I raise the following three points. First, in 2022, young men's face and body self-care practices are more normalized and also instrumentalized than the earlier time when Soshokukei was termed in 2009. To recall Lury's argument on the consumer culture in neoliberal globalization, individualized practices that they claim were still organized by the larger societal needs and norms. What is consistent through the skin and body practices was this notion of the pursuit of pleasurable experiences and making "healthy body." Especially, the skincare practice which used to be largely "feminine" has now become neutral based on interviewees' accounts. My interviewees detach themselves from this femininity by appealing to their motivation primarily concerning the attainment of their health rather than becoming like a woman and emphasizing its functional purposes.

Second, self-care practices symbolize young men's lifestyle which is contrasted to salaryman's masculinity. These young men redefine their manhood by making self-care neutral, which is to turn feminine neutral and even necessary. For some, one of the powerful reasons why they desire to be or at least to look healthy is bound by what is desired and well-perceived at their workplaces. For others, self-grooming serves more generally as a sign of maturity not even limited to the realm of work. Just like the salaryman's period, work is still central to Japanese men's manhood (partly because many interviewees are new to the workforce), while others are concerned with ways that enrich their personal life outside work/schools. Or the concept of "work" is taken differently from that of the salaryman's period. From the interviewees' accounts, the work for this young generation seems to be an extension of their personal life, which blurs the work/life boundaries, also with the influence of the pandemic. I understand that their self and body management even for work is immediately linked with the enhancement of the quality of their life.

Third, it is evident that this Soshokukei masculinity is characterized by its flexibility and diversity in their practices. Soshokukei masculinity is also expressed through the varying level of self/body care; not everyone practices the same things to the same degree.

The pandemic especially has highlighted variations; some perceive the pandemic has made it easy for them to be negligent toward their health and appearances due to the physical absence of others. The pandemic also gave them the time to attune to their individual needs and focus on other self-care activities. They play with what is acceptable within the scope of Soshokukei self-care practices of body and face. For example, fitness or body making is not only limited to their regular exercises in gyms but is molded into their daily routines or is even achieved in the process of engaging in other hobbies or practices. Thus, I argue that Soshokukei masculinity is

characterized by its variations, customizability, and “malleability of the self” (Miller, 2003, p. 49).

5. Generation and Gender Oriented Pressures

This chapter is an analysis of how my interviewees who belong in the Soshokukei generation talked about the actual labeling of Soshokukei – if they resist the label, however subtle or indirect. As Fukasawa (2009) who coined the term claimed, young men as a group, since the fall of the salaryman ideal, have been lamented for their effeminate quality.

5.1 Soshokukei Label

When I asked the interviewees what they think of images of Soshokukei, most of them agreed that this label carries negative connotations. I did not even label my interviewees as "Soshokukei" but their answers to my question "what they think of Soshokukei" invited their bitter reactions. Most of them said that they feel they are not entitled to answer the question as they understand that Soshokukei is a label used by women or anyone but young Japanese men (in their 20s).

Taiki said that Soshokukei is a label which older generation and even women group all these "young men" together and consider them passive or effeminate. He continued:

Sorry but I do not like this label at all. I feel any label like this is not accurate. I am neither weak nor strong, neither active nor passive.

Though he and others also showed resistance to the label usage, the label also allowed me to dig deeper into their thoughts about their Soshokukei associated practices, which emphasize their perceptions of the term as a generational maker.

Many of them did not seem comfortable being labeled as such. However, when I asked if they do what they describe as Soshokukei, many admitted that they do. The conversation between Hiroto and I followed:

Me: Do you identify as Soshokukei?

Hitoro: Me? No.

Me: What do you think these Soshokukei men would do?

Hiroto: Hmm. Caring about their appearances? They favor stuff that they can do for their looks.

Me: Would you do what you just described?

Hiroto: Hmm. Maybe. I do.... I think it is because my friends have started.

It is clear now that they resist being labeled as weak or womanly, but they seem comfortable doing what Soshokukei is claimed to do. This shows that saturation of Soshokukei practices in society which serves as a change from 2009 where the term was coined. Penelope Eckert (2002) argues that one's identification does not lie in the category itself but in "the idea" of the category. In this context, my interviewees are mainly disidentifying with the Soshokukei "category" itself, while they agree that they do what they/scholars I quoted say that Soshokukei men would do, especially the care for their appearances. First of all, the very reason why my interviewees do not like the soshokukei label is that they think it has been created by the previous generation, notably salaryman. In other words, interviewees' conscious or active disidentification with this Soshokukei "category" rather emphasizes their disidentification from salaryman. They do so by normalizing what soshokukei entails – their associated practices especially concerning their aesthetics or health. As Fukasawa (2009) says, this label was created to single young men out as

a deviant who does not conform to normative masculinity considered back in the 2000s. This generational difference is highlighted by the claim by Celia Lury (2011). Lury (2011/1996), quoting Mike Featherstone (1991)'s claim on a new middle class, discusses the lifestyles of old bourgeoisie and new middle-class groups. I find their observation useful for my research as we can equate the old bourgeoisie to salaryman whose life is based on the dedication to morality, modesty, and duty while the new middle class, the emerging young Soshokukei men, pursue liberated and pleasurable lifestyle (Lury, 2011, p. 96).

My question "What do you think of Soshokukei label?" allowed me to observe how my interviewees actively distance themselves from the lifestyle of the old generation, who are, supposedly, the main speakers or critics of Soshokukei generation in my interviewees' accounts. For example, Hiroto says that he does not like the Soshokukei label as it is an inaccurate and reductionist label. He says:

> I feel like I am not even Soshokukei either or do not understand what it means either.

Meanwhile, Soushi says that he can agree with what is described as Soshokukei. The conversation goes like this:

Soushi: I understand that soshokukei men to be like fashion conscious or *Osyare* (fashionable in Japanese).
Me: Yeah. Would you identify yourself as such?

Soushi: Ah. Hmm, maybe. I had to say yes. I do not mean to be like Soshokukei but I fit into what I think of Soshokukei... I have two sisters who also help me choose my clothes etc, so it is normal for me to go shopping for clothing. So yes I think I am more like Soshokukei.

The point here is not whether the interviewees like or dislike the label; I found that they are affirmative toward Soshokukei practices. In other words, the active pursuit of individual hedonism is very well sensed by my interviewees. I argue that many of them do not agree with the surrounding sentiments, however abstract, that came with the label – especially "weak" or "feminine," but some practices associated with it – corporeal aesthetics – have now become seemingly so normal that they cannot avoid practicing it. In this sense, their resistance is only against the imposed label itself but not the Soshokukei practices in questions.

Moreover, these Japanese men seem to comfortably talk about their individualized practices which fit into the theme of Soshokukei masculinity. Kei says:

This is a label which sees us as weak or feminine, right? But I don't care, to be honest. I am not sure if I am becoming more feminine or.... I am okay with doing skincare or caring about clothes or my looks too. I don't find it feminine.

His comments show how Soshokukei is now becoming hegemonic rather than subordinate. In other words, practices of self-management or corporeal aesthetics are more permeated and accepted now than not only the era of salaryman but also than the emergence of Soshokukei era, back in 2009, where certain men were distinctively marked as "feminized" and gained some attention.

In summary, Soshokukei as a label is refuted by many interviewees. However, they also realize, during the interviews, that they actually practice what Soshokukei men were usually claimed to do. Thus, I see that they are just disidentifying "the label" -- made by the older generation or women who see their feminization as apprehensive – and relate to the claimed practices themselves.

5.2 Women's Gaze

This section analyzes their accounts regarding their relationship with (heterosexual) women when they talk about this topic of feminization of male bodies. My presence as an interviewer asking about their masculinity allowed me to hear how their accounts on the Soshokukei practices tell us about their perceptions toward (heterosexual) women.

First, beauty is the domain where fluidity of masculinity can be located against what my participants perceive as rigidity in gendered expressions associated with salaryman. Skincare or fashion, practices which were long reserved for women are becoming men's practice with the help of close women, such as their partner or their sister/mother, as Miller (2013, p. 46) also says that this beautification is a form of courtship between men and their partner. Haruki, Yu, and Kei said that they started to care about their skin or fashion because of their mother and girlfriends' recommendations, respectively. One of the conversations between Yu and I went:

Me: So you do skincare?

Yu: Yes, I started when I was a teenager because my skin was not good at all – with lots of pimples. I also knew that people around me began to take care of their skin. My mother also recommended me using skincare products and I used hers.

I recall Miller (2003)'s claim; she seems to see woman's advice as a relationship booster with their partners, as she says "admiring girlfriends" or "his girl approves..." Yet, how about the help from women who are not in romantic relationship, like their mothers or sisters? What does it mean to be helped by women who these men do not have to impress or don't need any affirmation from? Shall this be still understood as their attempt to stay in heteronormative assumptions that Japanese men, in the end, try to impress heterosexual women? It still needs more analysis to argue that seeking the advice from other women is motivated by their attempt to look for or impress their potential partners thereby intensifying heteronormativity.

Morioka (2011) said that men's Soshokukei tendency mirrors these young men are becoming more gentle, democratic, kind and egalitarian. However, also with Charlebois (2017), I argue that Morioka's view is reductionist. In general, my interviewees were attentive to what they said especially when it comes to a description of Soshokukei men or reference to women's characteristics. However, there was still a moment I saw lingering assumptions and stereotypes fixing women to a classical gender role – such as an expert in skincare or beauty practices. Men asking questions or seeking women's advice tell us that women are expected to be highly conscious about their beauty and is to be knowledgeable about the changes in taste. Yet, in the context of the "men's crisis" called out in Japan recently indicates (Iino, 2013; Taga, 2005), men are no longer able to become the traditional salaryman figure; the increase in gender fluidity in men's expression of beauty can read as primarily oppositional to salaryman but also as Soshokukei men's "malleability of the self" (Miller, 2003, p. 49) which is rather expected in consumerist culture (Lury, 2011).

Men's high care toward beauty, at the same time, mirrors women's reality regarding their beauty expressions. The women and the notion of beauty are so tied that they are not allowed to be dismissive about their appearances.

Apart from the topic of beauty, there was still a moment when I sensed that masculinity is secured through lowering women's status or more broadly displaying the power to explain women. Haruki said:

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Hmm. For a long time, I had no clue about what to wear but now mine (his girlfriend) said that I need to take care, so I listened to her advice... I don't know if I am wearing good, but she says it is good, so I believe it is good... but I honestly don't care.

Haruki began to care about his fashion, but he also admits, somewhat hesitatingly, that he cares about what to wear. His constant reference of his girlfriend, a woman, still implies his view that fashion is a domain that he is not comfortable talking about alone. Also, he calls his girlfriend "Uchi-no" (mine, but in a way that conveys his view toward her as an object) which struck me. The term Uchi-no sounded somewhat disrespectful or condescending toward women. Yet I sensed that this word usage neutralizes the emotional impact when entering the feminine domain in the form of caring about his clothes. In other words, he could be worried that mentioning his increasing awareness of fashion only leaves me an impression that he is just feminized. The word Uchi-no, a seemingly women-objectifying word, still signals his comfortability in showing his power to possess or describe women. He is in control of insulting or owning female sexuality particularly as a way to mitigate his anxiety entering the feminine sphere. Moreover, this can also be viewed as a resistance against the newly created position of men in images -- "men-as-

images" to borrow Thornham (2007)'s conceptualization -- through Soshokukei discourse. I sensed that he was resisting being portrayed or talked to by, not only the wider discourse of Soshokukei, but also by me, who asks him about this Soshokukei label.

Another general tendency I have observed is that their invocation of "human" rather than "man." For example, when I was asking Kazu and Makoto say:

I know there is a label such as Soshokukei, but what I think I want to pursue is not to be like a man or woman but more to be a good human being. I think that is what I think I should do and want to pursue.

The interviewees seem to be mitigating their anxiety about talking about their maleness or masculinity by repeatedly emphasizing that they see themselves and their actions as simply "human." They reference what they see as the standard morality for any human being, rather than a specifically male experience. I attribute this invocation to humanness to the idea of "ideal men" currently conceived in Japan. On the one hand, they are aware of the risk of transgressing the border to which (heterosexual) men can even refer to the topic of gender with a woman who they are not in romantic relationships – also in order to avoid even looking as if they were seductive towards the woman researcher. On the other hand, they also want to be looked at in certain ways, especially self-disciplined and healthy, which are both required for Soshokukei men (Morioka, 2011). The very reference to maleness or men's ideal in the presence of a woman seems to appear that they are constantly thinking about romance or dating – which seems to be abandoned by the new generation. Thus, their reference to human morality seems to appear that they are not aware of heterosexuality at all but rather seems to be symbolic to this generation.

To summarize, though I raised skincare practices broadly as part of their lifestyle, the topic of beautification especially seemed to bring them some anxiety. Though their attempt to alleviate this anxiety may derive from my mentioning “Soshokukei,” a term that they perceived as disparaging for this generation, some interviewees generally talked in a way that emphasized their power to possess and describe women -- also as a way to negate the new position of “men-as-images" emerged in consumer culture. Or to go step one further, I argue that these men can be considered that they actually regain more power through their double positioning. By possessing the power to explain their existence in a portrayal, these Japanese men both exist in and out of the portrayal while claiming the space that they can explain, and they are explained within.

6. Conclusion

This thesis explored how current Japanese young men in urban spaces, Osaka and Tokyo, redefine their masculinity by engaging so-called Soshokukei practices concerning their beautification or body/self-management. Through the analysis of 13 urban living Japanese men in their 20s, I demonstrated how they redefine their sense of manhood by their self-care concerning their face and body, which indicates their disidentification from salaryman's unhealthy and uncared lifestyles.

I situated this thesis into a wider global discourse of masculinity studies led by Connell, demonstrated the significance of using Soshokukei as an analytical tool, and relate this thesis to relevant theories of aesthetization and feminization of modern life. I first gave an overview of Japanese social context which gave birth to this salaryman singularity as well as its shift to the new form, Soshokukei. Then, I showed how masculinity has been conceptualized in Japanese academia also to demonstrate the significance of analyzing the continuation, or more precisely, the saturation of Soshokukei masculinity since 2000s, due to its implication as pluralized forms of hegemonic masculinity(ties) and (de)feminization of men's life, which, I argue, is becoming more relevant in the discourse of masculinity in 2020s.

My interview results showed how these Japanese young men now see self-care practices concerning their body and face as acceptable; yet they also negotiate the degree to which they engage in these practices. These young Japanese men detach themselves from feminization by emphasizing their motivations behind engaging skincare practices, such as curing pimples or maintaining good skin health, rejecting the pursuit of becoming "beautiful" per se. In the same way, physical fitness is also one of the ways to look healthy and embody desirable looks whether this is at work or in their personal life.

Next, Soshokukei as a label is no longer widely used in society or refuted by many interviewees. However, they also realize, during the interviews, that they actually practice what Soshokukei men were usually claimed to do. Thus, I see that they are just disidentifying "the label" -- made by the older generation or women who see their feminization as apprehensive – and relate to the claimed practices themselves.

Also, though I raised skincare practices broadly as part of their lifestyle, the topic of beautification especially seemed to bring them some anxiety. Though their attempt to alleviate this anxiety may derive from my mentioning "Soshokukei," a term that they perceived as disparaging for this generation, some interviewees generally talked in a way that emphasized their power to describe women -- presumably as a way to indirectly question or negate the new position of "men-as-images" emerged in consumer culture.

Based on the thesis, I propose three following points that future research can address. First, future research can take men's social class into consideration and how Japanese men talk about ideal masculine lifestyle. My thesis focuses more on the hegemonic masculinity desired by a lot of members in society; thus, I did not specify each interviewee to a deeper degree. Second, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) call for in masculinity studies, women's views should be incorporated. Japanese masculinity, especially this Soshokukei masculinity, is argued to correspond to the changing desire of Japanese women (Miller 2003); thus, women's accounts should contribute to the conceptualization of their masculinity. Third, it would also be effective to analyze how older Japanese men, especially those who were the salaryman in the 1960-1990s, view these young men. It seems that Covid-19 has allowed the public to be more affirmative toward Soshokukei lifestyle concerning their self-care/self-management; this event could have

influenced older men's (who used to be supposedly critical of Soshokukei generation) views toward young men.

Lastly, in the process of writing this thesis, I have thought of why I situate my thesis in the wider framework of masculinity studies initiated by Connell – which appeared to be still totalizing, Euro-American, English-speaking centered. Yet her reconceptualization done in 2014, "world-centered rethinking of masculinities," seems to suggest the need of changing my own perspectives from being narrated to narrating my/own stories. I still cannot deny my existence in Western English-speaking academia which already grants me a huge privilege, but I believe my identity as a Japanese woman -- born and raised -- can reflect voices of my fellow Japanese friends and community, which may not be done otherwise. Thus, though my topic does not even has to do with community/women empowerment, I hope that this thesis as a product can impact people in my community in better ways.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Questions (Translated)

1. What do you think of the term Soshokukei? What are the images? What do you think what “Soshokukei” men do?
2. Do you think you resonate with the label? Why or why not? Do you do what “Soshokukei” men would do?
3. Some scholars have said that men in Soshokukei (generation) is characterized as their care for their appearances, such as through skincare, fashion, or makeup or generally engage in practices that are regarded as feminine -- would you agree? Do you practice any of what I said?
4. For interviewees who mention the word “pandemic”: Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has affected your daily routine/practices in a way or not? If so, how? If so/not, why/why not?

Appendix 2: List of Interviewees (Data as of June 30th, 2022)

Name	Age	Current Occupation/Education	Grew up in
Makoto	25	Employed	Tokyo
Yu	25	Employed	Tokyo
Haruki	24	Employed	Osaka
Mao	24	Employed	Osaka
Soushi	23	Graduate degree	Osaka
Dai	24	Employed	Osaka
Hiroto	26	Employed	Tokyo
Nobu	24	Employed	Osaka
Ren	24	Employed	Osaka
Taiki	23	Undergraduate degree	Osaka
Naoki	25	Employed	Osaka
Kazu	24	Employed	Osaka
Kei	23	Employed	Osaka

Appendix 3: Oral Consent (Typed and Translated Below)

As a participant in the research, what can you do?

- You can participate voluntarily in the research only if you are above 18 years of age.
- You will be requested to attend 1 or 2 interview sessions with the researcher (Anri).
- It is not necessary to provide your name and family name to the researcher.
- If you agree, the interview will be recorded on audio. If you do not agree, please inform the researcher. The researcher will then take handwritten notes.
- Interviews will be conducted in Japanese.
- If you do not wish to answer the question, please inform the researcher to continue to the next question or topic.
- If you wish to stop the interview and leave, please inform the researcher immediately.
- After finishing the interview, if you want to cancel your participation in the research, please send me a message via LINE application or send her an email with your name and request at yoshii_anri@student.ceu.edu

What will happen to the information collected by the researcher?

- The information collected will be studied closely and will be stored on the Central European University Library page. All names and personal details about participants will be anonymized.
- The Central European University will have (limited) access to the gathered information.
- The researcher shall not share confidential information collected in interviews directly or indirectly with other institutions, NGOs, or legal authorities unless requested by the participant.

What are the risks involved in participation?

- The researcher might gain access to information about you that is personal and know more about your past and current romantic/sexual life.

What are the benefits of participating in the research?

- You may not benefit directly from this research, but I believe your answers would contribute to the literature on herbivore masculinity which has often been contrasted to the traditional masculine model exemplified by white caller workers, salaryman.

Subject Statement of Voluntary Consent

- "When (orally) agreeing with this consent, I am agreeing to voluntarily participate in this research. I have understood this consent form / it was explained to me in a language which I use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been informed that I can withdraw at any time."