The Lonely World of Virtual Love:
Masculinity between Self-eradication
and Neo-Validation in Late-modern Japan

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Abstract

Based on a four-year empiric-phenomenological fieldwork in the slippery domain of virtual interactions as well as in-depth literature research on new media, masculinity studies and entertainment industry with specific focus on Japan, this paper aims at clarifying some of the major – and to a certain extent, central – themes recurrent in the, at times obsessive, radicalized consumption of virtual leisure practices among (Japanese) men: particularly online dating, video games and digital pornography seem to have slowly, steadily, quietly conquered the cyber-space – notably large segments of the male population. Previous academic research on the digital space and its relation to masculinity, particularly the seminal studies of Azuma Hiroki (2000, 2001) and Morikawa Aiichirō (2008), deal mostly with the otaku ("nerd") phenomenon classically linked to the cyber-industry and digital culture. The current paper analyzes the two additional paradigms of masculinity in Japan framing the otaku social appearance – the salaryman ("corporate samurai") and the "herbivore men" – in historical-comparative perspective while highlighting the complex gender dynamics in late-modern Japan, in the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics, and suggests some possible measures towards a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the challenges masculinity is facing currently, in a global perspective.

Keywords: cyber-space, Japan, masculinity, salaryman, otaku, herbivore men

Introduction: questioning "toxic masculinity"

Recently, there has been an increasing amount of debate on the role played by men in the current development of historical events related to violence in the public space, to competitiveness and efficiency in the workplace as well as to the overwhelmingly dysfunctional family patterns coming to light within intimate relationships. Labeled as "toxic masculinity",

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the classic paradigm of "how a man should be" in his three primary functions – to provide, to protect and to procreate – is mercilessly dismantled. However, an equally powerful counter-model of masculinity is not being issued, neither in academic circles nor by means of mass-media proliferation, which leaves millions, if not billions, of men wondering where they actually belong to and what they are supposed to do. While the feminist arena has offered throughout the decades alternative lifestyle models for women in opposition to traditional existential trajectories, this has not been so far the case for men: abandoned in the real space of inter-human exchanges and without the support of social-intellectual networks able to offer them orientation and validation, a vast majority of men in the prime of their lives – that is, aged 17-62 – find themselves isolated, lonely, confused, ultimately deeply unhappy. Lacking the neuro-physiological ability and the socio-educational background to connect to and to analyze their emotions, most of these male citizens find it impossible to locate themselves in the present-day world, and thus choose to retreat into the virtual one. The stronghold of such a historical situation is Japan.

Based on a four-year empiric-phenomenological fieldwork in the slippery domain of virtual interactions with more than 500 respondents as well as in-depth literature research on new media, masculinity studies and entertainment industry with specific focus on Japan, this paper aims at clarifying some of the major – and to a certain extent, central – themes recurrent in the, at times obsessive, radicalized consumption of virtual leisure practices among (Japanese) men: how can we explain the fascination which virtual distraction devices exert on male perception and on the processing of reality to be explained? What can we learn from the huge numbers related to the money paid for the purchase/upgrade of video games and the hours devoted to playing those video games, in a world and era in which the value of time is even more highly perceived than the value of money? What impact does "virtual socializing" have on "real-life socializing"? Is there a connection between the consumption of virtual pornography and factual interactions with women, occurring in everyday encounters? Is there any impact on the society or the world at large derived from the cyber-activities of men? Particularly online dating, video games and digital pornography seem to have slowly, steadily, quietly conquered the cyber-space – notably large segments of the male population, including, among others, kindergarten kids, neurotic teenagers, cool hipsters, ambitious CEOs of utopian startups, progressive intellectuals, secluded

NEETs (persons described as "Not-in-Education-Employment-or-Training") and middle-aged employees of large corporations or governmental agencies. While academic research on the digital space, without being specifically focused on its economic success, is still in an incipient phase with the notable writings of Azuma Hiroki (2000, 2001) and Morikawa Aiichirō (2008) which deal mostly, though, with the *otaku* ("nerd") phenomenon classically linked to the cyber-industry and digital culture, this paper attempts several answers and explanations to the above-mentioned interrogations, and suggests some possible measures towards a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the challenges masculinity is facing currently, in a global perspective. The two additional paradigms of masculinity in Japan framing the *otaku* social appearance – the *salaryman* ("corporate samurai") and the "herbivore men" – are analyzed in historical-comparative perspective, while highlighting the complex gender dynamics in late-modern Japan, in the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics.

In adopting this dialectical perspective, I shall follow a three-step procedure. The first step in my analysis is a general presentation of the research field as an ethnographic endeavor, followed by an in-depth explanation of the applied methods and theories (in 2.1. "The research field, theoretical background and methodological approaches"). Herein, I delve into the twofold problematic of tackling masculinity – or masculinities – in present-day Japan from my perspective as a white female belonging, clearly, to the socio-educational upper-class, of Romanian origins with the excruciating economic-political experiences of the communist era (1980s) and the aftermath of the calamitous changes occurring during the 1990s. At the intersection of past-historical oppression and present-day status-related perceived superiority, there is the tremendous question of how femininity is mediated and processed by male actors in the Japanese social field, and how they represent themselves during informal conversations. The clarification of my position plays a key-role in this dynamics of potential power-plays, with the possible challenges and obstacles, while facilitating exceptional insights into the mechanisms of late-modern Japan, with its meticulously programmed reproduction strategies and disturbingly administrative intrusion into individual intimacy.

Based on this first step, the second level of the current paper (in 2.2. "The crisis of masculinity: mechanisms and victims") focuses on the three masculinity patterns in postwar Japan, both in their historical promotion

and development and in their relevance within the social reality: the salaryman, the otaku and the herbivore men. As to be shown further below, they are deeply ideological constructions, imposing specific behaviors and thinking patterns, more often than not emerging as a consequence of the social "downward mobility" epically mentioned by sociologists since late 1990s, when referring to the rise of the network society. In the final stage of this paper (in 2.3. "Re-defining the masculine self: visions and strategies"), I analyze several strategies employed by men in their everyday life to survive their own sense of loss and crisis, and to move beyond social neglect and judgment. It takes courage and commitment to change, once the deepest core of one's identity threatens to implode, for instance, when basic needs such as sexual intercourse or the innate sense of belonging are rejected. However, the alternative is a life based on lies, towards oneself and the others, in order to keep up the delusion of safety and comfort – lies which very often lead to a point-of-no-return, where depression followed by the imminent suicide respectively incredible violence towards those around oneself become the only possible alternatives.

As I argue in two further papers on masculinity and its reflection on online dating behaviors – *Love in the Digital Age: Online Dating and the Resurgence of Toxic Humanity* – and on video games occurring mostly in virtual networks – *Alternative Realities, Alternative Masculinities: An Empiric Inquiry into Japan's Video Game Culture and Its Global Impact* and (both forthcoming, 2018) –, the seclusion into the digital world of virtual encounters appears as a means to cope with newly emerged historical practices which robs male social actors of their traditionally transmitted sense of superiority and unquestioned power. The identification with exceptional characters coming from non-privileged backgrounds who manage to survive and thrive in the wide world, while simultaneously avoiding the capitalist standards of success – money, status and the corresponding female attention/admiration, more commonly known as 'sex' –, and thus display a carefully crafted alternative image of what a "man should be like", seems to offer to male participants in the cyber-universe a gate to a parallel space, in which the access to recognition and validation comes without the often inevitable by-product of failure and rejection – or at least, not openly, publicly humiliating.

In their work *Evil Media*, Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey argue that, as a consumer of digital information in the proliferation of the all-encompassing media, one can either become an instrument of a multitude

of "Big Brothers" dispersed across the virtual spaces or an agent of change (Fuller & Goffey, 2012: 25). There is a deeply disturbing dimension in this ethical challenge each of us, quotidian consumers of digital media, face every day: comfortable submission and indifference or respect and compassion for "absent others"? As Michael Kimmel puts it in *Angry White Men – American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, from an early age, and not only in the highly prosperous, post-industrialized nations of the G-8 group, men are educated and socialized to compete and win, which comes added to the biological drive to provide, protect and procreate, and thus creates a socially determined compulsion to overcome and achieve – which still is the paramount model of masculinity promoted by mainstream media and by prevalently acknowledged role-models (Kimmel, 2015: 31). Furthermore, as Bell Hooks writes in her book *The Will To Change:*

> [t]oday, small boys and young men are daily inundated with a poisonous pedagogy that supports male violence and male domination that teaches boys that unchecked violence is acceptable, that teaches them to disrespect and hate women. Given this reality and the concomitant emotional abandonment of boys, it should surprise no one that boys are violent, that they are willing to kill, it should surprise us that the killing is not yet widespread. (Hooks, 2004: 51-52)

It is this clash of two opposite flows in the existential formation and ongoing information that confronts men, and which leads, inevitably, to what Kimmel labels as "aggrieved entitlement" so typical for the toxic masculinity of late modernity within the patriarchal, white-hegemonic framework (Hooks, 2000) I referred to in the *Introduction*: there is the natural, biologically ingrained instinct to protect and provide and there is the permanent input of violence and revenge, motivated or not, which permeates the daily experience of boys and men. But I would argue that most men, instead of directly targeting those around them as possible outlets for their pent-up energy and frustration, prefer to retreat from the real world into the virtual universe, were the three main competitors women face nowadays are located: online socializing, porn/pornography and video games. All three are huge industries with yearly turn-outs of billions of USD employing the virtual space and the digitalization of human lives as catalysts for financial growth, regardless of the impact they have on the individual well-being and, even more so, on social structures. This phenomenon is already taking place in Japan, with the male population increasingly retreating from the dating and marriage market

with women in real life towards the cyber-space populated with dating sims [dating simulation apps], virtual girlfriends, VR [virtual reality] sex/porn and digitally reinforced intercourse, relationships and marriages with mange/anime characters, etc. Statistically speaking, as of September 2016, 42% of heterosexual men aged 18-34 were virgin, compared to 44,2% of women in the same age group, according to Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, virginity being defined as "intercourse with a person of different gender and in real life". Furthermore, according to an analogous research of the Japan's Family Planning Association published in February 2017, over 47,2% of marriages in Japan are sexless ("sexless" being defined as "no intercourse between spouses during the past month and without expectation for that to change in the future"), an increase of 2,6% compared to a similar data from 2014, and impressively higher than the 31.9% recorded when such a survey was conducted for the first time in 2004 (Kobayashi, 2017: 18, Tsuji, 2018, Schad-Seifert, 2018: 83-88).

Not being a netizen myself and, therefore, not being an active member of the cyber-society, it felt at times deeply challenging to empathize with my counterparts' enthusiasm for new program, platforms, future developments and the differences to older products. However, it became very soon obvious that the more questions I asked, the more my discussion partners would explain and their willingness to open up towards me would increase – and deepen. Empathic listening, dynamic asking of questions and then allowing them the freedom to answer them at their own pace worked wonders and provided me with information I would have never expected – and with insights which showed me the free fascination and perceived kindness of the virtual world as a viable alternative to the cruelty and superficiality of the real world. The more profound issue is, of course, to what extent the immergence and refusal of living in the "here and now" of the real, physical world is, in fact, a sustainable choice. As I shall explain in the "Conclusion: masculinity and acceptance", there is a deep longing for connection and belonging with "real humans in the real world" lingering in the emotional-mental outfits of the male netizens populating the virtual world. There is, though, an even deeper and stronger fear of being inadequate and awkward among "real humans in the real world" – and to that fear, the cyber-society offers a stable, safe space of friendly, even if volatile, encounters. The refusal to listen and empathize displayed by female citizens, who, for better or for worse, have come so far

to control and determine the dynamics of the "real world", plays, in my opinion, a fundamental role in the retreat of male citizens in present-day Japan towards the online "floating world".

2. Masculinity at crossroads and the re-writing of the human condition

Based on statements collected in informal discussions with various men I encountered during my fieldwork in Japan (fieldwork conducted, in fact, in the field of Japanese mass-media and popular culture), the forthcoming analysis focuses on the shortcomings of the real life, in "here and now", counterpointed by perceived more deeply fulfilling experiences in the cyber-space, which thus becomes a vitally important condition to surviving and overcoming the quotidian life.

2.1. The research field, theoretical background and methodological approaches

"When I play video games, I feel alive." (JT, 25, single, lives with family)

"I go online, and there are hundreds of women willing to talk to me, and then suddenly, I feel like I am the hero of my life." (AI, 21, single, student, lives alone)

"You see, I come from my work [part-timeaty Uniqlo], I put on the headphones and go online, and watch those women doing all sorts of things, and here I go." (KO, 27, single, lives with family)

"I play with my 5-year old son. Well, mostly, he just watches me, my wife doesn't want him to play." (AW, 32, married, one son)

"I come home late … the company implements strategies to cut-down the overtime … but honestly, what should I do if I come home earlier? … The [two] kids are old enough now, my wife has her own life, with friends and shopping, and doesn't want to have me around … anyway, not too long and not two 'present' … so I go online, and talk to some women, they are single and want to meet an available man, to get married and to have children … I tell them I'm single … earlier, I had told them I'm divorced, but then they would lose interest because they thought the wife had taken all the money in the divorce … and before that, I had told them I am living separated, but they discarded me immediately because they thought I'm looking only for sex outside of my marriage … so I tell them, I am single, and

looking for a girlfriend, and they talk to me, and listen to me … I avoid meeting them face-to-face, because then they would want to push for further interactions and for deeper relationship, and this is troublesome … when one gets too pushy for meeting in real life, I just vanish … I haven't met anyone online yet who would make me want to really get to know her personally … I have been doing this for 5-6 years now … I've never thought if it was bad for the women I talked to online, I mean, they don't really exist, do they?" (TK, 45, married, one daughter, one son).

Globalization and the liberalization of the Internet had unprecedented impact of the social lives of men in Japan. The Japanese sex industry, arguably accounting for 2-3% of its current GDP, but in the glorious past of the economic miracles, particularly in the 1980s, having been much higher, has been largely regarded as the most dynamic and "fulfilling" in the world. In addition to "real-life" sex industry, the virtual space started to offer, increasingly after the Internet became an affordable commodity and strongly impacted by the rise and proliferation of the smartphones, valid alternatives to it. Online socializing and dating, pornography, video games are currently regarded as just another place where men can find an outlet for releasing the tension and frustration accumulated during long hours of work and compulsory family activities, compounded by an ongoing lack of affection, both from their kids and their spouses. Recent years saw an alarming increase of virtual communities of male netizens who seem to be willing to withdraw from traditional forms of interacting in the real, physical world and to replace them with digital versions. Specific elements such as the anonymity provided by the cyber-space, the illusion of a huge availability of potential environments, a clear absence from daily participation, have been said to be reasons for the cyber-space to quickly turn from a leisurely activity tolerated by prevalent norms into a subversive clock-bomb for social engineers and family politicians.

From summer 2013 until summer 2017, I was inadvertently pursuing a form of so-called "applied anthropology", as promoted, among many others, by Anne Allison (1994) and Christine Kondo (1990) and more recently Simon Sinek (2014): It is a combination between everyday lifestyle and research in which the investigator (in this case: me) serves as the main subject of his/her own research endeavor while keenly observing its counterpart, in this case (Japanese) men and their relation with the social environment. The major difference to the classical "participatory

observation" is the fact that in "participatory observation", the observed phenomena occurred usually in groups of humans belonging to a different cultural circle or geographical sphere than the researcher and took place without a prior theoretical formulation of the expected results and impact on further areas (see Clifford, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Giddens, 1992). In case of "applied anthropology", the point of departure serves as a clear orientation entity and incorporates considerable amounts of prior preparation, both theoretical and methodological, so that the result, while not being entirely predictable, is to a certain extent estimated in terms of its relevance for larger segments of human life and activity.

The empiric part of this research endeavor consisted mainly of informal conversations with the subjects – (avid) consumers of cyber-entertainment in the three fields mentioned above – and leading those discussions towards such topics as categories of devices, informal hierarchies, financial dimension, involvement with fellow-netizens. The phenomenological part referred to the active implication in the consumption of digital entertainment by attending the informants in their daily pursuit of this by far favorite activity. Furthermore, participant observation has been extended in the Akihabara district of Tokyo, incontestably the Mecca of the cyber-industry and consumption of digital devices, in which theme-cafes and specialized shops abound and function as meet-up points for veterans and newcomers, locally and internationally. The fieldwork informants expanded subsequently from Japanese students in their early 20s to include male citizens aged 25-50, mostly Japanese with various professional and educational backgrounds. Gradually, an interesting power balance emerged: on the one hand, it was me, the white female researcher, clearly belonging to the socio-economic upper-class, wanting to find out about masculine strategies of inhabiting the virtual world – and why it appeared as more suitable than the real one. On the other hand, there was the concept of Japanese masculinity which I was trying to comprehend, both in the international context of economic-political upheaval and in the local area of its own local transformation. The results, particularly when they unfolded in the natural rhythm of isolated voices allowing themselves to be heard, possibly for the first time in their lives, and to be at ease with someone who genuinely, authentically cared for them, were astounding. In time, and with a great amount of patience on my side, they migrated from the virtual space into the real, physical one, and it was within the face-to-face encounters that the crushingly repressed

volume of alienation and frustration actually came to be expressed, performed, released from the dark depths of the individual suffering. Keeping emotional distance and providing a mental environment of safety for those informants who did dare to leave the virtual universe in order to talk to me, were fundamental strategies in bridging the unknown, and in giving the faceless actors an identity and a voice – for which they were both grateful and relieved. As to be shown further below, their sense of self has been increasingly shattered in the course of their attempts to align with the social expectations of fulfilling their duties – at the workplace, in the family, in the immediate community –, but there was no reward in the form of gentle, honest appreciation. The slow loss of confidence and energy can be explained solely by the term "to be taken for granted" – and it was a slow, painful death, rather than a sudden lethal shock.

2.2. The crisis of masculinity: mechanisms and victims

"Hey, you become Luke [Skywalker] and the legend of the whole galaxy … who would say 'No!'?" (KS, 35, single, lives with family)

"You ask questions, you listen to me ... how many people do you think listen to others? Oh, you even seem to care, and I haven't even paid for your coffee ... " (PU, 32, married, one baby-boy)

"Look, all these women online … they understand, they don't blame or judge you or whatever ... they are there." (MK, 28, single, lives alone)

"I watch porn online because it's wild and free." (MS, 37, married, two sons)

"Sometimes, I just want to release the whole tension of the work. I live together with my wife, in a normal flat in Tokyo, which means I have hardly any space for myself. We haven't had intercourse in more than 5-6 years now, I tried to get a girlfriend or some sort of sex outside of the marriage, but good women want proper relationships, with dates, dinners, sleep-overs, and avoid married men like the plague, and I cannot stand the less-good women, who are down to anything, just like that … because I don't have so much money … my wife controls my income, and gives me some pocket-money every month, but this is not enough to go out and have fun with women. I tried to get a divorce, but she refuses it, and asks for huge amounts of money as compensation, and I cannot afford paying it, given that she

has been controlling the money all along anyway … I am stuck, I feel trapped, and watching online porn is the only thing which brings me to sleep at night … for a few hours, then I have to work hard the next day [at a big IT company in Tokyo area], again." (TE, 43, married, no children)

The *salaryman* is the symbol and carrier of Japan's postwar high, steady economic growth – until late 1980s. Typically employed in large corporations, working long hours and commuting long distances, they are known as corporate warriors (*kigyō-senshi*), who spend most of their time in the workplace and in work-related activities (such as commuting, golfing, drinking with coworkers) and are largely detached from their families (Amano, 2006; Taga, 2006). This totality of men's engagement in paid work, which even exhausted some to death (resulting in the infamous *karōshi* [death by overwork] phenomenon) was complemented by the women's role of sole responsibility for reproduction and homemaking, their unpaid domestic work supporting the wellbeing of children and employed men. However, professional housewives (*sengyō-shufu*) have been having the absolute control of the financials, deciding upon domestic expenditures and giving their husband a small allowance every month as pocket-money. Thus, while men's exclusive involvement with work was compensated by a social order that promised stable, life-time employment and became the foundation of a welfare policy that advocated the ideological view of the corporation as a family, the workplace turned into a distinctively masculine place, where Japanese men typically constructed their everyday experience, and was virtually the sole source of men's identity and status. In contrast to it, women's involvement in paid work was limited; they were excluded from labor unions and employed mostly in low-wage, part-time jobs, i.e., with non-regular employment relations. Moreover, university education, life-time employment, marriage and children were all assets of Japanese masculinity, climaxing in the concept of being a *daikoku-bashira*: this is the cultural concept traditionally denoting the big black wooden pillar that supported the whole construction of a house, and being used in postwar Japan to denote the "main breadwinner" or "head of the family". This was naturally the man in the family, and being the *daikoku-bashira* implies being the person with the most money in the marriage; there was additionally some value to *daikoku-bashira*, as a person who provides stability and guidance within the household. However, in recent years, there seems to be a shift in emphasis from money to attention and emotional presence – thus

challenging the traditional core of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 2005, Connell & Messerschmidt. 2005) in Japan as largely promoted by conservative media and ideologies.

A very distinct category from the *salaryman* is the *otaku*, which has come so far as to being regarded as emblematic for the so-called crisis of masculinity in late modern, highly industrialized nations. The term itself appeared in the early 1980s to identify young single men who absorbed themselves in Japanese popular sub-cultures, such as animation, manga, comics, computer games, films and TV programs, as well as the development of computer software (Okada, 2008; Ôtsuka, 2004; Dasgupta, 2013, Condry, 2011). *Otaku* representatives tend to neglect their appearance, dressing much like nerds while focusing on narrowly defined and imbalanced consumption, which has inspired this thriving new cultural industry. Although *otaku* citizens refrain from involvement in other life domains and are generally reluctant to work with other people, some willingly work for this industry for low wages. A further characteristic of the *otaku* category is that they usually live in isolation and are keen to communicate only with those who share the same interests on cyberspace. However, contrary to the established cliché, those described as *otaku* seem to have once been ambitious and technology in the 1970s, as Morikawa Kaichirō (2003: 86) observes. The cyber-space presents a credible counter-image to all current relativizing social and gender roles, positions as well as sexualities and identities. To the disempowered masculinity represented by *otaku* in Japanese parlance, the popular culture and its reinforcement in video games and online pornography reacts with romantic masculinity clinging to classical elements of male existence. As a blatant antagonism to the image of the *otaku*, which is by now omnipresent in Japan and from Japan spreading worldwide, the cyber-version of the male essence appears as a charismatic individual capable of abnegation and sacrifice, as gamers repeatedly underline in their statements, and replicates or re-confirms as ideological model and embodiment of self-styled identity the fact that the *otaku* phenomenon points out, on a social level, the identity confusion in postwar Japan (Morikawa 2003: 71). The *otaku* is the individual replication of the historically accomplished transition from premodernity to postmodernity without a sufficient modernization. The *otaku* culture is marked by the conscious abandonment of message and focus on media through the projection of one's own emotion upon two-dimensional, symbolic simulacra constituted by separate elements contained in

databases, as Azuma Hiroki (2001:33) puts it. *Otaku*'s reality is the reality of his own hand-crafted metaphorical work, not the reality of general society. It is indeed a romantic, friendly metaphorical work softly melting fantasy and substantiality into one, and turns thus into a desire object and projection site – from a pariah cliché into a hero, a figure of longing and, paradoxically, belonging.

A third category of masculine presence in the Japanese society is the recently coined term of "herbivore men" (*sōshoku[kei] danshi*), which seems to be a direct post-bubble-era rejection of traditional hegemonic *salaryman* masculinity: the term "herbivorous men" is used to classify a new growing population of young Japanese men (Fukasawa 2009). The most conspicuous characteristics shared by herbivorous boys are the lack of active association with women (including sex), the failure to adhere to old-generation masculinity, and willing engagement in typically feminine acts, such as cooking and eating sweets. Like *otaku* lifestyle, "herbivore masculinity" is seen as "funky youth cultures" that emerged while "the *salaryman's* mode of life was questioned" (Chen 2012: 295), and displayed increasingly an emerging form of 'new man' as opposed to the out-dated *salaryman*: permanent employment is not always a contextually available masculine resource (Charlebois 2013: 96). From this perspective, more leisure-oriented "herbivore masculinity" does not necessarily represent an authentic transgression, but instead follows broader sociocultural patterns. Accordingly, "herbivore masculinity" is constructed from alternative gender practices such as narcissistic body- management (the preoccupation with cosmetics and physical beauty), a primacy of consumption, and the formation of intimate opposite-sex friendships (Chen 2012, Charlebois 2013), which result in a high focus on body aesthetics and effeminate looks, even using makeup and fashionable goods. In time and with great care, "herbivore men […] develop a feminized body that is distinguished from the [sturdy simplicity of the] *salaryman*. By adopting male beauty practices and gender-ambiguous fashion, they [...] transgress oppressive gender norms." (Chen 2012: 303). The large body of research dedicated to beautification processes in Japanese society, before the term "herbivore men" even existed (Iida, 2005, Miller, 2006) suggests that this is a real trend in current Japan, while it is still unclear if the effeminate look of "herbivore men" means they are not interested in pursuing a sexual relationship with women, or the fact that the very effeminate look of "herbivore men" is

created after the changing tastes of women, and thus turning into a mirror image of a more suitable husband as the ultimate goal.

At the end of the so-called "lost decade", in 1999, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society and the revised Equal Employment Opportunity Law were passed: this was a mixed result of the efforts of Japanese feminists and democrats backed by international trends, as well as of civil servants who were inspired by the rise of the service economy, growing globalization and the need to increase the labor supply. These laws stretched the employment scope, increasing promotion chances for women and lowering gender segregation in the labor market. It resulted in an increase of frustration on the side of some young men who felt deprived of their job and status entitlements, and who responded by blaming the gender-equality movement for their hardships (Kaizuma 2005). At the same time, though, gender norms were not modified, so that men were, and still are, expected to abide by the overarching role of breadwinning to establish their masculinity, to build a family and to actively contribute to the society. This, in turn, raises the pressure on young men, especially on those in non-regular employment, whose low-wage, unstable jobs impede their identity construction. The precariousness of their employment and economic prospects deprives them of full participation in the Japanese way of life (Amamiya 2007). During recent years, Japan has experienced a growing fragmentation from what was believed to be an egalitarian society to one where workers in non-regular jobs are distanced from others who enjoy the benefits of regular employment relations (Hashimoto, 2009). The effects of this fragmentation are mostly felt by the younger generations, whose men face high rates of unemployment. These men are both confused and unsettled by the loss of their status as breadwinners and thus search for other ways to help reconstruct their identity. These developments have provoked conflict and frustration among many young men, who fail to meet the strict codes of the hegemonic image of Japanese masculinity. The two newly emerged alternative types of Japanese masculinity, challenging and, to a certain point, threatening to dissolve the "hegemonic masculinity" embodied by the *salaryman* reflect different versions of economic transformation and render different gendered geographies surrounding the home. "Herbivorous men" seem to present a mirror image of the corporate warriors of older generations, who focused almost exclusively on their jobs, rejecting domestic involvement whatsoever. Their great emphasis on appearance and their estrangement from the stressful career of paid work

finds a counter-balance in their high engagement in domestic affairs and their fascination with which they cultivate their houses, though their motivation for coupling or making families is rather ambiguous. Their choices indicate a flight from, and a "feminization" of, traditional masculinity. *Otaku*, on the other hand, is implied by their focus on consumption. Yet, soaking up the entertainment of game-playing and neglecting their appearance, they appear to be introverted and selfish, escaping from a commitment to real others. Instead, they place themselves in imaginary homes, either in cyberspace or in commercial maid-cafés, where fictional relations are practiced. From this perspective, it might be said that both otaku and "herbivore men" are social consequences of the exploration path of alternative masculinity tracks and thus generated alternative masculinities, which challenge the hegemonic image – and will probably at some point replace it. As to be seen further below, these alternative masculinity phenomena are symptoms of a battle occurring currently more deeply, both socially and individually.

2.3. Re-defining the masculine self: visions and strategies

"They [online gamers/gaming community] are the only friends I have." (GH, 44, single, lives alone)

"Come on, it's the only way to feel like a man: out there, online, there are millions of women wanting you … fighting for you … unlike the wife which takes all your money and ignores you, or even worse, dictates what you do at home, which, eventually, drives you away from home … in some manga-café, from where you keep on messaging these women, who adore you … and whom you'll never ever meet … because, hey, if they really knew you, they would despise and drop you immediately … right?" (HE, 39, single, lives alone)

"I am lonely and unhappy." (TI, 41, Japan)

"You feel the master of the universe when you watch those women online, for free, doing all sorts of stuff, and you can simply enjoy it … I have hardly any money, as my wife controls the financials [he works as IT engineer at a popular car company in Nagoya area]. I thought of divorce, but I am scared of what consequences that might have over my work … what if I get fired or downgraded … I don't know, I don't see any exit from here …" (SA, 46, Japan)

"I live together with my family [wife and three kids]. I sleep in a different room than them, I do this for years, maybe 10-15, and by now they also sleep in different rooms, I believe. My whole salary goes to my wife, I receive a small amount of pocket money every month, but it is much more than most of my coworkers or friends receive. She puts the money in an envelope at the beginning of the month, on the kitchen. We don't talk, it's too troublesome. I meet online lots of women, I tell them I'm divorced for 10 years or so, and that I am looking for a new partner, to share my life with until death. It's very easy, there are so many desperate women in their late 30s and early 40s, they all want to marry and have children … They are from all over Japan. I talk with at least 8-10 at a time, and it's them that make it possible to meet … they come to Tokyo, for vacation of business-trips, and then we meet, and have sex, and if they push for more (like me going to their place, or visiting me to my place, or some dinner, common weekends away, etc.), I just cut them off. No idea if this is fair to them or not … hahaha … never thought of that, I mean, who cares, really?" (KS, 49, Japan)
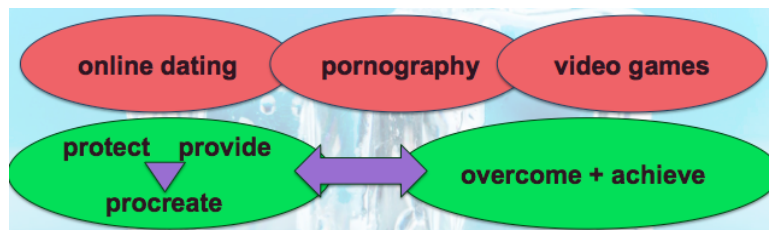
Admittedly, comparable movements of alternative masculinities as a reaction to the hegemonic matrix represented by Japan's *salaryman*, such as otaku and more recently the "herbivore men", have emerged in the Western world, too, e.g., the "incel" ("involuntary celibats") and MWGTOW ("Men Who Go Their Own Way"). The fundamental difference between the Japanese and the Western version of alternative masculinities is that, while the Western version is characterized by a deep-sense of "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel, 2012 and 2015, the Japanese version is rather passive (or passive-aggressive) and is very much based on the idea of "endurance" (*gaman*) and "hard-work" (*doryoku*). The presence of mainstream media – TV, cinema, popular music, fashion, advertisement, news – plays a crucial role in creating specific lifestyle models based on structures of power, hierarchy and domination. One might argue that the overwhelming impact and influence of mainstream media and its educational function replace the direct or extended family, the immediate community, an effective schooling system, in which boys turn into men by following valid role-models and learning the subtle art of compassion and reciprocity. The popular image of a man who feels threatened by women and whose ego is so fragile that he gets off on humiliating them, has long become a reality in the cyber-space and haunts the romantic efforts of women seriously searching for a reliable life-partner. This trend of resurgent toxic humanity, rather than toxic masculinity as there is nothing masculine in the activity of purposefully hurting and deceiving other

human beings, is a by-product of what Bauman labeled as the rise of "human waste" (Bauman, 2010; see Riesman, 1950), due to the large availability of digital devices and media entities to human beings unable to grasp the responsibility which comes from the ability to come in contact with – and to interact with – other human beings, who exist on the other side of their screens, who receive their text messages and react to them. I believe the trend is unstoppable – what can be done is to find ways to diminish its evil through awareness, education and by providing valid, powerful alternative role-models.

In 1999, the anime movie *My Neighbours, the Yamadas*, directed by the reputed anime director Takahata Isao from Studio Ghibli, was released, and in spite of being a discrete masterwork focused on the daily life of an average Japanese household, it turned into a brutal flop at the box-office. During our conversations in the years 2005-2007, I told him that I love *My Neighbours, the Yamadas* and I do not understand why it was so unsuccessful. Takahata's reply was brisk: "You like it because you are not part of the society it describes." Gaining awareness is not a children's game. When confronted with the reality of one's own misery, particularly if that misery is the whole life one has built all along, there are only two alternatives: to ignore the problems and to keep on doing as everything were perfect, which means, to lie to oneself and to the others in order to keep up the illusion of safety and happiness; or to face the problems and to decide to do something about it. Doing something about the crisis means recognizing love as a birthright and as a fundamental need, and to return to love as a fundamental need – and a human right. In late-modern societies increasingly dominated by digital media, love (*ai*) as a primary necessity according to Maslow's pyramid of needs in its most basic comprehension as acceptance and belonging transcends the classical development of commodities in the Marxist logic of consumption (luxuries turn into affordable commodities, which then turn into needs, and the faster the process, the more successful the product) and follows the opposite trajectory: from a survival need turns into a buyable commodity (see online socializing, video gaming and cyber-pornography), which, eventually, ends up as a luxury for those who can still imagine possessing or striving for it.

One unexpected effect of allowing men to talk openly about their online activities, thus transforming them from a leisurely activity into a topic of academic interest, was the mediation of fundamental values such as loyalty, responsibility, trustworthiness, hard-work, discipline, and

ethical coordinates such as reliability, stability, kindness, which gradually migrated from their virtual world of fantasy endeavors into the immediate-physical one. A possible explanation could be the fact that, while opening up to me on their own terms, in a safe emotional-mental space free of judgment, they gained the courage to address important daily concerns and to simply ask questions: how to protect one's own identity amidst a multitude of influences; what is happiness; how to build deep meaningful friendships; how to find one's path in the world and advance on it; how to gain – and keep, or enhance – self-confidence; how to interact with romantic partners, and how to differentiate between good and bad potential romantic partners; how to dream realistically and fulfill those dreams. On the one hand, there was the micro-level of the actual interaction between humans separated by a smartphone or laptop/computer followed or not by a direct meet-up in real life. On the other hand, there was the macro-space of online platforms whose very existence depends on the sheer number of subscribers. In-between the micro-surface of the digital medium and the macro-industry of capitalist merchandizing, the humanity of the social actors involved is mercilessly crushed. Desire turns into weapon, and yearning into addiction. Online activities seem to offer, at least in the futile efforts to find meaning in one's individual life beyond capitalist compulsions, that oasis of warmth and strength, of recognition and acceptance, which become increasingly out-of-reach in the quotidian world of casual friendliness and non-committal encounters.

The challenge and disruption of the obvious mechanisms of crisis – such as *katei-nai rikon*, *jukunen-rikon* (see below) – and the questioning of the nuclear family (*kaku-kazoku*) as the cell of society and the foundation for reproduction, encompasses a quiet revolution, in which change occurs slowly and constantly. Furthermore, the access to international masculine role-models, made possible by the unfiltered internet connection since late

2000s, allowed the confrontation with alternative lifestyles and the promise – as elusive as it is in consumption societies – that romantic happiness and marital bliss can be achieved with the right woman on one's side, that strength and ambition are allowed, and that love and existential fulfillment are birthrights. Learning to live alone, finding goals and life trajectories which relate to oneself, and then seeing along the way if the right partner – that is, someone who accepts him for who is truly is, flaws and dreams included – shows up, appear increasingly as a clear tendency among under-30s men, who are cautious about entering life-long commitments with women who, as they have seen in the examples of previous generations, could change radically after the marriage papers were signed and the extremely expansive ceremonies are over. For those already in unhappy, sexless and/or loveless marriages (also known as *katei-nai rikon*, literally "divorce [de facto] within marriage"), separating and getting a divorce is the most radical step, carefully ignored as a phenomenon by mainstream media. More importantly, divorces are scrupulously avoided by Japanese (house-)wives, as it is generally known that "the difference between a well-off woman and a poor one is a certificate of divorce", as a sociologist-colleague put it bluntly (and informally). An input to this has been the surge since mid-2000s in the *jukunen-rikon* ("divorces in adult age", referring to those divorces occurring among citizens in their 50s or more frequently, in their 60s, after the husband retires from the workforce), and the realization on the side of men that they are disposable (in fact, several words used by women and media to describe old, retired men have trash-like connotations: "oversized garbage", "wet [autumn] leaves").

As it turns out, subsequently, neither *otaku* is a threat to the hegemonic masculinity in Japan posed by the *salaryman*, nor the paradigm of "herbivore men" is an attack to its apparently almighty existential model. In fact, the *salaryman* paradigm is challenged from within, by men questioning the prevalent discourse and searching for answers beyond the official public discourse. During my conversations with them, in the most unusual of places outside of the virtual realms – coffee-shops, book-stores, in the train, on platforms, in the libraries, in McDonald's, Starbucks, family restaurants, cinemas, parks, shores during fishing, swimming-pools and hiking excursions –, I could see and feel the joy of sharing their experiences in front of me, empathic and openhearted. This gave me, in turn, the opportunity to highlight the advantages of live experiences over virtual ones or of real-life events over digitalized ones (see Hidaka, 2010).

Contextualizing the situation in this way, reveals the fact that the unexpectedly anti-social behavior typologies displayed by male participants engaging in online dating is simply part of a larger social phenomenon taking place in Japan and expanding on a global scale: Educated and socialized in the feminist era with its specific gender-related challenges, but in social structures still firmly anchored in patriarchally traditional settings regarding role-models, men find themselves torn between biological wiring and societal pressure, reinforced daily by mainstream media and personal experiences. The virtual space and its main promoter, the digital media represented by smartphones and dating apps, SNS (social network sites), dating sites, are solely an outlet for releasing anger and frustration, pent-up emotions and incomprehensible feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, weakness, exhaustion, powerlessness. The victims of their behavior – unknowing women on the other side of the apathetical screens – turn, more often that not, into bitter, jaded, angry persons, deeply wounded by never-formulated rejections, never-acknowledged humiliations and never-enunciated apologies.

2. Conclusion: masculinity and acceptance

"I separated from my wife seven years ago, when she caught me exchanging messages with another [Japanese] woman. At that point, we hadn't had sexual intercourse for more than 4-5 years, more precisely, since my second child [a boy] had been conceived. Every time I had approached her, she rejected me, at first with reasons, then simply by turning away. I had heard from friends and coworkers that the situation was the same everywhere. But I couldn't take it anymore. I went online, and it was easy to find someone to talk to. We only talked. After my wife found out, I had to move out, and for more than two years, her father controlled my salary, and gave me a small amount to cover my rent and my daily expenses. She, her family and my family threatened that they would go to my workplace (an important governmental institution in Kansai area) and tell them to fire me for moral misconduct. They didn't agree to divorce. In the two years that followed the separation, I got to know a French lady, who was teaching French in the area, she became my girlfriend, and she gave me the strength and the courage to go to a lawyer and to pursue an official divorce. It was complicated, but it worked out, it lasted more than two years and I had to pay 10.000.000 JPY [100.000 USD] compensation, and I did a loan for that, but in the end, I got back control of my salary and now I am married to the French lady and we have baby-twins. My employer was very supportive, particularly because this is no rare situation. I am a happy man now." (TH, 45, married)

It has been repeatedly argued (Castells 1996, 2001) that the rise of the internet and the emergence of the so-called network society will prompt the appearance of new existential attitudes and interactions patterns, which would challenge the human being both on a personal and on a collective level. One of the most reiterated warnings referred to the increasing isolation of the individual, which would add an additional layer of self-centeredness to the alienation and loneliness brought about by the capitalist era, with urbanization and industrialization, at first, and gentrification and commodification, eventually. One of the fundamental features of the Japanese society – its strictly collective-oriented hierarchical structure – finds itself even more rapidly dissolving in a changing world in which the individual feels increasingly isolated and lonely in spite of a progressively permanent and intensive connection to the others due to digital media largely available and affordable, as observable in men's solitary online activities, void of the warmth of publicly shared experience in real-time with physically present humans. Furthermore, while the social construct of family and reproduction in present-day Japan is still anchored on the paradigm of *ryōsai kenbo* ("good wife, wise mother") as established by Meiji technocrats, a diluted version of feminism regards motherhood as the foundation of women's strength. (As Kristeva points out in "Women's Time" and *Des Chinoises*, motherhood was seen by the Founding Mothers of Western feminism as the catalyst of empowerment and liberation; Kristeva, 1974: 33, see Butler, 1993) However, what struck me in all the discussions I had with Japanese women along the years, much longer than the past four years in which I have been focusing mainly on masculinity and its relationship to femininity in late-modern Japan, was a complete lack of awareness as to what a man, in himself, might mean. There were socio-economic expectations from a man, or from men, generally speaking, but there was zero insight into what a man might want, might desire, might dream of himself, how he might want to be treated – and most importantly, why. In other words, there was a complete lack of interest in *why* a man is the way he is, and what could a woman do to fulfill his innate needs or to accompany him as himself – not as the hardworking provider – on his journey through life.

This lack of interest from the side of women, in Japan as elsewhere, but particularly obvious in Japan, leaves men lonely and unhappy (Yamada, 2017: 9; see Bauman, 2003, Kristeva, 1989). Occasionally, they might flirt, awkwardly, with some foreign lady who happens to roam the

neighborhood or who just sits closely by in the coffee-shop – or, for that matter, who rents a cheap room in the countryside or becomes a temporary researcher in the same academic environment. They are thrilled by the warmth and the attention she offers, naturally, which they recognize, distantly, vaguely, from movies to which their girlfriends – now their estranged wives – had taken them in their youth, "Titanic" or "Romeo and Juliet". But more often than not, they retreat into the cyber-space, which, like compulsive overtime-work or after-work drinking, is just another method to fill the void within, and cancel any emotional subscription to the human dimension of the potential partners on the other side of the smartphone's screen, while deluding themselves that they are doing their best. Simultaneously, though, Japanese men, experiencing growing distress regarding their social stance, appear to become homebound, seeking a sense of domesticity and of acceptance. One type of this quest for "home" are the aforementioned categories of *otaku* and "herbivore men". The other one is the social construct of *ikumen*: "education dad", referring to that new model of masculine citizen who is both a breadwinner and a fatherly figure (Bienek, 2018: 199-203, Mathews, 2002: 113-115, Kumagai, 2012: 159, Vassallo, 2017: 58-67). Nonetheless, the political-economic model of *ikumen* is bound to fail due to highly contradictory loyalties these men are facing in their everyday lives: on the one hand, the strong responsibilities at the workplace, with strictly reinforced relationships of hierarchy and obedience; on the other hand, the critical skills required at home, with a wife being, by the very nature of her socio-cultural background, more able to deal with children, household and communitarian duties. Primarily, the focus on home seems to represent the opposite side of the work–home dichotomy, which echoes the traditional gender binary, expressing disappointment from and resistance to the world of work. Additionally, the focus on the idea and materiality of the "home" reflects the need for "a place in the world" as a crucial component for the process of identity reconstruction and suggests that the fulfillment of this need can be reached at different scales. Their domesticity is not confined to the private space of the home, but is rather a site of resistance and dominance, which is intimately tied to the world beyond the materiality of their place of residence. It is, however, noteworthy that a painful irony lies in this process: as these men shape their focal place of identity, i.e., their home, they reverse their own experience of exclusion (from regular employment) by excluding and defying others (mainly women). Their supremacy is

acquired by turning to what is familiar and cozy, employing domestic strategies of power interactions to shift ideas about the kinds of people and behaviors that fit in and those that do not. Gender power relations are important for this reconceptualization of the home, as is the issue of reproduction, which is not touched upon in this paper. This preliminary glance at the geographies of alternative masculinities in Japan and their relation to the cyber-space simply opens the door for contemplations on the changing meanings of home and work, belonging and resistance, love and fulfillment at the intersection of various categories and different types of power discourses and practices.

While I think that for the current generation of grown-ups, aged 28-45, a turn in the dealing with digital media on a personal level might come too late, I strongly believe that there is a lot we can do for the next generation. If we, the representatives of the X generation, act ethically in accordance to what benefit the world, as we actually should, and decide to serve as valid role-models in the real world through solutions we consistently implement in our everyday life, we could offer an alternative lifestyle and value system by showing our successors the advantages of a responsible existence regardless of the spaces we choose to live in. The way I see the current situation with online socializing, networking, entertaining and male citizens increasingly retreating from the factual universe towards a fantasy one mediated by digitalization and virtual reality, the solution is to "bring the boys back home", to quote a famous American politician – where "home" is the immediate reality, with its beauties and miracles and its flesh-and-blood inhabitants. Digital media, online dating, as well as mainstream media and prevalent relating practices reinforced by them, are no social trend to be reversed easily, precisely because they emerged on the historical background of releasing the individual citizen from the pressure of submitting to collective values and forging one's own trajectory in the world (which corresponds, to be sure, to the very top of Maslow's pyramid of needs). Furthermore, the goal of such efforts is not to reverse the trend of digital media and cyber-distractions – they are coping mechanisms to stay and have a constant impact on our lives –, but to educate the consumers on the implications their online activities have on other human beings, to enlighten them that on the other side of the plastic screen, there is another human being investing emotions and mental energy in their interactions, to teach them what one might call "cognitive empathy": the ability to recognize on a rational level what another living entity might feel in a

specific moment, under specific circumstances, even if they are not in their immediate perception area. Simultaneously, by anchoring social actors in the palpable reality of their lives, they start to understand and feel that the cyber-space is merely one part of their existence, which comprises several other dimensions, and that they are inter-connected, so that the unity of their personality and individuality should not suffer and be fractured depending on the level they act on (virtual, real-physical, intimate, professional, written, on-stage, projected into the future). I believe that a higher educational standard of what digital media, as differentiated from mainstream media, mean in our lives will automatically lead to a higher degree of awareness on our own impact on the many invisible others floating in the cyber-space. It will allow us to treat them more humanely – in fact, as one female netizen put it, "as if we truly cared".

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