

Tracing *Bishounen* Fashion: Visual Culture and Style from Heiwa to Reiwa (2000-2020)

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Abstract. This article explores the evolution of *bishounen* (美少年) fashion in Japan from the mid-Heiwa era to the early Reiwa era (2000–2020), a period marked by rapid cultural transformation. *Bishounen*, or “beautiful boys,” have long been icons in Japanese visual culture, but their fashion aesthetics have shifted significantly in response to broader social changes. The central problem addressed is the lack of focused academic discussion on *bishounen* fashion as a cultural phenomenon shaped by both tradition and global influences. The purpose of this research is to analyze how *bishounen* fashion has transformed across two decades. Employing Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker’s modernization theory, this study interprets the evolution of *bishounen* fashion as part of Japan’s adaptation to modernization, where traditional values coexist with rising secular, individualistic, and global trends. A qualitative methodology was applied, combining content analysis of visual media (anime and manga) with selected representations of *bishounen* in contemporary Japanese culture. The findings indicate that *bishounen* fashion has been shaped by six key influences: manga, anime, idol culture, sexual orientation discourse, k-pop influence and western brand. This research contributes to understanding how fashion not only reflects but also actively negotiates identity and aesthetics in a modern Japanese context.

Keywords: *Bishounen* Fashion, Japanese Pop Culture, Heiwa-Reiwa Era, Modernization Theory, Cultural Transformation.

1 Introduction

As the world of anime has rapidly evolved, particularly in terms of character visual representation, fashion has become an essential element in depicting character identity. One of the subcategories of characters that has gained significant popularity is *bishounen* (美少年), or “beautiful boy,” which has been an icon of culture in Japan since the 9th century [1]. The androgynous male figure, characterized by an ideal physical appearance, flowing hair, and delicate facial features, is not merely a character in anime but has been celebrated in Japanese art, literature, and religion for centuries [1]. The term “bishounen” consists of Chinese characters for “beautiful” and “boy/youth,” originating from the Tang Dynasty poem “Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup” [2]. *Bishounen* have been part of Japanese aesthetic tradition since the Heian period (794–1185), where the beauty of young men was often immortalized in poetry and classical literature such as *The Tale of Genji* [3,4]. The term also has appeared in

Japanese popular culture at least since 1829 in the title of the illustrated book "Kinse setsu bishōnen roku," or "A Record of Reports Concerning Recent Beautiful Youths" [1,5].

According to the website *Tvtropes.Org*, the term *bishounen* is actually only used to describe young men in their 20s. Their personalities tend to be sensitive, mysterious, melancholic, and gentle [7]. While their appearance typically possess a slender body, beautiful face, and stylish clothing, reflecting the aesthetic tastes and visual beauty highly valued in Japanese society. Similar to the term "bishoujo," which refers to ideal female characters with traits such as luxuriant black hair, opaque skin, and red cheeks, *bishounen* has its own distinctive characteristics but embodied in the form of a male. However, the meaning of *Bishounen* today breaks the stereotype that has surrounded feminine male characters. The term *bishounen* itself is not related to gender preferences or sexual orientation [8].

The emergence of *bishounen* and their influence on fashion can be traced back to traditional Japanese art, particularly *kabuki* theater, which began in 1629. In this theater, all the actors were men, and some of them took on female roles, creating an intriguing and innovative art form [9]. Their delicate and feminine appearances, as well as their ability to express beauty and elegance, made them highly appreciated in *kabuki* performances. As Japan entered the modern era, the *bishounen* figure found new expression through anime and manga, especially in series like *The Rose of Versailles* (1972), *Saint Seiya* (1986), and *Fushigi Yūgi* (1991), which presented emotionally expressive male characters central to the story. These media became platforms for exploring gender fluidity and challenging rigid masculine norms, particularly in *shoujo* and *Boys' Love (BL)* manga [1,2].

As this visual archetype grew in popularity through manga and anime, it soon crossed into idol culture, where real-life performers began embodying the *bishounen* look and demeanor. Japanese artists like Kimura Takuya embody this "soft masculinity," blending charisma with fashion-forward, androgynous visuals. Similarly, Shunsuke Michieda, a member of Johnny's Jr., is often teased by his fellow members for enjoying *shoujo* manga and Korean dramas during breaks. When he sees romantic scenes, he even covers his face and screams, traits traditionally associated with female fans, yet embraced playfully by him on public platforms [10].

This evolution reflects broader societal changes regarding gender expression and identity, as *bishounen* fashion allows for a fluid interpretation of masculinity that embraces both feminine and masculine traits [11]. In recent years, this fluidity has found further expression through genderless *kei*, a youth fashion subculture that emerged in the 2010s, where male-presenting individuals confidently adopt makeup, skirts, and traditionally feminine silhouettes, pushing the boundaries of binary fashion norms [12]. In parallel, this transformation has been strongly influenced by the global

spread of K-pop culture and the growing presence of Western fashion brands. Idols from groups like BIGBANG and BTS have helped normalize makeup, earrings, and gender-fluid styling for male performers, which has inspired Japanese idols to adopt similar visuals. At the same time, brands such as YSL Beauty, Gucci, and Balenciaga began featuring male ambassadors from Japan with soft, *bishounen*-inspired aesthetics, further blending local and global interpretations of male beauty. In this context, fashion serves as a key element that reinforces the visual characteristics and persona of *bishounen* figures, creating a continuously evolving trend over time.

However, despite the widespread visibility of *bishounen* figures across media, there remains a lack of focused academic discussion on *bishounen* fashion as a cultural phenomenon shaped by both tradition and globalization. Existing studies tend to focus on gender or media representations in isolation, while few examine how fashion operates as a site of aesthetic negotiation and identity formation. Therefore, this research aims to answer the question on how has *bishounen* fashion evolved between 2000 and 2020 in response to Japan's cultural modernization and global influences.

2 Methods

This research will employ a qualitative approach to explore the evolution and impact of *bishounen* fashion in contemporary society. The methodology will consist of two primary components: content analysis and theoretical framework with modernization theory. The first phase of the research will involve a comprehensive content analysis of various media forms, including manga, anime, fashion magazines, and social media platforms. This analysis will focus on identifying key visual elements, themes, and trends associated with *bishounen* fashion. By examining a range of sources, the study aims to uncover how *bishounen* aesthetics have been represented and evolved over time. Content analysis is a widely used method in cultural studies, allowing researchers to systematically interpret visual and textual data [13].

In addition, this study will employ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel's modernization theory as a conceptual framework to interpret shifts in *bishounen* fashion through the lens of cultural value change. According to Inglehart and Welzel (2005), as societies progress from survival-based to self-expression-based values, symbolic expression, aesthetic autonomy, and individualism gain prominence. These shifts are reflected in fashion, which becomes a cultural language for negotiating gender, identity, and social belonging. By overlaying this theoretical model onto the content analysis, the research can evaluate how *bishounen* aesthetics mirror deeper cultural transformations in Japanese society.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Early 2000s: The Rise of Manga and Anime (2000–2005)

During the early 2000s, *bishounen* fashion in Japan was predominantly shaped by the visual aesthetics found in *shoujo* manga and anime. Series such as *Fruits Basket* (2001) and *Prince of Tennis* (1999–2008) offered iconic representations of *bishounen* characters, slender, gentle-faced young men with layered clothing, delicate gestures, and carefully styled hair. At this stage, manga served as the primary visual medium promoting and perpetuating the *bishounen* image, providing a safe and culturally accepted platform to explore a softer form of masculinity.

A notable example from this period is Yuki Sohma from *Fruits Basket*, whose character embodies early 2000s *bishounen* aesthetics. He is portrayed with smooth silver hair, pale skin, and a gentle demeanor that earns him the nickname “Prince Yuki” at school. His clothing is consistently clean, elegant, and non-aggressive, often long-sleeved school uniforms or *yukata* that accentuate his graceful movements. Yuki also frequently expresses himself in a soft-spoken, introspective manner that contrasts sharply with more assertive or stoic male characters. For instance, in Episode 3 of the anime, he tells the protagonist, “You always think of others, but I feel like you don’t take care of yourself enough.” In another moment from Volume 2 of the manga, Yuki reflects, “I want to escape this birdcage. I want to become someone who can live freely...”

These lines reflect an emotional openness and yearning for personal liberation, both of which align with Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005) concept of emerging self-expression values. According to their theory, societies undergoing modernization shift from “survival values” rooted in economic and social stability, toward “self-expression values” that emphasize emotional autonomy, aesthetic exploration, and identity expression [14]. Yuki Sohma’s portrayal can thus be read as a metaphor for youth navigating the pressures of collective conformity versus the desire for personal authenticity, mirroring Japan’s broader social transition. His desire to “escape the birdcage” reflects the tension between traditional expectations of masculinity and a modern urge for individual freedom, similar to the value transitions observed in post-industrial societies [15].

3.2 Mid to Late 2000s: Idol Culture Becomes Dominant (2006–2010)

Between 2006 and 2010, male idol culture started to take center stage in shaping the image of the *bishounen*, gradually replacing the influence of manga. Idol groups like Arashi, KAT-TUN, and NEWS, managed by Johnny’s Entertainment, introduced a new kind of masculinity, softer, more expressive, and fashion-conscious. Their

appearances in TV shows, magazines, and live concerts turned them into style icons for teenage boys in Japan who were beginning to express their identities more freely.

The appearance of idols during this period reflected a heightened awareness of image construction. For example, Jin Akanishi of KAT-TUN often appeared in layered outfits, fitted leather jackets, and silver accessories, creating a cool yet romantic impression. In a Cartoon KAT-TUN variety show, he confessed in English, “This ring here represents my heart...”, with a shy smile, highlighting his romantic and emotionally open image. His style was edgy yet elegant, pushing against traditional masculine norms while still fitting into idol culture. Notably, fans explicitly referred to him as *ikemen* and *bishounen*, reinforcing his reputation as a “boyish beauty” icon during this period [16].

Sho Sakurai of Arashi was known for his semi-formal style, paired with neatly styled hair and a soft yet confident facial expression. He represented the calm, intellectual type. As a host on TVBS NEWS, he wore sharp suits, styled hair, and natural makeup. ANAN Magazine shoots showed him in soft sweaters, muted tones, and clean-cut looks. His fashion was not extreme, but it carefully balanced strength and gentleness, a quiet type of *bishounen*. Online fan communities often described him as “magnetic,” “elegant,” and “intellectually charming,” admiring his combination of aesthetic softness and mature composure [19]. Sho Sakurai’s balance of strength and gentleness exemplifies what Masafumi Monden (2019) calls a “continuum of male beauty”, a space between hypermasculinity and youthful aesthetic appeal. Monden argues that Japanese pop culture does not strictly adhere to a Western binary between rugged masculinity and feminine beauty. Instead, it embraces an in-between, where beauty in male idols can be both gentle and strong, stylish yet emotionally expressive. This echoes Inglehart and Baker’s (2005) observation that cultural change in industrialized societies often manifests through symbolic fields like fashion and media, where gender roles become less fixed.

3.3 Early 2010s: Sexual Orientation Discourse Gains Ground (2011–2015)

Entering the 2010s, *bishounen* fashion evolved beyond aesthetics and began to intersect with identity expression and gender discourse, especially through the increased visibility of genderless *kei* and *Boys’ Love (BL)* subcultures. Rather than merely presenting soft beauty, *bishounen* figures in this era began symbolizing broader ideas of gender fluidity and queer expression. One of the most iconic figures of this shift was Ryuchell (りゅうちぇる), a genderless *kei* influencer and television personality. Known for his bright makeup, pastel hair, oversized earrings, and gender-neutral outfits, Ryuchell broke new ground in how male beauty was presented in the public eye. As they told on grapee.jp, “I don’t know what being myself is. I’m not

trying to live as ‘myself’. What feels like myself can change over time; maybe it’s hard to stick to one style forever.”

In fiction, a prominent *BL*-coded example is Ren Jingūji from *Uta no Prince-sama* (2010). Though originally intended for the *otome* game audience, among fans Ren and his roommate Masato Hijirikawa are consistently featured in *BL* (*boys’ love*) pairings. On fandom platforms like Honey’s Anime, their “RenMasa” pairing is frequently ranked among the top *BL* dynamics in the series. This strong fan interpretation frames Ren as gay-coded and romantically expressive, cementing his character as more than just visually elegant, he signifies queer-friendly *bishounen* identity. Ren’s design with long strawberry blond hair, flirty wardrobe, pierced ear, and rose-themed motifs, paired with lines like, “If only I could embrace you with my voice...”, which reinforce his image as emotionally accessible, romantic, and somewhat gender-fluid, all of which resonate deeply within *BL* communities.

Through figures like Ryuchell and Ren Jingūji, *bishounen* fashion became an arena where non-normative gender expressions gained cultural legitimacy. Ryuchell’s refusal to fix his identity into static categories parallels Welzel’s (2013) argument that postmodern societies foster the rise of “emancipative values”, including openness toward sexual diversity and personal fluidity. The popular pairing “RenMasa” in fandom discourse can be seen as an example of what Henry Jenkins (1992) calls “textual poaching,” where fans reinterpret media in ways that resist hegemonic masculinity. These reinterpretations also align with Japan’s slow but visible inclusion of queer aesthetics in mainstream media, further supported by cultural scholars like McLelland (2005) who identify Boys’ Love as a subversive platform for imagining alternate masculinities.

3.4 Late 2010s: K-pop Influence and Western Brand Integration (2016–2020)

During the period from 2016 to 2020, the *bishounen* aesthetic in Japan underwent a significant transformation through the global exchange of fashion, particularly driven by K-pop trends and Western luxury branding. The J-pop boy group JO1, launched in 2019 via Produce 101 Japan, fully embraced a K-pop-inspired *bishounen* look. For example, member Kawashiri Ren cited BIGBANG, a pioneer of soft masculinity, as a major style inspiration. “The reason why I do vocal training is that I watched K-Pop artist BIGBANG. I watched them on TV and DVDs. When I saw BIGBANG, I admired this music world,” [22]. This global influence was further validated when JO1 was appointed as YSL Beauty Japan’s first male ambassadors. According to their official profile, JO1 signed a one-year “official beauty partner” contract with YSL in late 2020 and was elevated to full ambassador status in January 2022, with the brand citing their genderless image and passionate fandom. Fan reactions have mirrored this narrative, with comments on Reddit JO1’s groundbreaking role, “I was surprised at even Ren’s tank top in his YSL ad this summer, this was...unexpected.”

Experts also recognize this shift. In International Journal of Communication, Lee et al. (2020) discuss how K-pop idols like BIGBANG and BTS “redefine masculinity” through polished makeup, earrings, and soft styling, setting new templates for male beauty across Asia. Many Japanese idols and fans, according to scholarship in pop culture journals, have adopted these aesthetic norms as deliberate identity strategies, not mere fashion trends. This aligns closely with Inglehart & Welzel’s theory that in post-industrial societies, aesthetic self-expression becomes a key form of communication, with fashion serving as a medium to negotiate identity beyond conventional gender boundaries [16]. By adopting dyed hair, subtle makeup, earrings, and gender-neutral styling, JO1’s visual branding reflects the “*kkonminam*” (pretty boy) tradition rooted in *bishounen* culture and enhanced by K-pop influence. As scholars like Elfving-Hwang (2011) argue, K-pop aesthetics have not only normalized male beauty rituals but have also globalized East Asian versions of soft masculinity. Japanese pop idols increasingly model themselves on this hybrid aesthetic, blending local *bishounen* codes with global fashion standards. Fashion here is not merely decorative, but a cultural tool for negotiating the tensions between *nihonjinron*-based national identity and cosmopolitan aspirations.

4 Conclusion

The evolution of *bishounen* fashion in Japan from 2000 to 2020 reflects a broader cultural transformation influenced by modernization, media, and shifting gender norms. From manga and anime to idol culture, genderless *kei*, and global K-pop trends, *bishounen* style has continuously adapted to express emotional openness, aesthetic fluidity, and individuality. Framed through Inglehart and Welzel’s modernization theory, this progression demonstrates how fashion becomes a language of identity in a post-industrial society, negotiating tradition and modernity, local and global influences, as well as masculine and feminine aesthetics. Ultimately, *bishounen* fashion is not just a style, but a cultural symbol of Japan’s evolving values and visual identity.

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