WALK LIKE A MAN, TALK LIKE A MAN: DANSŌ, GENDER, AND EMOTION
WORK IN A TOKYO ESCORT SERVICE

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MARTA FANASCA

SCHOOL OF ARTS, LANGUAGES AND CULTURES
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ABSTRACT

My thesis offers a theoretically engaged ethnographic examination of the female to male (dansō) escorts phenomenon in contemporary Japanese society.

Dansō is a Japanese word that means "male dress" and it is commonly used to describe a girl or a woman who crossdresses. Since 2006 and mainly in the Tokyo area, dansō escort companies started to offer their services to customers, giving them the possibility to enjoy a romantic date with a crossdresser woman. From September 2015 to July 2016, I worked on a voluntary basis in a dansō escort company with the aim of unfolding the meanings of this form of crossdressing. I had the opportunity to observe on a daily basis dansō escorts in their working duties and in their free time. I also experienced the creation and performance of a masculine identity. Moreover, I was also able to meet customers in the framework of paid dates and public events held by the company while presenting myself as my male alter ego. I adopted as methodological tools semi-structured interviews and participant observation with both crossdressers and clients in order to represent the phenomenon of dansō escorting as a whole, with a focus on the issues of gender identity and self-expression, emotional labour and commodification of intimacy. My research questions are: how can dansō be defined in gender terms, and what kind of masculinity do they express? Who are the customers who benefit from the crossdresser escort service, and why? How can dansō-customer relationships be described in terms of emotions involved and exchanged? Therefore, I focused on the two major actors in the practice: dansō and their female clients, to look specifically at how dansō-customer intimacy develops in the context of paid relationships.

Drawing on Butler’s gender performativity theory, I argue that dansō represent a new gender definition, a way of self-interpretation which avoids binary categorizations such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. In this perspective, to do dansō is a way to express dissatisfaction with conventional Japanese gender roles enacted by Japanese women who, for different reasons, fall outside prescribed categories and embodiments of femininity. Then, I highlight the most common typologies of customers and their reasons for dating a crossdresser escort. My contention is that dansō are providers of emotional support and intimacy, both perceived by customers as impossible to achieve in relationships with men and outside the frame of a monetary transaction.

To conclude, after presenting the points of view of dansō escorts and their customers, and the benefits they obtain from the crossdresser escort service, I argue that this occupation is a form of emotional labour, and I highlight the negative consequences on the psychological and personal wellbeing for the individuals involved, underlining the relevance of this study in a wider frame involving the commodification of intimacy.
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Imagine a cozy coffee shop in a tall building in central Tokyo: wooden tables and comfortable seats, dim lights, cool jazz as soundtrack. A couple is seated slightly out of sight of other customers. The man is very charming in his fashionable clothes, the hair carefully styled, luxurious accessories by famous and pricey brands. Maybe he is not so tall, but still very attractive, surrounded by the scent of sophisticated cologne. He elegantly moves his hands when pouring milk and stirring the lady’s coffee, and always smiles at her. She is significantly older than him, a bit chubby, and wears a childish pinafore dress adorned with ribbons and crochet here and there, and a light pink cardigan. They look a strange couple. Perhaps she is his mother? No, their glances, their behaviours are those of a couple. She talks extensively about how her work has become terrible recently, explaining that her boss bullies her every day, and her colleagues never invite her out or organize events that include her. She feels like nobody loves her and sobs silently; she is on the verge of an outburst of crying. During the conversation he never takes his eyes off her, carefully listening to her words with a sympathetic expression on his beautiful face. Then, he takes her hands, and pulls them closer to his lips saying “I care about you. You are the most important person in the world to me” and delicately kisses her hands. A phone call interrupts the magic moment. He answers quickly, muttering only a few words like “Wakarimashita” (I see), and then hangs up. “What do you want to do? Our time is almost over…” he asks her. “Let’s go.” She takes the bill and steps towards the cashier, while he collects her bags, and discreetly waits a few steps behind while she pays. The couple walks out together; she hangs on his arm. A light rain starts falling, and they walk under the same umbrella, very close to each other. As they reach the subway station, they hug for a long time, which is a scene rarely spotted in fast-paced Tokyo. Then she descends the steps, turning around two or three times to wave him goodbye again, as if she would like to carry his smile with her on her way back home. He waits and waves back until she disappears from his sight. Then he takes again the phone, makes a call and announces “The date is over, I am coming back to the office”. If you spot a similar scene in Tokyo, you have probably witnessed a date between a female to male (FtM) crossdresser (dansō) escort and his client.

Literally, the word dansō means “male clothing” and it is commonly used to describe women who crossdress. A dansō escort company offers clients dates with crossdresser women. The dansō escort service, the focus of my doctoral research, is just one of the new
entertainment forms linked to the word *dansō* that have developed since the mid-2000s in Japan. In 2006, when this new *dansō* phenomenon started, there was only one *dansō* escort agency with 5 crossdressers, and a single *dansō* café, both in Tokyo. At the time of my fieldwork (2015-2016), *dansō*-related entertainment was present in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Sapporo, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka. \(^1\) Besides two *dansō* escort agencies with twenty-one escorts in all, I knew of nine *dansō* cafes in Tokyo, plus two *dansō* host clubs. The Japanese media investigated the *dansō* phenomenon in documentaries and magazines, and the members of probably the most famous Japanese all-girls idol group, AKB48, performed in drag several times from 2010 onwards on the television programme *AKBingo!* (helped in their transformations by members of a Tokyo *dansō* escort company), showing that the *dansō* phenomenon was more than one of the hidden peculiarities of Akihabara’s back alleys. Despite still representing a niche market, the business of *dansō* was definitely growing. It carved out its own space in the variegated world of *otaku* subculture, and gradually won new fans of different age ranges and social backgrounds. I decided to investigate *dansō* escorting specifically because of its position between different worlds, which overlap and influence each other. *Dansō* escorting involves gender performativity, and draws on Japanese popular culture – imaginaries fed by manga, anime, and computer games. It is, at the same time, part of the *otaku* culture\(^2\) and of the *mizu shōbai* world.\(^3\) *Dansō* escorting shares with other forms of entertainment linked to Akihabara (such as maid cafés\(^4\)) the idea of performing a character to provide alternative forms of emotions and intimacy for paying customers, outside the frame of heteronormativity. Yet it is also embedded in the world of daily life. While maid cafés are meant to be places where one forgets the world outside the café, dates with *dansō* take place in ordinary spaces, allowing clients to mix fantasy and reality to create their own

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\(^1\) Data gathered through interviews with my *dansō* informants and web-based searches.

\(^2\) *Otaku* is a term commonly used to describe individuals with obsessive interests, mostly (but not exclusively) related to anime and manga. For Nobuoka, *otaku* are “lead-users and sophisticated consumers of Japanese popular culture” (2010: 211). The term is often linked to the neighbourhood of Akihabara, where most of the manga/anime/games-related shops and entertainments are located. *Otaku culture* broadly refers to the subcultural world of anime, manga and games, their production and consumption. Morikawa defined it as “the traces left by *otaku*” (2013: 64). For a fuller explanation of *otaku* culture, see Galbraith and Schodt (2009), Azuma H. (2009), and Itō, Okabe and Tsuji (2012). For a wider definition of the word *otaku* and its negative implications, see Kinsella (2015: 102-138).

\(^3\) Literally “the water business”, the term indicates night time entertainment in Japan and, by extension, those businesses which involve serving alcohol, the supply of male and female company to customers and the offer of erotic and sex-related services.

\(^4\) In maid cafés (*meido kissa*), waitresses are dressed as French or Victorian maids, and treat customers as masters (or mistresses) in a private mansion, rather than as clients.
emotional experience. Furthermore, as I discovered, *dansō* escorts work their lives and identities out of a desire for self-expression in a context of commodified intimacy. Within the wider offering of intimacy provided by the Japanese affective labour market, and among other forms of crossdressing, *dansō* escorts represent a case of interplay between business and identity. Crossdressers do *dansō* to express themselves, yet their work involves the performance of a partly fictional character put on the stage for the sake of clients, at their specific request. The tensions between these different sides of *dansō* escorting engender the necessity to constantly negotiate boundaries of self-expression, commodification and interpersonal relationships, differentiating *dansō* from other crossdresser identities more linked to the cosplay world or to the LGBT community.

Indeed, the *dansō* escort service, contrary to what I first thought, is not intended to satisfy only geek girls who devote their lives to manga and anime, but rather to cater for the need for romance of women at large: full time housewives, office ladies, and women who are fed up with men and their insensitivity. In the world of *dansō* escorts, every woman can find her prince charming, the perfect man she always dreamt of. Clients just have to choose the crossdresser escort that most fits their ideals of masculine beauty and personality, and then enjoy his company for the booked time. And eventually forget that the *risōtekina otoko*, the perfect man they are going to meet, is not a man.

Hence, my research questions are: how can *dansō* create a male identity and successfully perform it in their everyday lives? What is leading these women to undertake a crossdresser escort job, with all the possible negative consequences of being a “gender outlaw” (Bornstein, 1995) and deviant from the standard career pattern in Japanese society, and how do they become so good at escorting to seduce their customers? How do they manage human interactions as crossdresser escorts and outside their *dansō* role? Moreover, why should supposedly heterosexual Japanese women want to date a crossdresser woman so much that they will pay an hourly fee plus all the expenses during the meeting? What is it that escorts can provide not only better than “normal” men, but also better than male escorts, or any other partner? What kind of relationships develop between crossdressers and clients? Finally, what are the implications of the *dansō* escort phenomenon for gender in Japanese society, and how can we relate it to the wider context of global queering?
Significance and aims of the research

When I first started looking at the scholarly works devoted to dansō, I found that coverage of the phenomenon was meagre, and rarely advanced my understanding. The majority of studies were focused on theatrical performers and transsexuals, but dansō are very different from both. Moreover, although there are numerous studies regarding male-to-female performances and performers, their female counterparts were far less investigated. A few articles investigated the dansō world, but none attempted an ethnographic approach. In magazines and the non-academic press, articles featuring crossdresser escorts were mostly an explanation of how to obtain a masculine look and be fashionable in male attire, or else accounts of the latest crossdressed performances of the idols of the moment. The social implications of this kind of entertainment were not debated at all, and the life stories and motivations of crossdressers and their clients were absent. I was surprised to discover that the phenomenon was almost in all cases assimilated to cosplay and the world of anime and manga, or to fashion, and deprived of any other sociological or anthropological relevance.

This lack of scholarship on the subject left much to be explored, and gave me the possibility of contributing innovative research to the field of Japanese Studies. With my work I want to provide a better understanding of dansō individuals as what I argue to be a new gender category, underlining what relevance this categorization offers to women who do not perform a cisgender identity in contemporary Japan. The history of crossdressing in Japan is vast and multifaceted, but I only focus on dansō escorts’ performance of masculinity in contemporary Japan, since gender expressions are situated culturally and temporally in a given context; therefore, this thesis is not to be considered as an historical account of Japanese female to male identities. Despite the theoretical developments in the field of gender and queer studies, academic discourse on gender is often still limited by a binary system of expression founded on dichotomies such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. My thesis shows the theoretical problems of continuing to refer to male and (or) female to explain what should be conceived as fluid, namely gender identity, and tries to address this issue in a way that goes beyond these linguistic limitations, proposing the word dansō as a usable term for those individuals who identify in this way. Moreover, this work also shows how masculinity can be enacted and successfully performed without men, highlighting how gender identity and sexual identity cannot be considered as intrinsically intertwined and indivisible. The recognition of dansō as one gender expression in between male and female genders, a term for a type of identity not ascribable to one of the above mentioned two
categories, acquires additional meaning in relation to the debate about global queering, concerning whether and to what extent queer identities in non-Western contexts are influenced by or can be described through Western theories on gender and (homo)sexuality. It is also significant given that individuals who do not conform to the binary male/female division in Japan are often ostracized and re-aligned to the above mentioned system of categorization, erasing differences and alternative gender expressions. In this regard, dansō represent one of the Asian realities that are challenging the supposed globalization of queer identities and, on a national level, represent a form of resistance against the rigid gender conservatism that still characterizes large sectors of Japanese society.

At the same time, it is my aim to contribute to understanding of the commodification of intimacy and its sociological relevance in contemporary Japan. Despite the growing interest in applying the concept of emotional labour to different sectors of service work, no ethnographic studies have investigated the relationship between emotional labour and the provision of commodified forms of intimacy linked to non-cisgender identities in Japan. My research aims to shed new light on the provision of services oriented towards the emotional (rather than sexual) satisfaction of a mainly female clientele, and which take into consideration the needs of those individuals who often fall outside the frame of heteronormative life trajectories. By highlighting what some women perceived as lacking in their everyday relationships and why they think crossdresser escorts can provide it, this investigation can obtain an improved understanding of the dynamics that positively or negatively influence the development of relationships in contemporary Japan, showing how, for some women, a commodified intimacy or a bought love story (gijiren’ai) can be seen as more satisfactory and less demanding than a non-commodified relationship with a “real” man. Furthermore, it can also help towards understanding some of the reasons that lead an increasing number of Japanese women to the choice of not marrying, instead preferring commodified forms of intimacy. In terms of applied outcomes, the analysis of my data could allow an increased knowledge of this phenomenon, and acquires importance due to the steady decrease of marriages in Japan, along with an increase in offerings of alternative forms of intimacy and emotional satisfaction at the frontier of the hospitality service sector. Moreover, exploring how crossdresser escorts manage their emotions during their work can add information on employee endurance and burnout in prolonged situations where the performance of unfelt emotions is mandatory, and can also suggest new research directions concerning the addiction which can develop in clients after benefitting for long periods from similar kinds of entertainment involving the sphere of human emotions.
I should make clear at this point, as will be understood from reading my thesis, that the field I have investigated and the materials I have analysed cannot be subsumed under a single particular theory. Instead, I referred to many theories from different fields to better depict the world where dansō escorts and their clients were acting and interacting, working, and loving, a world where gender issues, sexual orientation(s), and emotions conflate, overlap, and reciprocally influence and shape each other. My research is the first attempt to uncover the reality of dansō escorting from an insider’s perspective, obtained through an ethnographic approach. Its aim is not only to make known to the academic audience the phenomenon of dansō escort service in contemporary Japan, but also to add a new piece within the wider frame of studies regarding affective labour, commodified intimacy and gender in contemporary Japan.

Outline of the thesis

My thesis is divided into five chapters. In chapter one, I provide a review of the existing related literature, and a theoretical framework to situate my research within the fields of Japanese Studies and Gender Studies. Specifically, I refer to theories of gender performativity to explain crossdressers’ embodiment of masculinity, and I analyse the dansō escort work as a form of emotional labour, inscribing it into the wider landscapes of sociological literature already produced on the topic.

In chapter two, I first explain the ethnographic methodology I adopted in carrying out my investigation, and how I approached my fieldwork. Secondly, I offer insights and reflections about my role as a foreign researcher and practitioner, examining how my double position of insider and outsider shaped my research and the data obtained. I also investigate, in a self-reflexive manner, how I managed my field relations and what I have done to represent my informants ethically in my research. Lastly, I provide a description of the company where I conducted my fieldwork.

In chapter three, the focus is on the crossdressers and on their embodiment of masculinity performed during work shifts and free time. I present crossdressers in terms of gender and sexual identity, demonstrating how dansō can come to define a new gender category. I also provide explanations of how crossdressers manage their social relationships inside and outside the world of crossdressing.
Chapter four is devoted to customers of the crossdresser escort service: I present the most common typologies of clients attending a dansō escort company and I examine their motivations and what they are looking for in a relationship with a crossdresser escort. I argue that dansō represent for clients a way to experience a more fulfilling form of intimacy compared to what they can obtain outside the frame of a monetary transaction with men, a sort of “augmented reality” (my term) relationship where “the ideal man” is actually a woman who perfectly understands other women’s needs. In addition, dansō can also be seen as a way to experience homosexual desires from a safe standpoint, without the need for clients to deal with homosexuality-related issues and the still strongly perceived societal stigma connected to lesbianism. Dansō can also come to represent an alternative lifestyle in opposition to the role of wife and mother, framed within the heterosexual marriage ideal promoted as a national project in Japan.

In chapter five, I contend that dansō work is a form of emotional labour, and I examine the efforts required of the crossdressers in performing their escort role. Furthermore, I investigate what kind of relationships develop between an escort and his clients, underlining pros and cons that can affect both crossdressers and their habitués in long term relationships.

The conclusion refines my main arguments: dansō is “doing” and “being” at the same time, and through this word my crossdresser informants can define who they are and their work; dansō is a performance of masculinity that can and should be read as a new gender category. Furthermore, for clients who benefit from this entertainment, it is a way to experience alternative lifestyles that cannot be pursued in their everyday lives. However, both for clients and dansō, there are negative consequences to face. The emotional labour the escort work requires can be extremely demanding and emotionally draining for those involved; at the same time, for clients who are extremely committed – both from a monetary and an emotional perspective – the frequentation of escorts can come to represent a sort of addiction, which can negatively influence their daily life. In addition, I left some questions open for further development of this project and other research in the same field.

To complete the picture, subsidiary information is offered in the appendices. Specifically, in appendix I, I present and discuss some contextual information about the interviewed informants. In appendix II, I present a one month working schedule of my crossdresser informants, to underline the discrepancy between the hours spent in the office and the hours spent in dates, and to give a tool to roughly calculate the escorts’ monthly incomes.
Chapter 1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction
In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework on which I based my investigation about female to male crossdresser escorts, and the relevant literature to contextualize this study within the fields of Japanese Studies and Gender Studies. I also discuss how the crossdresser escort service can be considered as a form of emotional labour, with all the distinctive features typical of this kind of occupation, and the relevance of this concept for a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of dansō escorting.

1.1 Masculinity in Japan
In this section I illustrate the social context in which the dansō embodiment of masculinity matured and developed, providing an explanation about the role that counter-hegemonic gender expressions played in making dansō an established alternative form of masculinity, starting from the premise that “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (Halberstam, 1998: 1).

A great amount of research on alternative masculinities in Japan has already investigated non-hegemonic or marginalised representations of manhood, focusing on fatherhood (Ikeda, 1996; Ishii-Kuntz, 2003), workers in small firms and day-labourers (Fowler, 1996; Gill, 2003; Roberson, 2003), and male homosexuality and transvestism (Mackintosh, 2006, 2010; Leupp, 1995; Lunsing, 2001, 2002; Ito and Yanase, 2001; McLelland, 2000a, 2003a, 2005; Pflugfelder, 1999; Moriyama, 2010; Mitsuhashi, 2003, 2007). However, up till now, very few attempts have been made to give a detailed description of Japanese female masculinities. This absence is not confined to Japanese Studies, since “female masculinities within academia, the media, and society at large have been pushed to the margins” (Baker and Kelly, 2016: 46), and often “framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (Halberstam, 1998: 1). So far, most of the scholarship about the topic has focused on female
interpreters of masculine roles in Takarazuka Theatre (Nakamura and Matsuo, 2003; Robertson, 1998; Stickland, 2007). FtM (female to male) transsexuals and onabe, even though to a lesser extent compared to their masculine counterparts, have received scholarly attention (Lunsing, 2003) especially through translations of personal life stories (McLelland, Suganuma and Welker, 2007; Summerhawk, McMahill and McDonald, 1998). To date, the available literature on the dansō phenomenon itself has mostly focused on female to male crossdressing in multiple media (manga, anime, TV drama, movies, books...), without a substantial and deep engagement with the actual practice of dansō crossdressing (Oshiyama, 2007; Saeki, 2009; Saitō et al., 1998; Taniguchi, 2002) outside the world of cosplay (Galbraith, 2013a; King, 2013; Okabe, 2012; Osmud, Liu and Brittany, 2012; Thorn, 2004).

In discussing dansō identities, masculinity is the symbolic complex in defining crossdressers’ self-perception and self-presentation. Paraphrasing Gayle Rubin, I would say that dansō are “constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols” (1992: 467). But what “codes and symbols” are reinterpreted by these Japanese FtM crossdressers to express their masculinity and to be perceived as masculine? What can be considered a signifier of masculinity within the Japanese social context? For Rubin, masculinity is depicted and enacted in different ways according to national, racial and ethnic groups (1992: 470); expressions of masculinity (and femininity as well) are extremely contextual and their performances strongly differ cross-culturally and over time. Therefore, how can we define the dansō’s masculinity if the idea of masculinity itself lacks a univocal definition? Sociologist R. W. Connell (1995), drawing on Gramsci’s (1971) concept of cultural hegemony, argues that masculinity linked to ideas of power, strength and dominance holds a hegemonic status with respect to the meaning of “being a man”. “Hegemonic masculinity” is not the one most commonly embodied by men (Gilmore, 1990) but “rather the most desired form in relation to social, cultural and institutional aspects” (Hidaka, 2010: 2) and hence “it embodie[s] the currently most honoured way of being a man [and] it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). It is possible to state that all masculinities construct themselves in relation to their hegemonic representation in a hierarchical structure. Hegemonic masculinity is usually characterized by compulsory heterosexuality and physical strength (Connell and

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5 The Takarazuka Revue is a Japanese all-female theater troupe founded in 1913 by Kobayashi Ichizō.
6 The term onabe refers to individuals born with a female body but who usually identify as men, crossdress FtM and sexually desire women, distinguishing themselves from lesbian identities. See Maree (2003), and Lunsing (2001: 263).
Messerschmidt, 2005) and, broadly speaking, by features such as “domination, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control” (Cheng, 1999: 298). Messerschmidt (2011) also pointed out that hegemonic masculinity “structures and legitimates gender relations hierarchically between men and women, masculinity and femininity” (2011: 206). However, hegemonic masculinity is a definition continually undergoing changes and modifications in order to keep its dominant status. According to Solomon-Godeau (1995), hegemonic masculinity is always in crisis and constantly needs to reshape itself to create a defensive line against outer intrusions that can destabilize it. At the same time, non-hegemonic forms of masculinity can appear and challenge the hegemonic form, representing a potential subversion of unbalanced gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2000: 12).

From this premise, it is necessary to identify the representation of hegemonic masculinity in Japan. According to numerous scholars, the hegemonic masculinity in Japan conflated for a long time with the salaryman imaginary (Dasgupta, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Gill, 2003; Miller, 2003). The term salaryman was first used in 1916, and became well known during the 1920s (Nakamura and Nakabayashi, 2004). However, the salaryman started to dominate the discourse on hegemonic masculinity in Japan from the 1950s, when the rapid industrialisation and urbanization that the country faced led to an increase in the separation between the public and private realms – with the former becoming the space of full-time working men and the latter of women – and thus to the birth of the “figure of the be-suited urban, white-collar ‘salaryman’ loyally working for the organization he was employed by, in return for benefits such as secure lifetime employment and almost automatic promotions and salary-increments linked to length of service” (Dasgupta, 2009: 83-84). Consequently, the complementarity of the salaryman and the housewife within a rigid system of gender divided roles became the social norm, with women embodying the role of the ryōsai kenbo – the “good wife, wise mother” in charge of domestic duties and raising children – and men depicted as the breadwinners and the daikokubashira (Dasgupta, 2005: 168), the main pillar supporting the house and the society with their complete loyalty to work and, especially, their company. The salaryman patriarchal system from the 1950s supported the image of men as “corporate warriors” (kigyō senshi) for their companies, and simultaneously “capitalist employee, state tax payer and family provider” (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003: 8), a sort of consumerist version

Though forms of hegemonic masculinity vary according to societies and cultures, the above mentioned features are recurrent and, to varying extents, widely characterize hegemonic masculinity worldwide.
of a contemporary samurai (Frühstück and Walthall, 2011). The salaryman and the fulltime housewife became the archetypes of hegemonic masculinity and “emphasized femininity”8 in postwar Japan (Charlebois, 2013; Hidaka, 2010; Tokuhiro, 2010). To enter into the hegemonic masculine category of “the middle class, heterosexual, married salaryman considered as responsible for and representative of ‘Japan’” (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003: 1) was considered to be the life-goal for the great majority of Japanese men, achieved via the shinki gakusotsu shūshoku, or school-to-work system, which ferried students from high schools to universities and then directly to their working lives. As Mathews points out, the ikigai, or “reason for living” for the majority of Japanese men is their work (2003: 110). The relation between the construction of hegemonic masculinity and the state’s need in Japan is close-knit, and failing to perform masculinity according to the approved social rules may result in sanctions which involve both the workplace and everyday life: men who are not in the job market occupying a full-time position, or who are not married, are often considered as hanninmae, half a person, and not ichininmae, a fully developed member of the society or shakaijin (Lunsing, 2001: 75). In terms of self-presentation, salarymen must dress in dark-coloured business suits which do not differentiate one from another, resembling more the uniform of an army than a common business dress-code; wear a white shirt and a necktie; keep hair its natural colour and short; facial hair and beards are usually not tolerated; accessories or eye-catching details should be avoided as much as possible (Dasgupta, 2010).

The image of salaryman as Japanese hegemonic masculinity was unchallenged until the beginning of the 1990s with the end of the “bubble” economy and the consequent economic stagnation, social uncertainty and anxiety that characterised the period (Yoda and Harootunian, 2006; McCormack, 1998), when the model of masculinity embodied by the salaryman started to lose its hegemonic role. The stability offered to salarymen in the past was less available to the younger generations, and the economic optimism which characterised the previous generations faded away. This led scholars and commenters to define the 1990s as “the lost decade” (Dasgupta, 2009: 79) and people trying to enter the labour market in the 1990s as “the lost generation” (Brinton, 2009; Genda, 2001; Honda Y., 2004). New staff hiring faced great cutbacks and, at the same time, a large number of mid-career salarymen between 40-50 years old, representing unsustainable costs for their companies, were fired in spite of the lifetime employment system (Roberson and Suzuki, 2003).

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8 Emphasized femininity is “a form of femininity that is practiced in a complementary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity” (Messerschmidt, 2011: 206).
Since the value of a man was calculated as equal to the value of the company for which he was working (Kazaki, 2004: 176), to lose their job was, for many employees, the same as losing their status as men and as full members of the society, leading to a sharp increase in the suicide rate among ex-salarymen (Dasgupta, 2010). These changes also brought to light socio-cultural shifts away from societal pillars which had previously dominated the Japanese landscape. According to Waters (1989), modifications in gender systems are due to external causes; otherwise, without exogenous factors, the dominant ideology will reproduce itself unchanged. One of the aspects involved in the change of perspective during the “lost decade” was a questioning of femininity and masculinity, along with gender roles and expectations. As Iida points out, “the decline of corporate masculine culture in post-bubble Japan provided young men and women with renewed opportunities to explore and assert new gender identities outside those conforming to the hegemonic ideal” (2005: 61). From the mid-1990s, words such as freeter, parasitic single, NEET or herbivore man started to be used for different forms of employment and/or masculinity, which were distanced from the hegemonic image of the salaryman both in terms of life trajectory and physical appearance. The expectation of moving towards the life of a salaryman was rejected by significant numbers among the younger generations, who were not willing to devote their entire lives to a company which could not ensure the same compensation and employment security as in the past. Thus, younger generations’ scepticism about a salaryman life appeared also as a wish to engage with a satisfying job matching their individual dreams and aspirations. Aesthetically, too, the stereotypical salaryman, the “dowdy, cigarette-smoking, alcohol-loving, middle aged [man] with a bad haircut, who did not exercise, have interest outside work, and who did not know how to treat women in the

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9 Japanese neologism created from the English word “free” and the German word arbeiter which identifies individuals from 15 to 34 years old who are not housewives or students and who are not full-time employed, but rather move from one part-time occupation to another, in striking contrast with the Japanese stereotypical work ethic. For further information about “freeter” in Japan see: Cook (2014), Taga (2006), Honda Y. (2005) and Inui, Sano and Hiratsuka (2007).

10 A definition firstly used by Yamada Masahiro to define unmarried people (mostly female) in their 20s or 30s living with their parents in order to benefit from a more carefree life. For further information about “parasite singles” see: Yamada (1999), Sarada (2000) and Yamamoto (2001).

11 The acronym NEET stands for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training”.

12 Soshokukei danshi or herbivore men represent a form of counter-hegemonic Japanese masculinity. Firstly used by Maki Fukasawa in 2009, the definition refers to heterosexual men who are more interested in personal grooming and fashion than in pursuing romantic relationships with women, and generally speaking, defines men who have “lost” their masculinity (Charlebois, 2013; Fukasawa, 2009; Morioka, 2009).
workplace with respect” (Dasgupta, 2004: 111), became less and less appealing for both women and men. Even for the reduced number of men who successfully pursued a salaryman career, the aesthetic ideal moved towards a more beauty conscious kind of masculinity. The new salaryman is well groomed and fit, takes care of his appearance and also catches up with the latest fashion trends; moreover, he can count among his skills some characteristics previously perceived as feminine, such as ability to cook or an increased savoir-faire with the opposite sex (Ibid.).

This new embodiment of masculinity is often seen as representative of a process of “feminization of masculinity” (Iida, 2005), through the adoption by men of aesthetic styles and strategies commonly linked to femininity. Refusing to adhere to conventional expressions of masculinity, these new men are debunking stable gender divisions between men and women, and their practices of crossing boundaries between genders generates fear and anxiety in patriarchal authority: especially, so-called herbivore men are blamed for not actively pursuing a sexual life (and hence for not contributing to fighting the decreasing birth rate) and contributing to the stagnation of the economy with their lack of interest in expensive purchases such as cars or apartments for the family. 13 A clear example of “feminization of masculinity” can be found in the category of idols, tarento14 and performers who dominate the Japanese media and pop cultures (Darling-Wolf, 2003; Glasspool, 2012; Miller, 2003; Nagaike, 2012). For instance, Kimura Takuya, a member of SMAP (one of the most famous and long-lived Japanese boybands, active from 1988 to 2016) and also extremely popular as an actor, was the first man to appear as a main actor in a commercial for women’s make-up. As Fabienne Darling-Wolf notes, Kimura, far from being a virile and muscular kind of man, and at the same time the opposite of the un-cool salaryman, embodies a new male icon: like many other popular Japanese male idols “his body and face are hairless, his facial features delicate, and his hair is generally long” (2003: 78) and these androgynous features are the most distinctive point of his charm. Similarly, artists and performers belonging to the category of bijuu-kei (visual kei15) display a feminine beauty in their facial features and bodies, often accentuated by a skilful use of make up to achieve a uniform complexion and a spotless white skin, red-rose lips and accentuated eyes. Laura Miller has interpreted the

13 On the relationship between masculinity and consumption – both material and sexual – see Allison 1994; Deacon 2013; Curtis 2004.
14 Celebrities and entertainers who regularly appear on Japanese mass media.
15 Visual kei is a Japanese music (and subcultural) movement. Artists involved embody an androgynous aesthetic based on elaborate make up, sophisticated costumes and flamboyant hairstyles. It is considered a sub-genre of J-rock with strong references to glam rock, punk, and heavy metal.
growing interest in pursuing beauty by Japanese men as an extension of the accepted physical expressions of masculinity, rather than as a feminization of men (Miller, 2006). Whether reading the interest in personal grooming as a practice of feminization or as a new component of masculinity, oppositional gender roles for men in contemporary Japan, in contrast with the hegemonic masculinity expressed by salarymen, are usually based on gender practices involving personal grooming, the creation of emotional bonds with the opposite sex that do not necessarily involve sexual satisfaction, and an interest in pursuing self-realization by undertaking a career outside corporate employment.

The birth of new expressions of masculinity in contemporary Japan cannot be explained only as a form of rejection of the former ideals of masculinity by new Japanese men of the latest generations, but must be read also through the lenses of women’s agency. Women have an active position in re-shaping and shifting masculinity as well. As transformations in gender roles affected men and masculinity, they also influenced women and their expectations of men. New generations of women are less and less attracted to the housewife and mother role16 that society has expected them to take on, renouncing their careers17 in favour of a subordinate condition to fit into patriarchal society (Kelsky, 2001; Jolivet, 1997; Iwao, 1993; Nemoto, 2016; Schoppa, 2006). For instance, women who entered the working system have gained economic independence, and show their (sexual) agency in contrast with traditional roles, looking for sexual relationships that are not marriage-oriented, often with foreign men (Nemoto, 2008). At the same time, women are also less interested in the unattractive salaryman, and aim to find a more suitable partner, both from a physical and psychological standpoint. In the early 1990s (at the same time as the “gay boom”18) gay men came to be considered by some heterosexual women as perfect partners for their supposed

16 According to the Japanese Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the annual number of marriages in Japan in the 1970s exceeded 1 million couples, with a marriage rate of 10 per 1000 individuals. In 2017 the number of married couples was 606,803, with a marriage rate of 4.9 per 1000 (data retrieved from https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c0117.html).

17 According to the OECD, the proportion of Japanese women in an age range between 25 and 54 who were working in 2017 was 69.5% (data retrieved from https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm#indicator-chart). The “M curve” that characterised Japanese women’s participation in the workforce as higher before marriage, dropping down after marriage and the birth of the first child, and then resurging in women in late thirties-early forties (with the concurrent decrease of family responsibilities), is flattening out, as 50% of women do not stop working for housewifery and child bearing (White, 2002: 130).

18 Japan in the 1990s underwent the so called “gay boom”, during which sexual minorities and LGBT movement obtained unprecedented attention from media, and started to be described through the use of a Western terminology (McLelland, 2000a: 32-37).
abilities in cooking and listening to their partner, the importance given to personal beauty care and, generally speaking, for being perceived as more sensitive compared to straight men (McLelland, 1999). Japanese women better evaluate a man who matches their canon of beauty by taking care of his appearance and, in addition, who is also kind, empathic and supportive. They value men who are not scared of their feelings, able to express them to the woman they love, who understand a female partner’s needs and are willing to help her with domestic duties and childcare (Uno, 1993; Kelsky, 2001). Japanese women as media consumers are increasingly more oriented towards this novel definition of sensitive and “feminine” men, as can also be seen through the analysis of dramas’ male characters, and male idols aimed at a female audience (Darling-Wolf, 2003). Women’s desires and views of masculinity are thus helping to shape and construct new possible gender identities for men.

In this way, the benefits men and women can obtain from traditional gender roles have diminished since the end of the economic bubble, and “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized femininity” are often questioned and dismissed in favour of alternative gender ideals. The development of dansō masculinity can be linked to the rise of counter-hegemonic and aesthetically-conscious forms of masculinity and the different expectations of women towards men and masculinity. The feminization of masculinity has led to the acceptance of delicate, if not openly androgynous, aesthetical features for men as characteristics of masculine beauty.

In contemporary Japan, gender neutral and androgynous characters seem to meet the audience’s desires. The cultural and aesthetical substrate from which dansō develop cannot be explained without taking into consideration the importance of gender ambivalence as a rooted and accepted topos in the Japanese (pop) cultural landscape. For instance, the otokoyaku, actresses performing male roles in the all-female theatre Takarazuka Revue, is an example of how female and male gender characteristics performed by a single androgynous individual are considered as extremely charming, especially by a female audience (Abbitt, 2001; Berlin, 1991; Nakamura and Matsuo, 2003: 63; Robertson, 1998: 142; Yamanashi, 2012: 145-148). Moreover, the bishōnen, the beautiful boy who looks like a girl (McLelland, 2000a; Shamoon, 2012; Welker, 2006), is a well-established typology of characters with a great appeal for Japanese female audiences. The idea of the bishōnen as a possible source of inspiration for beautified and androgynous masculinities has already been investigated (Jung, 2009; Louie, 2012) in relation to Japanese and Korean male idols and the concept of a pan-East Asian soft masculinity. Dansō, being women with delicate features but performing a male gender identity, embody androgynous beautiful characters similar to those found in
*shōjo* (girls’) manga, on the Takarazuka stage, or among J-pop and K-pop artists. These various depictions and embodiments of feminine masculinity in contemporary artistic and popular culture have helped create the space for *dansō* to appear and develop. Moreover, sources of inspiration such as the *bishōnen* or the *otokoyaku*, do not only represent an aesthetic reference, but also provide a set of ideal behaviours (Louie, 2012) that *dansō* should master to become the perfect partner clients want. To open the door for a woman, to gently kiss her hand without feeling embarrassed, to carefully guide her through a crowded place, are just a few examples of behaviours that ideal men such as beautiful boys from *shōjo* manga or Takarazuka *otokoyaku* commonly perform to make their female partner feel loved and protected. Qualities such as charm, sensitivity, and chivalrousness characterise the alternative model of masculinity that clients are looking for when dating a crossdresser escort, and which successful *dansō* should possess to win over their clients’ hearts. While it is very unlikely that crossdresser women who define themselves as *dansō* could be assimilated to the stereotypical image of the salaryman, the aesthetic gap between the new trends of “feminized masculinity” for Japanese men and the “female masculinity” of *dansō* is much smaller. Physical and biological differences can easily be overcome by the strategic use of visual devices, such as make-up and clothes, and the final gender performance merges traits of masculinity and femininity.

### 1.2 Dansō and gender definition

It is necessary to identify how *dansō* define themselves in terms of gender. *Dansō* refuse to perform a feminine gender identity in accordance with the current aesthetic and linguistic gender practices that define femininity in Japan. At the same time, they also explicitly state that they do not want to be considered men. Consequently, I argue that it is correct to consider *dansō* as a new gender position, which can indicate the reality of life for FtM crossdressers in Japan nowadays who do not define themselves as women, nor as men, who do not share the same wish to surgically modify their bodies as transsexuals do and who do not feel the necessity to link themselves to a homosexual identity. I also argue that the word *dansō* should be used, since it is the one those individuals believe to be the best to describe who they are. The use of the word *dansō* is fundamental in developing a strong personal and group identity. With this statement I do not want to fix gender or sexual identity, which I consider to be fluid, but I claim the necessity to contextualize the use of the word *dansō* as “a
self-referent/identity term” (Maree, 2003: 1). I will develop my argument drawing on gender performativity and queer theory as well.

The assumption that the dichotomy between man and woman represents the unique and natural outcome when it comes to describe an individual’s sex, and that the two possibilities, clearly separated by a neat division, determine gender is now widely confuted. Its limitations in describing the great variety of possibilities between the two poles of male and female within the gender and sex spectrum have already been highlighted by several studies. For instance, Anne Fausto-Sterling states that “biologically speaking, there are many gradations running from female to male” (1993: 21), describing sex as “a vast, infinitely malleable continuum” (Ibid.). For Stone, there are several sex features that describe the two sex categories of male and female, but to count as belonging to one or another it is not necessary to satisfy all the features of a certain category. For instance, to be a woman, it is not necessary to have all of the following characteristics simultaneously: female chromosomes, genitalia, secondary sex characteristics, the ability to give birth. In this view, it is possible for an individual to be closer to one of the two positions, but the distinction between them is not clear-cut, and consequently trans19 people can be located in the centre and their sex cannot be determined (Stone, 2007: 44). Similarly, Marjorie Garber argues that crossdressed identities should be considered as a third option, for their capacity to challenge biological or cultural binary notions such as “male” and “female”, “straight” and “gay” and also “sex” and “gender”, and that the assimilation of them within the categories they are challenging is a way to underestimate them (1992: 10). She defines the third option as “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space possibility” (Ibid.: 11) which emerges from the crisis of category that it generates. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick in Epistemology of the Closet also advocates the importance of looking more carefully at "the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other" (1990: 23), and in her essay Queer and Now highlights her understanding of the word queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (1994: 7). Furthermore, Beall, Eagly and Sternberg (2004) described gender differences between men and women as a continuum which cannot be

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19 I here identify transgender or transsexual individuals as those born with typical male or female anatomies but experiencing the feeling of being caged into the “wrong body”, and/or equating their feelings with those of the opposite sex/gender; as a result, they self-identify as the gender other than that assigned according to sex at birth.
defined only by two options, while other studies suggested the existence of several different nuances of masculinity (Hamilton, 1994; Schrock and Shwalbe, 2009) and femininity (Halberstam, 1999).

In Japan the problem of gender definitions was also highlighted, among others, by Morinaga Maki (2002) who highlights the concept of gender multiplicity in Japan, or Sumiyoshi Masami (2003) who invites scholars to think in terms of “anarcho-sexualism”, a gradational and not oppositional definition of gender identities between the two opposite positions of “male” and “female”. In addition, Ishii Yukari (2010) outlined the impossibility of all individuals’ adhering to a single definition – differentiated into only two possibilities – for their whole life, underlining the fluctuations of gender identity through time. Furthermore, in a subsequent study, Ishii (2012) analysed the life stories of individuals who identify themselves as having experienced gender non-conformity: they started to create their identity taking as models femininity and masculinity as represented in mass-media but, in the end, they affirmed their own self-image which Ishii defined as their “actual identity” (akuchuaru aidentiti), not a ready made social identity but rather a unique expression of the self which does not fall within established and dominant categories and which can be subjected to modifications according to circumstances and to the desires of the individual 20.

Starting from this premise, it is possible to understand how declinations of gender transcend the division into male and female, but this does not make the task of defining those alternatives easier. In this thesis, drawing on the definition given by Caplan and Caplan (1997: 7) where “‘Sex’ marks an essentially biological distinction between women and men that may be based upon their anatomical, physiological, or chromosomal properties. ‘Gender’ marks a sociocultural distinction between men and women on the basis of the traits and behaviour that are conventionally regarded as characteristic of and appropriate to the two groups of people”, I will refer to sex as biologically determined, the physical reality of the body, and to gender as a socially constructed reality not necessarily dependent upon biological sex. The notion of gender as a social construct is especially relevant in my analysis of dansō performance of masculinity. When Simone de Beauvoir affirmed that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1972: 295) the idea implied is that females become women through a socially constructed process in which they learn how to perform and

20 While these approaches recognise the impossibility of defining gender identity, especially in terms of fixed standard categories, it is also arguable that they support a diffuse subjectivism which may be counterproductive from the perspective of establishing a community and forms of activism, since they undermine the idea of a common identity that can be taken as representative for a wide range of individuals.
embody behaviours and traits of femininity; hence gender differences have a cultural nature instead of a biological basis (Millett, 1971; West and Zimmermann, 1987). Since the early 1990s, scholars in the field of gender studies started to develop the idea that social constructs such as femininity and masculinity can be considered as performances. Those performances should be read as grounded on imitations of behavioural patterns, bearers of a meaning in a certain time and society, and are supposed to work when performed in front of a gendered audience who are aware of the same meanings behind the performed acts. The work of Judith Butler in particular is focused on gender performativity. Starting from Monique Wittig’s assertion that individuals are socially constructed as male or females through power relations (Wittig 1992: 6), the central idea in Butler’s theory is that gender behaviours are neither natural nor connected to the sexual identity of the subject. Gender is a repetition of acts with no originals, acts which are reproduced through patterns conventionally accepted and learned in a certain society. Heteronormative dominance forces individuals to learn how to perform masculinity and femininity, in accordance with their born sexual identity, reproducing traits of male and female genders proposed as natural and essential properties of males and females, with the aim of maintaining the status quo unchanged. For instance, presumptions about people born with female genitalia are that they belong to the category of women, they act feminine and are sexually attracted to men. However, in Butler’s view, gender is not “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow” (1990: 140). She rejects the idea of gender as something that individuals are, proposing instead that gender is enacted, a performance that individuals do: “gender is […] instituted through a stylized repetition of [habitual] acts” (Ibid.). Consequently, gender does not exist as a reality a priori and “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” (1990: 25), but rather gender is composed by the results of its performance, by “the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Ibid.). Dressing in a determined way, using make-up and acting in a certain gender-coded way is presenting ourselves as feminine or masculine according to gender performances (bearer of a shared meaning in a certain social context) and not according to a gendered self that exists behind the performance. The performance is not an expression of gender but produces genders. The process is continuous and individuals keep reproducing the same stylized patterns that give the appearance of a fixed gender identity: “The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and

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21 Before the development of gender and queer theories, the theme of the construction of identity through performances was already investigated by Goffman (1959; 1963), Garfinkel (1967), and West and Zimmerman (1987).
re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (1990: 140). However, since identity is stable only until the performance is repeated, it is not fixed and furthermore, the repetition of the same acts in a different social context or time can become bearers of different meanings that can subvert the dominant norms. Practices that question hegemonic socio-cultural norms as alternative gender identities and performances could be read as able to put in doubt the assumption that the current social order is natural and the only one possible.

If, drawing on Butler’s theory, gender is real only because it is performed (1990) and it is made of the results of its own performance, then it is possible to state that a dansō’s performance of masculine gender is as true and real as that performed by a male-born individual. According to the above mentioned definition of sex and gender, the identity of dansō in terms of sex is always to be intended as feminine: dansō affirm to be biologically women and to have a female body. However, in terms of gender, dansō define themselves as males. Their self-recognition within the male category is due to the failure or to the conscious choice to not perform femininity correctly, with regard to the presumptions that define femininity in Japan. They went through the process to learn how to be women but they also decided to diverge from those aspects that the society expects to be compulsorily performed by women. Instead, dansō choose men’s clothes, avoid using make-up in the way women usually do, and take on an active role, especially when in a pair with women who express canonical traits of femininity. In short, they perform a masculine role. If to perform masculinity or femininity is related exclusively to the acts and behaviours associated with each category, the masculinity of dansō, expressed through the gender-coded acts that signify masculinity in the Japanese context, has the same value as any performance of masculinity enacted by a man. The realness of the performance is given by the ability to embody the norms.

As for sexual identity, dansō show a multifaceted reality which spans from lesbian to asexual identities, underlining how gender, sex and sexuality are to be understood as three different dimensions not necessarily dependent upon each other. Due to the particular connotations of words such as rezu, rezubian or bian (lesbian) in Japan, it is not surprising that both crossdressers and their female clients detach themselves from these labels, using instead other ways to describe themselves and their sexuality. As already highlighted in several studies (Chalmers, 2005; Sugiura Ikuko, 2006; Kakefuda, 1992; Izumo and Maree, 2002: 35-37; McLelland, 2004; Welker, 2010), these words still bear a deep social stigma and are often associated with perversion and pornography, so it is not uncommon even for self-
identified homosexual women to not use the word “lesbian” (or its synonyms) but to describe themselves as *otoko to niawanailotoko ga anmari suki janailotoko to nigate* (a person who cannot match with/who does not like/not good with men). As Sugiura Ikuko notes “it was in the latter half of the 1990s that the definition of *rezubian* as ‘women whose gender identity consists in regarding others of the same sex as objects of sexual love’ took hold in the lesbian community” (2006: 128), especially thanks to the work of the lesbian activist Kakefuda Hiroko. Kakefuda presented herself as lesbian in her book entitled “*Rezubian* de aru to iu koto” (On being a lesbian). In this book, through the narration of her personal experience, Kakefuda talks about being lesbian in Japan, the different realities of the lesbian world, and represents herself as “*rezubian no hitotsu no genjitsu*” (Kakefuda, 1992: 215) or “one of the possible lesbian realities”, avoiding answering the question of what or who is a lesbian and, during the chapters of the narration, seeking to destroy those stereotypes – mostly connected to the pornography world and for the sake of the male gaze – within which lesbians are circumscribed by Japanese patriarchal society.

Subaltern expressions of gender and sexuality, especially drag performances and transvestitism, are often interpreted as debunking categories of gender and sex, and the supposed “natural” connection between these categories and heterosexuality (Garber, 1992; Lorber, 1994; Rupp and Taylor, 2003). While literature about drag queens often defines the practice as supporting the supposed double nature of gender by the appropriation of symbols of institutionalized femininity (Dolan, 1985; Schacht, 1998, 2002; Tewksbury, 1994), scholarship on drag kinging, drawing on the influence of queer theory, stresses the will to challenge binary gender and identity divisions through FtM crossdressing (Halberstam, 1998; Shapiro, 2007; Volcano and Halberstam, 1999). However, it is necessary to note that, in spite of their subversive image, *dansō* are not subverting the norms and stereotypes of gender performances in Japan: I argue here that the process they adopt to reproduce masculinity, more than undermining gender roles, is reinforcing them. It is true that dissonance created by a female body performing a masculine gender can destabilize the view of gender and sexual identity as connected and intertwined; through the double categorization of *dansō*, as females with regard to sex and as males with regard to gender, the supposed natural correlation between sex and gender (and eventually sexuality) is debunked by identities that cannot be labelled under normative categorizations. Nevertheless, since a *dansō*’s masculinity is reproduced through the accepted norms of masculinity in Japan, it reinforces the norm more than creating a threat. In this perspective, *dansō* are not actively taking on a role of resistance against patriarchal norms. More than demonstrating possibilities for women to undertake
different lifestyles, crossdressers rather express the will to be considered as men, for all the advantages in terms of freedom and social status that they perceive the masculine gender and role can potentially provide, especially in relation to women who perform stereotyped femininity. As also noted by Sharma in her study on Indian masculine lesbians, women take on men’s behaviours “in order to create a space for themselves in a society where men are more privileged” (2006: 39). Therefore, female masculinity cannot be considered a way to challenge the power and privileges of masculinity and patriarchal society if it is only a transfer of power and, on the contrary, it can only reinforce the hierarchical dominance on which masculinity is founded (Bauer, 2013). A similar situation is highlighted by Wieringa (1999) in her study on Jakarta’s butch/femme community, where homosexual women mould their lifestyle in accordance with heterosexual parameters and do not have any will to subvert the Indonesian gender regime.

Refusing to be categorized as women, dansō do not want to present themselves as an alternative way to embody femininity, but as a different embodiment of masculinity. Their undermining impact is represented by the appropriation of masculine gender, and hence privileges, by women, in an overturning of powers, where the submissive and “weak” side appropriate the power of the dominant and “stronger” side. In doing so, dansō show how those categories used to enclose gender possibilities are not adequate to encompass the fluidity of positions along the “spectrum” between the two poles of male and female, masculinity and femininity, and how gender and power relations are only social constructions that can potentially be overturned by performances divergent from the norm. However, their subversive role is not actively intended, an hypothesis reinforced by the lack of connection of dansō with the LGBT movement in Japan, their unwillingness to associate themselves with a homosexual persona, and their reluctance to tackle gender issues when interacting with Japanese media (TV, magazines, books). Moreover, the attempt by Japanese media to ignore the dansō phenomenon, or to read it only through the lense of a juvenile fashion trend avoiding any deeper engagement with gender and sexuality issues, can be read as an attempt to weaken the potential revolutionary power of this alternative gender position within Japanese society, restricting it to an emblazonment of dress and nothing more.
1.3 Is dansō part of global queering?

Starting from the early 1990s, several scholars have analysed the increasing number of new same-sex and transsexual identities around the world as a symptom of cultural globalization (Altman, 1995, 1996; Miller, 1992; Plummer, 1992; Jackson, 2000, 2009). Altman defined this phenomenon as “global queering” (1996, 2000), to be understood as the expansion of Western categories regarding the realm of gender and sexuality in non-Western societies, due to a globalization of lifestyles and identities (Altman, 1996: 33). Plummer in 1992 wrote about the globalization of homosexuality, arguing that gay studies should pay attention to international connections but also to unique local expressions of gay, lesbian and transgender identities (17-18). For Boellstroff it is incorrect to analyse Asian queer identities as inauthentic, dominated by or accessory to a supposed Western influence (2007: 198). Building on Appadurai’s view that it is not always possible to equate globalization with homogenization or Americanization (1996: 17), Jackson, through his analysis of Thai queer identities, argued that even though “transnational similarities amongst queer cultures are indeed emerging […] diverse new queer identities have also developed in Asia that are not converging towards Western forms” (2009: 15). Rather, when Western discourse with its categories and definitions meets the “other”, new realities which maintain their locally distinct traits can develop. Research on Asian queer realities is actually challenging the supposed globalization of non-cisgender identities (Tong, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Johnson, 2005; Kam, 2008; McLelland, 2000a, 2005; Lunsing, 2001; Tang, 2011; Sinnott, 2008). I argue here that self-identified dansō individuals and the phenomenon of escorting linked to them can be analysed as a Japanese reality with distinct traits, and represents a queer identity bearing a specific meaning in the Japanese context, not determined by Western queer identities. Acknowledging that the use of the word queer could also be subjected to criticism when applied to women (Wieringa and Blackwood, 1999) or to Asian cultures (Erni, 2003; McLelland, 2005; Shimizu, 2007; Sinnott, 2010; Wilson, 2006; Tang, 2011), I will refer in this thesis to the definition of queer given by the feminist scholar Annamarie Jagose: “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire [and] queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire” (1996: 3), and I base my argument on the fact that in Euro-American countries too, to give a univocal definition of queer identities is an almost impossible task without imposing a “totalizing sameness within the group” (Epstein, 1987: 48). For instance, it is possible to state that the contemporary Western concept of
homosexual identity is a social construct that dates back roughly one hundred years (Altman, 1996; Weeks, 2003; Katz, 1996). According to Halperin, it is defined by the prevalence of sexuality over gender (2000: 91), while for D’Emilio “capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals’ lives” (1993: 473-474). This definition of homosexuality is descriptive of a socio-political identity limited to contemporary Western cultures, and although this interpretation of homosexual identity is increasingly being adopted in other countries of the world, it is not a cross-cultural, unitary construct present in all societies. As highlighted by Lunsing (2001) and McLelland (2000) in their ethnographic accounts of Japanese gay men, the homosexual identity as expressed above is not the one the majority of their informants aspire to, and the perception of homosexuality in Japan reveals a strain between Western perceptions of sexual identity and autochthonous views (Beachy, 2010). Similarly, dansō do not rely on homosexual Western vocabulary when using a self-adopted label, and the definition of dansō itself represents a way to express a gender identity rather than sexual orientation, showing an incongruity with dominant Western notions. Similarities can be found in the tomboi or t-birds category of the Southern Philippines (Johnson, 2005).22 As in the case of tomboi, even though some dansō define themselves as lesbian, the word cannot be equated with female homosexuality since “it is not primarily about sexual orientation, nor is it a sexual identity category in the same way that the term ‘lesbian’ is” (Johnson, 2005: 87). At the same time, it does not seem possible to assimilate dansō to transgender identities, since the Japanese words for describing those categories, toransujendā or more specifically in the case of FtM individuals, onabe, was never adopted by my informants when talking about their personal experiences, and indeed they explicitly distanced themselves from the above mentioned categorizations, stressing the differences more than the common points.

At this point, it is important to provide a brief account of female crossdressing in Japan in order to better understand the position that dansō occupy and how they relate to other crossdressing realities. History of Japanese queer identities has been mainly identified – and investigated by scholars – as a male queer history, and often equated to (male) homosexuality (McLelland, 2005: 15-16). Despite accounts of queer and homosexual practices among males being numerous with scholars of different sectors focused on them, representations of women’s same-sex sexuality and non-cisgender identities mostly passed unrecognized and only in recent years have they started to attract academic attention. With

22 Both terms are used to describe female born masculine-identified individuals.
regard to Japan, female-to-female sexuality was largely ignored by Japanese society until the end of the eighteenth century (Leupp, 1998). The introduction of the medical discourse on sexology from Europe, through the translation of works by Krafft-Ebing, Freud and Hirschfeld amongst others, led to a new understanding of sexuality and sexual desire, and to the division of sexuality into normal (seijō) and deviant (ijō) (Furukawa, 1995; Pflugfelder, 2005; Wu, 2007). During this period the word dōsei (same-sex love) came into use to describe homosexuality, and same sex practices started to be considered as a perversion different from “normal” heterosexual practices. The existence of sentimental and sexual relationships between women was considered in a negative light and often reported as a form of mental illness, due also to a series of love double-suicides involving young women in 1911, which were extensively covered and sensationalized by the press (Pflugfelder, 2005; Robertson, 2007). Same sex forms of intimacy among women were tolerated if limited to an adolescent phase, whose end usually coincided with marriage and the beginning of a heterosexual life. Love relationships or passionate friendships among schoolgirls, often called “S” relationships, were considered non-threatening to the extent that they did not interfere with the heterosexual development of the subjects involved. In this landscape, FtM crossdressing was considered an alarming sign of lesbianism and the appropriation of markers of masculinity by a girl or a woman was seen as an indication of moral depravity derived from the Westernization of Japanese costume, especially if performed by middle and upper class women (Robertson, 2007) who did not need to pass as men in order to obtain employment (Tomioka 1938: 103 quoted in Robertson, 2007: 225); FtM crossdressing was hence an illicit appropriation of the higher male status by a woman, subjected to sanctions by society. A famous example of a lesbian couple appearing on some occasions in crossdressing outfits is the writer and feminist pioneer Hiratsuka Raichō, founder of the Bluestocking Society, and her onetime lover Otake Kōkichi: both were occasionally crossdressing and taking on behaviours preconceived to be masculine like smoking and drinking, and were pointed out by the contemporary society as emblems of moral depravity for their apparent avoidance of a “wife and mother” life trajectory (Bardsley, 2012; Lowy, 2007; Suzuki, 2009; Wu, 2007).

What is probably the most famous form of Japanese female to male crossdressing dates back to 1913, with the inauguration of the all-female theatre Takarazuka Revue. In contrast to other forms of crossdressing, Takarazuka actresses playing male roles were not considered destabilizing of societal norms; rather, their performances were seen (and are still seen and promoted) as a way to improve the “good wife, wise mother” role for women. The
efforts of the Revue’s founder, Kobayashi Ichizō, were aimed at avoiding any link between theatre and female homosexuality: actresses, once turned 34, were often asked to retire and marry, and he affirmed that *otokoyaku*, while performing and enacting male roles, could learn about and better understand men and hence become better wives once retired (Robertson, 1992; Stickland, 2008). During the Taisho period (1912-1926), the phenomenon of *ero-guro nansensu* or “erotic grotesque nonsense” took place, leading to an increased interest in sexual “perversions” and queerness, including crossdressing (Roden, 1990). In the 1930s, homosocial environments also developed among men in the army, and between women for instance in factories. Again, lesbian couples came to the attention of the wider public, though in this second wave the focus was on the “butch-femme” form of coupling. In this period also developed the trope of *dansō no reijin*, or beautiful women dressed in male clothes, also known as *dandy beauties* (Robertson, 1999) or *miss dandy* (Toyama, 1999). A famous *dansō no reijin* of the 1930s who gained fame in popular culture as the “Eastern Mata Hari” was Kawashima Yoshiko, a Chinese princess raised in Japan, who in male clothes served the Kwantung Army as a spy during the second Sino-Japanese War (Birnbaum, 2015; Yamamuro, 2005). Under the label of *dansō no reijin* were also identified crossdresser bar staff from the early 1960s to the early 1980s: at the beginning, those places had crossdresser staff at the counter and female hostesses in female clothes to entertain customers, and mainly aimed to cater for heterosexual men and women; only at a subsequent stage did they become places for contact and development of community bonds among lesbian women (Toyama, 2007: 209-221). Reaching their peak in the 1970s, those FtM crossdresser bars can be considered as the forerunners of *onabe* bars, a denomination which started to be used in the 1970s. According to Nanami (1990: 102) the first *onabe* bar opened in Roppongi in 1973 and, unlike its precursors, all the staff was composed of crossdresser women. The word *onabe* literally means “pan” and it is parallel to the word *okama* (pot) used to describe gay men, though it never achieved the same popular diffusion as its male counterpart. Even if in some cases the word *onabe* and the word lesbian were (and in some cases still are) used as synonymous, they do not have the same meaning (Valentine, 1997; Sugiura, 2006; Abe, 2004; Maree, 2003). For instance, in the world of Shinjuku Nichōme, the famous Tokyo gay district, there are bars for women only which can refuse access to FtM transsexuals and *onabe*, and places that instead welcome them, while *dansō* can usually enter any bar or club. This separation underlines a difference in perception and self-perception between *onabe*, crossdressers and lesbian individuals. Lesbians in Japan are usually characterized by a division into *tachi* (butch) and *neko* (femme) roles, with more masculine girls and women adopting the label *tachi* and
not onabe. Self-identified onabe do not describe themselves as lesbians, but rather as emotionally and psychologically males, and often do not hang out in lesbian bars and clubs. Some dansō define themselves as lesbians, while others distance themselves from this category: in any case, they find the word dansō more closely describes their situation than any other label, highlighting that sexual orientation can come into play but might not be a requisite part of being a crossdresser. At the same time, dansō never identify themselves as onabe, due to the fact that they do not want to become men, do not undergo surgery to change their female body into a more masculine one, and do not take hormones to deepen their voices or to obtain a mannish appearance. In addition, with regards to crossdresser escort companies, those in the process of changing sex or who are undergoing hormone therapies are not accepted as dansō escorts. This is explicative of the complexity of defining identity in general, and especially the difficulties of applying a Western vocabulary over an already existing set of nomenclature in use to describe local queer identities.

The word “gender” has also generated debates in Japan: for instance, Ueno Chizuko has argued that in Japan the use of the definition danjo byōdō (equality between men and women) would be better than “gender free”, since the latter has an unclear meaning for the Japanese audience and can suggest the erasing of gender categories, thus creating diffidence (2006: 395-404, quoted in Shimizu, 2007: 504). Moreover, the word “gender” in Japanese is sometimes equated with the definition kokoro no sei, sex of the soul: it is used to define how an individual self perceives his or her own gender identity, in spite of the reality of the sexed body. However, the definition of kokoro no sei neither involves a “social” meaning nor refers to a social constructedness, a distinctive trait of the concept of gender in Western definitions, but is principally related to a personal expression of an inner identity despite the bodily reality of the subject, and to specific feelings experienced by individuals whose physical sex does not match with their self-perceived gender. Iwata (Inoue) Miku (2009) argues that it is necessary – especially for transgender and crossdresser individuals – to build their gender identity according to their kokoro no sei, an identity which cannot be merged with the word “sex”, nor with the concept of gender, and which is fluid, ambiguous and continually changing.

Another point to be considered when exploring alternative gender identities in Japan is the debate around the topic of GID (Gender Identity Disorder). The term was authored by the American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin in 1966, and applied to transgender people: those who experienced the feeling of being born in “the wrong body” were diagnosed as suffering from GID, and as appropriate treatment doctors suggested therapies based on hormone
replacement treatment (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery (SRS). In Japan, the guidelines for diagnosing and eventually being entitled to be treated with SRS are largely imported from the American legislation, and state that patients are eligible if they have experienced a severe distress towards their natural body since a very young age and strongly desire to obtain the opposite sex’s body (Harima, 2004), taking into consideration a real improvement in their life quality (Seidōitsuseishōgai ni kansuru tokubetsu iinkai, 1997: 539). However, interpreting transsexualism as something that needs medical treatment implicitly means to support the view of anatomical sex as necessarily aligned with gender identity, so that transsexual identities are no longer considered as confuting the binary system of female/male, but as an error to be fixed, re-assigning people not clearly defined in gender/sex terms into one of the two “regular” categories of men or women, in a “gender conservatism […] encouraged by the medical establishment” (Shapiro 2005: 141). This discourse could also be seen as erasing the specificity of non-Western transgender identities due to the dominance of the binary system, especially supported in the case of Japan by the American influence, and leading to an imposition of transsexuality over local transgender categories. Japanese scholars have argued that treatment of GID, rather than applying already existing gender dominant models, should be directed towards building self-image and body according to the individual's gender view (Ishii, 2010: 17). In a partial attempt to do so, GID guidelines were slightly amended in 2002 and 2006. In the 2002 version it is stated that treatments are not intended to be oriented towards the reinforcement of a binary male/female system (620), while in the 2006 version a special emphasis is put on self-determination and self-responsibility of the individuals; the correct treatment must suit individuals’ lifestyle and values (8), recognizing the existence of different possibilities beyond the man and woman options.

As highlighted by Blackwood and Wieringa, “by continuing to use Western terms and categories, there is a risk of ignoring the difference of other sexualities and suppressing new knowledges” (2007: 7) or of engaging in what Khan (2001: 105), talking about the Indian context, defines as “sexual neo-colonialism” or the process where indigenous sexual discourse has been overrun by Western theories about identity and sexualities. In such a complicated landscape, it must also be noted that several Japanese scholars (Saitō T. 2000; Saitō M. 2001; Satō, 2008; Hidaka, 2011) have described the topos of dansō no reijin as typical of the Japanese (pop) culture, without an equivalent in Western countries.

Therefore, I argue that dansō are a local queer identity arising in Japan, not connected to – or at least, not directly influenced by – the global queering wave; hence, the use of the word dansō is to be promoted, and unfaithful translations of the term should be avoided. It is
unavoidable especially given the aim of providing a description of my informants as close as possible to their life realities, and in order to present locally-based research which takes into consideration the wider complexity of the investigated phenomenon. This study should be situated within the interaction of queer theories and the need to problematize Western terminology and theories and their universalism. Contending the untranslatability of dansō is a way to sustain a de-westernization of queer terminology – especially when referring to queer realities in the Asian context, as also noted by Tang (2011) – and to acknowledge that, despite the inevitability of consulting queer theories, it is possible to give them a wider meaning, as also noted by Eva Cheuk Yin Li in her study about zhongxing (gender neutral) celebrities in China (Li, 2015). Moreover, the importance of the word dansō must be sought in the ability of those individuals to adopt a specific word to recognize themselves. What is relevant in this call for local embodiment is also the relationality with the local market for affect and emotions. Dansō identities exist also through the entertainment business where they act, and their specificity lies in the tension arising from self-expressions and labour market’s needs, as I shall explore in details in the next section. In relation to this, the study of dansō acquires value since it can be considered as a call for recognition of a local embodiment of queer identities and realities, also vis-à-vis local occurrences of the Japanese labour market for affective services.

To avoid excessive repetition, I will use as synonymous with dansō the words “crossdresser” and “garcon”. While the first expression is the one I found closest to the original meaning of the word dansō, the second was used by my informants as a reliable synonym: since the first dansō escort company in Tokyo was named Garcon to issho (With the garcon), the term came to define the entire category of dansō escorts.

1.4 Dansō escorting and the market of affects and emotions

The services crossdressers provide are usually those of guide, chaperone or romantic partner for dates involving activities such as dinners out, afternoon teas, or just strolling together. However, among their duties, it is necessary for dansō to provide emotional support to the customers and to show empathy towards their everyday problems, whatever the role of lover or supportive friend they are required to embody. The emotions provided can be considered as the most important feature of a crossdresser escort and the core aspect that clients are in all cases looking for. Those emotions range from a display of sincere preoccupation with the
client’s situation to an intense love. To provide a high quality service, necessary to secure an ample pool of returning clients, dansō have to manage their emotions, trying to generate an emotional response and involvement in their clients’ lives. The act of performing emotional involvement to any degree can be defined as “emotional labour”.

The idea of emotional labour was firstly defined by sociologist Aarlie Hochschild (1983) in her ground-breaking work *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings*, where she explored how flight attendants manage their emotions in order to meet the company’s standards and expectations. Hochschild developed her theories drawing on the works of the American sociologists Charles Wright Mills and Erving Goffman. Mills argued that individuals involved in the service industry experienced feelings of estrangement as human beings when obliged to “sell” their personality (1951); Goffman, on the other hand, investigated how individuals control their outward appearance and the display of emotions to give others a specific impression, in accordance with social rules regarding how they should appear in determinate situations (1959). He compares human interactions with a dramaturgical perspective where the individual is the “actor”, the others represent the public, and the place where the interaction occurs is the stage. Emotional labour, in Hochschild’s theory, is described as a conscious suppression or promotion of specific emotions performed by workers in the service sector, in accordance with the feeling rules which are present in everybody’s private and social life. However, while all the jobs that involve interactions with clientele or public include an element of emotional management, the concept of emotional labour involves also the requirement, for those who perform it, to induce a certain emotional status into others.

To be correctly performed, the managed emotions are expressed through adequate facial and bodily displays; individuals thereby generate in the “audience” (clients) a specific emotional state and response. For instance, during a funeral service, the socially accepted feeling rule states that those who take part into it must be grieved and show affliction for the loss. To contravene those rules can result in social sanctions. In the case of workplaces where employees are requested to perform a determined emotional state when interacting with customers, failures in the correct display of emotions will be sanctioned as failures to fulfil the work requirements. Emotions can be performed through “surface acting” and “deep acting”. The first is when the worker acts to modify only the outward expressions of his/her feelings, without changing his/her inner emotions. Deep acting, in contrast, involves also the sphere of the inner emotions: mental mechanisms are activated to actually induce the feelings to be displayed. In Japan, the concept of emotional labour has been applied to women
working as hostesses (Takei, 2006; Hayashi, 2014) and by extension to those professions related to *gijiren’ai*\(^{23}\) (Matsuda, 2008; 2009), among others.

The concept of emotional labour is especially fitting in describing the *dansō* escort job. Crossdresser escorts have to perform feelings such as empathy, affection or love to inspire an emotional response from the clients. In doing so, they resort to both surface and deep acting to better profit from the clients’ feelings. From the introduction of the concept of “emotional labour” a great body of literature has grown drawing on Hochschild’s theory, and the concept has been adopted in numerous studies about different work roles. Especially fruitful for this study is its application to those occupations which belong to the realm of “sex work”. Enck and Preston (1988) applied the concept to waitresses in topless clubs, and highlighted how employees create a “counterfeit intimacy” to increase their selling of alcohol. Boles and Garbin (1987) also focused on waitresses in men’s clubs and their use of nudity to negotiate intimacy with (potential) customers. However, subsequent studies have showed how customers’ search for real intimacy, and sex-workers’, strippers’ or waitresses’ efforts to deliver a good service, can often develop into relationships where the border between performed intimacy and real intimacy is very unstable (Frank, 1998; Lever and Dolnick, 2010; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012; Pullen, 2005; Sanders, 2008).

I argue that the *dansō* escort service is emotional labour and that those involved perform a high level of emotion management to induce paying customers to become recurrent ones. Emotions are strategically used to allow clients to develop an intense and intimate relationship with their favourite crossdresser. Clients are in every case experiencing a deep emotional involvement, described through a wide range of words connected to feelings. Recurrent words include *suki* (like, love), *kimochi ga ii* (feeling good), *ren’ai* (love relationship), *akogare* (yearning, longing) and *tokimeki* (fast heartbeat). The last two words are particularly interesting when investigating relationships between crossdressers and clients. *Akogare* describes a feeling of admiration towards someone who is considered to be unreachable (Kelsky 2001: 26). In the world of *dansō* escorting, feelings of *akogare* do not only describe desire directed towards charming crossdresser women, who clients can date but not “possess”; they can also represent the desire of customers to experience and enjoy a lifestyle that they cannot live in their everyday reality, and that is confined to the realm of a dreamlike longing for a crossdresser, a parallel reality where pretending to be different is not

\(^{23}\) Love experience or sentimental relationship provided by a host or a hostess to a client upon a monetary exchange.
only possible, but very welcome. Meanwhile, *tokimeki* expresses the physical effects of dating crossdressers as echoed by the body: it represents the fast beating of a heart in love, and it has a nuance which links the word to the first love experience (Occhi, 2008).

Sentimental interactions between *dansō* and customers are part of so-called “affective economics” market exchanges where desires and emotions are evaluated and commodified (Jenkins 2006: 61-62). For Hardt and Negri “affective labour produces or manipulates affects” (2004: 108), and this is what *dansō* provide to their customers. According to D’Emilio (2007: 253), the development of affective economics is linked to the decreasing importance of families as affective units within capitalist societies, and to the concurrent increase of wage labour. This situation has created the space for new forms of intimacy to develop outside the heterosexual family. Although D’Emilio was specifically focusing on homosexual individuals and their bonds, his statement also holds true in the case of *dansō* and their customers in Japan. Even though family in Japan is still seen as a fundamental institution, the steady decrease of marriage and birthrate (Dales, 2018; Kishi and Gaston, 2010; Shu, 2003) shows how its existence is jeopardized, and does not represent an obtainable possibility or a desired life-trajectory for a growing number of Japanese people. At the same time, alternative forms of intimacy represent a lucrative business, and provide individuals with affects and feelings that cannot be obtained through the family unit. In Japan, as Takeyama highlights, the affect economy is rooted in the entertainment business, and its final aim is to profit from affection while matching the needs of the different parties involved, even if in asymmetrical ways (Takeyama 2010, 238). This can be seen also in the case of *dansō*, whose provision of intimacy (as I will explain in chapter 5) becomes a means of self expression and actualization for both crossdressers and their clients, but can come at a high cost in terms of monetary commitment and compensation, relational status, and physical and psychological wellbeing.

Hochschild (1983) argues that the constant need to perform not honestly felt emotions could potentially have a negative impact on employees’ wellbeing, leading to an increasing sense of dissatisfaction towards the job. Workers can experience feelings of alienation and self-estrangement and, in the most severe cases, the striking contrast between felt and performed emotions can result in emotional burnout and even clinical depression (Pugh, Groth and Henning-Thurai, 2011; Erickson and Ritte, 2001). This applies also in the case of crossdresser escorts, and the negative influence of the emotional labour could be intensified if stress levels are not lowered by, for example, significant relationships with relatives, friends or partners outside the work environment (Nelson, 2010; Meyers, 1999).
Conclusion

In this chapter I critically discussed relevant literature on gender (especially related to Japan) and emotional labour, which represent the two main theoretical focuses of the thesis.

First of all, I presented a detailed account of the concept of masculinity, and how it is defined in terms of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic; I analysed Japanese embodiments of masculinity, showing the shift in its hegemonic form – namely the salaryman – as linked to socio-economical changes in the mid-1990s, and the subsequent development of counter-hegemonic gender roles. Then, I showed how dansō can be seen as a form of female masculinity derived from an already codified aesthetic matrix, arising from counter-hegemonic expressions of masculinity and femininity and echoing, at the same time, an androgynous aesthetics deeply rooted in the Japanese (pop) cultural landscape. Through the analysis of theories regarding sex, sexuality and gender in connection to identity, I showed how binary divisions such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual cannot be considered satisfactory to describe the variety of human identities. The appearing of beautified forms of masculinity, and the search for alternative roles outside the frame of “good wife, wise mother” for women created a space for dansō to develop and affirm themselves. However, dansō should be seen not as an alternative femininity, to be opposed to femininity as stereotypically perceived and performed in the Japanese context, but rather as an alternative to femininity, a gender performance that non-conforming Japanese female born individuals adopt to avoid being linked to femininity, preferring instead to embody a masculine gender role. Hence, I proposed the adoption of the word dansō as a new gender definition to describe my crossdresser informants. This argument should also be read taking into account the point of view of resistance towards “global queering” ideals: the use of the word dansō is to be promoted instead of the adoption of a queer vocabulary based on Western ideas on gender, sexuality and identity which are not always representative of realities in different geographical contexts, such as Japan.

Secondly, I outlined the development of the dansō escort business as part of the “affective economies” market, and linked the escort business to the theory of emotional labour as proposed by Arlie Hochschild. I focused on the two dimensions of surface and deep acting, explaining how they are both adopted by crossdressers to carry out their escort work and create a strong emotional bond with clients. Finally, I also discussed the possible negative backlashes that can affect workers performing emotional labour.
Chapter 2

METHODOLOGIES AND FIELDWORK SETTING

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss how I conducted my nine month (September 2015 - July 2016) ethnographic fieldwork in a dansō escort company. I start by providing an introduction about approaches and methods I adopted in my field research, outlining my reasons for relying on qualitative methods; then I discuss participant observation and interviews as conducted in my fieldwork. Subsequently, I critically discuss the role of the researcher as an insider or an outsider in relation to the investigated field and the informants, highlighting the strategies I adopted to engage with my otherness, and how I negotiated my position on the border between being an insider or an outsider in the field. I address the negative aspects that, as a fieldworker, I faced when stepping into the realm of the escort business as a practitioner, and the negotiations required to successfully complete the investigation. Drawing on ethnographic studies focused on individuals involved in the provision of commodified intimacy, I compare advantages and disadvantages of this kind of research with my research experience.

Subsequently, I offer insights into the specific field of data collection – a crossdresser escort company in Tokyo – providing a detailed explanation of its setting and agents, and describing what the crossdresser escort service Dreamland provided and how it works. All the names of companies and informants in this study have been anonymised using pseudonymous and self-chosen nicknames, to protect their privacy. A summary of the socio-demographic data of informants is provided in Appendix I.

2.1 Ethnography as a research method

In carrying out social scientific research, scholars usually divide methodologies into quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach is used to obtain data which can be quantified, or hard data, often through questionnaires. The qualitative approach mostly obtains data by means of interviews and observation in situ. These methods can be gathered
under the term “ethnography”, and the collected data are also called soft data. Research carried out with an ethnographic approach expects the researcher to participate in the daily lives of the subjects of the study (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002). In this way people’s actions and activities can be studied in an everyday context and, as Levi-Strauss states, "[t]he observer apprehends himself as his own instrument of observation" (1977: 35). In this project, my first aim was to investigate what kind of masculinity dansō perform and embody, and how dansō negotiate their identities in their everyday lives – beyond the spatial and time limits of their entertainment profession – along with the kind of relationship that develops between dansō and their customers. To address those research questions, the most suitable method was an ethnographic approach, employing in particular semi-structured informal interviews and participant observation. Interviews aim to find out what informants consider important (Smith, 1974; Madison, 2005), and to obtain informants’ personal perspectives (Li, 2008); participant observation allows the researcher to explore the gap between what informants say and what they do in reality (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008), and enables the collection of authentic information and data otherwise unattainable (Gans, 1999). As Padgett notes, “maintaining the integrity of a particular method does not preclude using it along with others” (2008: 49). The combined use of two different data collection methods was aimed not to confirm pre-existent information, but mostly to gather original insights on the dansō escort service and its agents (Jick, 1979: 603-604). To be entitled to proceed with my research, I submitted a detailed plan of my research project to the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester, and obtained full approval. The data obtained from spoken and written descriptions, actions and life trajectories and experiences of my informants (Gee, 2011) were then coded and analysed.

2.1.1 Participant observation

Observations can be divided into two different branches: non-participant and participant observation. In non-participant observation, the researcher observes passively from a distance and does not participate in the activities of the group s/he is observing, trying not to influence the informants’ interaction, while during participant observation, researchers seek to observe people, events and situations as far as possible from the inside, trying to be part of the group they are observing. Rather than trying to fit informants into a theoretical frame, founded on hypotheses which could clash with and even skew the findings of a piece of research,
participant observation aims to understand what is crucial for the informants (Agar, 1980). Ethnographic studies investigating fields similar to the one I have focused on include Anne Allison’s (1994) study of a hostess club, analysing Japanese corporate masculinity and the gender roles and identities in the hostess club entertainment world, Nana Okura Gagné’s (2010) analysis of intra-gender tensions between hostesses and their female managers, and Rachel Salazar Parreñas’ (2011) study of the world of migrant women working in the red light district in Tokyo. In all those cases, the researchers worked in the same clubs as their informants, entertaining clients as well.

As it is possible to understand from the previous examples, fields of investigation where participant observation is used can vary greatly. According to Jorgensen, it is particularly appropriate when:

- little is known about the phenomenon (a newly formed group or movement, emotion work, fundamentalist Christian schools, improvised human conduct);
- there are important differences between the views of insiders as opposed to outsiders (ethnic groups, labor unions, management, subcultures such as occultists, poker players, or nude beachers, and even occupations like physicians, ministers, newscasters, or scientists);
- the phenomenon is somehow obscured from the view of outsiders (private, intimate interactions and groups, such as physical and mental illness, teenage sexuality, family life, or religious ritual); or
- the phenomenon is hidden from public view (crime and deviance, secretive groups and organizations, such as drug users and dealers, cultic and sectarian religions). (1989: 12-13).

The dansō phenomenon involving FtM crossdressers in Tokyo and their customers largely fits in the suggested categories. First, little is known about the topic. A few publications about dansō in Japanese are available, such as Oshiyama (2013) or Saeki (2009), but they investigate crossdressing (both FtM and MtF) through the analysis of mixed media such as historical monogatari, manga, movies and theatrical productions from different geographical, chronological and sociological contexts (ancient and contemporary Japan, sixth-century China, sixteenth-century Europe, and US productions from the 1970s to 1990s), and do not investigate the lived reality of the people who define themselves as dansō. The only study where an ethnographic approach was used is Azuma (2007), but her study relies
only on partial non-participant observation of crossdressers working in dansō cafes. Azuma did not conduct any interviews, confining her analysis to a quite superficial non-participant observation, limited in time and frequency of the visits she made to the place, with no attempts to approach the topic from the perspective of the subjects involved. Her study does not provide the reader with an account of what crossdressers and clients feel and think about crossdressing and their motivations for involvement with it, or their reasons for frequenting or working in dansō cafes. Moreover, there is a lack of critical engagement with gender and queer theory problematics. Consequently, the ethnographic approach I adopted allowed me to advance knowledge about dansō, uncovering aspects that could not be noticed from an outsider’s perspective.

Secondly, my complete access to the field allowed me to observe my informants not only during their working shifts but also in their private life and spare time. An in-depth investigation such as the one I conducted would have been impossible to an outsider observer, or even to a partially-insider observer (such as a customer). In addition, since most of the interactions between crossdressers and clients take place in semi-private settings, I would not have been allowed to witness any of these private meetings and to unpack the meaning of most of my informants’ declarations if I had not been working as a crossdresser. My role as both researcher and practitioner helped me in understanding my informants’ experiences and gave me the opportunity to enhance my data by including a personal and emotional perspective in my research (Smith and Kornblum, 1996).

By the end of my fieldwork I was able to collect data from 112 periods of participant observation conducted in the office or in the nearby neighbourhood of Akihabara during working shifts, 6 participant observations during special events, and 15 participant observations during one-to-one (one dansō, one customer), two-to-one (two dansō, one customer) and double (two dansō, two customers) dates. In all these cases, at the beginning of any interaction with a new potential informant during observation, I clearly stated my role as a researcher from a UK university, specifying that “doing dansō” was my way to investigate the phenomenon. After every observation, all my fieldnotes were carefully written (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995), in situ when possible – for instance during idle time in the office – or soon after the observation itself (on the same day or the day after). To be sure not to forget

24 Concept cafes where all the staff is composed of FtM crossdressers. More information about dansō cafes (dansō kissa) is provided in chapter 4.2.
important details, I also resorted to voice memos when taking notes was impossible for several hours.

2.1.2 Interviews

The interview is considered to be a core method in social research and it is focused on the production of talk (DeVault, 1999). For Janesick, an interview is the “communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (1998: 30). Interviews can be divided into structured, semi-structured (also called in-depth interviews) and unstructured. Structured interviews are the most formal and follow a rigid list of questions decided beforehand by the researcher, while unstructured interviews are more spontaneous, and often questions are not prepared in advance but arise from the situation. I decided to adopt semi-structured interviews, which “allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (Esterberg, 2002: 87) without being caged in a rigid sequence of questions, but following spontaneously the rhythm and the themes that emerged during our conversations. The flexible format of semi-structured interviews allowed me to set a basic scheme to follow, including some common background questions for the two main groups of informants and questions specific for each group. At the same time, this format left me enough space to freely move between questions, change the order according to informants’ answers, and include different questions for every informant, investigating more specific themes relevant to every individual which emerged during our “guided conversations” (Hochschild R.T., 2010: 626).

In-depth interviews are particularly suited to inquiry into marginalized and minority groups (DeVault, 1999; Reinharz, 1992) and offer those people commonly living “closeted” or “in silence” the possibility to express themselves, as in the case of my informants. In my interviews with both crossdresser and client informants, I drafted questions to ask all the informants (mostly the information reported in Appendix I, Table 1 and 2), then I tailored specific questions for crossdressers and for clients, and I left the final part of each interview to investigate specific topics that emerged during previous observations or during the interview itself. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total number of 28 informants, divided into:

- 14 professional dansō;
- 11 long term customers;
2 managers of companies offering a dansō escort service in Tokyo; and
1 editor at Keraboku – a side publication of the monthly magazine Kera – devoted to boyish fashion in Japan, which usually features dansō models.

All the interviews were conducted in Japanese, recorded and subsequently transcribed for the analysis. I translated into English only those parts of the interviews which I actually quote in the thesis, providing the Japanese original words in brackets for those concepts and expressions that could have been lost or misunderstood in translation (Shibusawa and Lukens, 2004).

With regard to my crossdresser informants, interviews took place between March and June 2016. I only interviewed individuals working as professional dansō escorts in a company, excluding cosplayers, freelance escorts, crossdressers working in dansō cafes, and dansō hosts. Belonging to a company for dansō means being part of a structured service requiring its members to comply with quality service standards. Therefore, working as a professional for a company spoke not only about the professionalism of my informants, but also provided uniform parameters about the job requirements and specificities. Thirteen out of fourteen informants were working in the same company, which I call Dreamland, while the other one used to work for Dreamland in the past but subsequently joined a rival company. He was introduced to me by two Dreamland informants because of his willingness to take part in my study. Before the interview took place, I met with him several times in friendly meetings with other crossdressers or alone, to allow him to get to know me better and to reach a certain degree of reciprocal knowledge and trust. It can be argued that fourteen dansō escort informants is quite a small number to be representative of a category. However, it must be noted that, with regards to Tokyo, the total population of FtM professional escorts at the time was composed of only twenty-one people, so I was able to obtain interviews with two-thirds of the total informants available. I considered the possible impact that I could have had on this small dansō community, and consequently made every effort to fit into Dreamland and into the group, doing my best to avoid creating tensions. I clearly explained at the beginning to my co-workers that I was not crossdressing with the aim of making escorting

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26 Dansō hosts, as male hosts, work in host clubs aimed at a female clientele. Hosts pour drinks, light cigarettes and flirt with clients, while entertaining through a light-hearted conversation. In some cases, hosts also maintain sexual relationships with their clients.
my career. They were aware of my temporary working status and as far as I could see, did not perceive me as a potential rival. In addition, given the short period of time I was working and the goals of my crossdressing, I was not in a position to develop deep, intimate relationships with clients (which obviously require many meetings over time). Specifically, I presented myself as a “friend type” of escort, making clear to customers that I was not there to provide a long-term relationship. My temporary presence prevented me becoming anyone’s favourite, and I was mostly booked as a one-time date by a variety of customers who already had their favourite at Dreamland but sometimes chose a different dansō for a single date (as explained in chapter 4.4.1). During my fieldwork, I obtained 11 dates, which made me one of the lowest in the company rankings; this probably helped to avoid arousing any perceptible negative feelings from other crossdressers.

It was more complicated for me to contact client informants and secure an interview. Due to my role as dansō trainee, I was not allowed to contact customers directly or to share my contact details with them. I had to ask the company to mediate and to contact potential informants to check if they were interested in taking part in a study about dansō. Moreover, the company decided the clients to be contacted, selecting only those people not likely to submit complaints (to lower the possibility of a negative backlash), and avoiding clients who might find my interview offensive or intrusive of their privacy. This limitation precluded me from interviewing those customers defined as “complicated” or “bad” (a detailed description of bad customers is provided in chapter 5.3) and considered as very difficult to handle. The fact that the company actively participated in the selection of clients to be interviewed imposed inevitable limitations on my picture of dansō-client relationships, and perhaps making it more favourable than it might otherwise have been. This was regrettable, but had to be accepted given my position within the company. Nevertheless, I was still able to meet complicated clients during public events and dates. Hence, even though I did not gather data about them from interviews, I was still able to observe them and ask them questions in informal settings; this data became an important part of my fieldnotes and greatly helped me in describing how the escort service can negatively affect the life of those clients whose interest in crossdresser escorts becomes an addiction (chapter 5.6).
I also set some standards that clients had to meet to be accepted as informants. Firstly, they needed to have been regular customers of Dreamland for at least two years. By “regular” I mean clients who visit the company at least once a month; the two year time span requirement was fundamental for me to analyse how clients’ relationship with favourite dansō developed and changed over a significant period of time. Secondly, they should have met at least two different garcons among Dreamland’s past and present escort staff, in order to be able to compare different relationships.

To avoid customers’ joining the study just to obtain a date with a crossdresser escort without paying the hourly fee, the company did not say that I was the one they were going to meet, stating instead that those willing to join the study would undertake an interview with an unspecified person responsible for the so-called “dansō project”. I then created an email address for the purpose of communication with those customers, and the password was provided also to the office staff and to one of the veteran dansō to check that I did not misuse the clients’ personal details. Information about the recruitment was spread by the boss himself and by my co-workers among those customers whose profile met the company’s and my requirements. After roughly one month from the beginning of the recruitment of client informants (April 2016), customers started to write emails to the “person responsible for the dansō project” and, by the end of June 2016, I had obtained eleven interviews. In nine cases out of eleven, I had met and conversed with my customer informants at least twice before they were chosen for interview. Specifically, five of them had booked me for a date, while I met the other four during public events. In one more case of a customer who satisfied both my and Dreamland’s criteria, but whom I had not met previously, I was able to interact with her before the interview twice during public events. Out of eleven informants, there was only one with whom I had no previous contact before the interview. This probably contributed to the fact that this interview ended up being the shortest of all my client interviews (45 minutes against an average of 69 minutes), mainly because the informant’s answers were less forthcoming than those of clients I had met previously.

All the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, the exact length mostly depending on the willingness to talk of each informant; interviews with dansō mostly took place in the Akihabara office, while I met all the client informants in a coffee shop near the office, which ensured me a quiet place to obtain good quality recordings and, at the same

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27 The limit of two years was decided after consulting with veterans of the company. Two year customers are considered as having a good knowledge of the dansō escort world, had the opportunity to join different kinds of events, and are usually considered less keen to stop their regular attendance compared to shorter period customers.
time, offered the required privacy. All the interviews started with basic background information to help the speakers feel comfortable before approaching more intimate details. I deliberately postponed the interviews to the second half of my fieldwork, so to be able to build and develop an intimate relationship with my informants wherever possible, since the quality of the data was directly proportional to the quality of the relationship between me and my informants (Measor, 1985: 57; Oakley, 1981: 48; Lunsing, 2001: 60). Due to the extremely private and delicate subjects I wanted to investigate with my questions, it was necessary to establish a relationship founded on reciprocal trust with my informants (Kim E., 2009), in order to let them feel at ease in talking to me about topics such as gender and sexuality, avoiding “politically correct” answers, usually adopted by my informants (as I personally witnessed) when dealing with strangers or public media who asked them about the same topics.28

Contact with the head of the other dansō escort company in Akihabara was established thanks to one of my previous acquaintances, and the interview was held in her company office, while the interview with Dreamland’s manager took place during one of my working shifts. The questions were the same for both the managers, and aimed to uncover why and how they stepped into the crossdresser escort business. Both the interviews were quite informal, and the informants were very keen to share with me their thoughts about dansō-related entertainment.

The interview with the Keraboku editor took place in the very formal setting of the company’s building. In this case not only the context, but also my linguistic register and the way I introduced myself (as a PhD candidate from the University of Manchester with a business card) were very formal. This interview was extremely useful to highlight how the Japanese press conceives the dansō phenomenon and how it represents it to the general public through magazines; specifically, it highlighted the media’s attempt to avoid conflating the dansō topic with issues connected to gender, sexuality and homosexuality, insisting on the assumption that “dansō is only a fashion trend”.

The analysis of data was carried out by means of Qualitative Content Analysis, a tool adopted in social sciences to reduce qualitative data to core information and themes (Patton, 2002: 453) defined as codes and categories. At first, I started coding my data through NVIVO software, and when the main categories were defined, I continued manually, using hard

28 More details about the way crossdresser escorts manage interviews with Japanese media are provided in chapter 2.8.
copies of the transcribed interviews to highlight sub-categories and topics. This approach allowed me to draw categories of main topics and to highlight recurrent themes within them, and to structure a comprehensive analysis of the dansō escort world based on data obtained through the ethnography.

2.2 Insider or outsider?

A field setting may be visible or invisible, and it may be more or less open or closed to outsiders. A setting is visible when major information is available to the general public (Jorgensen, 1989), but whether or not a setting is closed does not depend only on its visibility, but also to the real possibility of interacting within it with the informants. Moreover, where the researcher is located with respect to the investigated phenomenon determines what can be observed. The dansō field is visible, since not only is information accessible, but the activities that the company undertakes are also known and advertised to the general public and to (potential) customers on the company’s website. However, it is also quite closed, since accessing it required considerable negotiation on my part, while outsiders are denied any access to the “backstage” of the company. From the information provided so far, it is possible to understand the dansō escort field as semi-visible.

From the beginning of my research, it was very clear to me that I needed to obtain an insider position in order to carry out my fieldwork successfully. As Alder and Alder (1987: 8) state about research focused on subculture or unconventional groups, “researchers must assume social roles that fit into the worlds they are studying”. To gather data about crossdressers’ gender identity, sexual orientations, private life and the nature of their relationships with customers, it was fundamental for me to be considered an insider in the dansō company, to go through the same experiences as my informants, and to show aspects of similarity between me and them. Moreover, the simple observation of dansō and clients during dates, which is supposed to be a private encounter, would have been impossible for a casual observer. Since dansō escort work is considered to be both part of the mizu shōbai and a topic strictly linked to otaku culture, it was very unlikely that either crossdressers and customers would share information with someone who was not “part of the game”, due to the fear of being negatively judged for their interest in this subcultural and liminal entertainment. However, what does it mean to be “an insider”? According to Naples, “outsiderness and insiderness are not fixed or static positions. Rather, they are ever-shifting and permeable.
social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed […] as ethnographers we are never fully outside or inside” (2003: 49). Being inside the company did not automatically make me an insider, and during my nine-month fieldwork I constantly negotiated my position. I was on the border between being inside or outside, and consequently I emphasized or reduced those physical, social, cultural and psychological features of mine considered as common points or differences between my informants and me. I consciously worked to adapt my body and my behaviours to the company’s standard and to be accepted by my co-workers. At the same time, I worked on my otherness and its undeniable features, trying to make them appealing for my informants rather than limiting. In this process, I found that being a white Italian woman was an advantage in carrying out relationships with my research participants. Previous studies have shown that it is not unusual for Japanese people to have a positive attitude towards white Europeans (Bennet, 2012:92-93; Miyake, 2013) compared to other racial positions and nationalities and my being a white Italian is likely to have weighed positively when the decision was taken to accept me into the company. On the other hand, being a PhD researcher from a European university was a detail to which my informants did not pay much attention.

As an insider in the company, I was able to collect a wider range of data and allowed to observe certain events that outsiders are forbidden to witness, since informants are less likely to change their behaviour around insiders (Bernard, 1994; 2006). A participant observer who can successfully merge him/herself in the scene will be ignored by the informants, and their behaviours will be less influenced. Moreover, the recognition of similarities between the researcher and the informants is fundamental in obtaining access to them (Zavella, 1996; Tewksbury and Gagne, 1997; Leblanc, 2000). Informants could change their behaviour when observed, and I took into consideration this possibility. However, to minimize the risk of reactivity (Bernard, 2006) – always present with participant observation methods – I tried to fit into the company as much as possible and I underwent the same experiences as my informants so that they were able to see me as a practitioner as much as a researcher. I took my escort role very seriously, and I worked both on the physical and psychological performance of masculinity that my role required. Specifically, I was training daily and following a protein-based diet to increase the volume of my (feeble) muscles, especially on my arms, and to better conceal the female curves of my body. I cut and kept my hair short, I trained my voice in order to speak and sing in deeper tones, and I studied how to move and talk in a different register to positively impress my customers, practicing outside
working time with my senpai and with other Japanese friends as well. These changes were necessary to neatly fit into the escort role, although they required constant effort. Being a practitioner smoothed my presence as a foreign researcher among crossdressers: for them I was there for academic reasons, but I was also among them working in the same way they were doing, and after a couple of months of mutual acknowledgement, they gave indications that they started to think about me as one of their co-workers who was also a researcher. Without the possibility of working and spending time at the company as a working dansō, interactions with my informants would have been greatly reduced, subjected to time restraints, limited in places where to meet them, and confined to semi-official meetings obtained through the mediation of the company’s staff. All these limitations would have negatively affected the quality of my data and findings. As an outsider, I would not have been able to establish the deep trust and the mutual knowledge which characterized my relationships with the other crossdressers and allowed me to ask questions that, with a different relationship, they would have likely skipped or dismissed. My presence as a dansō was less intrusive for my co-workers, and I was able to observe them in naturally occurring interactions unaltered by the presence of an outsider observer. Being inside promoted an intimate knowledge of the area of study, reducing the possibility of misunderstanding between my informants and me, and the gap between informants’ words and behaviours. Indeed, working in a dansō company allowed me to share with my co-workers the apprentice time, the working time and the spare time between shifts. Interactions between working shifts and natural conversations offered powerful insights into crossdressers’ world, and observing how dansō interact with their co-workers in a “safe area” – the office – without the presence of customers provided matchless insights into the representation of their masculinity as individuals and as a group, as well as into their private lives.

From a spatial perspective, once initial access to the field was secured I was “inside”; however, this did not automatically make me an “insider”. I was still a foreigner, with very little knowledge of the dansō escort work in its entirety, a good but not perfect knowledge of the Japanese language and facial features which screamed out my origins to the other dansō and clients. All these facts positioned me on the border between the inside and the outside, and every time I negotiated my identity and position in order to take advantage of the different perception my informants could have of me. In fact, I was accepted as a trainee

29 To a wider extent, a similar approach was adopted by sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2004) in his ethnographic investigation of the boxing world in Chicago. Wacquant carefully describes his physical efforts to adapt himself to the world of boxing, from the initial training up to fighting in professional fights.
Dansō not only thanks to my previous acquaintances, but also because my age and my androgy nous aesthetical features were considered to be in line with the policies of recruitment in the escort company. A similar situation was faced by Liza Dalby (1983) in her controversial study of geishas’ world and culture.\textsuperscript{30} Firstly, Dalby was allowed to enter a geisha house due to her being a young adult female. In the same situation, a male researcher would have not been allowed the same access. Secondly, she was a foreigner with a good knowledge of the Japanese language and culture, and her ability to play the shamisen permitted her to be taken seriously by other geisha in her willingness to experience their life. Another woman researcher without the same characteristics probably would have not been admitted. Similarly, as a female researcher, I had easier access to my informants, while a male researcher would have probably faced more resistance than I in gaining their trust;\textsuperscript{31} also, a woman researcher with different physical features or little knowledge of Japanese might not have been accepted as a dansō escort.

Here arises a question regarding if – and to what extent – bearing an otherness could harm the fact finding. The question was already investigated by other scholars both with regards to Japan (Kondo, 1990; Killick, 1995; Lunsing, 2001; Okano, 1993) and in other settings where differences in ethnicity and social backgrounds between the researcher and the informants could impact the research (Hoang, 2015; Ho, 2010; Li, 2008). As Merry Isaacs White highlighted in her study about teenagers in Japan in the 1980s, being a foreigner is not necessarily perceived as a problem or an obstacle in doing fieldwork in Japan: “What made me an acceptable adult was in part my foreignness, for I was someone outside the world that judged them, someone desperately needing instruction” (White, 2003: 28). White, in her forties, was not in the position to disguise herself as a teenager or pass as Japanese, but this does not invalidate her research: she positively worked on her otherness and distance from her informants in order to obtain as much information as possible. Showing a need to be guided and taught about young people’s trends, tastes and desires, while distancing herself from the adult world usually identified with teachers and parents, White succeeded in gaining participants’ trust, negotiating her identity without informants’ fear of being judged. In my case, as a foreigner from Europe, I was in a position to raise interest in my informants; they

\textsuperscript{30} Dalby’s \textit{Geisha} was considered by several scholars such as Cornell (1986) and Plath (1984) not to be a serious ethnographic work. However, I am not discussing here the reliability of Dalby’s study, but only the possibility for her to be admitted to a very closed ambience such as a geisha house.

\textsuperscript{31} About the importance of researcher’s personal characteristics (gender, race, age, etc.) in establishing and maintaining field relationships see Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002.
always asked me why I was interested in dansō, which allowed me to ask them the same question in return, establishing a dialogue (Reinharz, 1992: 32-35). Moreover, my requests for explanations or additional information about this sub-cultural phenomenon did not appear too strange or intrusive for either crossdressers or customers, since as an outsider I needed to be trained and informed about all the details that can be taken for granted by somebody who is already into crossdressing. Rather than assuming I had any previous knowledge, my informants took the time to teach and explain to me their activities and the reasons behind them, which was fundamental for me to obtain a clear idea of the investigated topics. In addition, all the Japanese people I met showed a very positive evaluation of my home country, Italy, especially features somewhat stereotypically linked to Italy, such as good food, fashion brands, art and culture. Therefore, being Italian was an additional advantage in creating contact points with my informants, opening up spaces for friendly discussions, which increased mutual knowledge. I was always answering all their questions about Italian food, football, politics, and so on, which made me appear in their eyes as a friendly and talkative person, which in the end helped me greatly in obtaining longer interviews. I often invited my co-workers for hand-made Italian meals at my place, and they always accepted enthusiastically. “Hanging out” is defined (Bernard, 1994; Gertz, 1998; Kawulich, 2005) as a process that allows the researcher to obtain informants’ trust and to develop a rapport with them. Weiss (2011) notably applied it to the case of queer researchers and informants. When I asked dansō for interviews, we were already at that point of our mutual knowledge to be considered, if not “friends”, at least good co-workers, a kind of relationship that can positively impact the quality of final data. Dansō informants felt at ease during our conversations thanks to the previous interactions we had before the interviews took place. Moreover, in both the cases of crossdressers and client participants, my willingness to openly talk about my sexuality, provide explanations and to discuss gender and homosexual related issues became another important factor in creating intimacy with my informants, who felt at ease in discussing similar topics during the interviews.

With regard to customer informants, some of them were attracted by my “exotic” facial features, and in some cases they overcame their shyness out of curiosity to meet and talk with the gaijin (foreigner, especially from beyond East Asia) dansō. My display of interest in their “hobby” stimulated them to talk extensively about what they liked in crossdressing entertainment or in the specific dansō they supported, which was not a topic commonly addressed in their conversations at home or with their friends. As with White
(2003), my not being a member of Japanese society let the informants feel free to express their thoughts without fear of being judged.

2.3 Negotiations while doing ethnography

In order to gain the familiarity of my informants, I attended the company on an almost daily basis and used all opportunities to meet and interact with my informants in official and unofficial situations. As Madison notes: “If ethnography is about anything, it is about putting your body on the line. It is about being in a particular space for a particular period of time” (2005: 401). However, in working as an escort, I had to confront the same problems dansō face during their work, and this required me to make major adjustments and changes to overcome misunderstandings and unpleasant situations and to fill social and cultural gaps. As with other scholars before me (Allison, 1994; Frank, 1998; Parreñas, 2011; Hoang, 2015), carrying out fieldwork involving the offer and the evaluation of personal physical characteristics by clients, usually from a lower educational background, requires the fieldworker to confront severe issues regarding the perception of the self, the management of complex social relationships and the necessity to mediate between (in my case) the feminist perspective of a Western female researcher and the reality of the social context where the research takes place. I had to learn how to handle comments on the colour of my skin and the shape of my nose, and, generally speaking, I had to accept being judged primarily on my aesthetic appearance. I cannot completely exclude the possibility that the low number of dates I collected could have been partly due to my not being Japanese, rather than only due to the short time I actually worked as an escort.

Moreover, it took me a long time to come to terms with feeling guilty for telling lies to the customers and performing the specific behavioural requirements of my escort work. For instance, I had to show empathy and affection towards all clients, even though I did not have an emotional bond with or a real interest in some of them, since this was a fundamental part of the performance required by my escort role. Thus, I had to flatter clients with compliments that, in most cases, were neither spontaneous nor truthful, and sounded phony to me. This

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32 I was explicitly taught by my co-worker Haruka that the best way to flatter and keep customers is to compliment them a great deal. Customers should be always defined as nice and cute (kawaii). However, if they are not beautiful and the compliments could sound fake, he suggested that I focus on and praise small details, like their hair or skin. If those particulars too do not provide anything to praise, then clothes, or make up or accessories must always be noted and praised.
behaviour was different from the performance of the escort role, and I personally identified it as “lying”, a difference also highlighted by Katherine Frank: “while we were always performing, however, we were not always pretending” (1998: 197). In addition, I often felt sad about and sorry for customers I developed stronger connections to, who spent very high amounts of money to get a nice conversation and friendly support, which I believe I would have provided for free or for a coffee in a different context. As highlighted by Blix and Wettergren (2014), obtaining and maintaining good relationships with gatekeepers and informants can be considered as a kind of emotional work, and all those interactions often left me with the feeling of being emotionally drained. Those experiences and feelings greatly helped me in understanding my crossdresser informants’ perspective in describing their relations with clients and the emotional investment and management required by emotional labour.

The most important part of Allison’s study of a Tokyo hostess club (1994), as she states, came from her interactions with the clients and the other agents involved in the business. Allison was obliged to face unpleasant situations like recurrent references to her breasts, rude behaviour from the customers who often targeted her body in their jokes and, generally speaking, a subaltern role towards men, who were expecting her to flatter and serve them (1994: 47-49). Consequently, she had to manage her positions as a feminist and as a researcher in order to conduct her fieldwork successfully. In my case, I was partially protected by the contract, which clearly stated that customers were not allowed any physical contact, with the sole exceptions of holding hands while walking and hugs when taking pictures (both options available only for female customers). However, I still had to endure slightly racist comments and behaviours, which were not sanctioned by any clause of the contract. Sometimes I met clients who openly showed a very dictatorial and rude attitude towards me, and nevertheless I had to behave nicely, light their cigarettes and carry their bags. Since I was with them not as a European researcher from a prestigious university, but as a foreigner undertaking a traineeship as an escort, I was not in the position to openly confront them and answer in kind. I could not return their unpleasant comments about my linguistic skills; I had to express a very polite “sorry” when they pointed out that some behaviours of mine were rude in the Japanese social context, judging them only on the basis that they were performed by a foreigner. In such cases, I had to show a learning and submissive attitude, even when my proficiency and knowledge in a certain field was far higher than my interlocutors’, much as Kimberley Hoang faced during her fifteen-month fieldwork conducted among sex workers in Vietnam (2015: 191-194). Fortunately, those events were
more the exception than the norm, but they nevertheless required negotiations with my social and educational background, and led me to reflect on my position. I did not let my different social status interfere and affect interactions with my informants and the quality of my data, and I was fully aware of my position as a researcher vis-à-vis my informants. Drawing on my personal experiences, I argue that the fieldworker occupies a privileged position, with the possibility of observing, asking questions and making judgements about the observed phenomena and/or people, but his/her position with respect to the informants can still be problematic. Arjun Appadurai draws attention to “the dilemmas of perspective and representation that all ethnographers must confront” (1991: 191). The dilemma is mainly about what the fieldworker can do to critically and ethically represent the studied subjects, keeping in mind that representing something or someone else is intrinsically an act of power over the represented. It is fundamental, as Rhodes states, to use fieldwork in order to achieve “the author’s position as a knower and teller and therefore destabilise the authority of authorship and foreground [our] own constructedness” (Rhodes, 2001: 4). In this regards, my dansō informants greatly helped me in finding a different way to contextualize what I initially perceived as acts of submission or just blatant lies. They helped me to understand that clients were actively looking for such services, and providing them with something different would not necessarily mean offering them something better. They were not necessarily looking for honesty, and the price they paid was the symbol of the transaction: money exchanged for emotions, compliments, appreciation, and wonderful although contrived memories. This shift in view and perspective helped me not only to go through my fieldwork, but also to reach a deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon and its agents.

2.4 Fieldwork location: Akihabara

The district of Akihabara, in central Tokyo, is well known for its extremely high concentration of electronics shops, and for representing a Mecca for manga and anime fans worldwide. Akihabara is considered, at the same time, the homeland of antisocial subculture and of a part of the Japanese pop culture exported within the “Cool Japan” project (Allison, 2009; Galbraith, 2013; Kam, 2013; Valaskivi, 2013) (see below). This double perspective is applied also to Akihabara’s iconic inhabitants, the otaku, who are represented by the Japanese media and government as both great producers and consumers of digital and creative contents, and also as antisocial and disruptive individuals (Kinsella, 2015; Galbraith, 2013).
From the 1950s to the 1980s, Akihabara was the place for families to buy household electronics. Then, with the arrival of computers, came stores specializing in informatics products and video games (Morikawa, 2003). Video games were soon followed by other representations of Japanese pop culture, such as manga, anime and their related gadgets, and the area, thanks also to its convenient location, became the perfect place for computer experts and hobbyists. Akihabara also plays a pivotal role in what the American journalist Douglas McGray defined as ‘Japan’s gross national cool’ (2002), which was subsequently given the official imprimatur of “Cool Japan” (Allison, 2009): a nation branding project based on “a social imaginary that brings together the aims of the Japanese government, the perceptions (and contradictions) of the national and transnational fans and fan groups, the aspirations of the (trans)national media, the business of the content industry, and various interests of artists and producers” (Valaskivi, 2013). The fields chosen to promote Japanese culture abroad within the “Cool Japan” project were popular culture, manga and anime, design, fashion, and lifestyle. In this sense, the role of Akihabara as a cradle for the development of a mixed popular-technological Japanese culture was actively supported by the Japanese government as well: in 2006, the future Prime Minister Asō Tarō underlined the importance of Akihabara as a means to export this specific expression of Japanese culture (Nobuoka, 2010).

In Japan, perspectives on Akihabara are divided: if for its frequenters it often represents a sort of “sacred space” (Nobuoka, 2010), for those who are critical of popular culture and subcultures, Akihabara represents the extremes of both, and a haunt where otaku individuals cultivate their “dangerous” hobbies (Kam, T. 2013). This double perspective about Akihabara also appeared in my customer informants’ accounts; they often pointed out during the interviews their reluctance to talk to family and friends about their visits to Akihabara to meet their favourite dansō, because of the location’s ambivalent reputation. Moreover, most of my customer informants stated that they visited Akihabara for the first time to go to Dreamland, and had not felt comfortable about going there before, out of fear of being associated with otaku.

Akihabara is hence a place with different “souls”: it still maintains its electronic-shopping oriented nature, but it also represents an extremely famous tourist spot in Tokyo, promoted within the “Cool Japan” project, which does not only attract otaku, but also curious visitors of different kinds and nationalities. At the very same time, Akihabara is strongly

33 The word otaku took on a specifically negative meaning from 1989 when the media used it to describe Miyazaki Tsutomu, the sociopathic killer of four girls between four and seven years old, in whose room the police found child pornography and animation (Kinsella, 1998: 128-129).
linked to the otaku image and otaku products, specifically targeting male individuals (Galbraith, 2010; Morikawa, 2008). In this sense, Galbraith defines Akihabara as “a ‘pure consumer’ space, an extension of the private (disconnected) ‘pleasure room’ into public space” (2009: 21).

The reference to pleasure and the consumeristic dimension of Akihabara is fundamental to understand the role the neighbourhood plays in the development of new forms of affect-oriented services. Contemporary capitalism has a strong focus on the production of immaterial goods such as information, communication and affect, through so-called immaterial labour, of which “affective labour” is considered one of the main aspects (Lazzarato, 2008; Coté and Pybus, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2004: 292; Terranova, 2004). The affective aspect of immaterial labour engages with well-being, excitement, and ease. It is not focused on producing objects, but on services to cater to the emotional needs of customers. Otaku are often described by their detractors as being unable to become full members of society (shakaijin) because of their lack of interest in human interactions, especially relationships with women aimed at reproduction, instead “engaging in play that detaches them from their roles and responsibilities” (Kam 2013: 160). To cater to the affective needs of otaku men, in Akihabara since the 1990s different business forms arose focused on alternative forms of intimacy. A prominent example was maid cafes. Maid cafes represented for otaku the intersection point between fictional and material worlds, allowing them to interact with maids, human beings performing a fictional character (Galbraith, 2013b).

If up to the first half of the 2000s these forms of affective entertainment were aimed mostly at a male clientele (Azuma, 2006), from 2006 the desires of female customers started to be taken into consideration. In this sense, the birth of dansō cafes and dansō escort companies represented the female-oriented counterparts of maid cafes. The main difference between maid cafes and dansō cafes on the one hand, and a crossdresser escorts company on the other, is that in the former, customers have to buy food and drinks to obtain the possibility of interacting with dansō or maids. Conversely, interactions are the main offer of a dansō escort service.

Dansō escort company managers’ choice of Akihabara as their business location should be read taking into consideration the renewal of the neighbourhood within the city

34 The perception of Akihabara’s otaku has been changing over the years, along with the development of the neighbourhood. This shift is described by Galbraith (2010) as a fluctuation depending on social conditions and cultural understandings, from otaku seen as social rejects in the 1980’s, as the representation of the downfall of the Japanese society itself, up to a more positive interpretation during the 2000s.
development (machizukuri) and “Cool Japan” projects (Galbraith, 2010). Dansō escort companies opened in the Akihabara district from 2006, arguably following the “Cool Japan” wave. They were openly promoted as guide services, and being in Akihabara created a link with cosplay and cosplayers, while distancing this form of entertainment from the accusation of homosexuality and any link with the sexual entertainment world (in locations such as Shinjuku). In this sense, it must be noted that recently (2016-2017) established dansō host clubs are located not in Akihabara, but in Kabukichō, Shinjuku, showing a stronger connection with the mizu shōbai entertainment world. The link to Akihabara and cosplay mitigates the possible sexualized aspects of this business, while the renewed image of Akihabara itself distances the escort companies from being too much into the otaku culture, with its perceived dark sides. Akihabara can now be linked not to the most extreme and antisocial aspects of otaku, but to a milder, colourful pop culture, ready to be consumed by everyone. Managers of dansō companies have thus been able to transform a potentially transgressive alternative subculture into a non-threatening form of entertainment, usable by anyone, to promote their business and to attract a wider range of customers. Dansō mix together otaku culture, androgyny and eroticism, but no one of those features is too extreme to scare clients who do not want to be openly linked to Akihabara’s otaku, or homosexual and transgressive forms of entertainment.

Moreover, Akihabara is a place allowing unconventional identities to exist, where playing with one’s own identity is accepted as a part of a larger context of “performative play” industries and identities. Cosplayers, crossplayers35, maids, and dansō are all – to different extents – performative and performed identities, who play with their self-presentation within the geographical boundaries of Akihabara, creating its atmosphere of playful experimentation. The existence of such a world of performative play in the neighbourhood has created the space and the potentiality for the crossdresser escort business to develop as part of the entertainment, and also allows clients to engage with the possibility of performing a different self during a date with a crossdresser escort (how dansō perform their identity is discussed in chapter 3, while this topic for clients is addressed in chapter 4). This experimentation is safe for clients in that they can step back into their “ordinary” world and identity when they exit the neighbourhood at the end of the date with their crossdresser. The performance is limited in time and space, and those limits can be decided by clients.

35 Cosplayers who interpret characters of the opposite sex.
2.5 The dansō escort company Dreamland

Dreamland (a pseudonym) is advertised on its website as the most famous dansō escort company: during my fieldwork it was the first result that came out when conducting a Google search about this kind of business in Japan, and in 2016 it celebrated its 10th anniversary, which made it, if not the most famous, at least the most long-lived of its kind. The company's boss, Mr. Hirota, had formerly worked in the adult entertainment business, and had run a kyabakura for several years. The dansō escort service that Dreamland offers is not the only service business run by Mr. Hirota: in the same office there is also the company Maid For You (also a pseudonym), which allows clients to enjoy a date with girls dressed up as maids. The company's staff was composed of Mr. Hirota and three other men working in the office. Usually, the boss maintains contacts with the customers, answers emails and phone calls, and manages payments, while the responsibilities of the other three staff members included the websites of Dreamland and Maid For You, shooting and editing pictures to be used on the websites, creating advertising materials (flyers, posters, etc.), accounting, and office-related duties. When the boss was not present, one of the other staff members in the office covered his duties. During the period of my fieldwork, there were 14 dansō working for the company, and I obtained interviews with 13 of them.

The company office is located on the seventh floor of a building a few minutes away from Chuō Dōri, Akihabara's main street. However, the building is not in the very heart of Akihabara; it does not even appear on maps showing the entertainment premises in the neighbourhood such as maid cafes, and the street where it stands has little in common with the flashy and noisy establishments of the Electric Town. Akihabara station is not even the closest one to the office. This borderline position reflects the liminal status of Dreamland and its crossdresser escort service: being on the boundary between cosplay-related kinds of

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36 Last Internet check: 16/10/2017.
37 Kyabakura, also known as hostess club, is a kind of Japanese entertainment bar. The name comes from the words cabaret (kyabaree) and club (kurabu). In kyabakura, (usually) women provide entertainment and company to groups of men after work, sitting next to them, pouring them drinks, lighting cigarettes and offering leisurely conversation.
38 I was not able to meet the fourteenth dansō working for Dreamland: he did not decline the interview but he was seldom attending the company and we were not able to arrange a meeting. The fourteenth crossdresser informant is a professional dansō escort working for another company. However, in the past he used to work for Dreamland, and he was introduced to me by two of my informants from Dreamland because of his strong wish to take part in my study.
entertainment and a purely mizu shōbai business, Dreamland cannot be clearly placed within one of those two categories, but is situated in a middle ground\(^{39}\). The aesthetic of escorts, their crossdressing, and some of their performed behaviour with customers can be related to the world of cosplay and to the imaginary of manga and anime. On the other hand, the specific kind of service dansō provide differs from what can be obtained in maid cafes or dansō cafes, and is closer to the service offered by host clubs in the sense of offering a more intense experience of commodified intimacy. This double status of Dreamland, as related to the *otaku* and *fujoshi*\(^{40}\) world of Akihabara but, at the same time, with resemblances to other forms of commodified intimacy services, is also reflected in the mixed range of its customers (see chapter 4.1) and represents a specific feature of the crossdresser escort service. Arguably, the dansō business has been set up in Akihabara because of the association with a world where serious play and unconventional identity are acceptable. However, a certain distance from the very heart of Akihabara could have been considered necessary by the company’s manager to allow clients to see the activities either as part of the wider performative entertainment world of Akihabara or not, according to the way clients define their interest in dansō. This scenario might therefore be the most suitable for the business to attract clients, reassure them, and be financially successful.

In Dreamland’s building there are also private apartments, other offices, and a photo studio. The studio is also managed by Mr. Hirota. Dansō and maids usually take promotional pictures there, and it is also rented to other people or companies who need to use a professional photographic studio. To access Dreamland’s office it is necessary to enter its code on the doorphone, and to introduce oneself by surname or, in the case of those working there and returning customers, nicknames. On the white door of the office there are two labels, “Dreamland” and “Maid for You”, so the customers are aware that the office is shared by both dansō and maids. On a piece of furniture near the door were placed several action figures of characters from anime and games, from Mr. Hirota’s personal collection. In the porch there was room for customers’ shoes and slippers, and a big shoe rack reserved for the staff. Then, there was a narrow corridor with two doors and a staircase on the right side, one door on the left side and one door at the end. The right hand doors were respectively the bathroom and the toilet. The staircase led to the second floor, where there was one room, with

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\(^{39}\) Regarding the ambiguous definition of Dreamland, some client informants (as highlighted in chapter 4.4.1) reported difficulties in understanding the kind of service Dreamland was offering when they first knew about it.

\(^{40}\) The term *fujoshi* was firstly intended as the female equivalent of male *otaku*. Then it came to define female fans or creators of works centered on male-male romance (Suzuki, 2013).
a big table for meetings, and two computers. The second floor was used mainly by the boss for his accounting duties, and by maids when performing live shows to be broadcast online in real time. I was allowed to use this second floor room to conduct my interviews with crossdresser informants, in order to talk freely in a silent place, for privacy reasons and to ensure good quality recordings. The room at the end of the corridor was the one where the boss and his assistants had their desk and where the interactions between Dreamland’s staff and clients took place. The room on the left side was for dansō and maids. There were two big sets of lockers and a large wardrobe. Half of the wardrobe was for dansō, who used it for their suits, coats, yukata\textsuperscript{41} and other clothes that were only worn on request, not on everyday dates (Figure 2.1).

\textsuperscript{41} Summer kimono made of cotton.
Every escort was entitled to have a personal locker to store belongings, with the exception of fresh food, which had to be named and stored in a common fridge. There were also two small tables with two laptops available for dansō and maids (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Dansō PC station

An internal rule states that communication between dansō and maids must be limited to greetings, and for this reason the two laptops and the sets of lockers were separated, giving to the whole room a sense of “girls’ side” and “boys’ side”; however, it was not unusual to share longer conversations, especially when the same customer was dating both dansō and maids. These interactions must be kept secret from the customers, especially from dansō’s female customers, who are usually very jealous of maids. Officially, crossdressers and maids are obliged to lie to the customers about their real interactions, saying that they barely know or meet each other and that waiting rooms for dansō and maids are kept separated (dansō occupying the 1st floor and maids on the 2nd floor). The waiting room is where escort staff spent downtime waiting for a date. It was also the setting for most of my observations and interactions with my crossdresser informants, during the downtime between one date and another. This room was also used by dansō for their bimonthly meeting, when they addressed topics such as the schedule of special events, participation in subsidiary activities (often in
collaboration with other dansō units active in Akihabara), and internal problems in the management of human resources.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{2.6 Entering the field}

I was able to obtain access to the field thanks to previous acquaintances of mine. I lived in Tokyo between 2011 and 2013, and during this time I became friends with two crossdresser escorts. I met them several times, and talked extensively with them to understand their reasons behind the choice to work as dansō escorts. Due to my interest in crossdressing, I worked part-time for their agency for a year as a dansō, participating in promotional photo shootings and special events. I underwent the new employee training and through this experience I was able to learn a significant amount about the agency operations and the working life of crossdressers. Although my previous acquaintances were no longer working as dansō when I started my fieldwork, their mediation was crucial in enabling my acceptance by Dreamland on a voluntary basis as an apprentice dansō, and an introduction to the head of the other company.

Before leaving for my fieldwork in 2015, I conducted extensive research on the Internet to identify the places where dansō-related entertainment was taking place. During my previous experience of dansō escorting, there was only one company operating in Tokyo, and a few cafes spread across Japan. However, the new Internet search showed me two different companies in Tokyo (both in Akihabara), one in Nagoya, a more varied offer of cafes in several cities (Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe), most of them devoted to a specific theme (such as Sengoku-period style,\textsuperscript{43} goth style, or ninja style). Towards the end of my fieldwork, dansō host clubs also appeared on the scene. I defined my geographical area of interest, and opted for Tokyo because of the centrality of its position, its importance as cultural and subcultural reference point for the other cities, the presence of all the kinds of dansō related businesses and also my good knowledge of the city. My previous dansō acquaintances were able to secure me a first contact in both companies (one of them used to

\textsuperscript{42} An analysis of the office space as a place for interactions between dansō, or with the staff, is provided in chapter 3.6.1.

\textsuperscript{43} The Sengoku period (1467-1573) is a period of Japanese history characterized by frequent military conflicts between rival clans. Sengoku themed entertainment usually focuses on presenting feudal warlords and warriors in costumes and armour. Dansō working in Sengoku themed cafes usually do not wear historically correct costumes, but are instead mostly inspired by videogames and anime set in the Sengoku period.
work as a crossdresser escort in Dreamland, and the other one was a close friend of the chairman of the other company), allowing me to introduce myself to both firms as a researcher interested in dansō. At the beginning, I tried to keep contact with both companies, but I soon realized the existence of a strong rivalry between them, due to the movement of some escort staff from one workplace to the other and to the competition over a niche clientele. I had to choose one side, so I evaluated the two companies, comparing the number of escort staff, the side activities (cafe events, public shows, broadcasting on TV shows and so on) they were running along with the escort service to promote their business, the number of followers on social media and the average number of clients, and on this basis chose Dreamland.

After a short interview with the boss and the company’s two most experienced escorts, during which I explained my interest in making the crossdressing escort business the topic of my research, expressing my strong wish to personally experience the life of a crossdresser escort, at the end of November 2015 I was admitted as a trainee at Dreamland. The first thing I had to do was to adapt my image to the company’s standard. I cut my hair short, and changed my wardrobe into a more masculine one. I then started the creation of my male alter-ego: I decided to interpret the role of a friendly and slightly flirty Italian guy, to better match the expectations and stereotypes my Japanese clients could have had about Italian men. I considered the possibility that to use a stereotypically Italian persona for the sake of clients might be in some way ethically questionable. However, I personally felt this character consonant with what I feel to be my authentic self, and according to my observations, my informants seemed to have found the character I performed pleasant. My name was André, a name that I chose for its “European” sound and for the link with one of the characters of the manga Versailles no Bara (1973), which my prospective clients likely knew and which I had used in the past when collaborating for some photo shoots with my dansō friends. In the subsequent week, I had to take several pictures in different outfits for my personal page on the agency’s website, and I also started a blog and a Twitter profile, to advertise myself to prospective clients. At the same time, I had a short training session with one of the veterans, who explained all the rules of the company and my duties, and also gave me some basic tips

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44 Known in English as The Rose of Versailles or Lady Oscar, this is a shōjo manga by Ikeda Riyoko subsequently adapted into an anime version and into several Takarazuka Revue musicals. It tells the story of Oscar Françoise de Jarjayes, a girl raised as a man by his father who wishes to see him as captain of Palace Guards. The story takes place against the landscape of the French Revolution. André is the male co-protagonist of the story.
on how to interact with clients. I also received daily feedback and advice from the other crossdressers on my look and on how to use social media smartly. At the end of the week I undertook a sort of examination with a veteran of the company: we had a one hour “mock date” where he acted the role of the female customer and I that of the escort. This was thought to test the attitude and manners of the prospective escort and his ability to conduct a conversation and to properly answer the clients’ questions. The procedure to follow is the same as prescribed for a date with an unknown customer. It requires the escort to introduce himself properly, speaking in polite language \textit{(keigo)}, ask the client’s name or nickname, and immediately confirm the start of the date by a phone call to the company. After the phone call, the \textit{dansō} asks the partner where s/he wants to go (it is mandatory for the escort to provide a suitable option for the booked time if the client does not know what to do) and, after the place is decided, he also asks the client if it would be fine to walk holding hands, and to carry his/her bag. Then, the couple slowly walk towards the place decided, starting a casual conversation. The mock date usually takes place in a coffee shop near the office; the escort asks the client what s/he wants to eat and order, but discreetly steps back at the moment when the bill is paid, which is on the customer; then he selects a table in a quiet place and brings the tray, letting the customer take the best seat (which can be, depending on the situation, the innermost one or the one most protected from other people’s gaze or one more distant from the door). After seating, the \textit{dansō} will ask the customer if s/he wants milk or sugar in his/her drink, and eventually will mix it for her/him. Then the \textit{dansō} starts a conversation asking questions about the customer’s likes and dislikes, answering the customer’s questions in turn, being careful not to disclose personal information (details to identify where he lives or his other workplaces, phone number, email address, LINE\textsuperscript{45} contact). During my mock date, I was explicitly asked by my examiner questions like “Do you like men or women?”, “Who is the worst escort in the company?” or “Does garcon X have a partner?” to evaluate my capacity to elude or correctly answer the kind of questions that curious customers usually ask. \textit{Dansō} working at Dreamland should be able to avoid sharing personal information about their private and sentimental life with clients, and, at the same time, must be aware that spreading gossip about co-workers will result in dismissal. The correct way to answer these questions requires the crossdresser to provide general answers like “I do not really care about the sex of my partners, what I like is the character of a person” or “All the escorts at Dreamland are very good, you just need to find the most suitable one for your interests” and

\textsuperscript{45} Instant communications free app for electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets.
“I do not know if he has a partner, but I do not think so, he is always working and busy with clients”. The mock date offers trainees the possibility to practice with similar questions and prepare adequate answers to use in similar situations during real dates.

If the test is passed, the crossdresser can start dating customers. At the end of each of the first ten dates, he has to fill in a questionnaire where he is asked to give a summary of the whole experience and to be self-reflective about the best and worst things he did or said during the date. This process of self-scrutiny is intended to help correct the garcon’s errors, and improve future performances. The questionnaire is evaluated by the veterans, who also give suggestions to improve the escorting skills of the newcomers. After having successfully accomplished my “examination date”, I became one of the dansō staff working for Dreamland.

2.7 Dating a dansō: how it works

Customers of the dansō escort service usually go to the office a few minutes before their date to pay the hourly fee. In booking a date, they can choose to use the online system or go directly to the office. Similarly, the payment can be made by cash or through online transaction. However, since most of the dates start in Akihabara, clients usually go directly to the office to complete the payment. After the payment is concluded, the customer waits downstairs and the dansō arrives shortly afterwards. If the customer booked a special date it is also possible to meet the garcon somewhere else, but those special options must be discussed with the head of the company and are subjected to approval or rejection not only by Mr. Hirota but, in some cases, also by the crossdresser involved. Dreamland accepts both female and male customers, but the policy toward male clients is stricter. The cheapest option for clients is the otameshi course: for 2,000 yen a female client can enjoy a 40 minute date, while for a man it will cost 3,000 yen. This option is reserved for first-time customers, and can be combined with a regular option. The normal fee for women is 4,000 yen per hour, with the possibility to extend the date for a price of 2,000 yen for 30 minutes. For men, prices start from 3,000 yen for 30 minutes. The fees are slightly cheaper if a customer books two dansō at the same time (1 hour 6,000 yen for women, 8,000 yen for men). Not only are men’s fees more expensive but male clients are also subjected to more restrictions than women: they cannot hold hands with dansō, hugs are forbidden, and they are not eligible to share an umbrella on rainy days. The most expensive option customers can book is the night pack: for
a fixed price of 40,000 yen it is possible to book a garçon from 11pm to 6 am. This option is only available to female customers. Moreover, men are entitled to go to places other than Akihabara only after the third date, while women can do this during the first date. The double standard policy was justified by Mr. Hirota as a way to support female customers, who usually do not have the same financial means as male clients. However, it also shows how men are considered as more “dangerous” than women for the safety of escorts, and for this reason limited in their range of options. During the date it is possible to buy a “picture option” for an additional 500 yen fee, which allows customers to take pictures of the crossdresser with their mobile phone or camera.

The dansō salary is 50% of the total payment from the customers, starting from a basic income of 1,000 yen for a 30 minute date.\textsuperscript{46} The income from dates can be integrated with several extras; 958 yen/hour can be earned by distributing flyers, but this activity is limited to one hour a day.\textsuperscript{47} Then, when a crossdresser participates in a special event, he receives a percentage: it is not possible to give an unequivocal account on how percentages are calculated, since they change depending on the kind of event and participants. Generally speaking, during events where clients are required to purchase tickets, the percentage can be calculated according to how many tickets a dansō is able to sell to his clients, after the expenses for the event are covered and the company has taken its cut. However, if two top dansō take part in the event, they can equally divide the income, net of the expenses, whereas if a low rank escort and a top star join the same event, the percentage is likely to be calculated as 70% for the top star and 30% for the low rank crossdresser. For those events where tickets are not required, percentages are calculated on net expenses, on a rank basis, since more famous escorts are likely to attract a greater number of customers than low or mid rank ones. During the event, special options are often put on sale (limited edition pictures, possibility to talk to a specific escort, voice messages recorded on the client’s phone). It is possible for a customer to buy an instant camera picture with her favourite escort, or to buy a five minute conversation with a specific crossdresser, or to ask for a crossdresser to draw a unique message on her food in sauce. In those cases, the crossdresser involved will receive half of the money paid by the customer for that specific option, while the other half will be collected

\textsuperscript{46} According to 2018 data, the national average minimum hourly wage in Japan is 874 yen/hour (see https://tradingeconomics.com/japan/minimum-wages). The income for a part time job in Japan can vary according to region, the kind of job, the age of the workers (for instance, high school students earn the minimum wage), and day or night shifts (night shifts are paid more than day shifts). For further information see Cook (2016), Gottfried (2008) and Imai (2004).

\textsuperscript{47} Fixed rate for Tokyo.
by the company. The same policy is adopted in the event of purchase of printed materials (pictures, laminated cards, posters) directly at the company or through other outlets. For instance, Dreamland sells pictures of its dansō staff through Family Mart convenience stores, which can be found all around Japan. In addition, the company also covers dansō transportation fees up to 900 yen a day.

If a crossdresser wants to quit the escort work, his decision must be discussed with Mr. Hirota and ideally should not take place during very busy periods (such as Valentine’s Day, Christmas and New Year) to minimize the financial impact. The escort has to inform his customers, personally and through social media, at least one month before leaving. During his last month he still has to attend all the dates already booked and he is usually asked to increase the working shifts to give a higher number of clients the possibility to meet him and say goodbye. After leaving the company, his personal page is erased from the website and his blog will be shut down. After quitting the company, he is strictly forbidden to contact customers or arrange private meetings, skipping the agency’s fee. If this occurs, the customer will be prohibited from frequenting the company.

2.8 Special activities

Perhaps surprisingly, all decisions about side activities were taken only by the dansō staff during their meetings, usually through public voting, without the participation of Mr. Hirota. The head of the company was informed about the outcomes of the meetings at the end by the veterans, and he completely relied on them regarding the decisions to undertake other activities and the organization process, normally approving their request for funding without raising any objection. The side activities I witnessed and took part in belonged mainly to three different categories: café events, special performances, and interactions with mainstream media (such as TV shows, radio programs, and magazines). They greatly increased my knowledge of the dansō phenomenon, especially with regard to the investigation of relationships between crossdressers and clients, and I found them extremely helpful in gaining a detailed image of the different typologies of Dreamland’s clients.

The café event was first launched on May 2016, and due to its great success (dansō were able to cover the costs of the event and top up their income), it was proposed on a monthly basis. Dansō rented a small coffee shop for one day; furniture and decorations for

48 On my last check on the Internet (16/10/2017) the event was still held every month.
the place were already provided, as well as kitchen facilities and tools. It was a slightly old-fashioned and shabby place, with ten tables and four places at the counter, and crossdressers brought another table to increase the total number of seats by four. At the entrance there was another small table used for registration and to exhibit small crossdresser-related goods (pictures and laminated cards) which were on sale for cash only. During the first event, the menu was composed only of biscuits, nibbles, and two different kinds of cakes (bought from a local supermarket), to be decorated with fresh cream and fruits on the spot, along with a small selection of non-alcoholic drinks (coffee and different kinds of hot and cold tea). Adopting the same style as dansō cafes (see chapter 4.2), purchase of food and/or drink was mandatory and, upon a minimum order of 1000 yen (a drink with one hour of free refills, served with cookies or nibbles), clients were entitled to stay for one hour; to lengthen the stay customers were asked to order again. During the event, which lasted from 6pm to 10:30pm, dansō were in the room, talking and entertaining customers, or serving and preparing food. In spite of the limited choice of food and drinks, the place became full very soon. Dansō also distributed a small questionnaire, requesting feedback on customer satisfaction and how to improve the event, and clients’ comments showed they were extremely satisfied. Building upon the first event, the offer of food and drinks was expanded, and other order options offered: for instance, it was possible to order a cake and ask one of the dansō to make a cute drawing with chocolate on the plate, or it was also possible to pay for a drink for one of the crossdressers, who would drink it at the table with the customer who paid for it, talking with her for five minutes. The time allocated to conversation outside specific purchase options was limited to one or two short questions (for instance “Are you enjoying the event?” or “Is your drink good?”), to encourage customers to “buy” the crossdressers’ company for longer conversations. I was able to participate in this event three times, during which I met and interacted with an ample array of clients.

The special performances I attended as helper were collaborations with other dansō formations performing in the Akihabara landscape as singers, dancers or, generally speaking, entertainers. One was a Valentine’s event held near Omotesandō on the 14th of February, in a music club rented for the occasion. Dreamland collaborated with a dansō unit who usually perform as a boyband, singing and dancing their own songs, and who had recently released their first album. The tickets were sold in advance at the discounted price of 2000 yen, and on the door for 2500 yen (one drink included). The dress code suggested was party dress or suit and bow tie: people dressed accordingly received the 500 yen reduction when also buying a ticket at the door. The event lasted five hours, from 3pm to 8pm, and several MCs alternated
in the role of presenter, introducing dansō who were singing, dancing or performing short comic sketches alone or in groups of two or more. There was also a chocolate fountain, and clients could buy a special option that for an extra fee entitled them to take a picture with an instant camera of their favourite crossdressers, and feed or be fed by a dansō with chocolate covered pieces of fruit from the chocolate fountain.

Another event took place in a small concert room in Akihabara, famous among cosplayers, maids and idol hopefuls, who used it to perform live events. This event was the 10th edition of a promotional showcase for dansō open to crossdressers from all around Japan. The dansō unit who collaborated with Dreamland for the Valentine’s event and two other groups of crossdressers were present: one was composed of representatives from a famous dansō cafe and the other one was a group of dancers and singers from Ikebukuro. Tickets cost 3500 yen in advance and 4000 yen at the door (one drink included). In this event two of the three top stars of Dreamland performed three covers from famous songs of Japanese male singers and boybands. I was asked to take videos of their exhibition and to help my senpai49 in selling items at the end of the event. The event attracted roughly 70-80 people, and the small room was crowded and filled with smoke. The emotion among the public was palpable, and the peak of the event coincided with the performance of Dreamland’s crossdressers. During both the events, especially while performers were singing, the public was standing up holding light sticks and looking at their idols in adoration. After the events, Dreamland’s staff were asked to go out for a date by clients who were among the public.

The last type of special activity Dreamland carried out along with its escort service was participation in TV and radio shows to promote itself and to reach a wider audience. Mr. Hirota’s aim was to grow the clientele and to engage with people outside the Akihabara subcultural world. The best way to do so was to present his company through mainstream media, trying to present his business as a service different and detached from the perceived weirdness and peculiarity of Akihabara. To achieve this aim, crossdressers featured in the shows were carefully instructed about what to say and what not to say: declarations of homosexuality were inappropriate and discouraged, but sentences like “We do not mind about the sexual identity of our customers, we can offer our services to everybody” were warmly welcomed. To explain their crossdressing, dansō had to link their activity with

49 The word senpai refers to a more senior person in terms of experience, hierarchy, level, and/or age in Japanese schools, universities, and workplaces. Sensai provide assistance and mentoring to new members, co-workers or students, defined as kōhai. Kōhai are expected to show respect and gratitude to senpai in return. At Dreamland the two veterans were occupying this advisor role vis-à-vis all the other crossdressers.
Takarazuka theatre, to create a connection with a well-known and accepted Japanese cultural and artistic performance. Reference to the Takarazuka Revue was also a way for customers to make their hobby socially acceptable through a connection to an established cultural institution. Takarazuka theatre, which had already won its battle for legitimacy and recognition in Japanese society, was the perfect medium to introduce the topic of crossdressing from a safe perspective involving the world of performance and theatrical interpretation, and at the same time disconnecting it from any form of gender experimentation and homosexuality.

To minimize the very common insinuations from the interviewer about crossdressers’ sexual lives, dansō were taught to explain their service as a kind of cosplay which offered guided tours of Tokyo by expert guides and company to those people who want to engage in an activity (try a new restaurant, visit an exhibition, go to a concert) but do not want to do it alone. One of the shows was filmed during a café event, while the other was based on interviews with dansō taken around Akihabara.

2.9 The use of Internet and social media

Dreamland presents itself and its activities through an official website. From the homepage it is possible to navigate through different sections, namely a presentation of the escort staff, the crossdressers’ schedule for the month, links to crossdressers’ personal blogs, an explanation about the price of the service and how to book a date, a section devoted to special events and campaigns, and the ‘how to get there’ explanations. To offer a wider description of its staff and events, the company also makes use of social media and requires its staff to do the same.

Dreamland manages an official Twitter account updated several times a day, with more than one thousand followers. Tweets are mainly of two kinds: explanatory and promotional. Tweets of the first category briefly explain practical matters, such as what kind of service Dreamland offers, how to book a date, or where and how to find information about crossdressers’ working schedule, referring to the official website for longer explanations. To the second category belong tweets that promote initiatives carried out by Dreamland. For instance, during the month of his birthday, every garçon offers special treats to those clients who book a date with him. Those treats can be a free photo, or the opportunity to take a picture with the crossdresser at no extra charge, or a personalized and unique voice message recorded on the customer’s smartphone. Every month the official Twitter account reminds
clients of the garcons who are celebrating their birthday. Similarly, the café event or special events are publicized on the official account.

In addition, Dreamland manages an official YouTube channel where videos are uploaded on an irregular basis: in 2017 new content appeared roughly once a month but longer periods of silence were not unusual in the past. Videos on the YouTube channel can be promotional materials or backstage footage from live performance. As for showcase videos, some of them aim to officially introduce new crossdresser staff to the public: one or two veterans interview a newbie, asking him about his favourite food, places he likes to visit, activities he would like to do with clients and so on, and end with an invitation to book a date with the newcomer. Other videos belong to the category of “broadcasting club” (hōsōbu) and are intended to offer some information about events of the company while showing a group (two or more) of crossdressers interacting with each other and staging short sketches to entertain the audience. Those videos usually require little editing and postproduction work, and are based on very short scripts, leaving most of the work to the improvising skills of the speakers. This very informal communication style is specifically used so as not to transmit a sense of distance to the customers, instead showing crossdressers in very natural settings and behaviours and letting the viewer feel part of the conversation. Videos from live performances can show short extracts from the performances or, more often, backstage moments of a special event, including snippets of the event preparation and funny moments shared between dansō.

It is interesting to note that Dreamland does not use social media as a way to actively promote interaction with customers. Comments under YouTube videos are almost entirely absent, and interactions on Twitter are scarce as well. Moreover, social media is not used to interact with crossdressers’ fans outside Japan, showing that the company is not really interested in promoting its business outside national borders. This can only partially be due to a lack of staff resources able to communicate in English, since when I offered to translate or create official tweets in English the initiative did not raise great enthusiasm and it was left “up to me”.

To better increase their visibility among customers and to promote themselves and the company, all dansō are required to manage a personal blog and a work-related Twitter account.50 The more active a crossdresser is on social media, the more his visibility will

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50 Twitter is the only social medium that dansō are required to use for their escort work. In my sample, Ren and Shōta were also using an Instagram account, while Shin had a Facebook profile. However, these were personal
increase among (potential) customers, giving them the possibility to know more about himself, his interests, likes and dislikes. This will also allow them to choose the best fitting dansō for the activity they want to do (going out for drinking, a fancy dinner, going hiking etc.). Garcons at Dreamland are requested to start the blog one month before they start dating customers, in order to allow them to get acquainted with the new character they will perform and to arouse interest around the “new entry”. The blog is meant to be a personal showcase; it should reflect the crossdresser’s personality, and at the same time, it must be captivating and catchy. Most of the dansō blogs reflect a sense of cool, with black and dark tones and poetical titles such as ‘Gymnopedie of a rainy day’, ‘Welcome to Eden’ or ‘Twilight Sky’. Dreamland asks its staff to update their blogs at least once a week. The stories shared on these platforms are usually accounts of a day out, such as a nomikai (drinking party) with other crossdresser staff, one day trips, a visit to a particular restaurant and so on. Blogs, allowing the possibility of sharing text with no word limitations, are also used to convey longer messages such as promotions and detailed explanations of an upcoming event, information about crossdressers’ schedules, or acknowledgements after a special event that customers joined; those posts are also very important in informing customers when a garcon intends to quit the escort job. In addition, blogs also offer the possibility of exploring the emotional status of the writer in a certain moment, in a sort of shared secret diary.

Dansō start to use a specific Twitter work account as soon as they start to be available for dates. Crossdressers can follow all the other dansō and also other private or public profiles that they find interesting, but it is forbidden to follow customers’ accounts or to answer their comments about personal status. The only permitted type of interaction with customers' accounts is to like their comment on personal and other crossdressers’ tweets. On the other hand, interactions between co-workers and retweets of the statuses of other dansō are highly welcome. Jokes and positive comments on co-workers’ social media are intended to present dansō as a group of close friends, rejecting ideas of rivalry and dislike among garcons. This is considered to be a positive way to promote the company among clients, and helps to prevent clients fighting about who is the best dansō. Twitter is also used to keep friendly relations with other dansō units active in Akihabara and in Japan. The use of Twitter is remarkably important as a daily communication channel for fast interactions with the customers, a way to be present in clients’ everyday routines through short sentences, which

choices and not Dreamland’s mandatory requirements. Informants did not disclose information regarding the possible use of social media unrelated to their dansō persona.
Dansō use as good morning or goodnight tweets, pictures of their meals and to share selfies taken alone or with co-workers. As in the case of personal accounts, they are not used to create connections outside Japan with foreign supporters or other dansō communities, despite Twitter’s potential as a networking tool.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the methodological approach I adopted, analysing the reasons behind my choice to undertake ethnographic research and to be especially involved first hand in a dansō escort company. I critically discussed the positive and negative aspects of my choice: if on the one hand, this kind of fieldwork was highly demanding and required great efforts and negotiations to find my place in the field and to manage field relations, on the other hand it also rewarded me, leading to unexpected and valuable findings, not achievable otherwise. Due to its nature, the crossdresser escort business occupies a liminal position between what can and cannot be considered socially acceptable within the Japanese context, hence my choice allowed me the freedom to move seamlessly into this sub-cultural world. Furthermore, being an insider offered me opportunities to gain reliable data, both from the point of view of the interviews and of the participant observations as well, since my informants were less influenced by the presence of an “outsider”. The strong bonds of reciprocal trust I developed with my informants allowed me to inquire about extremely private and intimate details of their life that would have not been disclosed to a researcher they did not trust. In spite of my being different from my informants for a number of reasons, I positively worked on my otherness in order to make of it a strong point and not a weakness, and I played my role of researcher-cum-practitioner always negotiating my position between “the inside” and “the outside”.

To conclude, thanks to my position inside Dreamland, I was able to provide a detailed description of all the operations at work during – and especially in the backstage – of dates and special events; my unique standpoint in the end gave me the possibility of discovering facts hidden to the public on both managerial matters and crossdressers’ private lives as well.
Chapter 3

GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY OF CROSSDRESSERS

Introduction

In this chapter I will focus on the identity that dansō create and negotiate in their everyday lives, from the perspectives of both gender and sexuality. I will start by defining the reasons of my informants for choosing to dress as men, and then I will move on to highlight the reasons that led them to become crossdresser escorts. From this starting point, it is my aim to show crossdressers’ gender identity as a performative construction, a not-fixed expression of the self which changes according to the social context and their interactions with other individuals. This will demonstrate that dansō is a fluid gender position within Japanese society, and can represent a non-binary alternative to binary categories such as male/female, and heterosexual/homosexual. Being dansō and doing dansō will be interpreted as a means toward free self-expression, avoiding labels and categorization, which allows the women involved to challenge the prevailing gender system and to explore their own gender identity from a new standpoint. Moreover, I shall demonstrate that masculinity is a social construct that can be performed and that is not necessarily linked to the presence of a man, and that the male gender that dansō perform, in its fluidity, can represent a way of self-categorization for those women who do not frame themselves within the life trajectory that Japanese society approves for women – namely marriage, childbearing and providing support to a breadwinner man – nor in the queer labels of homosexuality, lesbianism and transsexualism.

3.1 When I started to dress as a man

The first step to undertake in an investigation about the dansō escort world is to understand when my informants started to crossdress and what reasons lie behind the choice to crossdress. To the question “When did you start dressing as a male?” my informants’ answers show in almost all cases similar life trajectories. Future dansō came from a childhood spent enjoying boys’ games and spending time with male friends, showing features of cross-sex behaviours which are typical of tomboy identities. According to Shōta: “Since I
was a child all my friends were boys. I really liked to play outside, playing with toy cars, and I was always bad at playing ‘mothers and daughters’.” This explanation was echoed by Seiji: “To be honest, when I was little I always went out playing, running everywhere, and I wore trousers more than skirts. Since then I have always thought the skirt to be very uncomfortable.”

The features of tomboy childhood — the wish to engage in outdoor activities and games, disinterest in games perceived as feminine, having mostly male friends, preference for wearing trousers and sporty clothes — are all present in my informants’ accounts. In contrast, skirts and “girls’ games” were unpopular among dansō, who since their childhood were not able to fully identify themselves with the stereotypical image of girls. In some cases, tomboyism was inspired or supported by their families, who bought my informants boyish clothes since they thought they were expecting a baby boy, or wished for a son rather than a daughter, as Yori recollected: “Before I was born the doctor told my mom that I would be a baby boy, so my parents started to buy boys’ clothes. They accumulated only boys’ clothes and then made me wear them. Furthermore, all my friends in the neighbourhood were males”. TorA similarly commented: “Maybe I’ve dressed as a man since I was born! My mom wanted a boy, so it is a kind of imprinting from my mom who, since I was little, was telling me to wear boys’ clothes!” The influence of the family could be present also under the shape of an older brother to steal clothes from, as Ren remembered: “I have an older brother and since I was little I used to borrow his clothes. Wearing them I felt more natural.” It is also possible to notice how, for instance in Ren’s narration, even at a very small age, future dansō were able to recognize their feelings of naturalness and compatibility when wearing the opposite sex’s clothes. It is consequently possible to argue that, since their childhood, dansō were unable to identify themselves with stereotypical female subjectivities, choosing instead a behavioural pattern perceived as boyish.

The call for a return to gender normativity in clothes came in the form of school authority. In Japanese schools the mandatory use of gendered uniforms for male and female students is very common, and it was then that most dansō felt the distress of being forced to wear clothes according to their birth sex. In Takumi’s words, this was a coercion: “Because it was the school rule, I wore the skirt”, while Ryōma remembered it as a very unpleasant period: “I didn’t want to wear it at all! I hated it [the skirt] and it did not suit me at all! The clothes I wear now are much better!” For most of my informants this moment coincided with the beginning of middle school, but Kunihiro was subjected to a school uniform policy from kindergarten, as he recalled:
When I started kindergarten I had to wear a skirt, and I remember I really did not like it. Even though I was only 3 or 4 years old I already hated skirts! But it was unavoidable, since the uniforms for boys and girls were different, skirts for girls and short trousers for boys. I always thought ‘Short trousers are better, I want to wear them!’ Well, maybe it wasn’t that I hated skirts but I felt odd wearing them, but I had to do it! [...] It was the same until the end of high school, I felt a sense of discomfort. Wearing different clothes other than the uniform at school ended up in a reprimand, so I never caused problems by wearing boys’ clothes, but kept telling myself to endure a bit more.

Kunihiro was clearly aware of the impossibility of fighting the nationwide system which forces students in many schools in Japan to wear a uniform according to their sex, and he tried to cope with his negative feelings, thinking about the possibility in future to dismiss the sailor uniform. In his resistance, he found great support in one of his elementary school teachers and his mother, who eventually allowed him to dress as he liked outside the school, and did not keep telling him that, as a woman, he was expected to behave and wear proper clothes prescribed for girls by social norms in Japan:

My mom and also a teacher in my elementary school – she was a very good teacher – they were doubtful about the fact that because one is born as a woman, one has to do woman’s things and dress as a woman. A girl can also be boyish, they thought. Those people were taking care of me, so I wore the girls’ uniform because there was nothing else I could do, but outside I always wore whatever I wanted, and nobody said anything to me. I was really blessed!”

Although the pressure of gender conformity worked within the school’s walls, outside Kunihiro was able to create a space for his personality to develop as he liked. Other crossdressers resorted to different strategies to escape the social pressure of the uniform system. For instance, Yori stated: “During high school the uniform was the same for boys and girls. Trousers and necktie. I probably chose that school for this reason. In class there were 30 boys and only 10 girls, because before it was a boys only school.”

Those who do not report accounts of a tomboyish childhood started to dress in a male fashion during middle school, in their private time and when meeting friends. Although all my informants started to dress in a more androgynous style no later than their teenage years, the possibility of wearing male clothes daily was, for almost all participants, postponed to the beginning of tertiary education, a turning point often coinciding with the beginning of a life outside the natal household. For those who were not born in Tokyo, it also coincided with the
beginning of a new life in the metropolis. Released from the direct observation of the family, most of the informants started to dress as *dansō*, and relegated the use of a less masculine wardrobe only to family contexts and/or during official situations, such as weddings, funerals or formal job interviews.

### 3.2 Why I crossdress

The first answers received to the question “Why do you dress as a man?” were usually “Because I like it”, “Because it is fun” or “For fashion”, with my informants trying to avoid deeper explanations. Behind these claims, it is possible to read an attempt by *dansō* not to identify their crossdressing as a social issue or a subversion of the societal status quo. Restricting the answer to the personal level of taste and enjoyment is probably a way of confining the reasons for crossdressing to a non-threatening level, as similarly shown by Baker and Kelly (2016: 53) in their study about drag kings in the southern states of the US. Baker and Kelly highlight their respondents’ statements that they performed in drag “just for fun” or “to relieve stress”, answers caused by the politeness rules of the Southern states (Johnson, 2008), which “likely affected the respondent’s willingness to use drag as a socially subversive force” (Baker and Kelly, 2016: 53). Similarly, in Japan the concept of *wa* (social harmony), is given great importance (Midooka, 1990; Tierney, Minarik, and Tierney, 1994) and deters Japanese people from creating trouble to other members of society. As Jennifer Robertson (1998: 145) notes, “as long as an individual’s sexual practices do not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy of the twinned institutions of marriage and households, Japanese society accommodates […] a diversity of sexual behaviours”. Crossdressing can also face the same kind of judgement. Hence, *dansō* detached themselves from what could be seen as gay activism and consequently from open opposition to conventional institutions such as marriage and family, and avoided making a political statement of their life choice, simplifying the explanation of their crossdressing to the level of personal taste.

When asked for further explanation, answers invariably incorporated the idea of naturalness, a feeling of relaxation and comfort experienced only through male clothes. Most informants affirmed that they could only express their true selves and feel comfortable and relaxed in male attire. In Shin's words: “I am relaxed, it's enjoyable, I have positive feelings. I feel myself stylish and attractive (*Anshin suru, tanoshii, kimochi ga yoi. Shakittosuru*)”. Ren said: “The first time I dressed as a man to date my friends I thought that style really suited me.
I did not think anything special, it was very natural (shizen) to me.” Those feelings are also strong in the interview with Ichi:

I like the design [of male clothes]. I wear it for fashion, of course I like my clothes! From the point of view of my feelings, I feel comfortable (raku). To me, being a dansō is something natural (shizen), it's my normal daily life […] I do not do dansō for fashion, but for feelings related to my gender51 identity (seibetsutekina aidentiti). It is a way to get closer to my masculine side (danseigawa).

Ichi recognized that fashion is part of his interest in male clothes, but highlighted that what he most appreciates is the naturalness they offer. Through his response it is possible to understand that for him, “fashion” motivates the choice of a specific set of clothes among others, but not the deeper choice to dress as a man. For Ichi crossdressing is a way to get in touch with his male side and, as highlighted by Shapiro (2007: 259), to stimulate self-reflection about gender identity and to reimagine oneself as differently gendered in everyday life. In addition, some of the informants not only felt that male clothes better suited them: they also reported feeling unconfident of their appearance in female clothes. Emblematic is the case of Haruka:

I do not feel ashamed [in male clothes]. There are occasions where I need to dress as a woman, but I feel like a transvestite (josō no kibun ni naru). I am very ashamed when they make me wear female clothes. The first time I wore male clothes I felt as relaxed as if I were wearing pajamas. In addition, I have a trauma: my father told me that, dressed as a woman, I look like a gay man, that I make him puke! And a couple of times, in Nichôme, somebody asked me if I was an okama! If I dress as a woman I do not have self-confidence. […] I am scared of all the bad things they could say to me. They’ve said so many that now it is really impossible for me!

While, as a man, Haruka is a top escort, a beloved idol of a good number of customers, and commonly recognized as an ikemen (charming man), he claims that the distress and the shock of being considered ugly and unattractive had an impact so strong that it made it almost impossible for him to wear female clothes.

Along with feelings of ease wearing male garments, a further reason emerged from Tora’s story, namely the sense of falsehood experienced when dressed up in female clothes:

51 In this case I translated the word as “gender” to better convey my informant’s view. During the interview, I confirmed with him that he was talking about his gender and not sexual identity.
I dress as a man because it is comfy. Yeah, it’s definitely comfy. Maybe because I can be natural, and it really matches my personality. My character, inside of me, was always like that, but when there are specific occasions I have to dress as a woman I feel like I’m in shock! This [wearing male clothes] is the most natural thing for me. When I wear woman's clothes my actions must accordingly be more feminine, but I am not like that, and this is very oppressive! So, in those situations, if I look at myself, I just pretend to be feminine. When I use a girly voice or speak in a girlish way, inside I am always the same, so it is very stressful! It is like keeping on lying, and it is a problem. In conclusion, what I am doing is the thing that suits me most.

In the case of Tora, the existence of a deep gap between female and male behaviour becomes clear. Even though Tora does not intend to be a man or want to become a man, his behaviours are likely to be associated with those of a man, since they are not aligned with the prescribed norms of femininity within Japanese society. For him, female clothes represent an idea of femininity which is far from his real personality, but which he feels he has to enact when dressed in female clothes. Hence, when forced by circumstances to correspond to a traditional feminine role, he feels as if he is lying. It is a lie that he tells not only to others but also to himself, and therefore he cannot endure the situation, and reaffirms his dansō identity as the more honest way to live his life. Discarding female clothes thus allows dansō to play with gender and to experience their female masculinity.

The negative feelings experienced when obliged by circumstances to dress in female clothes are a common point in my informants’ stories. In almost all the interviews, the recurrent words used to describe informants’ feelings when dressed in female clothes are iwakan, kimochi warui, and hazukashii, which are clear markers of negative sensations (discomfort, disgust, shame). Only two informants preferred male clothes but had no strong negative feelings towards female clothes, while in all the other cases female clothes were not worn unless unavoidable. For Takumi: “I never wear female clothes, I absolutely do not have any wish to wear them. When I do I feel very uncomfortable.” Not only are female clothes not faithful to the identity dansō express by crossdressing, but they are also charged with sexualized feminine meanings that dansō try to avoid, as Tora explained: “Women’s clothes are very boring and then you have to wear makeup, and I hate it!” Similarly, Yori remarked: “I feel ashamed when I have to dress as a woman, it is unpleasant. Dressed as a woman I feel naked, there is too much skin exposed”. The close link between female clothes and the cultural meaning of being a woman makes it impossible for dansō to avoid the labels attached to those garments and the behavioural patterns expected of those who dress so. Being a woman, for my informants, means to use make up, to act in a girlish way, to speak in a high
pitched voice, to be delicate and feminine, and to be sexualized; also, it entails taking on the role of the wife and mother, assuming a subordinate position towards men and masculinity (Dales, 2009; Kurotani, 2005; Allison, 1991). All those features must be enacted if dressed in female clothes, in line with their idea of what being and acting as a woman means. As discussed by Cavallaro and Warwick (1998), dress contributes to the transformation and redefinition of the body in its material substance into certain cultural images; similarly dansō shun female clothes so that they will not be penned into the female category, with all the perceived negative attributes that belonging to this category entails.

To sum up, the reason behind the choice to dress as a man must firstly be sought in the possibility of being able to truly express oneself. Dansō identifying informants do not want to become men, but at the same time, they fail to recognize themselves as members of the category of women. The values and social constructions linked to femininity and expressed by female clothes do not represent the life experiences, identities and aspirations of dansō, who therefore choose instead to express their personality through a wardrobe and social behaviours defined in gender terms as masculine. The masculine clothes and, by extension, the masculine gender they wear and embody, offer them the possibility to freely express themselves without the restraint of womanhood, as they interpreted it. I argue here that their identification with the category of “dansō” cannot be seen as a way to resist, negotiate and rephrase the category of “woman”. Crossdressers’ idea of femininity does not explicitly challenge the stereotypical Japanese view of femininity and womanhood, and dansō do not present their existences as alternative ways to experience femininity. They do not want to be seen as feminine individuals. Instead, for them dansō is an alternative to femininity, a different gender categorization. Their challenge to the patriarchal status quo is unspoken and unintended; rather than change unbalanced gender relations, dansō prefer to be considered as gender masculine, and hence entitled to benefit from some privileges of the male gender (fewer societal constraints, the possibility to experience a wider range of situations, dominant role when in a couple with a woman, etc.), without calling for the same privileges to be extended to all women.

3.3 Why I am a dansō escort

I next analyse why my informants choose to work as crossdresser escorts. Is the decision to work as escorts strictly linked to the crossdressing itself? Is part of the pleasure that dansō
find in switching their gender identity gained by dating clients – and specifically, mostly female clients – for money? My argument here is that escort work allows my informants a high level of freedom, impossible to be obtained in other working contexts. Furthermore, through the escorting, dansō feel appreciated and wanted for their uniqueness; hence, the crossdressing escort work provides them with a place where they do not need to hide a non-cisgender identity.

The entrance into the dansō escort business arrived for all my informants after several years spent dressing in a boyish fashion, and was connected in 13 cases out of 14 with the urban spaces of Tokyo. The only informant who worked as a dansō before moving to Tokyo was Tora, who had started in his hometown, Osaka. All the informants except one started this work in their twenties. The exception is Yori, who is now 40 years old and began to work for Dreamland at 35. Takumi and Shin are the veterans, as they have been escorts for ten years, while Ichi and Seiji, the newcomers, had started one year before. In all cases, the first contact with the company was made through the Internet, with the “wannabe” dansō looking for information on how to start working dressed as a man. Despite the fact that dansō kissa are more famous than dansō escort service companies, and hire a larger number of dansō staff, only two informants worked in a dansō kissa before starting their work as escorts. One was Tora, who stated: “At the beginning I was living as a dansō, and then in my neighbourhood a dansō kissa opened and I thought ‘Does this kind of job really exist?’ and I started from there”. In Tora’s surprised words it is possible to read the happiness that he felt in finding a community where he could exist and also be accepted as a highly qualified worker exactly because of his alternative fashion and gender identity. Ichi also started by working in a crossdressers’ café but, as he recollected:

I was looking for a part time occupation and I was thinking about what kind of job I would be able to do as a dansō. Before starting here, I worked for a dansō kissa but it was not the right job for me. When there were too many customers I did not know who to talk to, and the work itself was a bit difficult for me. So I changed my mind, thinking that maybe the escort work would be better. So I chose Dreamland.

Ichi found the work in a dansō kissa stressful because of the tight schedule, the complicated tasks and the impossibility of interacting with clients freely. Similarly, Rei stated: “In a kissa you cannot decide your schedule as you want, here you have much more freedom.” The differences between dansō kissa and the escort work were clearly expressed by Ren:
Dansō working there only look masculine; they wear wigs and also the way of speaking and moving is very feminine (onnappoi). In dansō kissa the relationships with clients are completely different, because other people look at you, and when a new client enters everybody must say ‘irasshaimase’ and the conversation stops, whereas during a date you can have a proper conversation.

According to these informants, working in a dansō kissa did not allow them to decide their working schedule freely, which was considered a negative factor. In addition, interactions with clients were not private, and were strictly subjected to time and space restraints. It must also be noted that staff of dansō kissa usually wear a uniform, which can be waiter-like or a cosplay costume, according to the café’s theme (see chapter 4.2). My informants preferred the escort service because it allowed them a higher level of freedom. Haruka affirmed that the possibility of freely expressing himself was his first reason for being an escort: “I work here because I can present myself as what I really am. It is relaxing. It’s the closest thing to what I am, to my character”. This explanation was echoed by Rei: “The reason why I looked for dansō escort work is that I am usually this way […] and in a normal work place I cannot be like this, right? So, I was looking for a place to be naturally myself”. Honest self-expression becomes such a strong necessity for them that the crossdressing transgresses the limits of private time and extends into the realm of the public, which is usually secluded from the private in the Japanese context. The feelings of the self (honne) are not sacrificed in the name of coherence with social norms (tatemae). In this way, dansō refuse to sacrifice their personal interests for the public’s sake. They are able to make a living of what could be a cause of unemployment, namely a discordance between natural born sex and their gender identity. Since they are aware of the difficulties that could be faced in looking for a job with their specific fashion and aesthetic, they have carved out a space where they are not only accepted but especially qualified by their specific features, namely androgyny, crossdressing and non-conforming gender identities. The possibility offered by the crossdresser escort service to work, dress and behave in accordance with their own wishes, without the need to perform a compulsory feminine identity and to dress accordingly (both perceived as mandatory duties in any other workplace), are considered as the most important benefits of the escort profession (Figure 3.1).
Besides the wish for self-expression, I asked my informants to give a numeric value, from 1 (the lowest) to 5 (the highest), to a set of motivations for undertaking the dansō escort work. The motivations were:

a) I want to feel the feelings of a man (otoko no kimochi kanjitai);
b) I want to be a man (otoko ni naritai);
c) the wage is good (kyūryō ga ii);
d) it is enjoyable (tanoshikute ii shigoto);
e) I want to be adored by women (motetai).

Except for Ichi, who later undertook hormone injection therapy and quit the escort work, no informant stated a wish to become a man. This willingness to maintain their female body is also seen as the difference between dansō and onabe, who were collectively defined by my informants as transsexuals who refuse their female identity, not only from a psychological point of view but also from a bodily perspective, and hence resort to hormone therapies and surgical body modifications. More varied was the wish to experience the feelings of a man: while this was considered very important for Shōta, Ren, Ichi and Naoki, who marked it as 5 and 4, it was considered a 3 by Takumi, Rei, Shin and Haruka (who also added that for him, the wish to feel the feelings of a man was limited to the possibility of experiencing sex as a man), while it was considered only as 1 by Yori, Ryū, Seiji and Tora. Two other informants were not able to classify their answer.
Regarding the wage level, it is interesting to note that those who rank this reason highly are not the most highly remunerated in the company. The three top stars (Haruka, Takumi and Shin), who indicated a monthly income starting from 150,000 yen (sometimes hitting 300,000 yen per month) also remarked that the compensation was insufficient, comparing the hourly wage with the effort and tasks required by the job itself. The issue negatively impacted on Haruka, who stated that he deserved at least double the 2000 yen/hour amount, particularly when dating highly demanding or unpleasant customers. In tune with his negative view of the customers, Haruka evaluated the enjoyment of the job with the lowest score, 1, as did Yori and Rei for the same reason, the need to handle very demanding (if not openly unpleasant) customers. In contrast to the hosts interviewed by Takeyama (2016), who chose to become escorts to pursue success and self-realization that included high financial rewards unachievable elsewhere, for dansō, and especially for top stars, money was not a key factor in choosing this occupation.

The most highly ranked choice was the last one, namely the desire to be adored by women. Twelve informants evaluated this motivation as 4 (three people) or 5 (nine people). Ichi was embarrassed by the question, so preferred to skip it, and only Seiji classified it as 1. However, there are two factors to be taken into consideration in evaluating Seiji’s answer: first, he was the only one who defined himself both psychologically and physically as a woman, and the only one who asserted that he was heterosexual. Second, to the question “why do you work as dansō?” he answered: “I was interested in this work. For example, when people tell me that I look like a man, a charming man, or that I am cool, I really like it”. Those sentences clearly show that Seiji likes to be adored or recognized as fascinating, but it is possible that he does not want to provoke those feelings in a female audience. Due to the great number of female customers, he possibly wants to distance himself from behaviours and connotations perceived as homosexual. His answer may be evaluated as a confirmation of the existence of a social stigma in Japan towards the identification or the association of an individual with a homosexual persona.52

For all apart from Seiji, the wish to be adored by women was the second key factor in choosing the escort work. It is acknowledged that “the lesbian and gay identity structure is characterized by the binary opposition of pride/shame” (Munt, 2000: 533) and the dansō crossdressers’ identities seemed to be similarly constructed. Before starting their crossdresser

52 Several of my informants’ answers showed the existence of a social stigma toward homosexuality and especially female homosexuality, but they never referred to or used a word that could be translated as “homophobia”.

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life, most of my informants had to cope with feelings of shame when dressed in female clothes. With the awareness of their non-conformity to a male-female gender category system, the development of a new gender identity and a change in dressing style, their self-esteem increased. Dansō actively started to publicly present their new self and their crossdressing, overcoming the restrictiveness of their private time and space, embracing a very visible occupation performed for the sake of an audience. The shame faded away, and pride prevailed, with dansō finally able to live according to their uncloseted identity. In this view, to be adored by female clients plays a pivotal role as an official recognition of the effort put into creating and successfully performing a new gender identity, an acknowledgement that there is neither space nor need for shame. Especially for non-heterosexual dansō, the pleasure of being adored by their clients is considered to be the most rewarding factor, and it is experienced as a subversion of feelings of shame by feelings of pride. Furthermore, the satisfactory nature of the job is augmented by the support, displays of affection and love declarations coming from clients.

To conclude, other interesting points were raised among the reasons given for undertaking a dansō escort job. For Seiji it was a means to improve communication skills he felt he was lacking, and the possibility of interacting with a wide range of different people was also behind Shin’s choice. Shin saw the escort work as an interesting experience to try before committing himself to work in a regular company. In the end, the experiences and possibilities offered by the escort service led him to quit his full time occupation in a company and to devote himself totally to the dansō work. The extended array of situations, people and places to experience was also one of the main reasons for Kunihiro:

I remember I was not comfortable with the word dansō. However, I used only to wear trousers, and then I thought that meeting people like me would be a good thing. Then, my main occupation is writing, I am a writer, and isn’t my work about producing incentives? It’s that kind of work where you need to pull out your knowledge, so I wanted to do a job that would help me look for new experiences. I also thought it would be good because I would be able to meet a lot of people.

At the beginning, Kunihiro was not keen to identify himself with the word dansō, even though he clearly linked it to his dress style and presented himself through a crossdresser identity. He chose to meet individuals who were sharing a similar experience, in order to understand whether he could equate himself to them, in a process of creating an identity by confrontation and identification with members of a community. A similar trajectory can be found more broadly in the homosexual world, where an important step in accepting one’s
homosexuality and identity is also marked by the so-called “debut” into the gay scene, with the first visit to gay clubs and bars or, more recently, on the net (Sunagawa, 2003: 30-31, quoted by Ishida, McLelland and Murakami, 2005; Wolfe, 1997). A process of development of self-identity consciousness through a space to experience gender shifting has been underlined by previous studies about homosexuals (Plummer, 1995a; 1995b) and drag kings (Schacht, 2008), which also underpin the importance of interaction in a supportive environment to fully develop a new gender identity. Kunihiro also believed that a part time job as dansō escort could positively contribute to his main occupation as writer, because of the increased opportunities for experiences otherwise unavailable. As a masculine identity is still perceived as a way to obtain a wider knowledge of the world, being a man allows him to taste a range of possibilities which he perceived as precluded for women. In shōjo manga featuring crossdresser heroines, the ability of the main female characters to disguise themselves as men allows them to live greater adventures than their “purely” feminine counterparts (Oshiyama, 2013; Shamoon, 2012; Welker, 2006). Although dansō did not make this link themselves, still similarities emerge with the way in which they evaluated gender switching. As with dansō heroines in manga, the dansō work – and implicitly the dansō persona – is seen as a way to widen one’s development and to be in touch with a broader range of people and situations. The restraints of femininity are overcome by performing a male gender identity, and a set of positive experiences perceived as allowed only to men become possible as soon as the gender is switched.

In sum, according to my informants’ statements, I conclude that being a crossdresser escort is a choice arising from the wish of individuals who strive to gain a space for personal expression, freed from constraints and limitations, including their wish to dress and behave not aligned with the behavioural patterns that conform to their female birth identity. The escort work entitles dansō to behave and dress for work as they would naturally do in their private lives. In addition, working as a crossdresser escort is also seen as a way to have a wider range of experiences. Moreover, the escort job also entitled dansō to be the potential recipients of positive comments and appreciation from (female) customers. Especially for those

53 In my informants’ view, the male gender entails the possibility of enjoying some experiences perceived as masculine, such as greater freedom (staying out the whole night, drinking and getting drunk with friends, flirting with girls), the possibility of behaving not submissively but on an equal level with other men, or the chance to occupy a stereotypically masculine role when together with another woman (especially with regards to domestic duties and chores, which dansō were in most cases not willing to perform). However, I found no evidence that dansō aspire to occupy a full male position, involving also societal rights and obligations, such as obtaining corporate full-time work, being the breadwinner of a family, or providing for a female partner.
crossdressers who identify as non-heterosexual, being adored and loved by women is considered as a great boost to the ego, and the role of womanizer is a way to rewrite their personal history in a more satisfactory perspective: a sexual identity sometimes not openly experienced with family, friends and other people outside Akihabara is recognized, appreciated and actively sought by those women willing to pay for a date. The support of paying clients is seen as a sort of authorization of non-alignment with the heteronormative rules of society, and allows dansō to re-define their identity through a switch from shame to pride.

3.4 Dansō masculinity

At this point, it would be useful to analyse the inspirations and expressions of dansō masculinity. First of all, one must keep in mind that dansō are a form of Japanese female masculinity; as already argued by Halberstam, (1998: 232–266), female masculinity is not merely a mimicry of male masculinity, and influences can be reciprocal between the two. Since “masculinity and femininity mean different things according to whether they are lived out and experienced by male or female bodies” (Grosz 1990: 73), there is potential for a new type of of identity that blurs the boundaries between femininity and masculinity to be created by crossdresser escorts’ performance of masculinity. Crossdresser escorts in my sample do not openly take inspiration from a specific contemporary male performance of masculinity, and their own interpretation of masculinity may also influence males, as in the case of Ryū, who was chosen as a model for a promotional campaign at 109 Men54 in Shibuya.

Analysis of the sources of crossdresser escorts’ masculinity can begin with the world of manga and anime characters. Considering the location of Dreamland within the Akihabara district, a link with Akihabara sub-culture and aesthetic cannot be excluded. Dansō, in their aesthetic practices, may resemble the bishōnen, the idealized male characters from shōjo and Boys’ Love55 manga. These characters are invariably young, and are always depicted as slim, smooth-skinned, and androgynous. Blurring the boundaries of the female and male categories, bishōnen characters stand outside the gender binary, and for Welker (2006) they allow female readers to transcend the limit of sex and gender. In this sense, they are similar to crossdresser escorts.

54 109 is a famous department store in Shibuya, mostly occupied by fashion and beauty product shops for women. 109 Men is the same department store’s men’s branch.

55 Boys’ Love (or BL) is a genre of manga and anime mostly aimed at a female readership, focusing on male/male sentimental and sexual relationships.
However, according to my data, this relationship is not openly felt by all dansō. As Takumi explained: “Some clients like BL manga, but if you say that we are close [to those fictional characters], no, that’s different (dansō to BL chikai ka to iwaretara betsu, sore wa betsu)”. Shin did not recognize the connection between the aesthetic of fictional characters and crossdresser escorts either: “I do not think there is a relationship between dansō and manga characters. Maybe we are beautiful, and BL characters are beautiful as well, like us. But BL characters are men with a feminine mentality, and they are not human beings (ningen). We are human beings”. For Shin, dansō can be as beautiful as the bishōnen appearing in BL manga, but he does not acknowledge a clear influence from those characters in the creation of a dansō aesthetic appearance, and he also stresses the difference between fictional characters and human beings, especially with regards to dansō mentality, which he understands as masculine, in opposition to the mentalities of bishōnen characters, interpreted as feminine.

More nuanced is the case of Yori: “At the beginning I was a cosplayer, so I was influenced by the manga characters I wanted to become. But then I developed my own style”. In this case, a male identity has been influenced by the aesthetic of fictional characters, and Yori recognizes that he was performing a male role inspired by manga characters. However, the performance ended up in the development of a personal style, where previous influences seem to play a minor role.

It is possible to say that some dansō can aesthetically resemble fascinating characters from manga, and this influence can be more or less consciously adopted, but it is not necessarily true for all my informants. Other crossdressers instead saw material human beings as a source of inspiration when creating their masculine appearance, as in the case of Rei: “I think I was influenced by bands. I had always listened to a lot of music, of every genre. Rock, punk, visual kei…a lot”. Ryōma also stated that he was influenced by human beings rather than manga: “I am not a big manga fan, and I am not influenced by manga in my style. I prefer to take inspiration from cool men (osharena otoko no hito) I meet in the street”. Both Rei and Ryōma bring the role played by material forms of masculinity into the discussion of dansō aesthetics. Some dansō mould their masculine appearance by adopting already codified and attested expressions of manhood, such as visual kei performers. Those examples can come from the the world of idols and tarento, or from men encountered during daily life.

Through “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990: 140), such as styling the hair in a certain way, wearing clothes of specific brands bought in shops for men, or using a linguistic
register perceived as masculine,\textsuperscript{56} dansō reproduce the identity practices of the fictional or actual men by whom they have been (more or less consciously) influenced. Still, crossdresser escorts do not become men; rather, as Sasson-Levy (2003: 448) argued in the case of Israeli female soldiers, “their behavior suggests a new gender identity that combines both feminine and masculine elements”. While my crossdresser informants recognized certain influences on their expressions of a masculine aesthetic, the final performance of masculinity of every crossdresser escort was ultimately a personal expression of a subjective perspective on what masculinity should look like. In this sense, Shin liked Burberry and Brooks Brothers as brands for his clothes; Haruka only shopped in 109 Men’s boutiques and never failed to use cologne,\textsuperscript{57} while Takumi had no favourite brand or shop but only wore black and dark-blue colours. Shōta bleached his hair and looked flashy, following an aesthetic code very close to that of male hosts, while Ichi was completely the opposite, wearing modest clothes to look like a nerdy university student, with shirts with a small check and v-neck jumpers. Tora mostly wore t-shirts from independent designers unless customers specifically asked him to wear his elegant suit, and Kunihiro, on the contrary, almost always wore a black suit and a bolo tie unless receiving different requests from his clients.

Similarly, the types of masculine behaviour performed by dansō varied considerably. There was a marked difference between the behaviours adopted in private time or when not with clients, and behaviours performed during interactions with customers. When in more private settings, dansō behaved more freely, expressing what can be considered as their personality, without the need to perform a specific role. In the downtime spent in the office together with my informants, I found that Ren loved to read both manga and books, Naoki practiced different make-up styles, while Shin often played with his Nintendo DS. Haruka, who defined himself as a “hitomushi” or a social butterfly, did not like to spend hours in the office and was often asking to the others to go out with him for a meal or a beer to kill time. When I met dansō in settings other than the office, their personalities emerged even more clearly, and I discover that Ryōma was sometimes unbearable when drunk, but ultimately funny, while Haruka was always telling dirty jokes, and often competed with Tora to occupy the “alpha male” position in our group, competing for instance on who was the heaviest

\textsuperscript{56} All the dansō informants in my sample referred to themselves as boku or ore, and they used to speak in plain Japanese, using the ru forms of verbs instead of the masu ending when talking to each other. With customers, the level of politeness was higher during the first three dates (with dansō using keigo during the very first meeting with a new customer) and was subsequently adapted to the customer’s request.

\textsuperscript{57} During my fieldwork, Haruka was particularly fond of Le Male, an eau de toilette for men by Jean Paul Gaultier.
drinker, or who had obtained more dates. Seiji was quite taciturn instead, but a heavy drinker during nomikai, while Shin was very trustworthy and almost in all the cases he took care of the others, checking for everyone’s last train or closest station to go home. Being caring, collegial drinking, and dirty language were all performances of masculinity for my informants, and also seemed to be expressions of their individual personalities.

The situation is different in the case of the behaviours dansō adopt when with customers. During dates, crossdresser escorts have to at least partially adapt themselves to the clients’ requests, and accommodate their wish for a specific performance. It is true that dansō try to give their customer an idea of the kind of “man” they are through their self-presentation on the website, and during the first dates. However, it is also true that the ability to satisfy a wider range of requests yields the possibility of earning more from a wider range of clients, and that to make easier for customers to understand their personality, crossdressers sometimes resorted to stereotyped kei58 (see 3.6.1) from the world of manga, anime and games, which only partially matched their personality. Hence, garcons were often ready to sacrifice more honest expression of the self to a more performative character, when with a specific customer. A clear example of how to perform a male role to satisfy customers comes from Rei:

I started to play otome games59 after starting this job. There are some fujoshi clients who came here to experience the same feelings as in an otome game, so I played those games to study, to understand clients. I tried the most famous ones, the best-selling ones, and studied them. Sometimes I say the same sentences to clients as the main characters of the games to make them happy.

Even though Rei did not define himself as a fan of manga, anime or games, he still relied on some already established tropes from those media to shape his performance of masculinity, in order to better match the taste of customers who were into those forms of entertainment. Indeed, it is not unusual for a crossdresser to change the working kei according to the

58 The suffix kei summarizes a set of physical and psychological features, behaviours, and style in clothes representative of a specific class of individuals. The kei can be inspired by sample cases from the fictional worlds of manga and anime, and here refers to an already well-established category among typologies of men.
59 A specific type of love-simulation game, aimed at a female audience, where the main character is usually a girl, and the main goal is to develop a love relationship with one of the different male characters. For further information see Kim (2009).
customer he is going to meet, with the precise aim of seduction. An excellent explanation of
the identity performance required when with clients comes from Haruka:

What kei am I? I am flirty (chara chara). I do not know, I do not have a real kei, I want to be cool
(kakkoii). Since I want to show off, I am basically a narcissist (kakkotsuketai kara kihontekini wa
narushiisuto mitai). I want to be myself. Yes, I want to be what I really am. I am not a kei, and I do
not want one. But when the customers ask me what kei I am, I say ‘What kei do you like? I can be
whatever you want’ and I make an effort to be the type they like. If you like the prince type, well,
I can be your prince [...]. My real self and the character I play for work are basically the same
person, but one costs you 4000 yen.

As Haruka clearly states, being a dansō is a way to be himself at his best, but he can change
his personality and his performance of masculinity according to the customers’ requests for a
specific kind of escort. The effort to perform a specific character is made only upon the
payment of the escort fee. Money is the discriminant that marks the difference between a less
performative expression of personality and a specific identity or kei performed in the work
setting exactly to meet the request of paying customers.

From these extracts it is possible to understand how dansō escorts differ from dansō
cosplayers, in that escorts create their own character. This character can be more or less
explicitly inspired by the characters appearing in anime, manga, or games, but it is not an
exact reproduction, as it is for cosplayers. Dansō perform their character in some cases
following “general scripts” such as the older or younger brother, but also maintaining a
strong personal interpretation, revealing the performer’s own character. In this sense, the self-
presentation of dansō can be understood as partly fictional, to satisfy clients’ requests, but
also partly individual self-expression. Thus, dansō escorting is a form of affective industry
straddling fictionality and the material world and part of the pleasure it provides is arguably
due to this overlap (as I will highlight in chapter 4.5).

60 The “older brother” or onii chan character was usually interpreted by dansō as a gentle and supportive kind of
masculinity. The older brother is always ready to protect his clients as “younger sisters” (despite the actual age
difference), and does not harshly scold them even when they do something wrong, trying instead to offer advice.
The “younger brother” or oto type was usually a character performed only by very young dansō (usually 18-22
years old) with clients older than they were. It was interpreted as an energetic and proactive kind of man,
sometimes impulsive, especially in showing to his “older sisters” his feelings of affection. Both those two kind
of characters can be performed with those clients who do not want a “boyfriend experience”, or can be offered
as a substitution by those dansō not willing to perform the role of the boyfriend/committed lover.
3.5 How dansō define themselves in terms of gender and sexuality

The problem of the definition of a sexual identity through words is very challenging, as shown by several studies (Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Butler, 1990, 1993; Dowsett, 1996; Epstein, 1998). Binary categories such as heterosexual/homosexual or gay/lesbian are not sufficient to contain those identities which are not normative in terms of sex, sexuality and gender. It can be argued that one of the starting points of queer theory itself is a calling into question of the presumption of a gay identity viewed as unified, in spite of the many variables which shape and build every specific identity (Epstein, 1998; Plummer, 1975; Seidman, 1996; Shapiro, 2007). In addition, scholarship on gender and identity has highlighted how dyadic models of describing gender and sexuality are insufficient to represent the variety and fluidity of gender non-conforming individuals’ experiences (Bornstein 1994; Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Feinberg 1996; Garber, 1992). Furthermore, being a crossdresser does not necessarily mean to be homosexual and vice versa (Blanchard, 1985; Devor, 1997; Freund, 1985; Harima, 2004).

I therefore approached the topic of how dansō perceive and identify themselves in terms of gender and sexuality by arguing that such identities are fluid, can vary according to the social context and across time, and can have very blurred borders, and proposing the word dansō as a new gender category to define my crossdresser informants.

3.5.1 Sexual identity

The need to investigate the sexuality and sexual identity of dansō arises from the necessity to confute or confirm the existence of a relationship between crossdressing and homosexuality. This will be useful to provide a better description of people involved in the crossdresser escort business in Japan, and also for the study of dansō-customer relationships.

First of all, only one informant out of fourteen, Seiji, expressed a heterosexual self-identification. Acknowledging that the cross-cultural use of the word lesbian can be problematic and can lead to misrecognitions (Wieringa and Blackwood, 1999; King, 2002), with regard to the other informants it is possible to find a constellation of different queer realities that in some cases cannot be subsumed under a specific label, except by allowing the use of the word dansō as a common definition. Concerning sexual identity, only five dansō openly stated that they were homosexual and to various extents used words such as “rezu”,

“bian” and “rezubian”, currently used in Japanese to refer to homosexual women. Thirteen out of fourteen participants agreed with one or more of the following statements:

1) had sentimental and/or sexual relationships with other women in the past
2) have no interest in finding a male partner
3) have no experience of heterosexual relationships

but excluding the five self-identified lesbian informants, the other eight respondents chose different ways to describe themselves, or refused to define their sexuality. For instance, three affirmed that they like women and have dated only women but do not want to use the term lesbian; three labelled themselves as bisexual due to the possibility of falling for a man one day or due to a lack of experience of heterosexual relationships; two were not able to define themselves in terms of their sexuality and one stated to be “something else” beyond every categorization.

It is necessary to note that while “coming out” narratives are considered as a key point in the development of gay subjectivities in a Euro-American context, practices and perceptions of homosexual visibility are differently performed and understood in different contexts (Hu, 2017). In Japan, where “sexuality, unlike gender, is not commonly understood to be the basis of ‘identity’” (McLelland, 2000a: 13) and where the “queer vocabulary” is mostly borrowed from the English language, the complication of defining one’s sexual identity through words is even stronger (Shimizu, 2007; Welker, 2010; McLelland, 2000a) than in other contexts. In addition, the above mentioned terms to define female to female sentimental and/or sexual desire are still bearers of a different range of meanings and nuances, often linked to an unpleasant heritage from the recent past. Rezubian and its abbreviation rezu still maintain a link to pornography that dates back to the 1960s (Sugiura, 2006). Accordingly to Chalmers “the connection of lesbianism with pornography is so strong that most women on first hearing or seeing the word rezu […] associate it with pornography” (2002: 39). In the personal narrations of the five dansō who self-identify as lesbian, three gave a brief explanation about their use of the words rezubian, rezu and bian. Shin and Ryū usually prefer not to use such terms, saying instead “I like women” (onna no hito ga suki). For Haruka, the use of the word rezu or bian is conceived as making it easier for other people to understand who he likes, but he does not feel comfortable in telling this openly to strangers, and he is also in the closet with his mother and some of his friends. Shōta showed a very little knowledge about the negative past connotations of the words, and became aware of it only
through his friends: “They told me that rezu is a discriminatory word, so I shifted to bian. But I do not really care”. Takumi was the only one who showed much knowledge about the subject and discussed his ideas: while he does not usually state that he is lesbian, he uses the word in friendly environments – such as bars and clubs in Shinjuku Nichôme – and finds almost meaningless the division of the word lesbian into rezu and bian: “I use it often, in a very casual way. In the past I did not use it, but now it happens that I say ‘we are lesbian’, it’s kind of normal. Since rezu seemed to be a discriminatory word it is like if [lesbian women] said ‘Ok, let’s use bian!’. But rezu and bian are just the start and the end of the same word, and it’s meaningless to think ‘if the start is discriminatory let’s use the end instead!’ It’s completely meaningless!” From this one can note how, even for those informants who clearly identify as lesbian, the use of specific words to articulate this is not something they are necessarily comfortable with. Especially for those people who are not involved in LGBT activism, the use of words such as rezu or bian can carry strong connotations in terms of identity shaping that they do not necessarily want, nor are keen to show and share. According to the sociologist and gay activist Kazama Takashi, “by considering homosexuality to be a sexual preference and identifying it only with sexual acts, homosexuality is recognized [by Japanese people] only as a private issue instead of a public one” (Kazama, 2002: 108).

Of the three informants who like women but do not define themselves as lesbian, two gave a similar reason for their choice. The first one, Ren, referred to the Japanese attitude of not directly addressing thorny topics, especially when talking about private subjects like one’s sexual life (Pizziconi, 2009; Saitô, 2010) and stated: “Words like rezu and bian are too straightforward to me. I think it is better to be indirect. It is typical of Japanese people, being indirect (mawarikudoi)”. Similarly, Ryōma said that even if up to now he had only had relationships with girls he does not like to use the word lesbian because: “I could not say it clearly (hakkiri ienai kara)”. Both informants shaped their self-naming according to the pressure felt in the Japanese context, and consequently avoided the clear enunciation of a feature considered to be private and not to be talked about in public. They experienced homosexuality as something that could be inferred but not overtly expressed. It is also possible to read in their words a subtle persistence of a social stigma that leads to evading identification as lesbian, creating a sort of shame or taboo. It was evident that those feelings, maybe unconsciously, still played a big role in coming to terms with homosexual identity – and hence self-definition – for some of my informants.
More complicated is the case of Kunihiro, who referred to the impossibility of defining himself as a woman as the reason for failing to recognise himself as lesbian. In his own words:

Lesbians are women who love women, aren’t they? But talking about myself, I do not know if I can define myself as ‘woman’. Of course, my body is a woman’s body but my feelings are different, and being called a man or woman depends upon other people. You can think whatever you want about me. I do not care of what people think about my sexual identity. The ‘me’ that you can see becomes the image of me inside you.

In this case the gender identity is questioned, and in turn sexuality as well. However, what can be argued from Kunihiro’s words is a point connected not only to how he perceives himself but also to how others perceive him. First of all, Kunihiro is putting forward the idea that he could be, in fact, something other than a woman. He is not sure his gender identity is a female identity, and consequently he is not sure if he can be considered lesbian. If his gender identity were a male identity, Kunihiro could eventually feel himself a man trapped in a woman’s body. However, the idea of being trapped in his own body does not emerge from the data. On the contrary, his identity can be read as a fluid position between the two poles of male and female. In this shifting between the axes male-female, a role is also played by others and their perception of Kunihiro’s gender: the others’ perceptions help him in the process of creating and re-creating his gender identity (Ward, 2010). In this case it is possible to talk about gender dynamism and to challenge the idea of identity as stable and fixed. Furthermore, the refusal of Kunihiro to acknowledge himself as a woman could also be linked to the pre-conceived idea of femininity he expressed during the interview. Assuming that femininity, in the Japanese context, is characterized by unavoidable features and behaviours, the unsuccessful performance of those features or a more or less conscious lack of them could eventually lead to a misrecognition of the self in the woman category. Indeed, Kunihiro’s view of femininity and women is strictly defined and in line with the Japanese socio-cultural context, where women are conceived as speaking in high-pitched voices (Kristof, 1995), being kawaii and childish (Kinsella, 1995), and relegated to the social role of “good wives and wise mothers”, responsible for keeping their houses tidy and clean and raising children (Uno, 1993). Since he does not match this description, consequently he does not recognize himself as a woman. In this stereotypical view of the gender role divisions, no space is left for the development of possible alternative forms of femininity, and the
stereotype is not challenged. In contrast, shifting towards the male category allows Kunihiro to be free from women’s social restraints.

### 3.5.2 Gender identity

Kunihiro’s account introduced the discourse of gender identity. Of the five dansō who defined themselves as lesbian, three identified themselves within the category of woman. A different narration emerges from Haruka:

> I think I am a woman. But I hate it if other people tell me that I am a woman. But I am not a man. In every case, when I am arbitrarily defined by somebody else I hate it! Neutral (chūsei) would be the best word to describe me but still, if others decide to define me, I hate it! When I think about myself, words such as man or woman do not concern me.

For Haruka the most important thing is to be free from other people’s judgement, having the possibility to define (or not define) himself instead of being defined by others. Even though he thinks himself a woman, he does not want other people to apply the “woman” label to him, with all the social connotations that womanhood carries. In the case of Haruka it is possible to see a clear differentiation between identity and external identification and he asks for the possibility of not being named by others, but freely defining himself.

Three other informants gave different definitions in terms of gender. Ichi was unable to define his gender identity, a topic that he explored and questioned while working as a dansō. Tora considered himself “70% lesbian” but, due to an undefined remaining 30%, he chose to define himself as bisexual. His decision also had another motivation: “As a dansō I need to keep saying that I am a man. If I splash out saying ‘I am lesbian’ it would be the same as saying ‘I am a woman’.” In this case, it is the connection between “being a lesbian” and “being a woman” that prevents Tora defining himself as lesbian. The masculine identity he performs while working is supported by self-identification with the male gender even in the absence of his customers, marking how doing dansō for work and being a dansō in his private life are parallel and intertwined life trajectories. Rei also expressed a fluid position, stating that sex does not really matter for him, either in himself or in his partners: “I am both. Now I dress like a man, but in the past I dressed girly, and I like both women and men” reinforcing the inability to categorize himself within binary oppositions such as man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual.
The gender definition becomes less clear in the cases of Ren and Ryōma. The first stated: “My name is Ren. I look like a man. That’s my appearance. And I like women more than men”. While indicating his preference for women, he took no further step to defining himself in gender terms, merely affirming that aesthetically he looked like a man. On the other hand, Ryōma stated: “What word should I use to describe myself…man, woman, lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual? It is complicated! How can I say…I am not interested in men, I cannot imagine myself dating a man. Maybe I am not a woman…” In both cases, more than affirming what or who they are, Ryōma and Ren state what they are not and what they do not like, narrating their identities through negations. They are not categorizing their identities but, as in Kunihiro’s case, they are leaving a blank space that can be filled with everything they want, without the limitations of a single option out of two.

Another interesting perspective came from Yori, who defined himself as something “other”, outside the categories of male and female: “I am Yori. And I like the people I like. Sex is not important. Women, men, newhalf (nyūhāfu)\(^{61}\), it does not matter. FtM, MtF, everyone could be fine. Am I a man or woman? I am something else!” Yori is not only refusing a categorization but he is also reaffirming his right to be what he wants to be. Under the definition of “I”, which is the only one that he accepts, Yori includes all the possibilities of his identity. Aware that identity does not have a singular meaning, Yori freed himself from the restriction of labelling, and left others the same possibility in interacting with him. He does not preclude any possible alternative in a relationship, nor does he cage his identity into gender and sexual divisions that force him to choose – and accordingly, exclude – one category in favour of another.

According to the interview data, dansō rely on crossdressing to escape the rules that define the social category of “woman”. However, in the same way as Epstein (1998: 146, cited in McLelland 2000: 194) notes about homosexual identities in Japan, we can say that there is no single reality and definition of dansō, but rather a constellation of different identities which can be grouped by the shared wish to escape from labelling based on gender binarism and heterosexual/homosexual opposition. Therefore it is possible to conceptualize the word dansō as a new gender category, which identifies those women who fail or do not want to match the requisites conceived as fundamental to express femininity in Japan and consequently switch to a (more) masculine gender identity and self-presentation. Starting

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\(^{61}\) Female-to-Male transgenders who consider themselves as an “intermediate” category between “male” and “female”, and thus an additional gender identity option (McLelland, 2002).
from this premise, it is possible to conceive the gender identity of my informants as not linked to the materiality of the body, but to a set of attributes and behaviours that can be worn, enacted and performed with the aim of reaching the desired dansō gender identity.

3.5.3 Dansō entertainment, homosexuality and LGBT movements

Regardless of definitions and self-naming labels, none of my dansō informants stated that they had ever been in contact with organizations for LGBT rights, or had attended meetings for supporters of LGBT rights. While some of them went to Shinjuku Nichōme for clubbing, this seemed to be their only contact with the local homosexual cultural environment. Most informants were not even aware of the existence of LGBT organizations, or did not pay them too much attention. Those who had a limited knowledge of gay activism in Japan still did not feel the need to join the cause, as expressed by Takumi: “I do not have a great interest in those things such as demonstrations and parades. I also never had the wish to join conferences and so on. I know there are such places but I never thought ‘Let’s go!’ maybe because I do not have those kind of activist friends”. The lack of a conscious gay awareness in Takumi and his friends could be read as a way to keep a distance from open identification with a homosexual persona in the Western sense. Notwithstanding a long history of homosexual activism in Japan, from the adoption of words such as gei/gay with a political sense in the 1970s and before (McLelland, Suganuma and Welker, 2007: 20-25), the political and cultural value of activism linked to LGBT groups (Savci, 2016) was not recognized by dansō. Activism was conceived as too direct and public a way to exhibit a sexual identity that in the informants’ view should be experienced only in private settings, as already highlighted by studies regarding Japanese homosexual men (Lunsing, 2001; McLelland, 2000a). We also see here a marked difference between gay identity politically defined, as in most Euro-American contexts (Altman, 1996; Weeks, 2003; Katz, 1996; Halperin, 2000), and a Japanese gay identity that may diverge from a developmental pattern involving phases such as coming out with family, coworkers and friends, or being active in seeking to obtain social recognition and rights. For instance, all my informants denied wishing to enter into a heterosexual marriage, but agreed with the idea of gay marriage/civil partnership, and they were very keen to reflect further on the issue and eventually marry a woman. However they did not argue that gaining rights and recognition for the LGBT community in Japan was likely to pass through activism; rather, they showed a lack of identification with minority awareness, as exemplified
by Ichi: “I never attended a meeting for LGBT people. How can I say, I do not have this awareness of being a minority and those people...it is difficult to explain but...maybe I could be a bit interested but I did not have any chance up to now. Maybe they are too direct for me.” Since dansō do not identify themselves as a sexual minority or as a subversive category challenging social norms, they do not find any connection between their crossdressing and social issues linked to homosexuality or to other queer identities. Moreover, in contrast to forms of female to male crossdressing in other countries, most of the respondents did not find any connection between being a dansō and queer culture. Even those who defined themselves as lesbian only acknowledged a distant connection between crossdressing and homosexuality, which are still perceived as two factors not necessarily influenced by each other. According to the interview data, then, being a dansō is not a stand for sexual minorities’ rights, nor a way to support social change. The subversiveness and the political meaning of dansō lie in the possibility that people who do not recognize themselves in already defined categories may experience personal and professional freedom to dress and live a different existence; however, this does not result in concrete activism or in any step undertaken to obtain wider recognition from society as a gender category or as an identity divergent from gender binarism. This lack of minority awareness and the felt need to obtain increased recognition from society at large reflect a common trend among Japanese individuals whose sexual identities diverge from heteronormativity. Activism is seen as something going against “social common sense” (jōshiki) and the tendency is to approach such issues as “personal situations” to be privately handled (McLelland, 2000b; Lunsing, 1997: 285).

3.6 Relationships with others
Although dansō found their work suitable for conducting lives that were honest to themselves, and considered crossdressing the only way to fully express their identities, they still have to manage a complex system of human relations, inside and outside the safe zone of Akihabara, which requires identity adjustments and negotiations. The possibility of living outside gender categories is not always secured in their everyday interactions. Carving out a space to live accordingly to their own wishes could potentially be in conflict with the management of other interactions, such as with families, co-workers in another workplace, or partners in real life. Moreover, the relationships with customers require dansō to perform their identity according to the customers’ wishes and needs, sometimes leaving a very limited space for their self-expression.
In managing their relationships with others, *dansō* always need to manage their identity, shifting between the “I” used when with customers, the one adopted with co-workers at Dreamland, the one used in other working spaces outside Akihabara, and the one performed with their families. In the next section I shall start to address the topic of relations with customers, giving a fuller account in the next chapter. Then, I shall focus on relationships with families and co-workers, highlighting how the office in Akihabara provides a safe space for free expression of the self for all the crossdressers – a function that gay villages usually have for homosexual or non-cisgender people – and I shall conclude by presenting how *dansō* manage love relationships in their private lives.

### 3.6.1. The working “I”: relationships with customers and co-workers in Akihabara

The creation of a male alter ego usually starts after a successful job interview with one or both of the veterans of the company. Neither the boss of the company nor other men working at the office take part in this process of selection; the explanation I obtained from both the veterans and Mr. Hirota is that men could be keener to hire a *dansō* for his physical appearance, choosing more feminine candidates rather than potentially good escorts with less appealing or less feminine features. Those who pass the interview screening are asked to start constructing their new identity, which will be the only one allowed inside the office, with colleagues, and with customers. Firstly, the new crossdressers are required to choose a name, which should at least partially represent the character they are performing: for instance, Haruka\(^{62}\) chose this stage name because he loves perfumes, and because the androgyny embedded in the name itself well represented his personality. Once the name is chosen it cannot be changed, and it is highly recommended not to use a name that can sound too similar to another *dansō*’s nickname, to avoid confusing clients. The only exception among my informants regarding the personal choice of the name was Ryōma, who was forced to adopt this name by the *senpai* due to his height (176 cm). When he was hired there was a lack of tall *dansō*: hence, to better transmit his impressive physicality, the *senpai* decided to call him Ryōma, in spite of his reluctance. The choice resulted in a striking gap between the name and his personality: despite his strong and masculine name, Ryōma defines himself as an “*otomen*” or a man with feminine hobbies like fashion, drinking tea in fancy coffee shops,

\(^{62}\) The name Haruka can be written with the kanji for “spring” and “fragrance” (春香) and it can be used both for females and males.
and so on, and his personality is very far from the warrior-like image evoked by his name. After the name choice, it is necessary to structure the kind of character crossdressers want to perform, and to build the kind of man (kei) they want to be. Customers are usually already acquainted with these kei, through having played the otome game before, or through reading manga. For instance, characters that can be easily found in games or anime include the prince type (ōji-kei), the little brother type (shōta-kei), and the “studious” type (megane kei), just to note a few. However, it is important for a dansō to avoid a male role he is ill-fitted to play: for instance, a very shy person probably cannot perform the role of a flirty guy, nor a less well-educated person the “megane kei” studious type. Thus, the creation of a realistic character is a balanced blend of reality and performance: it has to be an expression of the crossdresser’s real self, based on likings, abilities and features that the crossdresser has in reality but, at the same time, this self has to be performed in a way that charms customers, to evoke their interest and, eventually, love feelings.

When crossdressers are in the office, waiting for a date, they still refer to each other using their stage names, and they are very reluctant to share even with co-workers private details such as their real name or address. This continuous reference to a stage persona is also maintained during friendly meetings (such as drinking parties or other informal meetings) when two or more dansō are involved. Since it is not unusual for newcomers to quit after a few months and consequently, before sharing personal data with strangers who can disappear soon after and share personal information with clients, dansō usually tend to protect their privacy, and allow others to know more about their private life only after a long period of mutual friendship. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in the office is usually very relaxed, with crossdressers chatting, or being involved in gaming or reading and other activities just to kill time. During the hours spent in the office, dansō often ask one another for suggestions about a specific customer who can be difficult to satisfy, or about general techniques to gain more clients. The relationships between co-workers are usually very informal, and veteran dansō are always very willing to offer their support to newcomers. Moreover, topics such as sexual or gender identity are sometimes addressed, with a more or less serious attitude. For instance, it is not unusual for crossdressers to complain about period cramps, or about the practice of chest binding, as it is very common for crossdressers to change their clothes in the office. Similarly, I personally witnessed several conversations about sex, where most of the participants were not shy about affirming their homosexual tendencies or sharing their sexual preferences. Conversations about sex usually took place in a spirit of blokish joshing, and jokes of a verbal and physical nature often occurred. Despite this playful approach, there
were also cases in which the forum of the office was used to share personal reflections, doubts and life choices about one’s identity and sexuality, obtaining support from an audience of peers. For instance, after talking with the others, Ichi realized that crossdressing was not the right way for him to express his masculinity, and undertook hormone injection therapy, a solution which better fitted his need to create his own identity. In his case, the crossdressing work was a starting point to question his identity, and a safe place to experiment with the male gender, eventually ending up in a process of gender and sexual identity shift. From this perspective, the dansō work and the company itself, with the other dansō sharing a similar life-style, appears to be a safe place, separated from life with a female identity. In this place, dansō are not only allowed to be, but also rewarded both from a monetary and emotional standpoint for being what they define as their most honest self. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to meet peers, often leading individuals to an enhanced self-discovery, developing feelings of belonging similar to the rentaikan (sense of solidarity) promoted by homosexual magazines from the early 1970s for gay men (Mackintosh, 2006; 2010). This interpretation of the crossdressers’ work and of the workplace itself also echoes the concept of ba, a physical, virtual or mental “shared space for emerging relationships...[which]...provides a platform for advancing individual and/or collective knowledge” (Nonaka and Konno, 1998: 40). The company, the office, the boss and colleagues play the role of a supporting social group, and offer social recognition and protection, in a process similar to that carried out by gay villages for homosexual people (Warner, 2002; Reynolds, 2009), helping crossdressers in gaining “a sense of themselves as members of a group” (D’Emilio, 1998: 186) and hence in creating a form of dansō identity.

The company actively promotes a cheerful image of the dansō, who are displayed as a big family or a close-knit group of friends, and to prevent any misbehaviour, spreading rumours about other crossdressers is prohibited, on pain of dismissal. Garcons usually talk in a positive way about each other, and I never heard negative comments about any of the crossdressers working at the time. I was always treated as one of the group and all my informants were very supportive and kind with me. This led me to think of the company as a space where the atmosphere was pleasant not only on the surface, but where people working there really liked each other, providing a group experience that made others feel protected and safe, as members of a very close association. It is important that customers perceive the crossdressers as a very tight group but, at the same time, close friendship among two garcons must be avoided, in order not to let the customers confuse a “masculine” friendship with a sentimental involvement. Camaraderie and jokes were very common in the office, and I often
found my informants to be very physical in expressing their friendship, especially compared with the usual Japanese behaviour: in the office it was not strange to see *dansō* sitting very close to each other, sleeping or resting on other people’s laps, and greetings were often accompanied by pats on the back, hugs and handshakes (Figure 3.2).

The office was also a place to release stress after very demanding dates. Irony was often used as a tool to lower the stress, and making fun together of bad customers was a way to cope with negative experiences. For instance, bad customers (see chapter 5.3) were known as “monsutā” (monsters), and Haruka, who had an unusually high number of bad customers, was commonly called “monsutā hantā” (monster hunter), alluding to a popular Japanese Playstation game. The use of humour as a way to keep emotional balance has been already investigated among individuals dealing with traumatic experiences such as emergency workers (Moran and Massam, 1997), police officers (Alexander and Wells, 1991), and subjects involved in highly controlled and repetitive occupations (Collinson, 2012) as well as among those subjected to high levels of emotional, psychological and physical stress, such as sex workers (Sanders, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Especially in those settings involving the commodification of intimacy – physical and/or emotional – irony has a double meaning: as Sanders (2004) notes, the use of coded irony and private jokes shared only among prostitute co-workers to make fun of customers, helps in dealing with negative experiences, and also
humour is an aid in detaching the workers from clients, becoming an essential factor in shaping appropriate emotions to be sold in performing emotional labour. In addition, irony improves the sense of community among a group (Goffman, 1963: 118); making a joke or being the subject of mockery is a way to actively participate as a qualified member of the group, shaping a personal feeling of belonging and a collective identity. Moreover, as Walker (1998) highlights, the use of jokes among men is a way to construct masculinity. I observed similar behaviours among my informants. In their use of irony, dansō were often very physical, and engaged in a high number of verbal and bodily sex jokes, such as vulgar wordplays and mimicry of sexual acts performed on unaware colleagues. This process of appropriation of negative stereotypically masculine behaviours was perceived as a sign of manliness and as a reinforcement of masculinity by some of my informants, in line with Pitt’s (1979: 38) observation: “The incessant exchange of caustic wit and rudeness is symptomatic of the close relations between the men”.

However, personal feelings of like and dislike were present, and the sense of competition between co-workers heightened them. The most requested dansō sometimes showed a feeling of superiority over those who did not obtain many dates, and verbally bullied them, remarking on the number of customers they had and asking why the target of their sarcasm was not going out often with customers recently. It must be kept in mind that, since dansō are selling themselves, not being chosen by customers is very often experienced as a strongly negative situation. First of all there is no monetary return for the investment of time and energy dansō make in their daily shifts, which is a very frustrating experience. Then, the situation is also seen as evidence of lack of attractiveness and charisma, and leads to decreased self-esteem among those who are not in the customers’ favour. One of the mid-range dansō, when questioned about his training at the company, told me that the senpai purposely failed to teach newcomers properly, to stymie competition for a small clientele. This explanation can be connected to the answer given to the interview question “If you fell in love with a customer, would you ask your colleagues for advice?” Almost all the informants affirmed that, since it would be a personal matter, they would be keen to decide without asking other people’s opinion. Thinking about the supposed camaraderie and the friendly environment in the office, at first I found this answer quite surprising. However, it seemed that given the possibility that personal secrets – especially on sentimental matters – could be used against a dansō who reveals too much about himself, my informants preferred not to address extremely personal topics with their colleagues.
3.6.2 Non-commodified love relationships

The importance of the dansō space is felt so strongly that my informants do not share it even with their partners, preferring to keep those two dimensions of their life separate. For instance Haruka stated: “I didn’t talk about this job with my ex-girlfriends, nor will I do so in the future. I do not trust girls, they can do anything when they are in love, they could be troublesome and for me this work is far more important than a girlfriend.”

Out of fourteen informants, two stated that they were in a committed relationship, and two started a new relationship one month before the end of my fieldwork (July 2016). The others stated that they occasionally met one or more sex-friends (yaritomo), and that they were neither in nor looking for a relationship, in some cases considering the work itself as more satisfactory than a real love relationship. Takumi and Shin, the only two in committed relationships, are also the two veterans of the company. They are living with their partners, and they would like to marry their girlfriends in the future. After a decade spent in the escort business, they became able to handle a committed love relationship and the job, whereas the other crossdressers were still looking for the right balance between the two. During the months I spent visiting the office almost daily and often going out with the other dansō, I never met their girlfriends, not even in friendly meetings outside Akihabara and in private spaces, and apparently the other dansō never met them either. I asked Shin why he was not bringing his girlfriend along sometimes, but he replied that he did not want to mix the working sphere with his private life. That was surprising to me, since Shin, as supervisor and veteran, was spending roughly six days a week in the office, from late morning or early afternoon until 11pm if not later. I asked him if his girlfriend was sad to spend such limited time with him, but he replied that she had been aware of the job since the very beginning of their relationship, and that her acceptance had been necessary for it to develop. It appeared very clear, for all my informants, that the most important prerequisite to dating someone was the acceptance by the potential partner of the written and unwritten rules of the dansō work. Every crossdresser must keep love relationships secret from the client, exhibiting himself as free but, at the same time, strongly committed to all his clients, without showing preferences for any of them, except when in a private setting. This basically means that, unless in a safe situation (such as in their own houses, other cities, hidden places, or abroad) dansō cannot meet and spend time with their partners as a couple, since the risk of being spotted by a customer and the resulting negative backlash would be too high. An offended customer could
spread the information on the Internet and halt the career of a crossdresser escort, lifting the veil on the lies that dansō say about their private lives and that customers pretend to be unaware of. Partners are also strongly discouraged from joining the public events that dansō hold regularly. The potential partner must be aware of the “idol status” – at least among Dreamland’s customers – of the dansō and must not be jealous of any present, love letter, hug or other expression of love from the customers. In addition, a potential partner has to understand that private time as a couple will be very limited, and on the occasions usually devoted to lovers such as Christmas, or Valentine’s Day, dansō will invariably be on shift, giving priority to customers over the partner. “Work comes first” and “Work is more important” were the only two answers I received when I asked my informants to evaluate the relative importance of work and love. The work conditions are seen as unavoidable, and the potential partner has no other solutions than bear with it. In addition it must also be said that, after spending hours acting the part of the perfect boyfriend, always carefully listening to customers’ problems, dansō are not willing to behave in the same way with their real partner. As I personally observed and according to data obtained from casual conversations with crossdresser informants, it is not unusual that a “prince type” escort turns out to be very cold, detached and selfish in his private time, and this behaviour can also negatively affect a love relationship. Rei in particular admitted to finding a girl’s voice annoying after hours spent with clients. Thus, due to the job they perform, dansō do not want to see in their partners feelings like jealousy, resentment, or sadness, since they often face similar issues with customers, and spend time and energy in reassuring them. Looking at all those limitations and rules, it is not surprising that only the two veterans became able to manage such a tension between private and public realms, and that only a few want to embark on a relationship of this kind. A strategy used by Shin and his girlfriend to better endure the problems caused by customers (lack of private and quality time for the couple, need to hide from the public gaze, restraints on places to go, presence of love rivals and so on) is humour. As Shin told me, sometimes he would tell anecdotes and funny stories about “weird” customers to his girlfriend, and they would make fun together of those clients who considered themselves the “number one” in Shin’s life, with the intention of reducing the stress arising from the presence of potential love rivals who actually are able to spend more time than his girlfriend with Shin. To avoid casual meetings with clients, they rarely go to central Tokyo together and, in these cases, they never hold hands. The ultimate countermeasure adopted in the event of an accidental meeting with a customer is to pass his girlfriend off as a next of kin, and
eventually introduce her to the customer, to dismantle the threatening potential of the situation.

Despite the veterans’ experience, not everybody is able or willing to properly balance private life and the escort work. In this case, as shown before, dansō tend to give precedence to their work over the partner. As Tora expressed:

If I looked for a partner (koibito) in any case it would be a very limited relationship, inevitably. There will be a lot of restraints, and very small space for us. If the partner is not a person that can forgive me for this, it cannot work. In this work it is like this. There is no space [for a partner].

Thus, recently I am very busy at work, so I do not think I would have enough time to commit to my partner (pātonā). And, if my customers found out about it! Just spotting me while walking with somebody, whether a man or woman, they will think right away “Oh, that is Tora’s lover!” So for the sake of my partner, but also for mine, for now it is better not having a partner.

He is echoed by Ren:

I am not looking for a partner. I am full up with work now, this is my lover, my job! I have so many customers recently that I really do not have time [for a partner]. Then, I am going to have fun with so many girls for work that a girlfriend would be jealous for sure. I think I would not be able to give her the importance she would deserve (daiji ni shite agerarenai). So for now I am okay like this.

Daiji ni shite agerarenai or similar expressions were commonly used to explain why the coexistence of the escort work and a partner is considered by dansō to be very difficult. Commonly, crossdressers take the responsibility for inability to please a partner’s emotional needs, avoiding blaming the other person for not understanding the modality of the work. However, Kunihiro reported me that in the past he had fallen in love with a person and in the end preferred to quit the job, due to the impossible tension between what he was called on to do for the job and what he wanted to do. In his words:

There was a person I was really fond of, and when you really love someone and also do this job… Psychologically, I was not able to find a balance in my feelings. It is bad when you have to date so many people, that is something that I really felt strongly. I started asking myself “What the hell am I doing?” and I did not feel good. It was like cheating, and because this sensation was growing, I quit the job.
In this case, the crossdresser felt guilty and unfaithful, assumed responsibility for the situation, and adopted as the best solution not a compromise but the choice of his partner over his work. After the end of the relationship and a short break to retrieve his energies, Kunihiro came back to Dreamland and started his escort work again. He started a new relationship when I was at the end of my fieldwork, but in this case he did not face the same problems as in the past because his new lover was one of the dansō working in the same company.

The topic of love relationships between dansō was taboo in the company, and my informants only felt at ease to talk to me about it once we had got to know one another well. At the beginning, when I asked if they had ever heard of a dansō dating a colleague, the answer was almost the same every time: dansō do not find each other sexually attractive because they want a very feminine partner. Haruka told me that his favourite type of woman was the yamato nadeshiko – a gentle, pure, modest girl (Endo, 2012), the opposite of what crossdressers embody. The idea dansō advanced of a love relationship strictly reproduced the heteronormative view of a stereotypical heterosexual couple, with the role of the “man” and that of the “woman” clearly differentiated and embodied by the two partners. Since dansō perceive themselves as the “man” of the couple, the presence of another crossdresser is seen as a disequilibrium in the manhood and womanhood that they find fundamental in a couple. According to their answers, I started to think that their idea of relationships was moulded on the heterosexual stereotype, but after a while a more complex picture emerged.

It is true that, in finding a partner, dansō can have a preference for feminine women, next to whom they can feel themselves more masculine, but it is also true they date or find attractive their colleagues or less feminine women as well. The first evidence of this kind came from Shin, who told me that he was aware of a dansō who worked for the company in the past and who was having sex with another crossdresser, but he also reiterated that this behaviour was rather uncommon. Subsequently, I heard similar stories from other informants, showing how the situation was not so “uncommon”. The final revelations came from Naoki, who privately told me that he was dating Kunihiro, and from Haruka. Despite his yamato nadeshiko girlfriend stereotype, he asked me to date and to become his girlfriend, even though I was looking pretty masculine for his beauty standards at the time. To avoid corrupting my role and my objectivity as a researcher, I gently turned him down but maintained a close friendship with him. If dating a colleague can be a very convenient solution from the point of view of how to explain the situation to a potential partner and in terms of time management, it also carries risks. First of all, both partners need to manage their jealousy, which can also acquire a shade of envy if one of the two has more customers.
than the other, intensifying the feeling of competition that all the crossdressers – to a different extent – experience. Secondly, coping with fights or separation when sharing the same workspace can be considered unpleasant everywhere, but especially in such a very narrow space as the one that dansō share. Thirdly, the end of the relationship, especially if not consensual, can also result in a desire for revenge from the abandoned side, who can own tangible evidences of the romantic and sexual life of his previous partner and potentially share them with the customers. The last eventuality was the biggest fear of my informants, and they always requested me not to share with the customers any information about their sentimental status, even when I reassured them several times and provided them with a written copy in Japanese of my confidentiality obligations as a researcher.

3.6.3 Relationships with family members and other co-workers
Relationships with family members are strongly influenced by whether or not the family knows about the crossdresser and escort identity. When questioned about family life, four dansō stated that their family were not aware of their job, while eight were out with their parents and/or siblings; one informant only told his older brother. The reasons adduced were in all cases rooted in the impossibility of parents understanding this kind of entertainment business. Parents are in some cases seen as “old” or narrow minded people, unable to understand such an unusual job as that of a crossdresser escort, as exemplified by Haruka: “I told them [his parents], but I don’t think they understood the meaning of what I said. I don’t think they got what I am doing…” However, in cases when they were informed about it, the parents (or other relatives, as in the case of Ryōma and Kunihiro) displayed an overall positive attitude towards the dansō job, and none of my informants reported cases of parents asking or obliging them to quit the job. They were not against it if their daughters were happy to do it, provided the job was not dangerous, as explained by Ichi: “Yes, they know. I’ve dressed this way a long time, so they only told me ‘As long as it is not dangerous, it is fine’” and Kunihiro: “Well...I do not have my parents any more, but as for my brother and my sister, they are both very open minded people, and they think it is fine to do the things one likes, so they told me ‘Are you a dansō? Well, if you want to do it, good for you!’ They are really like this! It is very relaxing for me (chō raku)!” Those extracts show an open attitude towards the occupation by the relatives of dansō escorts. It is seen as a part-time job that fits the interests of those involved and, as long as it is not dangerous, it is not negatively perceived.
However, when it comes to talk about sexual identity, only two dansō stated that they were out with any part of their families. Here again, being a dansō and being a non-heterosexual individual were not considered linked issues. This reveals that social pressure to conform to heteronormativity and marriage is still a deeply felt issue affecting individuals who do not fit into what Halberstam calls “a middle class logic of reproductive temporality” (2005: 1-4). Keeping the two matters separated can be seen as a way to avoid casting a negative shadow connected to homosexuality, and especially female homosexuality, on a job that occupies such an important place in the lives of dansō. It is a way to protect this haven for crossdressers’ non-conforming identities from prejudice and accusations of immorality. My informants acknowledge the difficulties of balancing their private lives and real selves with the constraints and expectations of the normative female role. For example, Ren – referring to his parents – verbalized it as follows: “They cannot understand. For them, if you are born as a woman you must do women’s things. You cannot be happy. It will be a big problem in the near future... Maybe I really should find a man or a gay man to keep up appearances.” In this excerpt, Ren (who comes from a very traditional family in a small rural town) underlines how society – and on a micro-level, the family, perceived as the closest group to influence his life – “cannot understand” the diversity in gender normativity. Problematizing the relegation of women to a cultural and social role that involves becoming wives and mothers (Dalton, 2008), included in social normativity through heterosexuality, femininity, and marriage (Knapp, 1995; Sievers, 1983), he proceeds to suggest that keeping up appearances is more important than finding one’s own place as an individual. Rather than overtly fighting the norms, Ren suggests marrying a gay man as a survival strategy, so that he will be able to live his life undisturbed while, at the same time, conforming to the role he is expected to perform. Similarly Haruka told me that during high school he dated and had sex with several guys, trying at his best to perform a cisgender identity, in accordance with his mother’s wish to see him as “normal”. He remembers being perfectly aware of being lesbian, but he felt an obligation to conform to the family's expectations, and accordingly tried dating different boys, hoping to find a suitable one. After a few years he gave up, avoiding confronting his mother about the topic as far as possible. Family boundaries strongly influence crossdressers’ lives, and informants tried to avoid facing directly the intertwined questions of their job and sexual orientation with their families, preferring instead to leave those matters in the realm of “unspoken” and “unconfessed”, avoiding the consequences of openly affirming divergence from their families’ ideas and expectations of what a woman should be and do.
Obviously, Ren’s and Haruka’s experiences cannot be taken as representative of Japanese women who choose unorthodox life trajectories (Mackie, 2003), or even of all of their colleagues, although they show that the position of a woman in Japanese society may still be strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors and the heritage of the past (Fujita, 1989; Arujo Nocedo, 2012). However, informants suggest that saving face and respecting the family’s will is more important than to openly affirm one’s identity, gender, and sexuality. The affirmation of one’s own sexual identity over family expectations can be linked to a Euro-American need for self-expression, not necessarily shared by Japanese people. It must also be noted how painful it could be for people like Ren to find a compromise between the family’s expectations, strongly tied to tradition, and his desire to live his own life according to his needs. I personally witnessed a similar experience during one of my observations in the office. One afternoon I found Naoki very sad and depressed and when I asked him why, he was reluctant to talk about it. After several days of struggle, he confided to me that his family had asked him to join an omiai meeting with a potential husband they had chosen. Even if the practice of omiai has sharply decreased in contemporary Japan, it still survives and affects the lives of non-married people, who are sometimes forced by parents or superiors at work to have arranged meetings to find a suitable partner to marry. This usually provokes distressing situations (Lunsing, 2001: 217-219), as in the case of Naoki, who struggled for several days before declining the meeting and – consequently – dealing with the dissatisfaction of his family. According to other information shared by informants, in the past there was another crossdresser who was compelled by his family to marry, and ended up abruptly quitting the job – even though he was one of the top stars at the time – to pursue a housewife’s life, cutting all contacts with his dansō colleagues.

Such narratives show how relationships with family members are strongly affected by being overtly a dansō or not, and how complicated it is to deal with societal judgment and tradition. When supported by their family – or part of their family – dansō showed a more relaxed attitude to family life. In contrast, when not out in the household, relations were characterized by tensions and strategies to keep their crossdresser life secret and to keep family expectations under control, through means such as limiting family time and reunions.

None of my informants was keen to share details of their crossdressing activities in Akihabara with co-workers in other fields outside the escort business, whether in a permanent full-time job or another part-time occupation. First of all, some full-time occupations have a policy restraining employees from engaging in other paid occupations. Secondly, the particular position of the escort business, and especially of crossdresser escorts, is not
expected to be understood or accepted by those who do not share a similar knowledge of this subcultural world. As with parents and relatives, my informants preferred to avoid the topic and the possibility of long and tiresome explanations, as exemplified by Naoki: “Since they will not understand, it will only be an annoyance to explain about it. The normal world does not always understand, I should give a specific explanation to everybody, and this would be a great waste of time.” Even if dansō can adopt an androgynous wardrobe in their other workplaces, nevertheless they try not to disclose any information about their part-time work as crossdressers in Akihabara, keeping it as a free zone, and showing no intention of disclosing personal information with individuals they do not recognize as friends or who could discriminate against them.

Conclusion

As I argued in this chapter, the label dansō within the Japanese context can be considered as a new gender definition among the various identities which span the spectrum between the two poles of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual. Individuals who started this crossdressing life trajectory chose to define themselves through the word dansō, avoiding other labels which do not completely represent their multifaceted personality and life choices, and also showed the desire to escape from a categorization imposed on them by others, which reminded them of a male/female dichotomy soaked in stereotypes. However, the definition of dansō is itself characterized by different realities and by a fluidity of positions in terms of self-definition of those who state they belong to it.

A crossdressing life usually starts after a childhood spent as a tomboy. It continues in adolescence with struggles between a self-perceived androgynous, genderless or masculine identity and the restraints of the female category that my informants were enforcedly assigned to by their natural born sex. The most striking contrast between the dansō self-perception and their perception by society came with regard to clothes. Clothes are seen by dansō as a way to express their real self (when dressed in male attire) or as a form of coercion (when forced by circumstances to dress in a feminine way). Clothes are considered as closely linked to a series of markedly gendered behavioural patterns. Consequently, changing their clothes and outer appearance and shifting their gender identity from feminine to masculine let my informants feel entitled to appropriate behaviours usually reserved to men. In doing so,
dansō show how masculinity does not belong to men, nor is being a man necessary to perform masculinity.

Doing dansō in their lives is a direct consequence, for my informants, of being a dansō and the escort service is chosen as a part-time job or as a main occupation for the possibility of freely expressing one’s own identity. It allows crossdressers to choose their working shifts, to dress according to their personal taste and to behave more coherently with their identity, compared to the societal requirements of other occupations. The dansō escort working space is considered a safe zone where the performance of a cisgender identity is not mandatory and where, on the contrary, the crossdressers are positively evaluated for their non-conforming gender identity. Moreover, after a period of time commonly spent in a painful process of shaping their identity, through the escort work crossdressers can see themselves appreciated by paying customers, exactly for being “different” from the commonly shared idea of femininity in Japanese society. This reward – in the form of support and love declarations by clients – is considered one of the major positive aspects of the crossdressing escort’s work.

In spite of their search for a way to honestly live their existences, dansō still have to manage a complex system of human relationships where their identity and sexual orientation are not always accepted and need to be negotiated and re-shaped according to interlocutors and the context, case by case. Thus, dansō have to perform various identities when with their customers, in order to meet their clients’ wishes; they have to perform a cisgender identity when in different workplaces outside the safe zone of Akihabara, and with their families if they experience their crossdresser identity as closeted. Consequently, dansō have to perform and manage different “I’s” and choose the most fitting for their different interactions. The shift between different “I’s” can be very stressful, and for this reason the Akihabara office comes to occupy in crossdressers’ lives a safe place of self-expression.
Chapter 4

THE CUSTOMERS’ PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

In the previous chapter the focus was on the escorts, especially on how they create and perform their male identity, and on their perspectives on relationships with clients. In this chapter I shift focus to the customers, considering them in their interactions with dansō, and taking into account their point of view about the escort service.

First, I will explain what individuals make use of the crossdresser escort service. I will propose a categorization of clients based on their attributes (including age, sex, and marital status) and on the kind of experience sought in dating a crossdresser escort. Then, I will move on to explain the reasons behind the choice to resort to an escort service, and especially a crossdresser escort service, highlighting the different roles dansō can assume in a relationship with a customer.

Subsequently, I will investigate the development of the relationship between a client and a crossdresser escort. I will discuss how the relationship starts, develops and eventually ends, underlining the clients’ feelings during the entire process, identifying the turning points which mark positive or negative changes in the relationship. I will also show how the levels of reality and fantasy intersect each other in these relationships, underlining the role of the “suspension of disbelief” to fully enjoy a relationship with a dansō. I will propose an explanation of the roles that those relationships play in the customers’ lives and I will also present them as an alternative relational model allowing new forms of intimacy within the wider frame of the “affective labour” economies. Then, I define those relationships as an “augmented reality”, sentimental relationships situated in a regulated space where reality and fantasy ambiguously mingle, apparently freed from negative consequences, which customers can perceive as safer and more satisfactory than non-commodified love interactions.

This chapter is based on interviews undertaken with 11 female customers of the dansō escort service as well as observations during dates and special events, and all the interview extracts in this section, unless otherwise stated, are taken from client informants. It is not my aim here to fully describe the life of individuals using the crossdresser escort service, but rather to consider their perspectives on the escort service and their self-representations as
customers. As stated in chapter 2, I had previously met 10 out of 11 client informants during dates and public events before interviewing them, while the other interviewee probably knew about me from the information provided on the company’s website. This context could have affected the way they represented themselves during the interview, though this is impossible to determine. I believed the clients were sincere during the interviews, but it is never possible for ethnographers entirely to decipher the extent of informants’ performativity, as Takeyama (2016: 163-64) highlights in revealing, near the end of her ethnography of Tokyo host clubs, the possibility that one of her key informants may have been telling her an invented story.

4.1 Typology of women patrons

During the observations undertaken in the framework of paid dates and public events, and for the purpose of the interviews, I was able to meet and talk to around 60 customers, roughly 70% of the pool of clients attending Dreamland. Furthermore, I obtained additional information from my co-workers, such as long in-depth explanations about the typology of customers they usually met. According to this data, five main categories emerged in analysing the typology of customers involved in the dansō business. Those categories are not to be considered fixed, nor representative of the totality of customers who attend Dreamland. It is also possible for clients to be included in more than one category. However, they show the most frequent patterns among the customers I was able to meet as a crossdresser or during the interviews, and can be taken as representative of the majority of the clients who benefit from the crossdresser escort service. The categories can be summarized as follows:

- those who do not want/cannot find a partner: customers in this category are single. Some of them are not actively looking for a partner due to negative past experiences, while others can experience difficulties in finding one for several reasons (they can be homosexuals scared by the homosexual world, they can be considered unattractive by the current Japanese beauty standards, they think they are too old to find a partner…) and find a perfect replacement for a relationship in dating a cross-dresser. Those customers represent roughly 62% of the client pool;

- those who are not satisfied with their current relationship: people in this category are also married or in a long term engagement, but find their situation unsatisfactory for several reasons (the partner can be old, unattractive, unkind or he/she is chosen only to perform a cisgender identity) and find in the dansō entertainment a low risk escape
from their unsatisfactory daily routine or a way to fulfil a fantasy. Those customers represent roughly 20% of the client pool;

- those who wish to avoid the commitment and/or the negative aspects of a real relationship, but still desire emotional excitement: people in this category are women who do not want to enter into the system of duties and responsibilities that characterize heterosexual relations. Specifically, they are not willing to get married, quit their job and enter into a patriarchal system which relegates them to the role of wives and mothers. Those customers represent roughly 10% of the client pool;

- those who need a friend or a counsellor: people in this category do not look for romance or emotional thrill, but mostly for a friend or someone to share their experiences who is not keen to judge them and can understand their life experiences. Several people in this category define themselves as transsexuals and/or homosexual males. Those customers represent roughly 5% of the client pool;

- those who came to accompany a friend (who is the person interested in dansō) or who are curious about the crossdressing escort’s world: people in this category mostly book a double date with a friend or only join public events instead of booking a date on their own. Those customers represent roughly 3% of the client pool.

The first category (those who do not want/cannot find a partner) is the most numerous, and the majority of the customers I interviewed or met belong to it. Clients belonging to this category are mostly women, in an age range between 21 and 50-plus. They are deeply discouraged about love relationships, and find the escort service a solution that combines their need for romance and the certainty of a non-hurting relationship where they are accepted and loved for what they are, in spite, for instance, of their physical appearance. Most of the women in this category have had negative experiences with male partners, and for this reason they do not want to date men anymore. Another classic pattern is represented by homosexual women, who do not have any interest in men, or who realized their homosexual tendencies after negative experiences with men. These women are looking for a woman who is aesthetically masculine to replace a male partner. They do not want a feminine partner, nor a female friend. Dansō, with their supposed ability to understand women’s hearts and their charming appearance represent the perfect conjugation of their expectations towards a romantic partner. For example, A tells her story as follows:
When I came here the first time I had a boyfriend, but it was a very negative relationship and I was very hurt. The relationship was going very badly and a friend of mine informed me about Dreamland and invited me. Up to that time, I’d never been in Akihabara and I never used escort services before, but I was a Takarazuka fan, and dansō are very cool girls, so I liked them as soon as I spotted their website.

The story of B is very similar:

I started to come here because I was sick and tired of real love relationships (riaruna ren’ai). I did not want another negative (iyana) relationship, and at the same time I did not want to be hurt any more. But if a human being does not feel emotions it’s a very sad thing, and without a lover those feelings fade away. So I started to come here to have a pseudo-romance (gijiren’ai). This is perfect for me because I can take only the bright side of a relationship. With my dansō there is this love-like relationship, but we meet each other because I pay. I am tired of real relationships that can eventually finish, I do not want them any more, but I still want the emotions and for this reason I date my escort, and that is fine.

Usually these customers harbour very strong feelings toward their favourite escort, who is often the only one they meet. They can perceive meeting another escort as cheating and, at the same time, can be very jealous of the other customers. The length of the dates these customers reserve is strongly influenced by their economic resources, but they visit the company at least once a week. It is not unusual for them to sacrifice money for their daily life in order to be able to meet their escort, while some of them resort to activities which border on prostitution in order to earn enough money to meet their favourite dansō. These customers are more likely to be involved in cases of stalking and verbal and physical harassment towards the crossdressers, and are very likely to complain to the staff if their escorts fail to deliver the service they wanted, even if this is included among the forbidden actions.63 Some clients belonging to the first category are very passionate about manga and anime, and some of them define themselves as fujoshi64 and also create fantasy stories with themselves and their love-object as main characters that take the form of dōjinshi,65 light novels and so on.

63 Those are the kind of customers called “monsters” (see also chapter 3.5.1 and 5.3.1) by the crossdressers.
64 There is a difference between my fujoshi informants and the fujoshi described by Galbraith (2011: 212), as unlike the latter, my self-defined fujoshi informants are not conducting heteronormative lives. They are not in relationships with men, and are not looking for male companions. They clearly stated that they were not interested in finding a male partner or, in some cases, explicitly affirmed that they liked women better than men.
65 Dōjinshi (literally "like-minded publications") are fan-works and creative manga that refer to or make explicit use of characters from an already published work, often presenting alternative or originally unintended coupling among the characters. For further information see Noppe (2010) and Lam (2010).
Clients belonging to the second category (those dissatisfied with their current relationship) are almost always married and in their 40s or beyond. In some cases they were previously Takarazuka fans who found the dansō world perfect for their needs, since it could provide romance, beautiful entertainers and no risk of cheating on their partners. While otokoyaku – female interpreters of male roles in Takarazuka theatre – are considered unreachable, in their view dansō are closer and real. Those customers look for romantic experiences, a love story in which to indulge and to fantasize about, without threatening the stability of their everyday existence. Some of them look at the escorts not only as romantic partners but also as perfect sons. Fairly coquettish, these customers act as if they were much younger than their actual age, and are very demanding towards their escorts. They desire never-ending compliments, and to obtain more attentions from their garcons they hypersexualize themselves, playing the most stereotypical possible feminine roles to perceive the escort as more masculine by contrast. Those customers can be very jealous of their favourite escort, and do not change to another escort unless their favourite quits the job or their relationship is not considered satisfactory any more.

People in the third category (those who do not want to be in a committed relationship nor are willing to marry someone) are also mostly women in their 30s-40s who have gained a good or at least satisfactory work position, and do not want to lose it through traditional marriage. These women usually live on their own, and in some cases they also have children they raised by themselves. They can be professionals, highly skilled freelancers, or company workers. In some cases they are also homosexual, but this is not a distinctive trait. Relying only on their income, they use the escort service as a replacement for a real relationship. While a real relationship, in their view, leads without exception to cohabitation and marriage, the escort service provides romance on a “switch on/switch off” basis, which allows them to maintain their independence and personal space. I personally met a dance teacher who often meets several garcons, who explained to me how this part-time romance perfectly meets her idea of a relationship. People in this category are also those less inclined to pursue a connection or a contact with the escorts outside business hours, clearly separating their leisure time from their private time.

One of my informants, Nana, belonged to the fourth category (people who look for a friendly companion and not an emotional involvement), and explained in detail her perspective on how to enjoy the dansō escort service and her reasons for doing so. She is a 27 year old woman, running her own company, with a very high monthly income. Since she is the head of her company, she cannot have a friendly relationship with her co-workers, who
only see her as “the boss”. Moreover, she is lesbian, but she is not out with her family, and does not feel like entrusting this secret to her friends, who might spoil things with her family. It is very hard for her to find a friendly environment to talk and relax without pretending about her identity, and this is the reason why she chose the escort service. After having met all the escorts of the company in the past, she now picks the escort who best fits the activity she wants to do. It is not unusual for her to book five or more escorts together for a night out, sometimes in the gay district. In her words: “I want to go out with dansō because I have a very masculine character. More than with girls, I like to hang out with guys. My favourite is Shin, he is the one who most tries to meet my schedule. I am very thankful to him but if he is not available I can book another one, or more than one. I love to go out with them because I do not need to pay attention to anything.” Another customer in this category is a gay man in his 30s who frequents escorts to talk with them about his sexual identity, as do several FtM people too. It is very common for transgender, transsexual or crossdresser customers to interrogate the escorts about their life choice and about how they perform an opposite sex identity.

People belonging to the last category are not loyal customers, so I was not able to obtain an interview through the mediation of the company. However, I met some of them (roughly 5-6 people) during public events. They greatly differ in terms of age range, occupation and marital status. They usually found the escort service interesting but pricey and seldom booked a date on their own, preferring instead the role of “companion” of a more devoted customer. Among the events, their favourite is the cafe event, where they can have a drink while chatting with their friend(s) and, at the same time, they can also be entertained by different escorts at no extra charge. The crossdressing factor is probably the most appealing point for these customers, who evaluated crossdressers according to their ability to pass as men. The excitement stimulated by the possibility of meeting crossdressers is also the lure used by their friend in asking them to join the event or a double date. Even if they find the environment enjoyable, they are mostly one-time customers.

Apart from the last category, which mostly represents curious and/or casual attendees, all the other female customers (MtF customers included) are characterized by close adherence to the canonical aesthetic ideals of femininity within Japanese society. During dates and events, clients almost always wear dresses and skirts, and only rarely trousers. In most cases, the feminine clothes they wear express a “childish femininity”, with a predominance of pastel colours (especially pink and ivory white), and girlish decorations (ribbons, glitters, hearts etc.), more than a sexualized and erotic femininity; all customers use delicate make up; and,
generally speaking, they act in ways that emphasise their being “weak and feminine” in contrast to the mannish appearance of crossdressers (figure 4.1).

![Figure 4.1 Client of crossdresser escorts](image)

This could be read in terms of gender labour (Ward, 2010), a definition used “to describe the affective and bodily efforts invested in giving genders to others or […] helping others achieve the varied forms of gender recognition they long for” (237). By enhancing their femininity, customers help dansō to present themselves as masculine, and recognize their belonging to different gender categories.

In sum, the clients involved in the escort business can have very different motivations behind their choice to date a crossdresser escort. Similarly, the relationships too can greatly vary in their nature and developments, as I will show in the next sections.

### 4.2 Dansō escorts and dansō kissa

It must be noted that dansō escorts’ customers could also be clients of dansō kissa or could have become clients of crossdresser escorts after attending crossdresser cafes. Therefore, it is
necessary to investigate the relation between customers of crossdressers escorts and crossdresser cafes, analysing how clients evaluate these two different dansō-related entertainments.

_Dansō kissa_ are a specific kind of _concept kissa_ – thematic coffee shops – where the staff is composed only of crossdresser girls and women. In dansō cafes, customers can come alone or with their friends, they are assigned a seat at a table or at the counter (if alone) and enjoy their food/drink while the staff members alternately join the table for a few minutes conversation. There is usually an hourly fee to be paid and to extend one’s stay in the cafe it is compulsory to order drink or food every hour. The staff rotate between guests, and it is not possible to have private time or private conversations with a selected crossdresser since all the interactions take place in front of the other customers (Azuma, 2007). The customers of Dreamland made a clear distinction between the two forms of crossdressing-related entertainment, and even if sometimes _kissa_ represented for them the first contact point with the dansō world, they no longer evaluated them positively after becoming a customer of the escort business. In addition, among those customers who still attend dansō cafes, there is the shared feeling that _kissa_ are not places to relax or to spend quality time with the crossdressers. Dansō working there are equated to cosplayers by both dansō escorts and their customers, and they are not believed to be expressing their “real selves” when working as crossdressers. The masculinity that escorts affirm to be normal and natural, and that customers perceive as so, is seen as something only performed on the job in the case of those crossdressers working in cafes. Thus, they are also thought to be very feminine in their private time once having dismissed their dansō identity at the end of the work, just as cosplayers lay aside their stage costumes after the events they join. As A expressed it:

Those who work in the cafes are like cosplayers, they only have the appearance of a man, but their mentality is totally different. And since it is just an aesthetic thing, I am not interested at all in it (mentality wa zenzen otoko janai, mitame dake dakara kyōmi ga nai). I never thought to become a cosplayer and I am not a fan of cosplayers. Some of them can look very masculine but inside they are normal women, so I do not have any interest. If I see a picture [of a FtM cosplayer] in a magazine I can say ‘Oh, he is cool’ but I do not want to know more about him, and I will not buy the magazine featuring him.
The fact that some dansō cafes have a specific theme (e.g. Sengoku period themed cafes, fantasy wartime, ninja) reinforces this feeling of a world of staged appearance and the staff is required to dress accordingly, linking even closer the world of dansō cafes to the world of cosplay and, at the same time, distancing it from the consonance between outward appearance and inner reality that customers perceive in the escort service (Figure 4.2).

![Promotional flyer of a fantasy samurai warrior themed dansō café in Tokyo](image)

Figure 4.2 Promotional flyer of a fantasy samurai warrior themed dansō café in Tokyo

Only one of my eleven informants, Reira, liked the dansō kissa, calling them a “good place for a coffee” but she gave preference to the dansō escort service when short of money, and thought that the two forms of entertainment were very different. In her words:

[At Dreamland] since you can have a conversation one to one, it is possible to talk in peace. [The dansō kissa she attends] is always full, and you can’t talk with the staff, you cannot get closer to them. I have a good relationship with people working there but if I have a problem or if I want to trust someone or hold a dansō’s hand it is not possible there. This is the strongest point of Dreamland, the affinity I have with [her favourite dansō’s name].

For Reira, the distinction between kissa and escort service is clearly marked by the possibility of becoming intimate with the dansō escorts. Despite having a good relationship with those working in the cafe she attends, she recognizes the distance in their relationship, and does not consider them as people to whom she can entrust secrets or openly talk to about personal problems. Moreover, the kissa’s rules do not allow any physical contact, and this limitation contributes to keeping relationships with customers detached. In contrast, escorts can provide this kind of physical proximity and are also considered able to offer deeper emotional support.

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66 Sengoku period themed cafes and restaurants have their staff dressed in colourful kimono, carrying fake swords, which recall video games and anime characters more than historical truth.
The impossibility of establishing deep mutual knowledge or talking in a private setting are the two main reasons my informants gave for not liking the dansō kissa, which fail to provide exactly what the customers of the escorts are looking for, namely intimacy. Mei explains: “I do not like the situation in dansō kissa. People can look at you, you can look at them, and when I meet the person I like, I do not want this situation. Then, always meeting the same person, I can feel at ease and relaxed, while if the staff change I feel a bit anxious.”

Similarly, B highlights how important and intimate the relationship with an escort can become: “Dreamland’s garcons listen carefully to you, they remember everything about you and they make me think ‘Do they really remember so much about me?’ and looking at how they are all putting all their efforts towards the customers is something that really moves me. It is only they who do so, and this is the very best thing about the company.” Likewise Flower: “At Dreamland you can meet your favourite one to one, you can ask him advice about everything and you can really fall in love with some of them. This is the best thing, and you cannot have it in the kissa.” The possibility of having a personal, intimate relationship which can evolve and develop into a sentimental commitment is what differentiates the escort service from kissa and is its most appealing feature, according to the clients.

Moreover, it is not unusual for the staff in dansō kissa to perform short scenes to entertain the audience, sometimes including Boys’ Love implications: in this case the role of the customer dramatically changes, and she becomes just the “audience” for an action involving other people, losing her role as heroine of the action, and the attentions of dansō. Dansō kissa are thus seen by Dreamland clients as cosplay-like spaces where the masculine appearance of the staff is only a way to entertain the audience. The time spent with crossdressers in kissa is not considered as quality time, since all the interactions take place in a public space, in front of the other customers, and this does not allow the development of an intimate relationship. In contrast, dansō escorts are considered to express, with their crossdressing, a more authentic self, and the relationships with them are considered more intimate, and generate in clients a stronger emotional response.

4.3 Reasons for meeting a crossdresser escort

The contrast between the services offered by dansō kissa and dansō escorts is very useful in analysing the reasons behind the decision to date an escort. First, it seems that customers frequent escorts for their ability to listen, understand and provide emotional support. In the
eyes of the clients, people that they can meet outside the escort business cannot provide this. As explained by Reira: “To me dansō means therapy and longing (iyashi to akogare). For sure the therapeutic side is very important. They [escorts] are not kin, nor friends, but people to whom you can tell your problems, all those things you cannot tell at home or to your friends. They are a third option, the perfect advisors”. The position dansō occupy is not that of pure friendship or love, since the relationship is based on a monetary transaction. The escort becomes a new option, halfway between an expert counsellor and a best friend, who is skilled in listening, provides support and, at the same time, shows an emotional involvement with the client. Thus, the customer does not feel the pressure of judgements and social expectations, as she would if speaking with a friend, a relative or a co-worker, and at the same time she feels pampered and protected.

In all the interviews, my informants underlined the escorts’ abilities to offer what normal relationships, and especially relationships with men, do not provide. For Maya: “Working as escorts, dansō do things that a normal boyfriend never does. They treat you as special, and this makes me happy. Compared to a boyfriend, dansō are far better, real gentlemen! A date with them is like a dream!” Maya is in a committed relationship with her boyfriend but she finds dansō more satisfactory than him, and dating her favourite escort is a dreamy experience that a “normal” boyfriend is apparently unable to offer. For this reason, regardless of her love relationship, she does not want to stop attending Dreamland. Another interesting insight is offered by A:

First of all, from an aesthetic point of view, Dreamland’s garcons really look like men. But they are not only beautiful, everybody is really interesting and there are many different characters. I have little interest in only looking at them. I like their boyish style, and of course I would not be able to feel an emotion with a feminine girl, but is not because they are cool that I come here. Dating dansō I lost any interest in real men, they are rude, unkind, dirty and loud. In the past I did not care too much about it, but now it is impossible, for me men became a big no!

A dated men in the past, but after discovering the dansō world she put an end to heteronormative relationships, despite the fact that she does not define herself as homosexual.

The escorts’ supportiveness, the possibility of feeling emotions and of eventually falling in love with an escort are the main reasons that lead customers to date dansō. In B’s words: “More than going somewhere special, with dansō I like to do everyday things, like drinking tea or coffee, having a walk, and talking. Yes, conversation is what I want more. When I feel down I want somebody who hugs me, when I am worried I want someone who
listens to me. But the main purpose is for sure the emotion (yappari ichiban ōkina mokuteki toiu ka wa tokimeki da to iu).” As B clearly states, the special features that escorts offer are the emotional support, their skills as careful listeners which make the client feel like someone really cares about her, and the possibility of experiencing emotions.

According to customers, dates usually follow very common patterns, such as a dinner out or an afternoon coffee and chat, partly because a special experience such as a day out in a theme park, or a one or two day trip are very expensive options. It can also be argued that customers largely prefer ordinary dates which closely remind them of a non-commodified date and let them forget the feeling of unnaturalness that a more contrived experience could bring; as Yuki explained: “I like him [her escort] because he is so kind and during the date I do not feel like I am paying for it, he has a very natural behaviour that I really like”. Further, the clients’ interest is only partially related to the physical attractiveness of the escorts: obviously customers find dansō charming, and in some cases they choose an escort – at least at the beginning of the relationship – for his appearance, but this is not the main or only reason. Especially for those clients who do not identify as homosexuals or who are not looking for a boyfriend experience, a nice looking face and a slim body are only side benefits of dating an escort. Mei comments: “I do not only think that they are cool. I cannot say I come to Dreamland to meet cool dansō. I want to talk with them”.

A further reason for choosing a female crossdresser escort over a male escort is that a woman is considered to be able to understand another woman’s feelings better than a man, as B explains: “For example, garcons put sugar in your drinks, or they carry your bag, but I do not need these attentions. If I were on a real date with a boyfriend, he would never do such things, so it is fine if they do not do them either. To me, a good date is when he is able to understand my woman’s heart better than a man.” Clients feel loved and protected, without facing the risk of being misunderstood, or being seduced and deceived, as they think they might be by a man. Their evaluations of a reliable escort strongly echo stereotypical conceptions about men and women, and in this context, they see dansō escorts as providing the positive aspects of both the male and female genders. Dansō are protective, kind, charming and masculine like an ideal man (risōtekina otoko), but not threatening as men are; they are also emotional and empathic like a woman, but do not need the same type of psychological support that customers seek.

It is also very interesting to notice that clients too tend to identify dansō as a gender category per se, rather than aligning them with existing categories, as clearly explained by Mei: “Dansō is at the same time something homosexual and not homosexual. Once one
Garcon told me that his sex was dansō, and I completely agree. I asked him if he felt like sexless (chūsei), but his answer was no. Dansō are not men, not even women, nor sexless. It is something very blurred that you cannot define in gender language (jendā no kotoba). Here, Mei states that the common gender words male and female do not fit the description of dansō. Similarly, crossdressers cannot be completely associated with homosexuality, precisely because they are not clearly defined in gender terms. Oneechan stated: “I am not interested in men, but I do not like women either. I like dansō.” For Oneechan, dansō represent a third alternative. Similarly, R explained: “It is a very deep concept, I really cannot explain it. They are not men, but I cannot say they are women. And they protect you, they are marvellous (fushigi). Marvellous, in the best possible meaning”. For these customers, crossdresser escorts stand on their own as something different from male or female genders.

From these interview extracts it is possible to make a sketch of the kind of relationships customers claim to look for when dating a crossdresser escort. Regardless of gender and age range, clients say that they are in almost all cases looking for a companion, someone to talk to without the pressure that dominates social relations, especially in the Japanese context. The intimacy which develops date after date is what usually clients want to experience in dating a crossdresser escort, and what they feel unable to experience in their daily interactions with friends or partners. The intimacy is facilitated by the fact that dansō are believed to understand women’s feelings better than a man but, at the same time, are able to offer appealing aesthetic features to both heterosexual and homosexual women. Moreover, their uncertain gender and sexual orientation create a space free from categorization that allows customers to engage with them without necessarily confronting their potentially homosexual desire. Dansō provide an emotional experience offering an attentive partner who puts women’s needs first, the opposite of what clients in my sample thought they could obtain in their everyday lives from men.

Depending on the customer, the relationship can be defined as a romantic one, with the escort providing a boyfriend experience, or a close friendship with dansō taking the role of a counsellor, an advisor, or an older or younger brother who will offer unconditional support. Among this range of roles the position that the escort occupies can change and shift according to the evolution of the relationship itself and according to the customers’ needs.
4.4 DCR: the dansō-customer relationship

A dansō-customer relationship (hereafter DCR) is the relationship that, meeting after meeting, develops between a crossdresser and a customer. The relationships I investigate mostly belong to the “love experience” category and lasted at least two years (in almost all cases five years or longer). Except for one case, they were still continuing at the end of my fieldwork. I chose long term relationships to better understand how they changed over a longer time span and to show how deep the commitment may become. While for the customer a DCR is usually a unique experience, every crossdresser is called to nurture relationships with several customers simultaneously in order to increase and secure his monthly income. A relationship can be based on pure friendship or could have a romantic basis, and the two are not mutually exclusive. It is very unlikely for a customer to develop more than one romantic relationship with different escorts, but a client could date a favourite for romance and another dansō for friendship at the same time. Focusing on “love-like” or “boyfriend” experiences, I will show how those relationships become satisfactory at the point that clients involved in them are not looking for a partner outside the escort business. I will investigate the customers’ perspective about the date itself, and what kind of feelings they experience as they develop a close bond with him. Then, I will analyse the relationships from the point of view of the customers, focusing on their perceptions of the feelings involved and on the commitment to develop a DCR as a whole.

4.4.1 The beginning of the relationship

Customers get in touch with the dansō escort world in different ways. Some of them, usually the self-identified fujoshi clients, were already aware of the existence of dansō in the subculture landscape, or had a previous interest in cosplay and Boys’ Love productions that led them into the crossdresser escort service, in some cases through dansō kissa; other clients had a more or less fortuitous encounter with a garcon who explained directly about the escort service, and subsequently decided to meet him on a date; for many others, the first date followed an information search on the company website, and a period during which the prospective clients were following their favourite escort on social media before deciding to book a date. Despite the fact that the company website provides a clear explanation of the service offered and additional information, most of my informants reported how difficult it
was for them to understand the mode of operation of the company, which deterred them from booking a date straight away. For some informants, the first date was also their first time in the district of Akihabara, and they remembered being slightly scared by the “weird” atmosphere of the place and its inhabitants. Another reason for the delay between learning of the crossdresser escort service and arranging the first date lay in lack of information about the characters of the escorts. To solve this issue, the company website offers a personal page for all the escorts employed, which shows at least three professional pictures of the garcon wearing a suit, and very often also other pictures shot with different clothes, which are changed according to the seasons (for instance, in summer it is very common to upload a picture wearing yukata, while coat and scarves dominate the winter imagery). Personal details such as name (written both in kanji and romaji to ensure the correct way of reading it), height, birthplace, birthdate, and personal likes and dislikes are also provided. In addition there is a space where the garcon can leave a short message to clients and links to personal blogs and Twitter accounts. Even so, it can take a long time for customers to book a date: the majority of them read the blogs and follow Twitter accounts for between one and 12 months before meeting an escort. During this time the role of social media is fundamental for garcons to promote themselves and let the customers know more about them.

For the first date, customers usually book a one hour slot, which is considered an average amount of time to make up their mind about the person they are going to meet. First time clients can also benefit from the forty minute “trial course”, usually combined with a one hour date, to lengthen the time to be spent with the escort. The first date is commonly described through words such as kinchō suru (being nervous), wakuwaku (getting nervous or excited) or dokidoki (to palpitate). The choice of escort, which is usually based on examination of pictures, blog and Twitter, can also be suggested by those on reception that day, but this service costs an extra 500 yen. After the escort is chosen, he is usually confirmed or changed within one and three dates. If a client goes beyond the third date, she/he is considered as “taken” by the escort, who can likely count another customer in his personal pool, especially if the three dates occur over a short period of a month or less.

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67 According to my informants, their difficulties laid in understanding the role of dansō (were they escorts, guides, or offering sexual services?), and whether or not they were female-born individuals. This difficulty was mostly due to Dreamland’s being the first company offering a dansō escort service. Many clients at first misidentified Dreamland as a sort of host club, as a homosexual erotic entertainment, or as a particular form of cosplaying-related business. These misunderstandings also highlight the borderline position of the dansō escort companies as being in between part of the otaku culture and part of the fūzoku business (as explained in chapter 2.5).
From the clients' perspective, the first date is considered satisfactory if, in spite of their nervousness, the escort is able to keep the conversation alive and dissipate their anxiety. For instance, R recalled: “A friend of mine was a customer before me, and she told me 'Try to meet XXX, he seems to be a good guy' so I met him. The first time we met I was very nervous (kinchō shiteru), but he melted my anxiety away, and we had a nice conversation (sono kinchō wo hodoite kuretari toka, kekkō yasashiku hanashi kakete kureta).” A shared a similar memory:

The first time I was very nervous (kinchō shite), and it was also the first time in Akihabara for me, I did not know anything […] and when he arrived I thought he was even better than in the pictures, and I became more nervous. But being together and talking I was not nervous any more and at the end, when he hugged me, my heart was thumping in my chest (sugoku dokidokishita). I really enjoyed it (sugoku tanoshikatta).

The most important aspects that customers remember from their first date are the physical beauty of the dansō and the nice conversation they were able to sustain. However, even though those two qualities are usually highly valued by customers, and are also points on which the escorts focus intensively, they are not enough to secure a customer. Among the reasons for changing escort, my informants reported lack of affinity and also the inability of the escort to “strike the right chords” to emotionally move the customer. As B remembered:

The first time I came here as a customer I met one that now is not working any more, Hisashi. He was wonderful, he was like a character from a fairy tale. But he was too fabulous, I had fun with him but I was not able to feel emotionally involved. So a friend of mine suggested that I meet Shin. Since he was a veteran, he would be expert in dating for sure. So with this friend we booked Shin, Takumi, Minoru and Ryū. All of them were top stars at the time, but I only felt a feeling of friendship towards Shin. At other times I met Ryū and Minoru, but they were not suitable for me. I mean, I liked them a lot, they were very cool, but I was looking for something different. In the end Takumi was the one closest to me, and since he is a very good escort, he was able to move me, and I thought he was perfect.

B’s preference for Takumi highlights the centrality of emotions rather than physical features in the choice of an escort and in the continuation of a relationship.

However, the choice of the escort is not only made by the customer. In a case in which the garçon understands that his performance would not be considered satisfactory by the client, or if he understands that their personalities do not match at all, or if the escort strongly
dislikes the customer, he can suggest a more suitable dansō for her/him to meet among the Dreamland cast. This is especially expected of escorts who are not able or willing to provide boyfriend experiences but prefer to keep the relationship on a friendship level (when the customer wants more), or in the case of hobbies and a personality that perfectly matches with another crossdresser’s character. Eventually, customers will probably meet the first escort again as a friend or when their new favourite is booked by other clients: the first one would likely be their second best choice in the future.

4.4.2 The development of the relationship

After the choice is made, the client will start to date the escort on a fairly regular basis. The informants I selected usually met their favourite at least twice a month. In describing their feelings before, during and after a date, all the customers seem to share a similar pattern of emotions. Before the date, they are generally feeling positively nervous and anxious, thinking about the upcoming meeting. Those feelings are stronger in customers who have been using Dreamland for a shorter period of time (up to three years). In those cases, feelings could be so intense that clients are not even able to fall asleep, as Sacchan explained: “The night before I can barely sleep, I am super excited thinking about meeting him, and nervously thinking what we will do, I stay awake until morning. Then I wake up very early and think a lot about what to wear.” Especially before long dates, usually booked in advance, customers start to make preparation for the event the day before. As R explains:

The day before I check the clothes I want to wear. I choose them accordingly to the favourite colours of the garcon I am going to meet, and I also choose clothes that he likes, and if I do not have anything fine I buy new clothes. If I can, I also try to match my clothes with his clothes. And then I arrange my hair differently from my everyday style.

However, with longer use of the escort service, customers can eventually become accustomed to their dansō or to the service itself, and the strength of the above-mentioned feelings decreases, as in Mei’s account:

At the beginning I was very very nervous, head in the clouds, I was waiting for the date and I was also anxious, always thinking ‘What can I wear?’, and paying attention to the make-up and the hairstyle. Now I am kind of getting used to it, and I am also a bit tired, and if I do not feel like I
want to put too much effort into preparation I just do not do it. Basically it is not that I am not excited at all, but it is like I am going to meet a friend.

Mei is a very loyal customer who has used Dreamland for five years. She used to come from her home town, Nagano, to Tokyo to meet her favourite dansō. When she moved to Tokyo, she started to meet dansō weekly, and she not only meets her favourite, but several garcons, just to have some fun and to be able to talk with someone. However, with her favourite escort, what at the beginning was a feeling described as like a “first love” gradually evolved into a deep friendship feeling, while her excitement decreased.

During the date customers enjoy their time with the escort, whether they go somewhere new or just sip a coffee in an Akihabara coffee shop. A positive tension, described as excitement, is always present, and simultaneously feelings of happiness increase along with the enjoyment of the situation. The words customers used in all the cases to describe their feelings during the date are enjoyment and happiness (tanoshii and shiawase).

Thereafter, when the date is about to finish, clients’ feelings dramatically change. A hint of sadness cracks the dreamy atmosphere when, ten minutes before the end of the date, the escort receives a call from the reception, reminding the couple of the short time still available and bringing the clients back to the commodified nature of their date. To this melancholia, A reacts by trying to extend the available time and prolong the dream: “I always ask for an extension (enchō), because I become sad very soon. But after one or two additional hours I have to go, and I become so lonely (sugoku sabishikunaru)”. This sadness is expressed by Sacchan as follows: “When the date ends I have to come back home alone. I always think things like 'I want to meet him again' or 'I cannot meet him next week' and I start feeling lonely (sabishikunaru). I listen to gloomy songs and end up crying.” Then, clients usually spend the time until the next date following their favourite dansō through social media.

Long term DCRs show how the next meeting day can be anticipated by crossdressers, who adapt their shifts to the expected visit of their loyal clients, or even decide the next date after confirming the customer’s availability, by arranging a pre-booking at the reception, which the customer only needs to confirm. Although dates are usually conducted in similar settings (restaurants, cafes, or around Akihabara) and dansō tend to visit familiar places unless customers explicitly make other demands, every date stands for itself, and every customer has favourite activities to do with a specific escort and special needs to be satisfied. There are recommended courses that dansō suggest to the clients, which are season-inspired
(for instance, in December it is common to go together to the illumination spots scattered all around Tokyo, while spring is usually devoted to hanami\(^{68}\) dates), but several small details are different for each person and date. For instance, some customers want to be hugged at the end of the date, whereas shy clients prefer to avoid physical contact, especially in public places. There are people who want the escort to carry their bags, while others find this meaningless. When asked to select restaurants or other places to visit together, dansō need to keep in mind the customers' tastes and budget and, if possible, they should give priority to quiet places which can ensure privacy. Since in the successful establishment of intimate conversations lies the possibility of creating a strong bond with the customer, a quiet location permits the client to fully enjoy the date, while the escort can increase the possibility of winning over the client. In the end, when a DCR develops, the client will not only be pleased with the service as a whole, but specifically with the person she is dating, nurturing deep and intense feelings for him, as verbalized by R: “When people ask me why I like him, it is difficult to answer. Date by date, knowing him, talking to him, I found him trustworthy, gentle, cool (tayori ga atte, yasashikute yappari kakkoii mo arimasu). In everything he does, like the way he eats, he is so cute and...I just like him”. When clients feel at ease with the escort, they will be ready to open their heart, and their openness will be echoed by a supportive, reassuring, and possibly flirty reaction by the crossdresser. Date by date customers can feel closer to their dansō, and the DCR will start to host feelings of intimacy enabled by mutual knowledge and understanding; on their side, escorts put great effort into remembering every small detail regarding their customers: this memory work enables them to foresee clients’ desires and, at the same time, surprise the client, showing them how important their presence is considered. The customer starts to feel loved, and this sensation of wellness, given by the perfect partner, results in more frequent dates, messages on Twitter, presents, and purchases of gadgets related to the customer’s love object. After a DCR two or more years long, ten informants out of eleven declared that for them garcons are more important than a real man, and they are not looking for a male partner because their dansō is the best substitute.

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\(^{68}\) *Hanami* is the Japanese traditional custom of viewing cherry blossom in spring.
4.4.3 End and aims of the relationship

All but one of the DCRs I observed during my fieldwork, were still underway at its end. The longest was an eight year old relationship, while the shortest had started two years before. Every relationship is characterized by some “turning points”, moments which mark when the relationship changes. I observed the following common turning points in a DCR:

- first date: after wondering about which escort would be the best, the client chooses one and books a date. This turning point marks the passing of the customer’s initial fears and she can start the relationship;
- the fourth date: this marks the official beginning of a relationship, since if a customer does not change her mind during the first three dates, she can be considered as “taken” by her escort;
- first love declaration: this turning point, from the client’s perspective, marks the wish to pursue a love like experience and not a friendly frequentation. From the escort’s point of view, it shows the wish to maintain a client, and does not arrive before one year of regular dates.

After the love declaration by a customer and a positive response by the escort, it is possible to argue that the relationship will not intensify further, since reciprocated love is the highest level a DCR can reach. The dates between the fourth and the love declaration are those during which the DCR develops and the intimacy between the two increases. Subsequent to a love declaration, the relationship proceeds in a stable way and tends to reproduce itself date after date, not moving towards a goal but renewing itself.

However, with the passing of time, it is not unusual for feelings to change, and for love to change into friendship. If feelings disappear, the relationship itself can end. If it is the customer who ends the relationship, this happens because her feelings turn cold. This may be due to the escort’s failure to keep the emotions in the DCR alive; alternatively, escorts can also actively decide to invest more into new customers who are more prone to spend money on him, and let the relationship with a previous customer descend into the “friendship” realm. The customer feels the emotional involvement disappearing and may decide to switch to a new escort, who can thrill her again, while keeping the first escort as a best friend or a second option. This eventuality is not perceived by clients as very traumatic, and they are usually able to cope with this kind of separation, avoiding strong negative reactions.
There are also cases in which the end arrives unexpectedly, and hits the customer hard for that reason. This happens for instance when escorts quit the job due to personal reasons (such as the beginning of a full time working position, or the wish to abandon the escort life). Despite company instructions about the correct way to inform customers of a forthcoming goodbye, escorts do sometimes quit suddenly. If this ends a committed relationship, it can be felt as painful, equal in negative complications to an abrupt break up with a lover. Two kinds of separations were clearly explained by Flower:

At the beginning I was dating Ryoya. We started as friends, but then we became more. But I started feeling nervous (nābasu). He is the younger son and he is very spoiled, and there were dates when he was thinking to have fun more than to entertain me. The relationship changed, and I started to meet another garcon. Now, I have not met Ryoya for two years. In the meantime, I was also dating Kosuke. He was my best friend for three years. But then he suddenly quit, and I felt so lonely, I want to cry.

Flower accepted that her relationship with the escort providing a boyfriend experience was over, and simply moved on to another garcon when she did not feel satisfied any more. This switch was not marked by negative comments, nor did it seem to cause her an emotional down. In contrast, she describes the unexpected end of the relationship with the escort she considered to be her best friend as a very painful episode, a loss she still mourns.

As Galbraith (1999:134) noted in analysing relationships between maids and customers of maid cafes, alternative forms of intimacy “often go unnoticed in a world that only recognizes and values intimacy in the couple or family”. However this does not reduce their significance. Taking into account perspectives of “affective labour”, contemporary capitalist societies support the development of alternative affectional communities (D’Emilio, 2007). In the last ten years, Japan has often been called a “muen shakai” or a “society of no-relation” (Allison, 2013; Ball, 2018; Nozawa, 2015). This definition describes a situation of social isolation due to the dissolution of familial and other types of human bonds. However, other forms of interactions and provisions of human intimacy have developed, creating alternative forms of sociality. The wide Japanese “affective market” involving hostess, hosts, maids, and also

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69 The word first appeared as the title of a TV documentary produced by Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai, Japan’s public broadcasting company (NHK Special 2010). Broadcast in 2010, the documentary focused on different cases of loneliness and disconnection. The term en may be rendered as “social relatedness” (Nozawa, 2015); Rowe (2011:45-46) also suggests “bond” and “connection”.

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dansō can thus be read as a response arising from individuals’ need for human interactions, different from previous familiar relationships but not necessarily less intense or meaningful.

For instance, Galbraith defines affective relationships between maids and regulars as a “circle”. A circle “is a loose association of people who support someone or something. Relations between any given member of the circle and what they support are not private or exclusive, because others are also in relations with the person or thing and with one another. A promiscuous affective charge moves through the circle […] the circle is a concrete, joyful encounter of heterogeneous bodies” (2013b: 113). Those relationships should not be considered as “failed”, but simply as different from a heteronormative perspective about coupling and its goals. Similarly, DCRs are affective relationships which develop differently from a heteronormative path: they do not involve heterosexuality, they are subjected to market rules, and they are not exclusive. Nevertheless they exist, the emotions at work within them are strong, and customers involved claim to find them more satisfactory than non-commodified relationships.

4.5 Reality, fantasy and performance in DCR

As clients express it, their feelings toward the escorts are strong and intense. Clients usually adopt expressions like tomodachi ijō koibito miman, suki, ren’ai, (more than a friend less than a boyfriend, I like him, love relationship) to describe their relationship with an escort. However, the role they assign to their garcon can be positioned along a spectrum, from a supportive friend to a perfect boyfriend. When I asked R to define her relationship with her favourite escort, she responded: “He is so many things to me, it is difficult to explain. We are friends…no, we look like a couple.” While she is not able to make a clear demarcation between friendship and love, she is aware of the different roles dansō can take for her. Sacchan is better able to identify the shifting positions of her dansō: “Sometimes he is like an older brother, sometimes he takes the role of a little brother, but he is also reliable as a boyfriend, and we behave as a couple would do.” In any case these relationships are very intense, as shown by Mei: “The closest explanation is to say that we are a couple. Sometimes we are best friends, but sometimes he is more than this to me. I think in any case we share a great intimacy (shitashii).” The higher the number of dates and the hours spent together, the deeper the intimacy becomes, allowing the customers to better express their thoughts, and consequently making the emotional involvement and the commitment towards a specific
escort stronger. Therefore a monetary commitment is also required, since every date becomes possible only upon payment of the designated fee. Hence, relationships are characterized by a high level of intimacy and commitment, both expressed through the time and money invested in the relationships, though they lack a sexual aspect.

To understand those relationships it is necessary to understand the sometimes blurred border and the inter-relational play between the worlds of reality, fantasy, play, and performance.

As explained in chapter 3.4, dansō, when working as escorts, can be considered as both fictional characters and real individuals. To an extent, they perform character types in response to the preferences of clients, but their performed selves tend to be grounded in an expression of what they feel natural for themselves. The double context of fantasy and reality is also present in customers’ self-presentation. It is not unusual for clients, when meeting dansō, to choose a nickname for themselves. This can be read as a way to detach themselves from their identity as experienced outside the escort world. It is also possible that, in presenting themselves to an escort, clients actively decide to show a different self from that they normally present outside the escort world, an imagined self, or just to talk about some aspects of their lives while hiding some others they do not want to share. Such self-presentations can entail a form of role-playing by customers. For instance, in choosing to tell an escort about her problems at work, a client is tacitly asking to be comforted. On the other hand, women who present themselves as more assertive may want to show themselves as not dependent on a man or a lover, and mostly looking for entertainment. These can be called forms of performative play that customers can adopt to make their experience of the escort service more enjoyable, or more specifically tailored to their interests. In a sense, the date takes place in reality, and both customers and dansō are real individuals. However, “real” and “reality” are concepts informed by the presence of play and performativity that to different extents are present in every DCR.

Similarly, information about who dansō are outside the frame of paid dates cannot be shared: company rules dictate that crossdressers not share personal information. Clients are told not to ask such questions that escorts cannot answer, and even if clients do ask such questions, they are also aware that crossdressers will probably avoid answering, or else not
tell the truth. Without this personal knowledge, it is not possible either for customers or crossdressers to draw a clear line between the real and performed selves.⁷⁰

Basing their interactions only on the information made available during dates, not only honest expressions of the self but also what is performed become real in a sense, if we define “reality” as something that is taking place in the material world between two living individuals. These performed selves do not need to exist in the same way outside DCRs, as they are enacted precisely for the purpose and in the regulated space of the date experience. Hence, part of the customers’ enjoyment is rooted in the possibility of moving across different layers of “reality” and “fantasy”, both as present during dates and as embodied by escorts (and customers themselves). Customers do not rely on the escort service simply to obtain commodified relationships, but also to enjoy the mixture of reality and fantasy and the kind of interactional possibilities this mixture entails. This double nature of DCRs also allows customers to diverge from specific gendered scripts they perceive as characterizing non-commodified heterosexual relationships. Clients are not required to be “wives and mothers”, they do not need to be sexually available or to take care of their “man”. These alternative relationships create a wide space for different possibilities and interactions between dansō and clients, and despite the more or less high level of performativity involved in DCRs, nevertheless those relationships entail a high degree of intimacy and, especially for clients, a great emotional investment.

Another perspective to take into consideration when evaluating the interrelation between reality and fantasy in DCRs is the lack of sexual intimacy between dansō and customers. Customers are often in love with their dansō, and they are free to confess their love, but they not always obtain a love declaration in return from garcons. Still, the relationship is exciting for the possibilities (even if ultimately unfulfilled) that clients buy when purchasing a date: the possibility of falling in love, of being loved in return, and maybe of overcoming the rule forbidding sexual interactions between crossdressers and customers. This ambiguity allows

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⁷⁰ Even though dansō cannot and will not provide customers with personal information about their private lives, during conversation they do share personal tastes, likes, dislikes, and opinions about matters ranging from light topics such as fashion brands, music or cinema, to deeper questions such as Japanese politics or social issues. As far as I could tell, what dansō shared on such topics were mostly honest expressions of their thoughts and feelings, and represented the part of their character that they are willing to share with clients. What dansō mostly perform and counterfeit are expressions of feelings (especially love feelings) toward a customer. Hence customers who often date the same crossdresser can develop a good knowledge of his non-counterfeited personality, and can prefer a crossdresser more than another specifically for his personality traits.
customers enough space to move, at least in terms of imagining different possible scenarios. Garcons reported a great number of requests to share their private details (telephone number, Line ID, address) and offers or requests of a sexual nature (see chapter 5.4). Dansō entertainment cannot therefore be considered the type of fantasy world where the customers indulge in an emotional and platonic image of love, without a sexual side to the relationship, as exemplified, for instance, by Takarazuka performances and their fans.

In their analysis of Takarazuka Revue, Karen Nakamura and Matsuo Hisako (2002) underline how, during the show, Takarazuka fans experience an “emotional catharsis” (67) which allows them to escape into a world of fantasy, populated by “ideal men” who have very little in common with real men, and especially with fans’ husbands. Furthermore, they highlight how, for female and also male fans, the actresses and especially the otokoyaku, are not seen as subjects of sexual fantasies, so that Takarazuka becomes a “special type of asexual, agendered space created through the actor-fan relationship” (128). Although, like the otokoyaku, dansō escorts embody the risōtekina otoko – the ideal man – and the frame of the paid date can provide a dreamlike space, the customers’ fantasies are often set in a very bodily field, and have a partially sexual nature. Dansō, with their natural appearance, no marked makeup and non-theatrical clothes, offering dates that could potentially take place with a boyfriend, answer to what clients are craving for: a realistic experience. The dreamlike aspect of the date, unlike the fantasy world created during Takarazuka performances, is rooted in a simulacrum of reality, and the experience satisfies clients insofar as they can perceive it as such.

However, customers’ requests for fulfilment of sexual desires are usually disappointed, and so the world of fantasy becomes the one where clients may experience this side of the relationship. During dates a subtle erotic tension is often present, even if not fulfilled or openly expressed, and fantasy becomes a way to sublimate sexual desires that are very unlikely to be achieved in reality and are banished to the realm of reveries. The heteronormative view that identifies a successful relationship with being sexually active is challenged, and the inter-relations between the two levels of reality and fantasy contribute to making DCR long-lasting.

It could be argued that the gap between what clients crave and what escorts provide could lead to dissatisfaction and, consequently, to the end of the relationship. But although customers could be seen as not totally satisfied, none stated (when asked) that she would date her favourite dansō outside of company rules and the hourly fee. Apparently, customers are aware that the high quality dates they can obtain are a direct consequence of the fact that they
are investing their money in an extremely specialized service, and that if the date were not paid for, the escorts’ behaviour would eventually turn cold or at least different from the staged attitude they provide during dates. This was made explicit by one of the crossdresser informants, Takumi: “Even though they are in love they also pay, and this is the reason why I put all my efforts into delivering a good service. Because you pay me I have this appearance that you like, and if you want a relationship for free this character will disappear. I am this way exactly because you pay (okane atta kara koso no kono hito nda)!”

In one interesting example, an informant (who asked in this case to be completely anonymized) was successful in meeting a crossdresser outside business hours, but reported the experience as absolutely unsatisfactory:

I absolutely do not want to meet him [her current escort] outside [Dreamland]. To be honest, in the past, I secretly exchanged my address and phone number with a dansō who worked here, and we met several times. At the beginning it was a good friendship, but then we got more selfish towards each other, and it was not clear any more who would have to pay for what and the relationship was totally destroyed. So, I do not want to do it anymore!

Developing a double relationship “inside” and “outside” Dreamland led in this case to an undefined relationship, where it was not clear who was in charge of providing company to whom, and the economic compensation, since it was not clearly defined, was a cause of anxiety which ended up in a rupture of the relationship and not in deeper mutual knowledge. The experience was negative for both parties, and the customer involved decided not to repeat it. Once the relationship moves outside the regulated space of the commodification, it thus loses the structures that help to ensure its particular quality for the clients.

4.6 An “augmented reality”

According to the analysis so far, we can affirm that customers perceive the dansō escort service as a world in between reality and fantasy, and their fascination resides exactly in this double nature of the escort system and of dansō themselves. In this existence in between, is it possible to understand dansō as 2.5 dimensional characters, a middle ground between reality and the fantasy world? The definition of 2.5 dimensional reality or space (nitengo jigen kūkai) was coined by Honda Tōru in his book Moeru otoko (2005) and applied to maid cafes. These cafes occupy a liminal space between reality and fantasy, providing a safe area for otaku men.
to foster their love feelings towards maids, characters who are considered 2.5 dimensional (Honda, 2005: 18-19). Galbraith argues that “the maid café is where those worlds [two and three dimensional worlds] most dramatically intersect with and impact the world of everyday human relations” (2013a: 6). However, while this definition and the concept of a 2.5 dimensional world can be considered pertinent in the case of dansō cafes, it does not completely fit within the dansō escorting context. First of all, with its lack of a defined space where dates – and hence relationships – are carried out, but definitely embedded in the material world, the escort service is characterized as an experience itself, and not a place to experience something. Then, with interpreters who try to be and offer an experience that could be perceived as real, the world of dansō and the escort service they provide can be seen as an “augmented reality” rather than a 2.5 dimensional space. Augmented reality has been variously defined as “augmenting natural feedback to the operator with simulated cues” (Milgram et. al., 1994: 283), “a situation in which a real world context is dynamically overlaid with coherent location or context sensitive virtual information” (Klopfer and Squire, 2008: 205) or as a way to create an enhanced reality, bridging virtual and real worlds (Bronack, 2011). Drawing on these definitions, I take the term from its original setting to define an experience taking place in the material world but enhanced through the strategic deployment by crossdresser escorts of specific behaviours, mostly not occurring in relationships outside the frame of a monetary transaction, with the aim of offering clients an experience to be perceived as better than those that can be encountered in non-commodified relationships.

If crossdressers must show and perform behaviours, manners and actions that are very unlikely to be found in a partner (man or woman) in non-commodified relationships, it is also true that they are required to be natural, and are highly evaluated by clients for their natural appearance (for this reason crossdresser escorts are not allowed to wear wigs or to bleach their hair in unnatural colours). Even though clients’ expectations of a date are very high and they wish for a perfect experience, as well as being ready to complain when their expectations are disappointed, they are also looking for experiences and dates that they can perceive as non-contrived. It must also be noted that, as Galbraith points out, the word used to represent feelings towards 2.5 dimensional characters (like maids), is *moe*, which

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71 The word *moe* is much used in studies about affection and emotions in contemporary Japan, although its meaning remains ambiguous: it is often simplified as a (sexual) attraction experienced by *otaku* men towards female characters in manga, anime or games, but the definition can also be used in referring to *fujoshi* girls or women and their attraction towards beautiful male fictional characters (Saito T., 2011:29).
characterizes an emotional response related to characters consciously interpreted as outside reality, in the realm of “pure fantasy” (2009). For instance, Azuma (2007) highlighted the importance for crossdressers working in dansō cafes of embodying a recognizable character from the Boys’ Love imaginary to help customers to develop interest and feelings of moe towards a specific member of the staff. However (as explained in 3.4), this is not completely true for dansō escorts, who do not embody so closely a specific character, despite incorporating fictional aspects in their creation of a masculine self. None of my client informants used the word moe to describe their feelings towards an escort. Moe is felt towards a fictional character, while my informants’ feelings are directed towards material human beings, and hence differently defined.

Thus, I argue that the escort service cannot be assimilated within a 2.5 dimensional world, but on the contrary is intrinsically linked to the material world, and that what crossdresser escorts offer and clients want is an “augmented” reality, deprived of the negative aspects that can interfere in imperfect everyday life, and enhanced with features that are very unlikely to be found in non-commodified relationships. The economic transaction marks the distinction between the two forms of experience, and ensures a high standard of service for customers. The emotional labour (see chapter 5) that dansō perform is a way to provide customers with a brighter and non-threatening emotional experience. Meanwhile, customers apply a sort of “suspension of disbelief” (see also chapter 5.2) to fully enjoy the date and the emotions it provides, forgetting about those aspects (e.g. the phone calls to and from the office defining the start and the end of the date, the necessity for clients to pay for all the expenses during a date) that show the date to be a specifically tailored and purchased experience. Moreover, in analysing DCRs and their existence within a mixture of reality, fictionality and performativity, it is necessary to consider that, in Japan, the definition of “authentic” does not always coincide with “real”. As Joy Hendry points out in her analysis of Japanese theme parks, “a Japanese version of authenticity requires less of a notion of ‘reality’ than an accurate or correct simulation of a ‘real’ place, and possibly also a ‘faithful’ experience for the visitor” (2000: 156). Drawing on Hendry’s view, dating a dansō can be seen as an authentic experience, because dates are moulded on the image of what a perfect date or love relationship should be, where the positive aspects are strategically enhanced by the use of fantasy and performance, and that is apparently deprived of any negative side. In this sense, dating a dansō can be an “augmented reality”, life-like but fictional-artificial at the same time.
4.7 Buying love?

After having presented how DCRs are structured and conducted, I will briefly analyse whether, and to what extent, engaging in a commodified relationship, where emotions are exchanged and offered for money, represents a benefit for clients. After frequenting Dreamland and its customers for a while, I formed a construct about how romantic love and romanticism were perceived by my sample. For my customer informants, romance was experienced as an emotion *per se*, a condition in the client’s mind and heart that fulfilled their aspiration for an emotional thrill, and also a way to enhance self-esteem. A similar situation was highlighted by Takeyama (2016) in her analysis of male hosts’ clientele, and the same dynamics that affect the women she interviewed are at work in the case of dansō escorts’ clients. More than “finding love” or their significant other, clients want to live a love story, to be in the position to experience the *tokimeki* – the strongly beating heart – the feeling of being in love with someone, to be loved and flattered by a devoted prince charming. Some of the women I met thought it was impossible for them to experience romance in real life; for others, it was something that would interfere with their working life; for still others, it was something that, for societal reasons, could not be obtained and enjoyed in everyday life. For all these women, the escort service represents the best way to fulfil their need for romance and love, to experience the excitement of being in love and being loved, without having to confront the problematics of non-commodified love relationships. For instance, while a real lover has his or her own schedule, and arranging meetings can be difficult in the usually very tight Japanese working system, escorts are almost always available, sometimes at very short advance notice; clients can choose the escort they prefer, from an aesthetic and behavioural point of view, while they are not judged according to the same parameters or refused for not matching the beauty or behaviour standards of their partners; clients do not have to behave kindly, while escorts must tolerate the selfish behaviour and rude manners of a paying customer as far as possible; customers can put an end to the relationship, while escorts are not allowed to do so (with the exception of very extreme cases, as I will show in chapter 5); dating a dansō, given the limitation imposed by the contract that both parties have to sign, is a way to avoid undesired sexual intimacy and all the risks connected to it (as an unwanted pregnancy); for married clients, dating a crossdresser woman is a way to enjoy a sort of extramarital affair yet avoid accusations of cheating on their husbands (since escorts are women, and the meeting is ‘bought’, clients do not define or perceive meeting a dansō as
cheating). It must also be taken into consideration that dating a woman can be subjected to a strongly negative judgement by society. The crossdresser escort service can be presented as a hobby rather than a sexual inclination that conflicts with heteronormative life ideals. Moreover, the crossdresser escort service does not require customers to interact even partially with the world of female homosexuality: from this point of view, it is an easy way to explore and experience lesbianism without too much involvement.

For all these reasons, from a practical perspective, clients find that dating an escort is easier and more satisfactory than carrying on non-commodified relationships. The act of purchasing romance makes the clients feel safer, similar to a buyer purchasing a service, and the risk of being refused is extremely limited. Apparently, the index of satisfaction is not influenced by the fact that the crossdresser escorts only perform being in love with their clients. Customers do not take this into consideration in evaluating the emotional satisfaction that they obtain by meeting escorts; furthermore, they prefer to think that the emotions shown are honestly felt rather than only performed, again resorting to a suspension of disbelief. The benefits of the purchased emotional experience also involve the realm of self-evaluation and, consequently, of clients’ psychological wellbeing. Having a committed admirer is, for instance, a way to enhance a neglected femininity. Married women in their late 40s or older, who are usually perceived as de-sexualized, can find new stimuli in romantic love with a garçon; single women can use their purchased relationship to show (to themselves and others) that they are sentimentally active. Thanks to the presence and the attentions of a dansō, clients feel desired, and re-discover their womanhood, taking renewed care of themselves through fashion, make up, and body care in order to be pretty and desirable for their dansō, in a process that increases levels of self-esteem. The ren’ai būmu (romance boom) of the 1990s in Japan was presented as “the ideal expression for a new womanhood” (Takeyama, 2016: 114) and this perspective is mirrored in the romance bought from dansō escort companies.

However, it is not correct to conceive the purchase of romance by a client as the purchase of a simple good: in establishing, nurturing, and experiencing a love relationship with an escort, clients do not occupy a passive role, but actively play the game of love they bought. The game does not provide an autoplay mode, and the escort’s efforts are insufficient if not sustained and balanced by the client’s will to fall in love; relationships with crossdressers require customers to engage with the escort to develop the feelings sought. Therefore, clients avoid thinking that their love story is just a performance put on stage by an actor. In order to make the seduction game work, and to let the emotions flow, clients have to abandon their rational side and fully enjoy the dream they want to live, enhancing the
experience with the possibility of presenting a different version of themselves, thus enjoying both the real and fictional sides of the DCR.

**Conclusion**

As shown in this chapter, the clients who benefit from the dansō escort service are very different in terms of their age, marital status and reasons for meeting a crossdresser escort. Some of them approached the escort service after a first contact with the dansō world at a dansō kissa. However, after meeting crossdresser escorts, clients showed a marked preference for this kind of dansō related entertainment over the cafes, which in almost all cases they stopped attending. Their preference for the escort service lies in the possibility of developing close and intimate relationships with escorts, a feature that kissa fail to provide. With regard to the kind of relationship that a customer wants to experience by dating crossdresser escorts, a DCR can be intended to provide friendship, with dansō taking on the role of best friend and counsellor; alternatively, relationships can also be thought as a love-like experience, where the garçon’s role becomes that of the perfect boyfriend. The dansō escort is considered in any case the best partner because of his matchless blend of positive masculine (risōtekina otoko) and feminine (listening ability and perfect understanding of women’s feelings) qualities, so even though the DCR can change its nature, and shift from love to friendship and vice versa, clients always evaluate crossdresser escorts’ abilities highly. Regardless of the type of relationship, the feelings of the clients involved are strong and intense, and the commitment to an escort can be very high, both in terms of economic investment and time devoted to the escort service. For this reason, usually DCRs lasts for years, even though they do not aim at goals such as cohabitation or marriage. A mutual love declaration can be considered as a DCR’s highest peak, and subsequently the relationship can only proceed on a stable basis or else decrease in terms of the feelings involved. This deintensification of feelings can be due to the escort’s inability to keep a customer’s emotions alive, or can be accepted matter-of-factly by those garçons who want to invest more energy and time into new customers. When a relationship ends because of lack of feeling, the unsatisfied customer can turn to another escort, and maintain a friendly relationship with the first. However, it can also happen that the end of the story comes abruptly through the dansō’s quitting the escort job. In this case, feelings of pain and sadness are commonly experienced by customers. In conclusion, I argue that the escort service that dansō provide can be interpreted as an “augmented reality”: an
experience happening in the material world, which offers clients only the bright side of a relationship, specifically enhanced by escorts’ behaviours, which also incorporate “fictional” aspects that positively works in clients’ definition of DCRs as extremely satisfactory emotional experiences. Customers enjoy being in love and being loved in return (albeit without sexual relations), almost excluding the eventuality of being rejected or hurt by their lover. Dates represent a regulated space which clients can enter upon payment, which allows emotional and social experimentation and that can be apparently left safely without any obligations. Clients can buy their ideal romance provided by their ideal partner, and experience a date that, regulated by a monetary transaction, perfectly answers their emotional needs. In addition, the space of the date represents for clients a possibility to play with their identity, potentially presenting or performing a different version of themselves which finds a space to exist in a limited time frame. As dansō play with their identity and emotions, also performing a character for the clients’ sake, clients can also play a character on their own. However, as I shall explore in the next chapter, there are some serious emotional costs involved in the escort business for both dansō and customers.
Chapter 5

WORKING WITH EMOTIONS – THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE BUSINESS

Introduction

In this chapter I will frame the dansō escort service within the wider “affective labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293) market, with specific regard to Japan. Then, I identify the work that dansō perform as a kind of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), explaining how crossdresser escorts strategically show or suppress emotions to fulfil their job’s requirements. I highlight how dansō perform and sell emotions, discussing how far it is possible to talk of “counterfeit intimacy” (Enck and Preston, 1988) in the crossdresser escort service. Previous studies on workers in occupations defined as “people work” (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Hunter, 2001), or occupations where the management of emotions is an important part of the job, underlined how workers, in performing emotions, often face several negative consequences (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Erickson and Ritte, 2001; Mann, 2004; Sharma and Black, 2001; Sutton, 1991). Those consequences can have strong implications in everyday life, and also cast a shadow on the psychological wellbeing of those involved, in this case crossdressers and clients. I shall provide an analysis of the strategies adopted (Erickson, 2004; Mann, 2004; Sanders, 2004; 2005a; 2005b) by crossdressers to handle the most common negative side effects of the escort service, namely emotive dissonance, stress and depression. I also analyse the negative backlashes which might affect regular clients, even though the experience of dating a dansō should be, as ideally imagined by customers, free from the negative issues and consequences that can arise in everyday relationships. In doing so I analyse the possible tension arising in relationships between dansō and customers, and between dansō and Dreamland management, discussing if, and to what extent, it is possible to talk of exploitation in the dansō escort work.

I shall conclude by showing that, notwithstanding the positive impact that the escort service can have on dansō in terms of freedom of gender expression, and on clients with regard to the support received and the possibility to experience emotion, in DCRs there are also negative aspects, affecting both escorts and customers, which influence individuals’ perception of their relationships with others (partners, friends, family, etc.) and which might negatively affect their lives from a monetary, relational, and psychological standpoint. These
aspects are inherent to the escort business, and cannot completely be avoided. However, individuals involved in the escort business develop different coping strategies to handle what both dansō and clients consider necessary evils.

5.1 The Japanese “affective labour” market

According to Lazzarato (1996; 2008), immaterial labour “produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (1996; 133) and “it exists only in the form of network and flows” (137). Contemporary capitalist societies’ economies are characterised by immaterial labour that, as argued by Hardt and Negri (2000), takes three main tendencies: the production of informatization, the development of symbolic-analytical services, and affective labour. Of particular interest to the case of dansō is affective labour.

Affective labour is defined as performed through actual or virtual human interactions, which produce “intangible feelings of ease, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293) and it is “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that the products are intangible” (Hardt 1999: p. 96). In this sense, capitalism has become more a “production of mode” than a “mode of production” (Featherstone, 2009: 7) or production of goods, and the consumption of a “good” (whatever its nature) is no longer only based on the purchase, possession and (eventually) destruction of the good itself, but also on the creation of a sense of belonging and of an emotional state generated by or felt toward the produced good. Hence, the concept of affective labour is particularly relevant to my analysis of the dansō escorts business and DCRs.

In Japan, the development in different fields of “affective labour” was observed by Allison (2009), Galbraith (2013), Arai (2013), Lukács (2010), and Takeyama (2010; 2016), among others. Allison highlighted how affective labour, through the creation of attachment and emotional states, is productive in terms of capital, but is negatively influencing society with regard to biological and social reproduction, by putting Japanese youth in precarious employment conditions (2009: 91). Takeyama (2016) focused instead on women as consumers of affective labour provided by hosts, and pointed out how they can be negatively judged for indulging in such entertainment, where they are required to economically support an entertainer. What is considered as “negative” in pursuing love fantasies with a host, is that those dreams of romance could distance women from their social roles and responsibilities, as
noted also by Sugiura (2006a) about fujoshi women fans of yaoi\(^\text{72}\) productions. Generally speaking, adult women are stigmatized for not actively pursuing their perceived fundamental role as established by the patriarchal values of the society, that is, to get married and raise children.

Drawing on Lazzarato (2008), immaterial labour mostly produces communication based on the continuous creation of information. Affective labour, as a subset of immaterial labour, is the production of human communications and interactions, to be made recurrent by the development of an affective bond between providers and clients. Affect is characterized by the ability to affect and to be affected (Clough and Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2002), and in the contemporary economic scenario dominated by commodification and biopolitics,\(^\text{73}\) affect lies on the border between autonomy and market (Clough, 2010: 219). Following Allison, “the ability to generate affection in consumers is what distinguishes a brand – that exists more in people’s minds – from a product – that resides more as a material thing” (2009; 94). Starting from this concept, it is possible to understand what dansō do and offer to clients not just as a product to be purchased, but also as an emotional investment to create affective bonds with potential consumers, as a part of the larger affective market within the current Japanese socio-economic landscape. Crossdressers respond to a specific market’s demand, namely to cater to the needs of niche female clients not interested in heterosexual relationships provided by male cis-gender providers. Arguably, dansō produce affect in terms of feelings, and at the same time they are affected by the interactions they establish with clients. On the one hand, the escort job positively affects a dansō’s life by providing a space for self-expression (as explained in chapter 3) but, on the other hand, this occupation potentially puts them at risk of exploitation, as I will address later in this chapter. As I will explore in the next section, garçons perform and sell emotions to fulfil the requirements of their escort job. Affect and emotions, in the case of crossdresser escorts and their clients, are thus commodified and subjected to market rules. Despite the difficulty of disentangling the commodified, honestly felt, and performed feelings of both clients and customers, since these feelings are mixed up in the performative play in which both dansō and clients participate, my attempt in this chapter is to define the emotional exchange between crossdressers and clients through the lenses of affective and emotional labour. In doing so, I will highlight the tensions arising between market labour and the need for self-expression, as well as the risk of

\(^{72}\) *Yaoi* is an alternative term for Boys’ Love (see footnote 53).

\(^{73}\) I draw here on the definition of biopolitics given by Clough et al. as “the extension of an economic rationality to all aspects of society, including life-itself” (2007: 72).
exploitation crossdressers and clients could be subjected to, showing how the navigation of these tensions requires constant negotiation.

5.2 Performing and selling emotions

Aside from a minority of clients with whom the relationship, as I will show, is based on an honestly felt – albeit unbalanced – exchange of feelings, what escorts do in the majority of dates is to perform emotions, in a way that Arlie Hochschild (1983) defined as “emotional labour”. According to Hochschild, emotional labour is “the management of feeling to create publicly observable facial and bodily display” (7). In some workplaces, where dealing with the public is mandatory, workers are required to adapt their emotions when interacting with clients, in order to conform with the rules of the organization. This leads workers to express a wide range of usually positive emotions which are not actually felt and, at the same time, to conceal feelings that are felt yet not communicated. In the case of dansō, the managed emotions are primarily those belonging to the world of love and affection, feelings that all the escorts must display in carrying out dates with clients. According to Hochschild, the management of emotions is performed in two different ways: through “surface acting” and “deep acting” (33). In surface acting, the person who is performing a character or an emotion pretends to feel or to be a certain way for the sake of the clients. The outer expressions and behaviours are consciously modified and adapted to the audience, but the inner feelings can strongly contrast with the performed self. Conversely, in deep acting the performer works on his/her own inner feelings in order to modify outward expressions and behaviours accordingly. The emotions are self-induced, and the external representation is based on modification of what is felt inside. There are two main methods of producing deep acting performances. The first works through exhortation, used to prevent or invoke a specific feeling which can be appropriate or sanctioned in a certain situation. For example, when receiving a present, even if we do not like it, we exhort ourselves to politely express gratitude toward the person who bought it for us. The second way involves the use of imagination and emotion-memory to depict or recall to the performer’s memory the emotions felt in a similar situation, which are also suitable in the case involved. Instead of producing and showing fake emotions that contrast with inner feelings, the performer stimulates his emotion-memory to recall how he/she felt in the past, or tries to imagine how he/she would feel in the same situation as the client (or audience), and subsequently reacts to this self-induced emotional
stimulus. In this case the emotional reaction will not only be appropriate for the moment, but will also lead the performer to be *emotionally present* in the situation.

My *dansō* informants often defined their work as *kokorozukai*, literally work in which the “heart” is used, and, by extension, work where it is important to take others’ feelings into deep consideration. In their management of emotion, *dansō* strategically adopt both surface acting and deep acting, so as to be able to better perform the character and emotions required on each date, in accordance with customers’ feelings. A fieldwork observation illustrates how crossdressers employ the management of emotions when working. During one of my crossdresser shifts, I was booked with Haruka by one of his loyal customers. She took us out for dinner to a very fancy *tofu* restaurant in Ueno. The atmosphere was very relaxed, as both of us had met that customer before on different occasions. In addition, she was classified among the good clients and was a renowned spender, always offering good meals, drinks and presents to her escorts. She had already booked a full tofu course for all of us. I was very happy, since I am a tofu lover. My co-worker, as far as I knew, was more oriented towards spicy food, but nevertheless he seemed to be very excited at the idea of eating those tofu delicacies. He found one of the appetizers so especially tasty that the client ordered another one not included in the full course for him. Every time a new dish came out, he would exclaim that it looked delicious, and, after one bite of every dish, his movements, his facial expressions, and his voice were expressing extreme happiness and total satisfaction due to a matchless culinary experience. After the date, when the client was gone, we were sitting on a bench near the subway station drinking a beer, and I said “You really love tofu! I thought it was not your cup of tea!” He was sipping his beer and told me, “I hate tofu. It tastes of nothing”. I was completely dumbfounded. His performance was so real that it was impossible to disbelieve the honesty of his display of appreciation. In this case, Haruka was obviously managing and displaying his emotions through surface acting, creating a contagious happiness which positively influenced me and seemed to make the customer happy and truly satisfied. He purposely exaggerated his reactions to show how much he appreciated the dinner, and he explained that, since part of the business is based on selling emotions, they have to be clear and understandable, leaving no space for doubts. In doing so, emotions become a way to show gratitude and repay the customer.

Similar situations occur, to a different extent, in almost every interaction with customers. Another example of emotional labour can be found in the cases of presents from clients. Presents can be sent to the office or directly delivered; in the first case, it is a company rule that the recipient must post on his Twitter or blog one or more pictures of the
present itself. Even though escorts do not have to publicly thank the person who bought the present (to avoid feelings of jealousy from other customers), they will obviously do so during the next date. When the present is directly delivered, the escort must show deep feelings of gratitude, sometimes almost overreacting in comparison to the object received. Obviously, a present will not always match an escort’s taste, but nevertheless dansō reactions will always be ones of extreme gratitude. If the present is an accessory or food, it will likely be worn or eaten at that moment, regardless of whether the escort really likes it or not. The accessory will also be worn during the following dates with the person who gave it. As Rei told me: “Very often I do not like the presents but, first of all, I am happy and always say ‘thanks’. The other person's feelings are precious, and the fact that she chose a present thinking about me is very important, and for this reason I always say ‘thanks’ with a smiling face. What I will do then with that stuff is another problem! [Laugh] That's work.” Although it is not unusual for dansō to get rid of undesired presents, on the surface they will always be happy about the gift and will recall it from time to time when talking with the client who bought it. The strong sense of gratitude shown by escorts deeply affects the honest manifestation of true positive feelings from them toward the clients, and often led me to think about the truthfulness of their reactions and emotions. However, the same doubt seems not to occur to clients, who apparently believe the escorts' expressions of feelings. Given that clients understand that they are purchasing a commodified service, again this may best be defined as a suspension of disbelief, where clients accept what is enacted as true in order to enjoy their relation with their escort. The date represents a special (quasi-ritual) space, limited in time, and controlled by specific rules (e.g. in relation to physical contact), and unwritten, internalized and accepted behaviours (i.e the possibility for clients to perform a different self), which aid customers to develop their suspension of disbelief.

One of my biggest concerns when I started to work as a dansō was how to build a close relationship with a customer. I did not feel nervous about having a conversation with a stranger, nor did I feel embarrassed flirting with women. However, I was puzzled about how it could be possible to become intimate with someone, keeping in mind the restrictions and rules of the business. What would be the best things to do in order to inspire love in a client? What would those women expect me to do? I asked my senpai for clarifications about this particularly thorny topic. I got very different answers, but a recurring point in their suggestions was to try thinking what I would like to hear, see, and do if the roles were reversed. Beyond recommendations about places to visit and to avoid, communication strategies and other practical matters, their suggestions were to try to identify myself with the
customer, imagining what kind of feelings a certain action would generate in my heart if I were the client. This “switching of roles” strategy recalls the above mentioned deep acting performances. Using imagination, dansō are not only able to produce performances and actions which satisfy the customers' needs but, at the same time, generate in themselves an emotional empathy that lets them feel not only present as performers but also emotionally present in the action performed. With regular customers in particular, as Haruka explained: “They do not only buy your feelings. They also give their feelings in return. A woman who spends 5000, 6000, 7000 yen for one hour is giving you her feelings, and this is important. So if you do not have feelings to give back, you cannot do this job!” As Haruka’s words indicate, it is essential for successful escorts to be emotionally present with their customers.

In addition to the surface acting and the deep acting highlighted by Hochschild – both of them performed by dansō – Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) assert that there is a third way to perform emotional labour. They argue that authentic emotions, spontaneously felt by an employee, can be considered as a kind of emotional labour, able to produce the expected results. Jealousy provides an example in the dansō escort service. In the dansō company, every regular customer is defined as the “[name of her escort] no ojōsama” (so-and-so’s lady). Though it is not unusual for a client to meet other escorts too, these relationships cannot be as intense as the one with the garcon the client meets most often. The love-like experience can be delivered by only one escort at one time, and the others know how to ensure their interactions with somebody else’s customer do not infringe on this, usually playing the role of the best friend instead. Despite this unwritten rule, a garcon can still feel menaced by a co-worker with a similar personality, or by someone he considers extremely charismatic, who often meets his customer(s). In those cases, when alone with his client, the garcon often makes a jealous scene and in some extreme cases also forbids the customer to date his (supposed) rival. Although those expressions of jealousy are most likely to be due to the fear of losing a good customer and hence, a portion of the income, some garcon told me how feelings of rivalry make them compete with the others, and losing a customer is considered a deep wound for an escort's ego. Reading from this perspective, the feelings of jealousy sometimes shown by dansō can be interpreted as true and, consequently, as another way to perform emotional labour with customers. Dansō make clients feel loved by showing jealousy, even if it is not really connected to love. Hence, the presence of authentic although temporary emotions must be considered alongside the management of honestly felt or merely performed feelings when analysing the dansō work.
5.3 Counterfeit intimacy?

In spite of the fact that the feelings of crossdressers and clients, and their intensity, are different, an emotional involvement could be present on both sides, especially when talking of relationships that last several years. However, how do crossdressers identify what customers usually define as “love”? To what extent are the feelings crossdressers perform in these emotional exchanges “counterfeit”?

The idea of “counterfeit intimacy” was adopted by Enck and Preston (1988) in their study of the interactions between topless clubs’ workers and patrons. Applying the concept of “cynical performance” from Goffman (1959), they introduced the idea that workers in topless clubs were creating – with specific behaviours and words – a fake intimacy in order to raise their income, through the sale of more beverages and by obtaining higher tips. Also for Boles and Garbin (1987), waitresses in similar clubs strategically use nudity to instil in the customer the idea of intimacy. From these interpretations, it is possible to argue that, through their bodies and acts, women in topless and strip clubs are misleading men to increase their income. However, later studies (Frank, 1998; Lever and Dolnick, 2010; Milrod and Weitzer, 2012; Zelizer, 2005; Sanders, 2008) have shown how men’s search for experiences that credibly mimic reality, and the striving for authenticity of women employed in erotic and sexual entertainments, often generate in such commodified relationships a very blurred border between honest and manufactured intimacy, with a real emotional involvement on both sides. Thus, Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) introduced the idea of “bounded authenticity” referring to the “sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection” (103) between sex workers and their customers. This bounded authenticity is made up of honest feelings, but it is limited to the purchased amount of time and it is exchanged for money, not given for free.

In Japanese, a love-like purchased experience or a simulacrum of a relationship provided by hostesses or hosts is commonly referred to as gijiren’ai, or pseudo-romance. The pseudo-romance can exist in a long term relationship with a provider, or in the adventure of one night in a hostess or host club (Parreñas, 2011; Takeyama, 2016). According to my data, with the exception of one informant who adopted the word gijiren’ai to describe the service that crossdresser escorts offer, customers never referred to the fact that the relationship with their favourite was a simulacrum or performance. They often used the word “sābisu” – service – to explain the high level experiences dansō can provide, showing that they were
aware of its commodified nature, but mostly seemed to avoid explicit reference to the idea of a pseudo-romance. This again suggests resort to the suspension of disbelief, as an essential component in any storytelling. If we understand DCRs as “love stories” written in collaboration by both crossdressers and customers, it is necessary for the latter to ignore the fact that what they are experiencing is likely only performed and staged, otherwise the possibility of developing feelings decreases. A service is considered good when the escort can deliver what customers are looking for and cannot find in their lives and partners. For some of my client informants, it was important that crossdressers embody a chivalric manner, in contrast with the stereotypical masculinity of Japanese men, believed to be rude and unkind. Actions like putting sugar and/or milk in the customer’s drink, and unwrapping the straw for her are obviously performed with the aim to please customers, but when it comes to considering emotions it is very difficult to draw a line between what is performed and what is honestly felt.

As explained in chapter 4, the emotional involvement of customers is usually very intense, and client informants define their feelings toward their favourite escort in terms of a very close friendship, something in between friendship and love, or love itself. Meanwhile, dansō talk about their feelings toward regular customers using mainly positive words. For Haruka, his relationships with his regulars can become very close and intimate: “My clients told me that they like me. I don’t know if they like women in general or only me, anyway I talk a lot with them, even about private things. Of course it is different with each of them, but I talk to them more than to a girlfriend. On the contrary, I do not trust girlfriends, and I prefer to make a customer happy instead!” For Haruka this intimacy involves only the psychological side of the relationship, not the physical sphere, but nevertheless the escort feels very close to his customers. Shin described meeting regulars as similar to meeting a friend: “When I am with them it is fun, I am happy (tanoshii, ureshii). Sometimes there are some annoying moments (chotto mendōkusai), but mostly it is like meeting an old friend of mine.” While there are no references to love feelings, Shin considers his regular customers as intimate as old friends. Similarly, Takumi explained:

I feel at ease with regular customers (futokyaku), I am well-disposed toward them. They are like friends and there are no problems like ‘What I am going to talk about now?’ or ‘Where could we go?’ though sometimes old clients are a bit tedious and you think ‘What a bore!’ Of course, it changes from person to person, and obviously there are a lot of nice people but there are also
cases, with regular customers, when you do not really want to do boring things, and those dates are a bit depressing.

The view of relationships with old customers outlined by Takumi recalls a long time relationship with a lover, when the passion is gone but reciprocal feelings of affection are still present. There is no longer a fear of making wrong choices about places to visit or things to be done together but, at the same time, the positive excitement of the first meetings has faded away, and the dates are sometimes repetitive.

Another way to evaluate the intensity of the feelings dansō experience in long term relationships is to consider their reaction when a regular stops visiting them. For less experienced escorts (working one year or less), the absence is not taken as a serious matter. For Seiji, the last to join the company, the explanation was very simple: “I would not worry. Maybe she does not have time. Or money.” A similar explanation comes from Ichi: “I would think she might be busy. At the next meeting I would ask her if everything is fine. If she did not come any more, I would be a bit worried about the money but there would be nothing I can do (shōganai).” The newcomers do not have regulars and their relationships with the clients they met had not yet reached a great degree of intimacy. For them, customers are still strangers, people that they meet for work, and there is no personal involvement. Their biggest concern is the loss of money. However, with the increase of intimacy, concern for a missing client increases as well. Shin answered even before I finished asking him the question: “I would be very worried! Is she sick? Did anything bad happen?” Rei showed the same attitude: “I would be worried, of course! Since we cannot contact them, I would not be able to know what had happened to her, and I would be very worried. I would not be worried by my earnings decreasing, but rather in case she was sick.” Obviously there is also a monetary problem but this concern is subordinated to an honest concern about the customers’ wellbeing in the case of long term relationships.

Even though the examples above suggest that the emotions performed by dansō are not necessarily a pure simulacrum, the relationships can differ according to the client. For instance, again Haruka clearly highlighted this point: “To be honest, most of the women who come here are just clients to me. More than being sad I would be worried about my income! I wonder where they are gone, but if they were not customers I would not care about them. Especially those customers who come every day, those weirdos…” Here Haruka openly referred to the “monster” customers (see also chapter 3.6.1). In addition, although DCRs can be read as based on the sharing of a deep intimacy, the idea that relationships are unbalanced
is also suggested by Rei: “We cannot choose the customers but…if a customer I really like to talk to comes, I am honestly happy (shōjiki ureshii), otherwise…With my regular I can relax even though she is not the simplest person on earth. She asked for a ‘friendly relationship’ but she behaves as if we were a couple. It is easier for me, because while her feelings are real, for me it is only a pretence.” As it is possible to infer from this extract, relationships could be strongly affected by unbalanced feelings, and clients may only get a façade of love in response to what dansō perceive as honest love declarations. In similar cases, the emotions offered during a date are mostly performed by dansō and not really felt. During one of the observations, I was talking to Haruka, who recounted his Tanabata date with one of his “monster” regulars. The girl spent all her money to book a three hour date, and was counting if the coins she still had were enough to allow her to ride the train back home after the date. She was almost crying because she did not have enough money to buy food during the date. Then Haruka bought gyōza from a street stall for both of them, and offered them to her. At first I thought he acted very kindly, and that he was really sorry for the sad situation of the customer. However, he afterward said that an expense of 600 yen (roughly £5) would bring him more than 10,000 yen in return. The customer was really moved by his action, which was also against the rules, and felt her connection with Haruka growing stronger, thinking of their relationship as more intimate than those of others. In the end, buying food for her and violating the company’s rules was nothing more than a way to cement the customer’s loyalty and obtain a greater amount of money in return in the near future. Similarly, with another customer who does not drink, Haruka always orders alcohol and asks her to join him in drinking: he explained to me that in doing so the customer feels like she is doing something special, a kind of “couple rite” which is limited to the occasions they are together. In addition, since she is not a heavy drinker, she gets tipsy easily and on these occasions it is easier for Haruka to introduce the idea of extending their date, sometimes even to an expensive night pack, and get a positive response. This vignette is explicative of the fact that one fundamental aspect defining interactions in DCRs is indeed the power relationships existing between

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74 Tanabata is a Japanese traditional festival held on the 7th of July. It celebrates the love meeting of Orihime and Hikoboshi (the stars Vega and Altair) separated by the Milky Way for the rest of the year. People usually celebrate it by writing their wishes on colourful paper stripes used to decorate bamboo branches. It is very common on Tanabata to go eating at street stalls wearing yukata (summer kimono). Because of its romantic history, the festival is very popular among young couples.

75 Dumplings filled with minced stuffing.

76 All the expenses during the date must be sustained by the client.
crossdressers and clients. Powerful positions can be occupied and exploited by either party in turn, as I will further explain in section 5.4.4.

Despite the displays of affection and the courtesy shown by crossdressers toward their clients, it is important for garcons to keep a position of predominance in the DCR, strictly managing the timing in the development of the relationship and demonstrations of feelings. Dansō should not declare feelings before the customer. They should be able to understand the growing feelings of the customer and calibrate their emotional response accordingly. The escort should let the customer think she is the most important among all others, and must be polite, kind and sensitive to her. At the same time, showing dependency on customers can invite undesired despotic behaviour, and potentially expose dansō to forms of harassment: for instance, a demonstration of love that is too marked can lead the customer to request forbidden services. What is considered to be the best in DCRs for escorts is to have clients who fall for them, while they can be detached and manage the situation in their favour. According to my crossdresser informants, sentences like “suki da” (I like you) or even “ai shiteru” (I love you) must not be pronounced until at least one year of regular dating has passed. The client has to show her dansō the strength of her feelings through monetary investment, which will be repaid with tenderness, and eventually love declarations, only after a regular and loyal frequeation, since DCRs are inherently part of the affective labour market. Crossdressers recognise (at least at an unconscious level) the existence of power relationships in DCRs, and through emotional labour they are able to maintain a powerful position. Since dansō do not have any monetary power over clients, they resort to performed emotions to establish their “emotional power” and counterbalance what otherwise would be a disadvantageous exchange. However, every escort decides individually how to manage power relationships with clients. For instance, avoiding declarations of unfelt love, or refusing to provide a boyfriend experience may indicate an escort’s wish not to exploit his client by taking advantage of her emotional weakness. In other cases (as described above in relation to Haruka), dansō explicitly take advantage of the emotional dependence of clients to increase their income, openly exploiting clients for their personal profit.

Finally, in the above mentioned studies regarding the development of intimacy between strippers, sex workers or escorts and their clients, a marker of the growing intimacy is often considered to be interruptions in calculating time. Encounters that take place or continue “off the clock”, with the provider forgetting or ignoring the time constraints that usually limit the duration of these meetings, are seen – not only by the customers but also by the providers – as stretching the boundaries between a paid and a non-commercial
relationship, and consequently as markers of an increased intimacy and emotional connection. The offer of free services is also seen as another marker of real intimacy in the framework of paid relationships. Conversely, in the DCRs I observed during my fieldwork, and from the interview data, time was always strictly checked not only by the company, but also by the escorts: a watch is one of the mandatory items an escort must bring during the date, and a friendly phone call arrives from the company ten minutes before the end of the date. The call is intended to be a help for dansō in keeping the time under control, and also helps to indicate to clients that their time is running out. Dansō almost never fall into “off clock” mode, and when it happens, the event is seen as a negative accident which, if repeated, is sanctioned by the company. While customers may try to obtain free minutes with escorts, the opposite is very unlikely to occur, indicating how for escorts the “romantic” exchange between dansō and customers has a commercial basis, and feelings are unbalanced.

Consequently, I argue that garcons can be honestly happy to meet one customer rather than another, and their relationship with a specific client can be close and intimate. However, they never identified those exchanges as love (as clients often did), and honestly felt emotions were not present with all customers. In addition, any expression of feeling was necessarily linked to the customer’s monetary investment in the date, reiterating in this way the commercial nature of DCRs. What dansō mostly displayed and sold is a carefully studied emotional management that they perform to make paying customers feel loved, supported, and heard, while maintaining their inner emotions detached from too deep an involvement. They thus maintained control over the relationship, and counterbalanced clients’ economic power with an “emotional power”. Hence, dansō might consciously carry out strategies to gain increased intimacy with clients, with the final aim of making them loyal customers and consequently earning more money from them; or conversely, dansō could refuse the provision of specific services (such as a boyfriend experience) to avoid exploiting their clients. Despite the possible presence of honestly felt emotions on both sides, dansō escorting remains a commercial business, in which emotions are the good provided and purchased. The inherent tension arising from the power relationship between garcons and customers is based on the commercial nature of their relationships; dominant positions could switch, and both customers and dansō could exert power over the other party.
5.4 Problems in the dansō-customer relationship

Due to the nature of the escort service and the kind of feelings that clients are invited to nurture, different problems develop in DCR. Despite the attachment shown by the customers, the emotions of dansō are in almost all cases only performed, and do not reflect their inner feelings. Even in those cases when escorts are very committed to a specific customer and their feelings are honestly felt, they are commonly limited to the time the customer purchases, as in the case of the sex workers studied by Bernstein. This can create feelings of jealousy and discomfort in clients, especially in those who identify their feelings as love. To cope with this unbalanced situation, customers rely on different strategies. For instance, A applied a very interesting analogy to her love feelings toward her escort: “We are like a dog and its master. A dog loves its master whatever the master does, and I want to be like that. If our relationship was like a normal couple I would be jealous of the other customers, and this is not good. So, whatever happens, I love my dansō, and I can be a dog. I want to be his dog.”

Obviously aware of the presence of other clients, A, instead of letting herself sink in feelings of resentment, consciously chose to switch her love relationship on to a different level, positioning herself as a pet who loves the master without reservation, a coping strategy to manage what can be seen as a very unbalanced love relationship. However, not all customers want to change or hide their feelings, and some try to impose themselves as the most important in their escort's heart. In those cases, escorts have to decide how to manage the customers' feelings. Two commonly used though opposed coping strategies in this case are denying the feelings or fostering them. Escorts who adopt the first strategy try to keep their relationship with clients on a friendly level, as Rei explained: “The client I meet the most, I do not know if she is lesbian or not, but I do not want to ask. If I asked her, she would end up declaring her feelings for me, and I prefer to avoid this! The situation would become very complicated. She wants a ‘couple relationship’ but I behave as if we are friends.” When a customer raises the issue of what her escort feels about her or declares herself, some escorts thus try to ignore her, or they remind her of the “friendly” role they should have.

However, other garçons prefer to foster the clients' love aspirations, as in the case of Haruka, who used this as an opportunity to increase his power over customers. Since he had a great number of customers who were in love with him, to capitalize on their feelings he did not only let them indulge in the idea of their love story, but also let them believe they were particularly special to him. During a conversation, I asked him how he was able to handle all

77 There was no perceptible irony in this statement.
his very passionate customers, and he just told me that the best thing to do, in order to make customers satisfied and not lose money, is to make them feel special, always reassuring them with sentences like “The others are only customers, but you are special!” or “You are different, I really like you”. While this strategy is potentially more remunerative, it is also the most unfair towards the clients, especially those people who cannot separate the escort experience from the reality of their everyday lives and who really believe in the escorts' love declarations. Moreover, this strategy is also a double-edged sword: while customers who are deeply in love are often those who spend the highest amount of money on their escort, they are also those whose affection can more easily tip over into obsession and addiction, and hence fall into the category of “bad customers”.

5.4.1 Good customers and bad customers

While for the majority of clients, meeting their escort is a positive experience, which offers emotional satisfaction and helps them confront the negative issues of their daily lives, DCRs may also descend into a spiral of negative behaviours by clients which closely resembles obsession. Customers who are able to safely enjoy the entertainment escorts provide, who are not jealous of other customers, and who are respectful of escorts and their privacy are considered “good customers”. On the other hand, customers who want to meet their escort at any opportunity, try to steal personal information, or feel anger and jealousy towards other clients and become obsessed by a garcon, fall into the category of “bad customers”.

Because of the way the escort business is structured, customers usually do not meet each other. Dates are generally on a one-to-one basis, as preferred by the customers. Furthermore, the way in which clients are dealt with at the office reduces the possibility that they will meet each other. People in charge at the reception try not to book several dates at the exact same time and when this is unavoidable, crossdressers refrain from going to meet customers together. Those measures are undertaken in order to protect the customers’ privacy, and to create a friendly atmosphere that makes the customers feel welcome and safe, as Mr. Hirota explained to me. However, there are special occasions when customers share the same space at the same time, particularly at public events where dansō perform together, such as live shows and regularly held special events like the cafe event. These events are widely promoted to all customers by all the staff through social media, newsletters and the company website. Hence there is a strong likelihood that customers of the same garcons will meet during the event, especially when their favourite escort is scheduled to perform (Figure 5.1).
In this case, if customers already know each other and have developed a friendship bond, they will probably come together to the event and, if possible, they will also share the same table. For those customers, becoming friends with someone who has the same feelings towards the same person is a way to express what they perceive as a sort of unrequited love and to share their thoughts. Such fans regularly meet together, even outside Dreamland events, to talk to each other about their love-object, and also to share pictures and memories from past dates. This is, for instance, the case with Reira:

In the past there were a lot of customers I did not know, but meeting them several times I started to recognize them and I also talked with some of them. In the past I did not know any of the other customers during the events, but now there are people that, through Twitter, I have built a good relation with, and often we choose to go to the event together. Meeting each other again and again and talking every time a bit more we became friends and we established a good relationship.

And A: “I know other customers. Now there are three of us who are friends and often come together. I met them through Dreamland. One of these girls had a blog and I liked it a lot, so I contacted her and we met in Akihabara, and then we started doing double dates.” These kinds of customers, who are less inclined to create problems and avoid open competitions with other users of the escort service, are usually referred to as “ii okyakusama” or good customers.
A good customer is always supportive of her favourite dansō and, generally speaking, of the company itself. Even if she feels very committed to one of the garcons, she can meet others too, and she is not keen to fight with the other clients, because she understands that the others are also important for her favourite’s income, and the more successful her escort becomes the happier she is, as A explained: “Sometimes if he has other bookings I feel a bit sad, but since I do not have enough money to reserve all his hours, if he had no other customers it would be a big problem, so there is nothing I can do. I am not that rich, so if other customers choose him it is a good thing, I can only be thankful to them.” This was also true for Mei:

If I want to meet him but he has no free time there is nothing I can do! If I cannot meet him today, I will succeed next time. I am not jealous, and I think that if he has a lot of reservations it is better, I feel relieved. On the contrary, I would be worried if he worked a lot and no customer came, it would be so sad! Yes, it is definitely better if he has reservations, even if I cannot meet him!

The good customers are also those not inclined to make complaints, and who seldom cause trouble to the reception. On the one hand, this kind of client is highly desirable, but on the other hand they usually do not spend high amounts of money on their dansō and frequent the company on a more irregular basis. They usually perceive a date with their dansō as an escape from the daily routine, and the date itself is usually longer and well planned in advance but occurs less frequently, like a special pleasure in which one indulges from time to time.

At the other extreme are those known among dansō as “bad customers” or, in a very locker room style of conversation, monsters (monsutā). This second type tends not to join public events, since they do not want to meet other customers and share their favourite with them. If they join an event, dansō must be very careful in balancing their attentions among all the customers, avoiding any kind of preference. A commonly used strategy by those crossdressers who have a relationship with such a fan is to upload on their Twitter, before an event, pictures of presents received from this hard-to-manage customer, along with a line like “Waiting to meet you, please support me!” or “I am very nervous but since you are among the public I can find the strength”. While these sentences can sound very generic, the picture of the presents clearly links the message to the person who bought it. This allows the customer to feel special, and soothes the tension that can eventually develop during the event. During the cafe event, those potentially troublesome customers are seated at the counter, with their backs to the room, to avoid the sight of their rivals, especially when talking with their
favourite garcon. Furthermore, dansō pay great attention to keeping apart clients who are not friends, especially if they are fans of the same crossdresser. During one of my observations after a show, Haruka, very popular among “monster” customers, was surrounded by three of them, who unrelentingly started asking him questions and favours, obviously fighting for his attention. One of them was threatening to submit a formal complaint if he would not bring forward their date thirty minutes; another one was glaring at the first, who had booked all the available slots for that day, and was commenting in a high pitched voice that she considered this bad behaviour, while the third one was just standing in front of him, intensely staring at him and repeating his name in an emotionless voice. Haruka recalled that moment as a “jigoku”, a hell from which he did not know how to escape. Despite the fact that such clients are very difficult to interact with, and are considered annoying, bothersome and generally speaking undesirable, nevertheless they are fundamental in developing a successful career: “bad customers” usually buy all sorts of merchandise to do with their favourite (such as posters or pictures), meet him at least once a week but usually more, and as soon as the dating slots are uploaded online, rush to secure themselves the longest slots during weekends and festivities. This race for the best time sometimes causes discontent among the other customers who cannot meet their dansō. To prevent such incidents, it is not unusual for the reception to take bookings before the release of the schedules, and to arrange special timings for those customers penalized by the “bad” ones. This is especially the case with Nana, a customer who is very much scared by the other fans of her favourite. Nana is one of those who is not looking for a love story but for friendship, and she has met almost all the crossdressers at least once. She did not join the public events for the following reason:

I do not like the events because I am scared of the other clients. I joined a cafe event once and I heard all sorts of rumours and insults, those people are scary! Especially Haruka’s customers are like ‘Leave him alone, he is mine!!!’ but hey, I do not want him! I do not crave him that much! Take him, go ahead! So, when I want a specific date, I ask the boss directly if the day and the time I want is fine, I always ask him directly. The boss is very kind to me.

After negative experiences, Nana avoids public events and only goes on dates with crossdressers. However, since she is not “racing for a slot” as the “bad” customers usually do, she decides well in advance when to go on a date and skips the booking process by asking the boss as a personal favour if she can have a specific garcon on that specific day. Obviously, this policy is kept secret by the company, which refuses the “bad” customers such favours.
The bad customers are also often involved in cases of stalking, menace and harassment towards their favourite garcon, in the desperate attempt to obtain more attention. Cases of unpleasant dates with some bad customers were reported by the majority of my crossdresser informants. Those negative experiences can result in the end of the relationship, a ban for the client or, in the most extreme cases, in the garcon quitting the job in order to avoid particularly frightful clients. Usually dansō try to endure negative situations, especially when lacking customers. Furthermore, since escorting is a job, it is considered unprofessional to refuse a customer. However, there are cases when they cannot tolerate bad customers any more, as Rei remembered:

I remember meeting [client’s name] as the worst date I have had. With her, regardless of what we were doing, I always ended experiencing unbearable stress, just because I was with her. Since it was my job I tried to hold out, but in the end I fell sick. I was so stressed that I started to feel sick during the dates with her too. It was the most difficult thing ever. Maybe now I would be able to meet her once again, since it’s been a long time, but in the past she used to book me once or twice a week, it was impossible! She was a stalker, I was scared! She wanted a boyfriend experience, so it was even more difficult. But since she was very rich it was complicated to dismiss her, but to me it became physiologically impossible to meet her. I was totally disgusted by her, yes disgusted. For this reason I fell sick, I was very very sick. In the end I refused her bookings. Trust me, I refused only that person. There are other customers that are, how can I say, detestable...no, this is unkind, let’s say complicated and I still meet them. With some of them you have to pay attention to every small thing but, believe me, I refused only that person. With the others I always do my best.

Rei described his negative experience using very strong words, and to be sure of delivering the exact meaning of what he was saying, he also checked the correct word in English. To put an end to this situation, he chose to refuse the customer. However, this is not always a practicable solution, as shown by Kunihiro’s account:

When I quit one of the reasons was the presence of an extremely detestable customer, she really made me sick [monosugoku iyana hitori no okyakusan ga ita ndesuyone, kimochi warui no okyakusan]. She was not a stalker, she was different. For example, a thing that I really hated [sugoku kimochi waruina to omotta koto] about her was that she always had dirty teeth, I mean you could really find everything in her mouth. I really did not want to meet her but, as soon as I uploaded my shifts, she reserved me as much as possible. How can I say, in one way I was thankful to her but it was very stressful. From a psychological perspective it was impossible for me to show love for somebody with so many negative aspects. I was very down, and I talked
about her with the boss. I told him that I would be able to keep working but I would not meet that customer again. But he said that it was not possible, that the other escorts had even worse customers [motto hidoi okyakusan] and they were just holding out [gamanshitera] and so should I. I tried for a while, but then I quit.

In this case, Kunihiro found both the customer’s behaviour and physical aspect unpleasant, and even though he was thankful for her bookings, he felt unable to sustain the mise-en-scène of love with a person he did not like at all. However, the boss did not allow him to refuse such a rich customer. A refused customer is likely to feel offended and, if in the best case scenario she will simply stop frequenting the escort service, in the worst case she can also post negative online comments about the company itself, bringing very negative publicity in addition to the loss of monetary income. As can be seen from both the accounts, the customers involved were very rich and had a spoiled attitude towards their escorts. My escort informants reported that they were victims of a wide range of antisocial behaviour. As Shin noted:

During the work, the most difficult thing is to keep bad customers under control. We must be kind, since they pay us, but as time passes, as soon as they become familiar with us, they become shameless and make unpleasant remarks or do forbidden things (iyana koto ittari murina koto yattari). At the beginning they are very careful, but as they date us they stop thinking about our feelings, start saying unfair things, and when they ask you to do things like date outside the business and you refuse, they get mad at you. When this happens it is a big problem and it is very exhausting.

Similarly, Takumi remembered:

The worst date I had was with a customer that kept telling me very bad things, like ‘I hate you, you make me sick!’ I do not know why she reserved me. Everything I did was no good, she invented unreal problems and in the end she even told me ‘I am not here to meet you!’ I was very upset, I tried to hold out but at the end of the date I yelled at her ‘Don’t come back again!’ She wanted me to lose my self-confidence. It was the first time I met a client who came here only to be angry, it was very strange. She came specifically to say things like ‘Hey, I do not like you!’ it was a kind of perversion. Maybe it was her attitude, but she was strange and I told her ‘Go back home!’

This experience was echoed by Haruka:
I had a lot of bad dates [...] Just ten days ago I had a bad one. It was with one of those clients who demand more and more because they are paying, one of those who thinks that we are nothing but objects. ‘I pay, so you must kneel down in front of me’ they think. Well, even if you pay me, I am not a doll, I have my feelings.

The management of bad customers is a very demanding activity and it is reported by crossdresser informants as one of the most complicated issues in the dansō escort business. For dansō, it represents a constant evaluation of positive and negative aspects, involving dilemmas as to whether to prioritize their income, the company’s needs, their well-being, or their desire to continue the escort job. The main reason for continuing to date bad customers is the economic profit crossdressers can obtain from them, since they are greater spenders compared to other clients (see 5.4.1). When this monetary perspective is outweighed by the unpleasant feelings experienced in meeting those clients, is still necessary for dansō to evaluate whether to refuse them could harm their escort career. Mr. Hirota encouraged dansō to endure unpleasant situations, and try not to upset customers. In doing so, he was obviously protecting the company’s (and hence his own) interests, potentially at the expense of escorts’ well-being. Having said this, his suggestions rarely took the form of an order, and his position was generally to mediate between crossdressers and clients’ requests. He rarely obliged dansō to chose between keeping a client or quitting the job, but similarly he rarely banned a client permanently. The situation was thus full of ambivalence, since in order to obtain the freedom to express themselves through their work as they desire, dansō have to endure relationships with unpleasant customers, or else they need to find a satisfactory way to get rid of those clients or to pass them to a colleague. Here arises a tension in the relationships between Mr. Hirota and his staff: Mr. Hirota needs to maintain faithful customers for his business to flourish, but at the same time, sacrificing the garcons’ well-being to please clients could lead to the loss of good escorts, and if this were to happen too often, it could badly affect the income of the company as a whole. Hence, both crossdressers and Mr. Hirota need to constantly negotiate their choices, taking into consideration their different perspectives.

5.4.2 Sexual harassment

To protect crossdressers from clients’ bad behaviour, the company adopts a sanctions policy based on a “yellow card” and “red card” system. However, as I personally witnessed, Mr. Hirota usually adopts a very soft line of judgment in order not to lose customers; while the
yellow card is equated to a slight vocal admonition, the red card is intended to be a temporary ban, usually withdrawn after a couple of weeks upon the customer’s apologies. In addition, he was also very keen to let customers obtain more physical contact with the escorts: in several cases the reception received emails from customers with requests such as “I really want to kiss XXX. Please, tell me the price, I will pay any amount” and Mr. Hirota then just asked the escorts involved if they would be willing to perform such acts with that customer, always obtaining negative answers.

In doing their escort work, dansō almost always spent time alone with their customers. While double dates or two escorts to one customer dates also occur, they are far less frequent than the classic one-to-one date. The latter allows the client to obtain the total attention of her favourite garcon and leads the couple to deeper intimacy, especially after several hours of repeated meetings. However, when the intimacy increases it is not unusual that feelings intensify too, and the customer’s requests can eventually shift from the search for platonic love and psychological support to more physical longings. Half of my dansō informants reported requests for kisses and requests or offers of sexual acts from one or more customers. Those making such reports were those who had longstanding relationships with their customers and who were more prone to establish a love-like bond with them; those who had never experienced such situations were newcomers or those who actively tried to keep the relations with their customers at a friendly level. Significantly, those who received such requests were the highest in the company’s ranking, while those who did not had mid or low level popularity. Arguably, a successful dansō needs to foster love feelings in his customers in order to make them faithful and regular and to obtain the greatest monetary return, but he must be aware that this also results in not infrequent requests for sex. Salazar Parreñas (2011), in her work about Filipina hostesses in Tokyo, shows that the most successful women in this business are those who are able to titillate men’s fantasy, especially with regards to sex, without actually having sex with them so easily; similarly, successful dansō should let the customer think about the possibility of having sex with them, without allowing them to obtain it; thus, to get more income, crossdressers have to involve themselves in more complicated and stressful situations.

Sexual requests from clients can be explicitly verbalized or only suggested. Ren reported that he was once obliged to put a client aside in the koshitsu, the private room of an izakaya,78 when she repeatedly tried to hang around his neck and kiss him on the lips. In

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78 Japanese informal bar where it is possible to order drinks and food.
other cases, implied and suggested requests took the form of sensual behaviours and sexual jokes, as Takumi remembered:

They did not directly ask ‘kiss me’ or ‘please sleep with me’. It was more a kind of joke mixed up with reality. For example, one night we [Takumi and his customer] were sleeping in the same hotel but in two different rooms, and she pretended to be drunk and asked me to join her in her room, and then started to laugh as if it were a joke.

Whatever the request style, in all cases dansō stated that they refused the proposals, which my observations gave me no reason to doubt. It is true that dansō usually do not find their customers attractive, since they can be much older, and often they are defined as “beautiful people” from a sentimental perspective but not from an aesthetic standpoint. However, this is not the only reason behind their refusal: a client who may prove to other customers that she had sex with a dansō (in order to compete and possibly push out rival customers) might lead to a great economic loss for the crossdresser involved. Furthermore, the company’s rules also ban this kind of involvement with a customer, and those who fail to follow the rule are subject to immediate dismissal. Moreover, it is possible to argue that, as long as customers fantasize about the possibility of increased intimacy with their favourite escort, they will continue to meet him, but having once obtained sexual access to the escort, their interest could likely decrease, or they could insist on obtaining dates for free, as in a non-commodified relationship. For dansō, obtaining dates from a client without having sex with her affirms their sexual attractiveness along with their power over the client.

Nevertheless, even if refusal is considered the only possible option, dansō enact different strategies to deal with such a delicate matter. As already noted, some try to avoid arousing feelings of love in their customers, while others, on the contrary, foster their clients’ love feelings. For those in the first category, the best way to decline a sexual request or offer is to remind the customer that their relationship is a kind of special friendship. This strategy is usually adopted by those who perform the character of the “big brother”, the reliable type of man, very sympathetic and supportive, not inclined to scold or be rude to his “younger sisters” even if they make a mistake. Another strategy is to let the customers know, before they even try a sexual approach, that this would be perceived as negative and unpleasant by the crossdresser, leading to a very strong reaction of anger, and risking an interruption of the relationship itself. This strategy of scaring the customer is actually enacted only by those dansō who embody characters in line with a hot headed, rebellious type of masculinity. In
addition, “I would do it, but it is not allowed by the rules” is a sentence commonly used to switch the blame from the crossdresser to the company, and to avoid responsibility for a refusal which can hurt the customers’ feelings. In the case of those dansō who encourage feelings of love from their customers, this recourse to the company’s rules helps to keep alive the dreams of romance of the customer, for if a dansō usually performs the role of a very devoted and committed lover, how can he then refuse a sexual offer from the person he claims to love? The company is consequently deployed to play the role of obstacle in the fulfilment of love between the crossdresser and the customer, the antagonist necessary in every romantic love story. Moreover, it also lets the customers imagine a future possibility of consummating their love, an option that sometimes is slightly suggested by the crossdresser himself to keep the desire alive, and consequently maintain clients as loyal followers. From this perspective, a very interesting example came from Haruka. He usually performed the role of the flirty boyfriend, and actively encouraged customers to fall for him. Due to the specific nature of the relationships he established with his customers, Haruka was also the one who reported the most frequent sexual requests. In refusing these, first of all he resorted to the rules of the company, which he posed as an insurmountable obstacle. But to not leave the customer with a negative image of him and to support the fiction of love he enacted, Haruka allowed his closest customers small concessions, on the verge between what was allowed and forbidden by the rules. He let clients kiss him and lick him on the cheeks and on the neck, and also let them touch him on his bound chest. However, when those attentions became too persistent, even as he refused more, he did not fail to add a touch of sensuality, perfectly in line with the character performed. To one of his loyal customers who insisted on trying to find his nipples under the corset he was wearing to disguise his breasts, Haruka said: “Please stop it now, or I am gonna wet my panties”. This kind of statement was fundamental in the performance Haruka enacted. First of all, it showed the deep intimacy he created with his customer, an intimacy in which he did not need to further sustain a male identity, but could eventually admit to be, at least at a bodily level, a woman. Then, despite refusing sexual contact, he allowed the customer to imagine how the contact could be perceived as pleasant and sexually arousing to him. This was rewarding for the ego of the customer, who felt herself able to sexually stimulate him, did not dismiss the creation of a fantasy world where the two were in love with each other, and also kept the fantasy to a real level, with a non-

79 Acts such as a kiss on the cheeks are labelled as grey and are considered as semi-forbidden by the company rules: garcons try to avoid performing or allowing them, but even though not openly accepted according to the rules, they are usually tacitly tolerated.
fictional body reacting to a mundane physical stimulation, in a mixture of reality and fantasy which is the very basis of the dansō-client relationship. In this way, without hurting the customer’s feelings, Haruka was able to safely manage and refuse the customer’s sexual desires, in a way which was completely aligned with his stage persona and which also strengthened the customers’ feelings toward him.

However, while these strategies are successfully applied with female customers, they are very much avoided with male customers. Dreamland’s male patrons not only have to accept different rules (see chapter 2.7) which strictly delimit what they can do, but also face strong refusals from the crossdressers, who do not apply the same courtesy to male as to female customers. Men are always seen as potentially dangerous, so limiting the possibility of physical interaction with them is considered necessary. Furthermore, Mr Hirota strongly advised his dansō to be very careful when dating men, especially if they were new customers of unproven trustworthiness. While this might be viewed as a strongly negative stereotypical perception of men, it must also be noted that the only two cases where dansō told me they felt uneasy or in danger during a date involved male customers.

In one case, Ren told me that he was out with a MtF transsexual who took him to a karaoke box. When the two were alone in the room, she started to show Ren several pictures of naked transsexuals, and talked extensively about her feelings with her new body while scrolling among the pictures on her phone. Even though there was no attempt at physical contact, Ren still felt very uneasy during that date, reported the incident to the company, and did not meet that customer again. In the other case, Ryōma was with a man who asked him to engage in mutual stimulation by hand. In this case Ryōma left the customer, who was banned from visiting the company. In the first case, the mere suggestion of sex left Ren with an unpleasant feeling, which led him to refuse further dates with the same customer. In contrast, when he was hugged or subjected to attempts to kiss him by a female customer, he just refused, without taking any steps against the customer, whom he continued to meet. He clearly had different, and much stricter, standards in the case of men; moreover, the case highlights how Ren perceived the transsexual customer as a man. This indicates that female and male customers are perceived to involve different levels of risk, including of sexual harassment, leading to different limits to what may be conceded to a customer. As Takumi explained: “There were some slightly unpleasant situations, but since the other person is a girl it is enough to say ‘Please cut it out now, I am embarrassed’, there is no need to run away. I never felt in danger with a girl.” On the other hand, a sexual proposal or even a reference to sexuality made by a man is seen by dansō as very unpleasant and undesired. Similar or even
more direct behaviour by female customers is more easily forgotten, justified and tolerated, and never results in a “red card” for the customer involved. Indeed, such incidents are sometimes recalled as funny memories and retold to the other crossdressers, and some of the dansō find such sexual attentions flattering, as they confirm their attractiveness to women.

5.4.3 Good dates and bad dates

Despite their abilities to control their emotions, and in spite of the fact that both escorts and clients aim to enjoy a pleasant date, things do not always end up as planned. What makes a date good or bad?

My client informants – who only belonged to the category of the “good customers” – told me that they experienced very few bad dates, but could clearly identify when a date was particularly positive. The distinctive feature that marks good dates is the high level of emotion clients are able to experience. As B explained:

To me a good date is one where I can be 100% close to the other person (100% chikaku midashite kureru dēto). Even if we do not do particularly fun things, when he perfectly catches my feelings (watashi no kibun wo kichinto kacchishite) and our feelings match, it is great. It is a date when he understands me without my telling him anything. Yes, if our feelings match it is a good date.

Mei also found the key to a good date in her emotional state:

Once I had a date on my birthday, and everything was very sparkling (kira kira), he prepared a very nice date in a wonderful restaurant. But if we talk about happiness (shiawase) it is a different feeling, and maybe I am happier on normal days than on my birthday and more than sparklingness, happiness is better!

For customers, especially those who have frequented Dreamland and the same escort for a long time, the kind of experience shared is not so important, as Mei indicates. Greater importance is given to the possibility of obtaining emotional closeness, which definitely marks a well-developed relationship, as in Maya’s words: “I like dating him so much because he always listens to me (itsumo hanashi kiite kureru). I can consult with him on many issues because he perfectly understands my feelings (sugoku kimochi wo rikai dekiru) and he gives me advice”. The ability to understand the client’s feelings is what makes the difference from the perspective of the customer. When escort and client can mutually understand each other,
when their feelings and thoughts match, the experience is depicted as very satisfactory. The same perception of a good date is also shared by garcons. For instance, Haruka explained as follows:

I have had a lot of dates, but maybe one of the best was in a park. I was with a customer with very little money, and I told her that even a date in a park would be fine for me. She is living in straitened circumstances and was very happy about my proposal. She was able to relax and she felt at ease (chotto rirakkusu shite, kimochi karuku shita). I understood that she was feeling good, she instilled that feeling into me, and I was very at ease too (sugoku kimochi ga raku). That was one of the most enjoyable dates I had. When the client feels good and is relaxed, even without talking you can feel it too, and you are happy. Yes, that date was very good (sugoku tanoshikatta).

Similarly, Kunihiro said: “There are some situations that really make me feel happy. For example, when a customer who is not talkative feels able to show me her heart and tell me her problems […] I really like to listen her, and if she comes back again I am very happy.” Ren summed up: “Of course expensive dates are good, but if I am with a person I really want to meet, because she is a nice person even a family restaurant can be a very good date!”

Apparently, for escorts too the positive evaluation is not related to very expensive and luxurious surroundings, nor to the money they can earn. A date is considered good by both parties when the feelings match and the situation is relaxed. More than anything else, it is the possibility of sharing time and space enjoying one another’s company that makes a date pleasant.

In contrast, what are considered markers of a bad date? In this case the points of view of clients and escorts slightly diverge. It must be kept in mind that for customers, dates, even though they involve feelings and emotions, have a double nature, and are also goods to be bought. They can feel like princesses, beloved girlfriends, or best friends of their escort, but they are ultimately customers, and maintain for themselves the right to be satisfied with the purchased product. When I asked clients to recount a bad date they had, most were unable to remember one when they were not completely satisfied, usually remarking how good Dreamland’s escorts – and especially their favourite escort – are. For instance, Mei explained: “There was no totally unsatisfactory date, because, you know, you pay. Sometimes, for example when I went to meet a new escort or one I never met before, it can be a bit questionable. In that case, I do not meet that person again.” Conversely, A had a bad experience to share:
Yes, yes, yes [in English]! I had a bad date. In that case it was not because of the place we went to or the things we were doing. Those details were not important. But it happened that he was not paying attention to the things I was saying. Sometimes this happens. Maybe he was tired. There is nothing you can do (shikataganai), and for sure he had better things to think about than my words, but I wanted to talk to him and I paid for that. So I said bad things to him, like ‘This is the last time I come here’ even though it was not true. In that case, even though I came on purpose to be entertained, it was not fun at all (zenzen tanoshikunakatta).

In both these examples, clients remarked that money can make or at least should make the difference in quality regarding a date, and to pay ensures a satisfactory service. The escort is the one seen as in charge of making the date go well, and clients do not want to blame themselves if a date is not satisfactory or fun. They feel excused precisely because they pay money to be entertained, and consequently they retain for themselves the right to be uninteresting, unentertaining, or passive during the date.

On the other hand, escorts have a different perception of a bad date. First of all, the situation could play a very important role in determining the quality of a date, as Shin explained:

One of my worst dates happened on a very cold February day. We went to a park and sat down on a bench for two or three hours. But it was an extremely cold day and we were just talking on the bench. I do not even remember what we were talking about, it was not such an important conversation. That customer has mental health issues, she is depressed (mentaru herusu, kokoro ga byoki no okyakusama) and has no money. Nevertheless she wanted to be with me, and I understand this feeling, and there is nothing wrong in a date when you just talk, sitting on a bench. But that day was really too cold, I thought I was going to die (shinu ka to omotta)! I did my best, but the customer was a bit bad to me (chotto warui datta).

As shown by previous examples, it is very complicated for escorts to refuse a date, so weather conditions and date locations have a strong influence on the final results. Places such as theme parks or fashionable spots that dansō have already visited several times can become very annoying, as Ryū explained: “One week, it was in December, Christmas approaching, I had to go to Disneyland every day. One week, seven times, from morning to night at Disneyland, and then back home. It was very hard (tотemо taihen datta)!” In such cases it takes its toll for escorts to show happiness and surprise about the date, and even if the place itself should be enjoyable to visit, the same situations, proposed again and again, lessen the

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80 The informant here used the loan word from the English expression.
pleasant side of the meeting, leaving only the feeling of duty. The date can consequently be evaluated as bothersome due to its repetitiveness. One’s physical condition is also very important in experiencing a date positively or negatively. For instance, again Shin recollected: “Once I had a bad fever, but I was booked for a date from morning until late. I could not refuse it, because it was my birthday and the customer wanted to celebrate with me, but dates that carry on when you do not feel good are always hard (itsumo taihen da)!” In this case, the client would have taken offence at the refusal of the date, and Shin had no other choice but to meet her. Irritating a customer is always something to avoid as much as possible, in order to prevent bad repercussions in the future. Moreover, refusing long dates, skipping days at work, or cancelling a date means a loss of money that escorts prefer to avoid. This leads them to work even though they are not in the best physical condition.

Secondly, certain types of date can suit one escort, but not another. An example is Seiji who, while trying to improve his communication skills, is still not very talkative. To him, a very bad date was: “Once we went to Jonathan’s [a family restaurant] and sat there for three hours. We ate and drank a bit, but it was a three-hour conversation date. Three hours just talking.” Similarly Haruka, who suffers from dizziness and does not like horror houses, does not at all enjoy dates in amusement parks and confessed to agreeing to them only in the case of very loyal customers who usually spend great amounts of money on him and that he considers “good customers”. In addition, generally speaking, garcons find double dates more enjoyable than one-to-one dates, since they can share the heavy duties with a colleague, and support each other in conversation. Double dates are obviously less satisfactory from the point of view of emotions, but are considered to be very “easy work”, so they are positively evaluated by escorts.

Finally, the categorization of a date as good or bad strongly depends upon the client involved in the date. Bad customers can make a date unpleasant with their unfriendly behaviour, or through physical and verbal harassment. However, the so-called good customers can also take on attitudes which may hurt the escort’s feelings, as Kunihiro explained:

The bad customers are those who think only about themselves. Obviously all the customers, exactly because they are customers, can be a bit like that, and it is very exhausting for us. And the worst dates are when they complain. In those cases you cannot do anything other than listen to them. Recently, one of my clients told me that I do not care about her feelings. To be honest I would have liked to tell her ‘It is you who do not think about my feelings at all!’ but obviously I
can’t. I know, I should understand that person’s pain, but I also want her to understand me. And it is not that she is unable to understand what I feel, but she wanted to complain. And there is nothing we can do (shikataganai), this is the work.

In this case, customers’ and escorts’ perspectives converge, and for both of them, it is the other person that can make the difference in quality when dating someone. Mutual understanding is most effective in conveying closeness, and when the feelings of both date participants resonate, the date is considered satisfactory and enjoyable. Moreover, it is not the intensity of feelings that customers or escorts claim to experience, but the ability not to impose them on the other person that creates a pleasant date. In spite of the high intensity of the emotions they feel, customers deeply in love are often described as very demanding and disrespectful of the escort’s privacy and company’s rules, and dating them can be more difficult than dating a more detached client. In addition, despite the strong feelings clients usually say they experience, it must be noted that, in my interviews with them, not one mentioned paying attention to the escort’s feelings during the date. They all stated that they paid great attention during a date to their clothes, their make-up, their behaviour or even their smell, but none of them expressed concern for the escort. This egoistic attitude also emerged during the observations. During dates, customers never asked me or my co-workers about our physical or psychological condition, which was a common and repeated question from escorts to clients. This underscores the lack of balance that strongly affects the relationships between customers and escorts. Where clients can claim for themselves the right to be selfish and unkind, demanding attentions and submitting complaints when their expectations are not fulfilled, garcons must be attentive and caring, even when their inner feelings are quite the opposite of what they show on the surface, and they find the date boring or unpleasant.

5.4.4 Risk of exploitation in the dansō escort world

As the previous sections show, dansō may be exposed to exploitation when working. They may be willing to accept bad working conditions or unpleasant clients because of the possibilities that the job offers them in terms of self-expression – possibilities that are difficult if not impossible to find in other employment. To work in male attire and present themselves, at least from an aesthetic standpoint, in a way that is closer to their ideal self-image, dansō have to accept an unsteady occupation, with an unpredictable income, which cannot ensure them any stability for the future. To endure complicated customers is sometimes a necessity not only to top up a salary, but in some cases even to reach a decent
monthly income (see Appendix II). In addition, the higher spenders are often the more demanding clients – those willing to establish a love-like relationship with their escort, and the “bad customers”. Therefore, the willingness and ability to deliver a boyfriend experience and to manage intense love feelings or unpleasant behaviours from clients is a likely path to higher income. To lose the job, or to lose a customer, can have negative consequences for a dansō’s life in terms of both self-expression and economics. Moreover, as explained earlier, the company’s management requires dansō to accept dates with unpleasant customers and to endure negative situations. From this perspective crossdressers could be seen as constantly at risk of exploitation, and the power relationships between dansō and clients, or dansō and the company, see crossdressers often in a disadvantaged position.

However, despite the tensions in the relationships between escorts and clients, and escorts and company, it is not correct to consider escorts only as subjects of exploitation. First of all, bad customers represent a minority, and most dates are not considered negative experiences by dansō. As explained in chapter 3, the escort work is not chosen because of any potential for extremely high income (in contrast to the case of the male hosts studied by Takeyama [2016]), but mostly because this occupation strongly matches the personal interests of dansō.81 Secondly, crossdressers have considerable agency in how they interact with clients: the company does not tell them how to interact, though there are some indications provided on how to avoid intrusive questions, or how to behave with customers who do not follow the rules. Dansō are not obliged to deliver a boyfriend experience if they do not want to. The way crossdressers articulate their character is based on their own personality, their idea of what a good escort should do and be, and on the kind of customer they meet. Though Mr. Hirota’s position seemed obviously profit-oriented, the vulnerability of the dansō escorts should not be overstressed, since they could refuse to perform acts they did not feel at ease performing with customers, and in my experience, they did so.

When it comes to “complicated customers”, dansō adopt strategies that suit them as individuals. For instance, Takumi decided to speak up against a bad customer, and in the end refused to date her again, judging his wellbeing during a date as more important than his income. On the other hand, Haruka indulges in drinking before and during dates with bad customers where he is likely to face negative situations. If drunk, he claimed to find it easier to forgive clients’ rudeness and maintain a likeable personality, and he could leave behind bad memories as soon as the date ended. Ultimately, Haruka was more willing than some

81 A similar analysis of maids working in maid cafes is provided by Galbraith (2013).
others to endure “bad customers” in order to maximise his income, even at a cost to his wellbeing. In either case, the final choice was the result of a personal evaluation of pros and cons. The relationships of dansō with clients and the management are thus characterized by complex and intertwined power relationships where the dominant position may be occupied by different parties at different times. Mr. Hirota can force crossdressers to date a certain client, but it is detrimental for his business to have escorts unwilling to work or unexpectedly quitting. Dansō accept the escort job with its negative aspects because of the possibilities it ensures them, but at the same time, they can decide how to perform their work, and to a certain extent whether to accept clients and dates. Customers, on their side, have economic power, but they often develop an emotional dependency on escorts which puts them in a weak position. In this sense, the world of dansō escorting can be defined as a game with no predetermined winners or losers.

5.5 The price to pay: the embedded costs

As it is possible to infer from the above, the definition of the dansō escort service as pure entertainment can be misleading. It can be argued that, as long as customers experience the entertainment that dansō offer as a diversion or a hobby, limited in time and not too consuming in terms of physical and monetary resources, the relationship can be satisfactory and positively enjoyed. However, how can we define a relationship that negatively affects a customer’s life? Furthermore, if from a monetary perspective the work dansō perform can be seen as remunerative (at least compared to other part-time jobs in Japan\(^\text{82}\)), and it obviously allows great space for self-expression, is this enough to compensate for all the negative aspects the profession entails?

At the beginning of my observations in Akihabara, my co-workers were slightly reluctant to face the topic of those customers who commit their lives to the relationship with their garçon. Despite their silence, I was able to personally meet some of these clients, who told me about their stories, and in the end my co-workers also confirmed the presence of clients whom they defined as “addicts” (chūdôkusha). Emblematic is the case of two of Haruka's customers. The first one, Mayuko, was working in an unspecified mizushōbai business in Kabukichō. She used to date Haruka at least three times per week. On a typical date, Mayuko booked Haruka for three or four hours, offered him a fancy dinner, and then took him drinking in another place, which made the bill for every date around 35,000 yen

\(^{82}\) As for 2018, the minimum hourly wage for a part time job in Japan is 874 yen/hour (see footnote 46).
(roughly £240). To be sure to obtain the best and longest date, she doubled her working shifts and started to go straight from work to dates, without sleeping or resting, to save time and earn more money. She was hospitalized twice, after passing out due to overwork. The second case, Chisato, spent more than £30,000 on Haruka for dates, dinners, presents and live show tickets over a year. She was working part time and, after consuming all her savings, she was barely able to survive on her income. Despite acknowledging her economic situation, and instead of asking her to reduce the frequency of their meetings, Haruka just informed her that, without money, they would not be able to meet any more. Chisato, who used to meet him for very long dates (often the whole night), could find no other solution than to start working in a climax massage salon. When informed about this, Haruka just commented: “It is work like any other”, while Chisato felt her love growing stronger through the efforts she made to be able to meet her love object. In a later post on Twitter, Haruka wrote: “What kind of woman do I like? It is not enough to say ‘I want to meet you’, I like those people who come to visit me even if it is impossible. In such cases, I will absolutely return their love”. Even though not openly directed to Chisato or Mayuko, or to any other clients, with this public statement Haruka made clear that his love could be obtained only through extreme effort and commitment, qualities that in the escort world are best represented by money. Technically speaking, Haruka never asked clients to step into any form of prostitution, but he did not try to dissuade them either, and he never showed any concern regarding their working conditions; meanwhile, Mayuko and Chisato never blamed Haruka for their choices, but thought that he could better understand their love because of their sacrifices. Obviously, not all the crossdressers have the same personality, and some of them can be more rapacious and ruthless than others. However, the power of seduction of every escort, and their drive to obtain a high number of customers and a top rank position, is inextricable from the ability to manipulate people. Therefore, the borderline between agency and coercion can become unclear, and some customers fall into descending life trajectories in trying to obtain their escort’s love. From these examples it is possible to understand how the escort service is not a hobby or a diversion for all the customers. In addition, while most clients claimed to be positively stimulated by dating their dansō, thanks to the support they receive from him, it is clear that in other cases those love feelings can become a sort of obsession, not necessarily discouraged either by the escort involved (unless he perceives it as negative or dangerous for himself) or by the company. As Ren wisely stated: “This is not a game centre, customers meet

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83 Massage centers providing men with assistance in masturbation.
real people (*nama hito*) and they can really fall for someone.” When the feelings at stake are real, and directed toward a real person, it is not always possible to dismiss the relationship as “purely entertainment”.

Even though it can seem as if the customers are those mostly affected by the negative aspects of the escort service, the work *dansō* perform is highly demanding in terms of time and effort, both physical and psychological. How much does it cost from an emotional and personal point of view for *dansō* to carry on this kind of occupation?

To begin, it is necessary to briefly analyse how many hours escorts work and how much they earn for their shifts (see Appendix II). Garcons who also have another occupation usually continue to pursue it until their customers book them, do not actively seek new clients, and arrange their shifts according to the bookings. However, this strategy can be applied only by those who already have another good source of income and a very limited number of loyal customers who can be easily managed during the weekends. There were only two *dansō* adopting this approach at Dreamland. Usually escorts come to the office at least twice a week for 6 hours or more, regardless of bookings, and they are often available from four to six days per week. This basically means spending most of the time in the office, waiting for customers, without knowing if someone will come or not, especially in the case of mid and low rank escorts who do not have a high number of reservations (Figure 5.2).

![Figure 5.2 Dansō waiting for customers in the office](image-url)
This long downtime is unpaid, and since wasting time without economic reward can be very frustrating, despite reassurances from senpai and reception staff, sometimes new escorts quit after a few months because their monthly earnings are not enough to support their daily lives. Moreover, if no customers come for long periods, the lack of dates can undermine the self-confidence of the escort: not having reservations means no official recognition for the efforts put into getting customers, and the thought of not being loved or not being charming enough to attract clients can easily sneak into the escort's mind. Dansō usually take the lack of clients as a very personal matter, and tend to blame only themselves for not having customers. Their first reaction is to work harder, increasing working shifts and being more active on social media, but these tactics do not necessarily ensure a positive outcome. On the contrary, if in spite of these additional efforts clients still do not come, self-blaming sentiments increase. Several escorts have to struggle with the depression instilled by the lack of clients or had felt similar feelings in the past, as Ryū stated: “I had several problems when I changed company because I had few customers: the situation made me feel bad, I felt so bad that I started cutting myself. I hated myself and the customers, and in the end I was also hospitalized for mental health issues”. Feeling bad because of a lack of clients is a situation faced by low rank escorts, especially when they compare themselves with top selling escorts. Even though it can take up to one year before obtaining one or more regular customers, not all the escorts are able to endure this pressure, and some quit within a year. This situation can be exacerbated by the continuous comparison with the top selling escorts, and in some cases the highest in rank can hide condescending behaviours behind semi-paternalistic suggestions or remarks to those who do not appeal to clients. In sum, being an escort can be a remunerative part time job, with a minimum hourly wage at least double that of any other average part time job in Japan, but the income is extremely unpredictable and varies greatly from month to month. In addition, as mentioned above, the lack of customers can also lead to psychological consequences resulting, in the worst cases, in clinical depression.

A second important factor in evaluating the negative aspects of the escorts’ work is located in the highly emotionally demanding relationships to be endured with clients. As previously shown, clients usually have strong feelings of love or affection toward their favourite escorts. Those feelings are reciprocated only partially and are not present with all customers. However, escorts must sustain a performance of love and affection in all cases. Hochschild (1983: 90) noted that continued surface acting and performance of unfelt emotion leads to “emotive dissonance” resulting from the continuous strain between what is felt and
what is displayed. When the emotions performed as part of the job do not match with the inner feelings, tension in workers arises, and in the most severe cases this alienates the workers from their own emotions, and challenges their sense of self. The results of emotional dissonance are usually linked to lower job satisfaction and increasing levels of burnout (Pugh, Groth and Henning-Thurau, 2011; Erickson and Ritter, 2001; Erickson and Wharton, 1997). This is also true for crossdresser escorts. To limit the emotional dissonance, escorts have two possibilities: they can change their inner feelings or their external display of emotion. If forcing themselves to change their feelings toward someone can be complex, and the performance of unfelt emotions strengthens the alienation from one’s own feelings, on the other hand changing the display of emotions can irritate the customer. A customer who does not feel loved or appreciated by the escort may date another, more passionate escort (which means a loss of money), or can switch on egoistic behaviours aimed at obtaining all the attentions the escort refused to offer. In both cases, the situation can be very stressful, and several escorts quit the job due to the extremely demanding relationships with clients that they were unable to endure. In addition, most of them in private conversations stated that they felt themselves to be estranged from their own feelings, highlighting a sense of detachment from human emotions on several levels. For instance, both Ryū and Shōta told me how New Year festivities, which they have not been spending with their friends or family members for 6 and 3 years respectively, mean nothing to them anymore, and represent just a very busy working moment of the year they wish to end as soon as possible: they described themselves as unable to feel and enjoy the festive atmosphere. Also, as noticed by Korczynski (2008), alienation can arise when there is a lack of autonomous choice regarding the emotion to be displayed. Since dansō are almost in every case forced to perform feelings of love and affection, the possibilities of emotional alienation and burnout increase, along with feelings of dissatisfaction toward the job itself. For instance Haruka, despite being the one with the highest monthly income, was also the one quickest to complain about the unfairness of the hourly wage, which he considered too low for the job he has to do.

In addition, dansō also have to cope with those customers who completely devote their lives to them and often start descending life trajectories. As highlighted by Erikson (2004) in her study about coping strategies in service work, workers can rely on two strategies to protect themselves and their emotions while engaging in demanding emotional labour. The two strategies are investment and detachment. In the first, workers try to positively engage with customers, creating connections and personal relationships which can eventually develop into significant social interactions. In detachment, workers perform emotions only as
a necessary part of their work, stop performing them at the end of the work, and do not create other connections with their clients. Escorts similarly rely on such coping strategies. The most common investment strategy adopted is to use the time escorts spend with clients to make them feel happy or give them relief from their lives, as Rei stated: “I use the time we spend together to ensure that she does not suffer (kurushimasenai yō ni sono jikan ga sono hito no tame ni tsukaimasu).” Dansō who rely on the investment approach seek to ease the customers’ psychological pain by offering them the best service they can, letting them forget reality during the time they spend together. Escorts tend to see the great effort they put into the work as a way to compensate the clients, and in so doing, they obtain satisfactory feelings from offering clients a good time and high quality service. However, this is only a temporary countermeasure: the customer’s sadness and uneasiness sooner or later will emerge, and it can directly affect the crossdresser, as Ren explained: “There are clients who love me. But I do not love them. They can feel deceived (damašetā)…they know you date them only because of the money, and this hurts them (kokoro ga itai) but not only them... It is very hard also for me (kocchi no hontō ni tsurai desu).” Consequently, escorts try to give the clients the best service they can offer, in some cases through behaviours belonging to the “grey zone” (such as kisses on the cheeks), to foster the idea of being as close as possible to the clients. Sadly, it must be said that this kind of behavioural pattern often leads customers to feel even more deceived, and it also inflates escorts’ negative emotion towards increasingly more demanding clients.

On the other hand, some escorts rely on several different levels of detachment strategy. One of these is trying to direct and diminish clients’ extreme manifestations of love, as in the case of Kunihiro:

For instance, when I receive a present I am happy but my feelings are very complicated (fukuzatsuna kimochi). If you think about presents you are obviously happy, but when you get them too often they start to look like tribute (mitsugimono). When it becomes like this, I clearly say to the clients ‘I am fine, you do not need to do this’, and sometimes I do not accept their presents. When presents looks like tributes clients seem to have a dependency (izonshō). For their mental health this is not good, so I tell them to calm down a bit. In the past I had customers who were saving explicitly for me, and this does not make me feel good (kimochi yokunai).

Kunihiro showed an honest concern for the wellbeing of his customers, and tried to restrict exaggerated manifestations of love that he interpreted as “tribute”. Similarly, he stated he did “not feel good” about a possible dependency on him. Instead of accepting presents and being
grateful, he chose refusal as a form of detachment strategy. However, this could be misunderstood by clients, who might perceive the refusal of presents and attentions as personal, and hence become irritated and angry toward the escort. In addition, presents count only as a minor part of the clients’ budget to be spent on dansō, since the major source of expense is dates. Due to the exact nature of the escort’s work, which is based on the amount of money clients invest on dansō, it is very unlikely that a garcon will limit dates with a customer. Thus, Kunihiro and the other dansō do not seem to show any guilty feelings about working as escorts and indirectly being the cause of clients’ negative and self-destructive choices. Facing situations which closely resemble mental illness, their reaction is to detach themselves from the real drama of clients’ circumstances, shifting agency completely to the customers, and considering them as adults able to take their own decisions. For instance, Ren stated:

I think that dating us is a way to have fun, to be entertained and have detox time (tanoshii, goraku, dokunuki jikan). If you want this it is fine. But, if in order to meet us, customers cut back their daily life (seikatsu wo kiritsumeru), ask for loans or pay in advance, I think that is better if they stop visiting us. If you can have a normal life it is okay, you can have fun with us.

Dansō thus reject the idea of being a reason for clients’ problems, and move the issue to the customers’ inability to understand the entertainment nature of the escort business. This detachment is a successful coping strategy to regulate their stress levels and personal emotions.

Another negative consequence of being a crossdresser escort is represented by the way the work spills over outside work hours. Especially for those who are in the business for longer, the boundary between private life and working life can become very blurred. Besides writing blog articles or taking pictures to upload on Twitter in their private time, dansō keep thinking about their customers and how to improve their relationships with them. In June, I went out with Ryū for some clothes shopping. We went to a department store and walked into an accessories shop. He had just started to date a girlfriend two weeks before and he seemed to be pretty captivated by this person. He was looking at very feminine necklaces, rings and bracelets, I thought for a present for his partner. He then chose a nice hair pin with a ribbon and told me that it would be the perfect present for his best customer's birthday the next week. Later on the same day, in other shops, every time he spotted cute objects he made comments like “That client would love this one” or “I will buy it for the next date with [customer
name]”. Not marking a clear distinction between working time and private time can lessen ability to enjoy private time and can lead to a sense of constriction highly diffused among dansō. Private meetings (of escorts or with other friends), are usually captured in several pictures and uploaded on social media, leading to the continuous performance of a stage persona. Most of my informants told me they felt free from their working identity only when travelling abroad or at least in another city, or when alone in their apartments. Similarly, the overlapping of the two sides of the self can also hinder love relationships in private life. Being forced to share time and space with several female clients, usually playing the role of the perfect boyfriend, it is not unusual for dansō to feel tired when with their real partners, and unwilling to behave as kindly as during their work. At least five of my informants reported such feelings, and being unwilling to engage in discussion or even to talk with a partner after working shifts. Some crossdressers also feel guilty about dating someone in their private life, due to the exact nature of the escort business, which makes them feel ineligible for a committed love relationship. The schedule of a crossdresser escort is very tight, and allows them very little time with partners, friends and family. The lack of significant private relationships is another determinant factor in the increasing stress level of the escorts: in similar studies conducted on male and female escorts and other sex workers (Nelson, 2010; Meyers, 1999) partners and friendly relationships have been indicated as key factors in mediating stress level and rooting life in a reality outside working time. Spending time with people they really want to be with helps the escorts to relax and dismiss the tension that accumulates through intimacy with strangers at work. This defensive line is largely or completely absent in the daily routine of dansō.

Conclusion

As I showed in this chapter, the dansō escort work entails several negative aspects, and to really succeed in this profession it is necessary to sacrifice a great amount of personal freedom to the staged performance and persona. Honest displays of feeling are often sacrificed to performed emotions, and emotional dissonance is not unusual among crossdressers. Emotional burnout and depression can become serious issues, especially for emotionally immature subjects, who find it hard to manage the performance of feeling, and fail to separate private and public space and time. In addition, being a successful crossdresser escort might result in inability to manage non-commodified love relationships, and family
bonds may be pulled apart in order to devote as much time as possible to the escort work. The positive aspects of being a dansō escort, for instance the possibility to express oneself without feigning a stereotyped femininity, are in some cases surpassed by the negative aspects of the work, and some escorts end up quitting the job because they cannot endure the stress. Dansō can be at risk of exploitation in the relationships they have with both the management of the company and customers, though their positions cannot be identified as “weak” as they retain space to exercise their agency in their job.

For the majority of customers, the experience of dating a crossdresser escort is defined as very positive, allowing them to re-discover their femininity and to enjoy a romance perceived as otherwise unachievable. Even though clients understand the situational and performative nature of their relationships with dansō, they are satisfied with the feelings and interactions obtained (sābisu) as long as the exchange is compelling and emotionally satisfying.

However, clients are also subjected to negative consequences that develop through an assiduous frequentation of escorts. First of all, from a monetary perspective, the dansō escort is a pricey service to use, and the more the clients want to spend time with their escort, the heavier the economic investment becomes. Secondly, in the case of DCRs that last for several years, strong emotions are involved, and this leads some clients to lose sight of human interactions outside the frame of monetary transactions, in a process that can culminate in isolation and detachment from everyday reality. The involvement with a crossdresser escort can eventually become so strong as to suggest an obsession, in the name of which clients impose restrictions on themselves, cutting down their everyday expenses to support their “addiction”. Moreover, the unbalanced exchange of feelings experienced by crossdressers and clients usually leads the latter to live unrequited love stories or “part-time” relationships, limited in terms of time, which end as soon as the money to invest in them disappears, a situation that can at least partially offset the benefits gained from those relationships. The supposed safety clients perceive in dates only seems to obtain if customers approach dates as regulated spaces allowing emotional experimentation for a limited time.

My findings show how in the escort business the well-being of crossdressers and customers is often subordinated to the job’s needs. Escorts accept difficult working conditions not for need of the income but for their need to express themselves. Clients accept living unrequited love stories for the sake of experiencing emotions. DCRs involve power relationships where the dominant position may be occupied by either dansō or client, and both can thus be at risk of exploitation. Dansō can exert their “emotional power” over
customers who are deeply in love, taking advantage of clients’ weakness to increase income. However, they are also subjected to clients’ economic power, and partially obliged to endure relationships with bad customers to maintain the only job that, in their view, can allow them a high freedom for self-expression.

The tension arising from this situation cannot be easily solved, and the escort business, despite offering positive possibilities for those involved, can also be seen as a problematic environment negatively affecting those who cannot balance commodified and non-commodified relationships. The power relationships involved result in a sort of game where there is ever-present potential for winning and losing.
CONCLUSION

In this final section, I present the arguments underlined in the previous chapters, and I provide a theoretical discussion on the value of crossdresser escorting in Japan. I specifically address the potential of dansō escorting in terms of possibilities for crossdressers’ and customers’ self-expression, and for experiencing alternative forms of intimacy. I also analyse whether crossdressing can be considered as a form of long-term resistance (Rosenberger, 2013) for dansō and their customers.

While I was working at the company, the crossdresser staff did not change drastically. I kept monitoring the website after the end of my fieldwork, and I kept in touch with some of my informants through LINE. Of the 14 dansō informants I interviewed during my fieldwork, 9 were still working as crossdresser escorts at Dreamland or at other companies as of October 2017. Among those who quit there was Yori: during the interview he stated (as did many others) that he had no clear idea if he would continue as a crossdresser escort, nor did he know what he would do in the future. Yori also had a full-time occupation, so he did not rely only on escorting for his monthly income. Although he is not working at Dreamland anymore, he is still performing as a crossplayer in several events. As already stated, Ichi left when he felt he was not a dansō, but rather a transsexual. Ichi was aware that the company did not allow its staff to be on hormone therapy, hence he quit the job. He still meets with the other dansō occasionally, and talks extensively to them about his new transsexual condition. I was able to meet Ichi while in Japan for a conference in June 2017, and he was looking more masculine than I remembered, proudly showing a hint of beard and a deep voice.

Kunihiro decided to open his own agency providing guided tours inside Japan, for people who do not want to travel alone. Kunihiro’s business idea was to maintain the “escort” system of Dreamland, but removing the provision of boyfriend experiences. Kunihiro was sick and tired of clients’ selfish behaviours, but was still thinking about the possibilities offered by places like Dreamland, which he felt played the role of psychological support centres providing human empathy and friendly support in exchange for a monetary fee. Naoki, on the other hand, quit because he was overloaded with his main occupation, and no longer had time to devote to the escort work. Yori, Kunihiro and Naoki are still crossdressing despite having quit the escort job, because being dansō, for them, is connected to their identity, and not only to the role performed at work.

The last dansō who had quit and probably the most interesting case of all was Haruka. Contrary to every expectation, although he was steadily holding his top star position, he “just...
woke up one morning” (his own words) and decided to quit the escort work to start a career as a dansō host at a host club. He told me he felt caged in the Dreamland system, which did not allow him any personal and working development. He felt obliged to comply with an unchanging routine and, at the same time, he was convinced that his efforts with clients were not fairly rewarded, as already expressed in his interview. He first spread the news on social media, leaving both customers and co-workers speechless, then processed all the dates already booked, and said goodbye to his loyal albeit sometimes unbearable clients. Crossdresser host clubs were opening in Tokyo and hiring staff, and perhaps he did not want to miss his chance to link his name to this new kind of dansō-related entertainment and to become a top star also in this field. Showing a smart entrepreneurial attitude, he kept the same stage name, giving his past clients the chance to follow and support him in his new working experience. As a host, he claimed to earn as much as three times more than his highest salary at Dreamland. At the time of my last online check (28/08/2017), he had secured the number one position in his host club. I contacted him through LINE, and asked him to explain to me the main differences between the two occupations. As a host, Haruka can now share his contact details with his customers, and texts them to visit him at the club. This is one of his duties, which is necessary to become a number one host, as is meeting clients outside the club to feed their love fantasies. However, in this case, fantasies are set in a more mundane world than at Dreamland, and he also had to satisfy the sexual needs of his new futokyaku (Takeyama, 2016: 88-90). I sent him a friendly “Be careful!” and his answer, completely in line with his (stage?) character, was “Of STDs? Of course!”

Although all these changes in the staff obviously also affected the clients, my previous colleagues told me that only two of Haruka’s “monsters” stopped frequenting Dreamland (and perhaps started meeting him in the host club), while all the others switched to other garcons. Even though during interviewing all customers claimed that they would be loyal clients until their favourite crossdressers stopped working, these facts suggest a different reality: clients in almost all cases cannot or do not want to stop attending the escort company, even if their dansō quits and they cannot meet him anymore.

Taken as a whole, it is possible to state that dansō escorting provides a fundamental asset in the daily lives of individuals involved, from several different perspectives. At the same time, the possibilities allowed by this form of entertainment can come at a high price in terms of societal recognition, life development and psychological wellbeing. For crossdressers, the most important value is the possibility of expressing their identity. As I have demonstrated, dansō is a doing but, at the same time, it is also a signifier for a mode of
Crossdressers do dansō to express who they are while they are working: they choose an occupation that allows them to dress and behave as closely as possible to who they feel they are. Often relying on their androgynous features, dansō can perform as crossdresser escorts, which means that they can act according to what they perceive as their true self. The company provides a safe place to achieve an enhanced sense of identity through socializing with individuals who share the same characteristics and life experiences, so that crossdressers feel they belong to a group of peers, which helps them in shaping their dansō identity (Plummer, 1995; Schacht, 2008; Mackintosh, 2006). Through the escort work, dansō obtain recognition and admiration from outside the escort world, precisely because of their non-conforming identity. Therefore, they shift from the shame of being non-cisgender and negatively evaluated by society, to a pride in being explicitly different (Scheff, 1990), following a shame/pride turnover pattern already identified in the development of homosexual identity (Munt, 2000; Britt and Heise, 2000). However, since they are dansō, their crossdressing is not only bound to the escort service, but extends further into their everyday lives. Crossdressers are dansō because they do not fit or do not want to fit into the “female” category, nor do they want to be assimilated as males or transsexuals, but find in the dansō label one which can represent them. Dansō is a way to perform female masculinity and to coherently relate a female body and a masculine gender identity without taking into consideration sexual orientation, while avoiding categorization through stereotyped labels. These findings contribute to move knowledge in the fields of Gender Studies, Japanese Studies, and global queering a step further. Like other Asian “queer” identities, such as Chinese thong zhi (Tang, 2011) and zhongxing (Li, 2011; Hu, 2017), or tomboi in the Philippines (Johnson, 2005), dansō must be considered as a local expression of a queer identity, not converging towards Western labels and categorizations (Jackson, 2009), but actually challenging the assumption that the West is “the original and authentic model of all transformations in the sexual and gender order of Asia” (Sinnott, 2010: 18).

Through crossdressing, dansō express their discontent with conventional Japanese gender roles, and present a striking contrast with the idea of womanhood they are expected to embody. Their female masculinity can be read as a reaction by women against gender expectations and, broadly speaking, against the Japanese patriarchal society which still allows women fewer possibilities of personal development compared to men.

However, this dissatisfaction is not an explicit criticism of the society, nor does it involve a threat to the gender establishment in Japan, but works into already established gender categories without challenging them. Dansō are debunking gender categories by
showing the constructedness of gender but, at the same time, they are not actively taking up a revolutionary role, or provoking societal upheavals. Instead, they pursue a personal solution, and create a niche to accommodate their different gender identity and self. This kind of reaction against social norms can be interpreted as a form of long-term resistance as expressed by Nancy Rosenberger (2013: 158) “Long-term resistance does not explode in protest or, usually, consciously aim to challenge the status quo, but simmers in personal dissatisfaction, stretching the limits of compatibility with the rules of the society through personal choices.” Refusing to present themselves within Japanese stereotyped canons of femininity, refusing to enter into the patriarchal system of marriage, refusing to be “the girl” in a couple relationship, dansō express their dissatisfaction and resistance without openly challenging the system within they live.

These refusals are expressed through entrance into a working system which cannot offer any form of stability, either from a monetary or a professional status perspective. The escort work rarely represents the only source of income for a crossdresser, and alternative occupations are necessary to ensure a satisfactory livelihood. In addition, the escort’s duties are extremely demanding. This is so first of all in terms of time management: even though escorts can freely decide their working schedule, it is also true that longer shifts can potentially attract a higher number of customers. Similarly, it is not mandatory to accept night dates, but they are the most profitable. Secondly, to carry out friendly and loving relationships with customers is extremely emotionally demanding. In order to satisfy their customers, crossdressers must continuously perform emotions not often honestly felt. In some cases, to secure a client, they also have to perform a specific character not completely in line with their personality, and the constant strain between what is felt and what is performed can affect their psychological wellbeing. While being a dansō escort allows crossdressers to express their identity honestly, this self-expression is still subject to negotiation, and the positive gains are partially counterbalanced by these limitations. Crossdressers are required to constantly negotiate between the private self and the working persona, and the two positions overlap and influence each other, often leading dansō to the inability to draw a clear demarcation line between their working “I” and their self outside the escort business.

Not forming a movement to overtly seek broader societal recognition (and possibly increased rights) can be seen as a strategy that crossdressers adopt to manoeuvre within the borders of a still conservative patriarchal society. By detaching themselves from overt social activism, dansō are not contesting the societal status quo and they are not subjected to open criticism and potential negative backlashes such as, for instance, the loss of part of their
cliente. Managing the situation through long-term resistance is an expression of the dichotomous relationship between the individual and the society in Japan: according to this, ideally social relationships should be characterized by individuals negotiating the expression of their needs without conflict with social expectations and norms (Doi, 1985; Lebra, 1976, Schoppa, 2006; Rosenberger, 2013). The pervasiveness of strong social norms in Japan forces individuals to act in a socially acceptable way; otherwise, they have to face negative consequences in terms of isolation and exclusion. Long-term resistance offers the possibility of challenging norms in an indirect way, avoiding open societal conflicts.

Nevertheless, the borderline positions crossdressers occupy also oblige them to accept an outcast position: their gender identification is not officially recognised, and cannot be adopted in all daily interactions (for instance, with families or during other jobs outside the escort business); moreover, the crossdresser job neither has high status, nor offers stable future prospects. Thus, it is true that working as a crossdresser escort is an expression of agency, but since this occupation is the only one available that allows such self-expression, the choice takes on the shape of a “constrained agency” (Broadbridge, 2010).

As demonstrated by the rising number of dansō-related forms of entertainment in Japan, as well as a wider engagement with the world of fashion and music, the dansō phenomenon is gaining visibility. At the same time, in interacting with mass media and society, dansō may be stripped of their revolutionary potential, adapted to a wider audience, and reduced to market products. A similar process was at work with regard to nyūhāfu in the 1990s (McLelland, 2003b; 2004; Ishida and Murakami, 2006), who were exposed (and exploited) by media, which presented them as the new attraction in the “show” of queerness without improving their living conditions or the contemporary understanding of issues such as transsexuality. Despite wider engagement of dansō with public media, this visibility does not necessarily result in an open dialogue about the reasons for and the meaning of their crossdressing, or provide them with improved life and working conditions.

The growth in the number of crossdressers and fans84 can be likely taken as representative of the attraction that this new gender performance has for an increasing number of Japanese women and, broadly speaking, as further evidence of how rigid gender

84 With regard to Dreamland, since its opening the number of crossdressers has risen from five to fourteen; customers jumped from about fifteen individuals to more than one hundred, the majority of whom are visiting the company on a regular basis (chapter 4.1). The popularity of the dansō idol group Fudanjuku should also be noted: from 2009 to 2018 they released seven albums, reached the first 10 positions of the Oricon chart with 12 singles, and their most viewed video on Youtube (Dansō Revolution) collected more than 1,200,000 views in five years (data from Fudanjuku official website, Oricon official website, and Youtube.com).
norms have been increasingly questioned in different ways by women in Japan from the 1990s onwards. However, the lack of deeper engagement with issues concerning gender and sexuality (and perhaps the lack of connection with a wider network of activism) in favour of resort to private solutions to face what is perceived and presented as a personal identity issue, contributes to marginalizing dansō in a low status and insecure position within Japanese society. Presenting gender and sexual identity as personal, fluid choices, while allowing a wider freedom, also contributes to moving the debates toward a diffuse subjectivism. To define oneself becomes an utterly subjective process, which in turn makes harder the emergence of a community and of a shared activism.

The phenomenon of dansō escorts, along with behavioural patterns such as the postponement or rejection of marriage and the refusal to associate femininity with motherhood (Rosenberger, 2013; Kelsky, 2001; Schoppa, 2006), or alternative aesthetic practices, such as tanned faces (ganguro) (Kinsella, 2014: 67, 131), in open contrast with traditional notions of Japanese feminine beauty, is an expression of dissatisfaction by Japanese women who, for different reasons, fall outside prescribed categories and embodiments of femininity. If dansō is restricted to the status of a topic affecting only those involved in crossdressing, it will echo many debates involving minorities in Japan at large, which have often ended up in a discussion between tōjisha and not-tōjisha on who has the right to speak (McLelland, 2009). This approach is in the end counter-productive, resulting in division into factions and increasing the isolation of minority groups, rather than contributing to their acceptance in the society at large. Hence it would be advantageous not only for crossdressers, but for all those women who do not adhere to stereotyped gender and sexual roles, to spotlight a debate about different embodiments of womanhood (both from an aesthetic and a life development point of view), to improve the life quality of non-cisgender identities. Such minority awareness and activism is perhaps still not perceived as a practicable solution by dansō.

Turning to clients, they attend the escort service mainly for two reasons: first, the possibility of finding a careful listener and a provider of emotional support, and secondly, to find a way to experience emotions. The escort service provides intimacy to those individuals who cannot or do not want to obtain it elsewhere and would rather rely on purchased intimacy. For some women, the escort service is perceived as the only possibility to be heard,

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85 The word tōjisha literally means “those who are concerned with the matter” (Horiguchi, 2018), and defines a sense of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” with regards to a specific topic, a line demarcating those who are directly affected by an accident or a condition.
supported and loved by a charming partner. As the intimacy between the couple develops
date after date, dansō come to occupy different roles for their clients: best friends, caring
listeners, loving brothers, committed lovers or all of these. Intimacy, especially in the
developed Japanese service economy, is evaluated as a commodity, and commodities
represent status symbols that in contemporary societies must be owned in order to obtain
happiness and recognition from others, and to secure one’s identity as a consumer, and (hence)
an individual. Intimacy, and specifically love, allows female clients to discover or re-discover
their femininity, and enables a better evaluation of the self (Takeyama, 2016) but, at the same
time, it is also perceived as dangerous and scary. Human interactions could require too deep a
commitment, as well as cares and attentions which not all women want to offer; feelings
could be strong on one side, but not necessarily reciprocated by the other person; a love
confession could lead to a relationship or to rejection. However, all such scary features of
intimacy can be overcome by paying for an intimacy without negative and fearful aspects, a
product to be consumed at the desired time and place, with a perfect partner chosen among a
range of possible options, with no risk of rejection. Even so, DCRs carry risks. Their safety
resides primarily in the client’s ability to experience them as a regulated space where
sentimental and performative experimentations are allowed within the limits of the purchased
time. The “semi-ritual” space of dates offers the possibility of enjoying a kind of human
interaction that clients feel to be unobtainable elsewhere, but it should be approached as a sort
of performative play which does not overlap with life outside the world of escorting. When
clients fail to make this distinction, and make excessive sacrifices in their lives outside the
DCRs, they often face severe negative consequences in emotional, psychological and
economic terms.

Different theories have tried to explain how relationships and intimacy have changed
over time: for instance, while Giddens (1991, 1993) sees in different forms of intimacy an
evolution of relationships from a means to reproduction to a form of “pure relationships” that
freed human interactions from the constraints dictated by social norms, Bauman’s concept of
“liquid love” (2003) shows how, in contemporary societies, love is a commodity or a service
that can be sold or bought. The combination of intimacy and market value can be criticized or
supported, but never ignored, and it offers a tool to analyse gendered social relationships in
late capitalist society. In the world of dansō, the market is ruled by the exchange of money
and emotions, and both can be seen either as “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) or as tools
to exercise different forms of power over those who come to represent the weaker in a given
system. Feelings – and especially love – become a means to induce clients to spend money,
and hence they are strategically deployed by escorts to increase their income. For crossdressers, performing and selling emotions are weapons to obtain not only material gain but also social recognition: through the establishment of a deep relationship with a client, dansō ensure themselves a source of income and, at the same time, they are loved for their female masculinity. The performed emotions, from the crossdressers’ standpoint, do not exist outside the world of Akihabara, but the benefits obtained through them expand into dansō daily life as money and positive evaluation. On the other hand, money is a weapon for clients to exercise their power over crossdressers: clients buy with money what they cannot get without it, due to their being unattractive, scared or uninterested in heterosexual relationships, or unwilling to enter into a marriage system that offers them a subaltern position vis-à-vis men. For clients, the performed emotions represent a good that can be purchased upon need and that they want to buy; even if commodified, it influences their wellbeing. Commodified intimacy offers, for the majority of clients, the only possibility of experiencing the kind of intimacy they want. Customers’ power is intrinsically linked to their economic resources, and lack of money makes them vulnerable on two different levels. On the one hand, they cannot meet their escort, and hence cannot buy the “good” they need. On the other hand, the lack of money obviously strongly impacts their everyday life, making in the most extreme cases their living conditions miserable, and intensifying feelings of desperation due to the impossibility of meeting their love object.

In addition, I also argue that there is another asset that clients can buy with money: hope. In analysing Filipina women working as entertainers for American GIs in South Korea, Sealing Cheng (2010: 142) states that escorts use love as a form of power and “where the state and the market fail them, love gives them a hope”. In the case of crossdressers’ clients, it is possible to state that “where love fails them, money gives them a hope”: first of all, creating and presenting a different image of themselves during dates, customers can think about themselves as having obtained intimacy and attentions from a charming partner, so as someone who “made it” and not as losers in the game of love. They can reinvent their personal history in a more satisfactory way, and projecting a different personal image can also lead them to re-discover their femininity. Secondly, the purchase of intimacy is the purchase of the hope of being loved for who they are, even if only for a limited time and upon the payment of an hourly fee. For clients, crossdresser escorts are providers of an “augmented reality”, an experience taking place in the material world, enriched by performed and tailored aspects. The final aim of such relationships does not reside in a goal to be reached together, such as marriage, or in the dream of a shared future: DCRs are lived and experienced in the
moment, and planning is not fundamental in their development. Their purpose is to offer perfect dates, and re-awaken emotions. The emotions felt when holding hands or when receiving compliments and hugs generate in clients the tokimeki, the fast heartbeat, and this is what makes dates so special; the experience of intense feelings is the final aim of DCRs.

Thirdly, even though most of the customers are aware that their DCRs are not going beyond the strict limits of commodification, some of them still nurture the dream of taking their relationship with their favourite beyond the time/money constraints of commodified relationships. Through an assiduous frequentation, clients intensify their intimacy with an escort, possibly setting the relationship on a boyfriend experience mode. To carry on a committed relationship with a dansō represents for these people a way to buy the dream of a possibility, keeping alive the idea that, at least potentially, their relationship can become something more than a commodity. In this space of possibility lies the strength to endure unrequited or part-time love stories: even if clients are aware that it is an extremely unlikely reality, the efforts toward a hope justify dates and relationships that would be otherwise empty. To set hope in motion is a strategy adopted by clients to compromise between lived reality and the love fantasy attached to the escorts’ world.

Furthermore, the specific case of dansō and their clients offers new insights into the engagement of Japanese women in the provision and purchase of commodified intimacy: while the topic of women as providers of intimacy has been deeply investigated (Allison, 1994; Parreñas, 2011; Hayashi, 2014; Matsuda, 2008; Ueno, 1989; Cheng, 2010 ), and some studies have also focused on women as customers of male providers (Takeyama, 2016; Shida, 2017; Yoshida, 2012), the investigation of dansō sheds light on a context where women are, at the same time, both clients and providers, and their interactions with masculinity are not linked to the actual presence of men. DCRs show how power relationships in non-cisgender intimate relationships are constantly negotiated. From one perspective dansō, in providing company and entertainment, still play a role perceived as feminine within Japanese society, taking care of the guests’ needs and entertaining them. At the same time, they also represent the “man” in the relationship with a customer, and the gender labour that clients perform for dansō reaffirms this heteronormative perspective (Mitsuhashi, 2006). On the other hand, women clients are aesthetically and emotionally feminine, but they are also those who buy escorts’ time, and who can provide financial support to the escort, and so occupy in this sense a stereotypically masculine position. Hence, power shifts from one side to the other according to what is going to be exchanged: with regard to emotions, dansō are those who occupy the powerful position and lead the game of seduction; however, they always have to recognise
the monetary power owned by clients, and must at least partially adapt their behaviour to the market rules which dominate DCRs. In the context of those relationships, both gender and emotions are performed, and this performativity is the common language that both clients and crossdresser speak to each other; the gendered scripts are constantly exchanged, and all the agents occupy in turn different positions, imposing their power on the other party.

This kind of purchased intimacy comes with some hidden costs and dangers, but this is considered as a part of the game by crossdressers and their clients: both play the same love-game, and both often face the drawbacks. Crossdressers have to manage the possibility of not being chosen and loved by clients, spending hours and days waiting for a date, with no income. They must be ready to offer love even to those people they dislike, and they have to bear selfish clients and put up with their bossy behaviour. On the other hand, clients must be aware that the escort service could become a dangerous form of entertainment: to develop, emotions require deep commitment in terms of time and money, and it is not difficult to cross the border between love and obsession, or entertainment and addiction, as this research has shown. The most committed relationships can eventually come to a sudden and unexpected end, due to unforeseen causes, like an escort’s “goodbye”. The tension arising from these power relationships shows how both dansō and clients run the risk of being exploited or becoming exploiters. Notwithstanding the pros and cons, for both crossdressers and their clients, the articulation of dansō as a way of living, or as an essential service to benefit from, becomes a reality that those involved cannot easily abandon. Is it possible to renounce our identity, once we have finally found a way to express it? Can we abandon a feeling, an emotion, when we can enjoy it anytime, just by buying it? These are possibilities that neither clients nor dansō can renounce.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Background information of crossdressers and clients

As previously stated in chapter 2, 14 dansō escorts and 11 customers took part in my research as informants. I shall provide here two tables which summarize the socio-demographic data and other useful participant information, in order to clarify their socio-educational background and make it easier to identify informants who are quoted through the chapters. With reference to crossdresser informants:
Crossdresser informants were anonymized through pseudonyms, and they are listed in order of the interviews. According to the information available from the agency’s website and from my direct contacts with crossdressers, five of my informants are currently not working for Dreamland but, as in the case of Tora, it cannot be excluded that they may start their escort work again in the future. Ryū is underlined because he is the only informant who does not work for Dreamland but for another company. Shin and Takumi, the two veterans, are the only two who admitted being in a committed relationship with someone (a woman in both

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86 Last checked: 16/10/2017.
cases) who does not have any link with Akihabara or the crossdresser escorts’ world, while Naoki and Kunihiro are marked with ** because they started to date each other in June 2016.

With regards to working status, only Shin does not have any other occupation beside the escort business; he works full time for Dreamland and he would like to be employed in the same office whether or not he decides to quit the escort service. Dansō who have a full time occupation usually work as escorts during the weekends, on national holidays or in late afternoon shifts. In those cases, the escort work does not have a real economic purpose (since livelihood is sustained by the main occupation), but it is undertaken mostly to fulfil the crossdressers’ wish to perform as dansō.

With regard to part time workers, along with his bartender occupation, Ryū often accepts jobs as a dansō model or collaborates with TV shows and magazines related to crossdressing. Haruka works in a snack bar near his house adopting his female identity: he does not drastically change his style in clothes, but does not bind his chest and wears a bra. He finds the work in the snack bar very similar to the escort occupation, due to the need to talk extensively with clients, and believes that the two jobs positively influence each other and made him a very good entertainer, able to cater to both men and women’s needs. Tora and Ren, marked with *, were temporarily living together at Tora’s apartment to cut down their rent expenses. Based on the data, it is possible to infer that the dansō occupation alone does not provide a sufficient income to sustain living expenses, and other sources of income are sought even by top ranking escorts such as Ryū if they cannot rely on a full-time occupation.

Senmon gakkō, in both tables, indicates professional training colleges or vocational schools. According to their educational background, crossdressers can be divided into two main groups: those with higher education who attended university for 4 years and those who attended senmon gakkō or even quit their studies at the end of high school. The difference in contemporary Japan in terms of employment opportunities between the two categories is fairly marked: university education usually permits work for better companies and better working conditions, while senmon gakkō occupy a lower level, especially in terms of social status. However, freelance or artistic occupations cannot be similarly evaluated and divided in terms of schooling, and most of my informants chose a senmon gakkō to fulfil their wish to

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87 A description of the relation between universities and senmon gakkō in Japan is provided by Cave (2008: 256-258).
undertake a career outside of corporate regular employment and closer to their interests.\textsuperscript{88} From this data it is possible to infer that the choice to work as crossdresser escorts could be influenced also by the chosen educational path which, in most of the cases, was not aimed to lead my informants into the corporate sector. According to their self-classification, all crossdressers come from middle or working class backgrounds, and possibly their educational choices reflected this economic background: especially those who stated that they came from low income families quit their studies at the end of high school. This data fits a picture of limited social mobility, strengthened by crossdressers’ will not to step into corporate career paths in Japan even when holding a degree, but choosing instead alternative occupations. Those who obtained a degree are also older compared to those who opted for vocational schools. This data can be read in terms of a possible increase in status in the last ten years for \textit{senmon gakkō}, leading to alternative working paths, especially for those people who do not want to step into corporate jobs (Borovoy, 2010). Another interesting issue emerging from school and professional choices of the crossdressers is that in almost all cases they opted for “artistic” (manga, animation, design, make up) and hospitality schools, preferring occupations perceived as non-gendered. Specifically, it is possible to notice a wish to pursue their own interests and to be outside gender stereotypes with regard to work, refusing to follow established social norms, and to avoid occupations that might likely request a strong adherence to gender convention. Although those occupations are likely to offer less stable working conditions and a lower income, nevertheless the possibility of benefiting from a wider freedom (for instance in terms of schedule or dress code) might be seen as compensative.

The second table provides information about client informants:\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{88} For more information about the ambiguous status of \textit{senmon gakkō} in the Japanese educational system nowadays see Borovoy (2010: 184-187).

\textsuperscript{89} All the customers interviewed are female born and self-identify as women individuals.
Table AI.2. Customer informants background information

<table>
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<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>IS HOMETOWN TOKYO?</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>OCCUPATION</th>
<th>SINCE</th>
<th>PARTNER</th>
<th>LIVING ARRANGEMENTS</th>
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<td>Maya</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Part time (maid in a maid café)</td>
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<td>Sacchan</td>
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<td>Senmon gakkō</td>
<td>Full time (nurse)</td>
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<td>no</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Full time (elementary school teacher)</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>no</td>
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<td>Mei</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>BA Literature</td>
<td>Full time (elderly care)</td>
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<td>Yuki</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Full time (receptionist)</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Full time</td>
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<td>Nana</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Full time (head of her company)</td>
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<td>Flower</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>BA Dentistry</td>
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<td>Oneechan</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>BA Psychology</td>
<td>Full time (Physician)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>no</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Client informants were anonymized through the use of self-chosen pseudonyms and are listed in order of interview. Where not explicitly stated, clients did not provide detailed information about their occupation or their educational background. Similarly, not all of them wanted to declare their exact age; data not provided expresses customers’ desire not to disclose such information. With the exception of R and Flower, all the informants are currently living in Tokyo. Those who are not originally from Tokyo used to meet dansō even before moving to the capital, often undertaking long and expensive train journeys. Informants living alone can rely on full time employment. However, not all those who have a full time occupation were living on their own; in some cases, they continue to live with their families. It must be noticed that all the informants who live alone are curfily living in Tokyo, but are originally from other regions of the country and their choice to live alone coincided with their moving to the capital, with the exception of Nana, who moved to Tokyo with her family when she was 5 years old. The choice to move to Tokyo, in the case of Mei, was taken to simplify her visits to Dreamland, and not for working reasons.

The interviewed clients do not know each other with the exception of A and B, who are close friends and often book double dates with their favourite dansō.

The social background of clients is more varied, compared to crossdresser informants, since Nana, Oneechan and Flower are self-identified daughters of high-class families, while the other informants are from middle class families, with the exception of Maya, who stated that she came from a low income family. Unlike crossdresser informants, all clients except
the three high class informants opted for feminine-perceived occupations (nurse, teacher, maid in a maid café, receptionist) and hence they followed more closely socially accepted working paths for women in Japan.
APPENDIX II

Crossdresser escorts’ schedules

This appendix is meant to provide useful information about the working hours of crossdressers. Specifically, it shows how many hours per week dansō usually work, and how much of the time devoted to the escort work is effectively spent with clients (for instance, ‘3/7’ means that the crossdresser was in the office available for dates for seven hours, but he was effectively on dates for only three hours).

This data was gathered in May 2016 through the schedule tool available on the company website. This tool shows, as a diagram, the everyday working shifts of each crossdresser as a blue line, and in red highlights the already booked hours; the information is updated in real-time according to clients’ reservations. Hours devoted to special events are green coloured and inform the customers that a specific crossdresser will not be available for dates when employed in a public event. I report the information of the diagram as simplified data in my table. Crossdressers who were not working on a specific day are left as blank slots. Mondays are left blank because the company is closed on Monday. The data accompanied by the mention +n show the hours devoted on that day to a cafe event. Ryū’s shifts are not inserted into this table since he belongs to a different company. Ichi’s shifts are not shown either, since he had already left the company in May, when this data was gathered.

Thanks to this information, it is possible not only to better understand the time that dansō spend in the office as downtime, but it is also possible to see the differences between top selling, mid and low rank escorts in terms of quantity of dates and thus income. Furthermore, it is possible to roughly calculate the monthly income of a crossdresser and of the company itself. However, the table shows working hours between 9am and 11pm, so expensive night packs, which provide 20,000 yen each, are not included. Similarly, crossdressers’ additional income from sales of pictures and other items, or from special options purchased by customers when booking a date, are also not shown here. Due to the exclusions noted above, the income of dansō reported here would be somewhat lower than their actual income.

A crossdresser’s income can greatly vary month by month, and it is not possible to define an average level. Moreover, months like December (Christmas), January (New Year) and April (Golden Week), when important festivities or events take place, represent very busy moments for crossdresser escorts, and usually increase their average income. Generally
speaking, low rank crossdressers can earn less than 10,000 yen per month (£80), while top selling escorts can earn above 300,000 yen (£2060) which makes it, in almost all cases, very difficult for dansō to resort only to their crossdresser’s occupation income to sustain their living expenses.  

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<th>Ryōma</th>
<th>Naoki</th>
<th>Kunihiro</th>
<th>Seiji</th>
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</table>

| Hours worked | 167 | 60+2/5 | 105 | 61+2/5 | 91+5 | 89+2.5 | 61 | 52 | 54+5 | 52+2.5 | 71 | 40.5 |
| Web dates | 92.5 | 57 | 96.5 | 18.5 | 20 | 62 | 23 | 16 | 5 | 6.5 | 19.5 | 33.5 |
| Income (yen) | 185,000 | 114,000 | 193,000 | 37,000 | 40,000 | 124,000 | 46,000 | 32,000 | 10,000 | 15,000 | 39,000 | 67,000 |

Table AII.1 Crossdressers’ working hours

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### Table AII.2 General Worker Wages in Japan


### Table AII.3 International Comparison of Wages

Sources: ILO, LABORSTA.