Mangaesque Characters in Physical Space:
An ethnographic study of butler café Swallowtail as female sanctuary

by

Carolina Lindström

The Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies
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Supervisor: Jaqueline Berndt
Abstract

Since the 1970s, Japanese contemporary popular culture as an academic field has gained increased attention, which has led to the emergence of fan culture and fandom studies. There is a certain academic bias toward otaku (i.e., the normative cis-gendered heterosexual male fan), and as such, maid cafés have become an increasingly popular part of the Japanese contemporary popular cultural phenomenon since the early 2000s, attracting customers from all over the world. Nevertheless, female-oriented popular and fan cultural practises play an equally significant role in the growth of said popular culture – however, notable research tends to favour the fans’ engagement with media texts as strictly 2-dimensional (e.g., anime and manga), particularly in works depicting homoerotic relationships between boys and men (yaoi/boys’ love).

This thesis investigates those inconsistencies through the singular case of butler café Swallowtail, a female-designated fantasy space brought to life. From a fan cultural standpoint, it accumulates netnographic findings (aimed at both regular fans and first-time visitors/tourists) and the ethnographic study done by consistent participant observation during eight months, inspired by previous studies on maid cafés by cultural anthropologist Patrick W. Galbraith. With the motive of bringing awareness to an otherwise secluded space, the study emphasises three of its most crucial elements; the butler, the fan, and the space in which the café exists. As a product of neo-Victorian transcultural media influences, it conjoins various pop cultural media and fan cultural expressions presented from a gendered perspective, with parallels to the maid café as its predecessor and widely acclaimed butler manga Kuroshitsuji (2006–present) as a model for the butler character type.

While the café operates as a place where fantasy and reality intermingle, the results suggest that the imaginative play previously considered limited to the 2-dimensional space has extended beyond the boundary of a fictional location. Much like the staged narratives seen in anime, manga and games, the café also practises certain routinised behaviour which favours repetitive actions done for so-called character building and development. Ultimately, it identifies the physical embodiment of the butler as a 3-dimensionalisation of a manga character type, raising the possibility of the café existing in the 2.5-dimensional space.

Keywords

Japanese popular culture; fan culture studies; female fans; otaku; maid; butler; otome; fan sanctuary; Otome Road; 2.5D; concept café.
Conventions

This thesis uses the Modified Hepburn Romanization system. Macrons will be used for a, u, e, and o when writing long vowels. Long vowel for ‘i’ will be written as ‘ii.’ Japanese words are written using italics, even if they are loan words, excluding the Japanese city names and more commonly used words such as ‘anime’ and ‘manga.’ As an example, ‘otaku’ would be written as ‘otaku.’

The text is composed by British English spelling conventions, with the exception of quotes written in American English. Western as well as Japanese names appear with the surname following the given name.

Lastly, all the translations are the author’s own, unless stated otherwise.

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ....................................................................................................................... 1

**1. Gendered Fan Cultures** .................................................................................................... 3
   1.1 Generically male-oriented fictional media ........................................................................ 4
       1.1.1 Young woman as character type in male fan culture: the maid .............................. 5
       1.1.2 Fan cultural place: Akihabara .................................................................................. 7
   1.2 Generically female-oriented fictional media ...................................................................... 8
       1.2.1 Young woman as character type in female fan culture: otome ............................... 10
       1.2.2 Fan cultural place: Ikebukuro’s Otome Road ........................................................... 13

**2. Butler Café Swallowtail** ................................................................................................... 16
   2.1 Researching the café ........................................................................................................ 17
   2.2 Visiting the café ................................................................................................................ 21

**3. Butler Café as Female Sanctuary** ...................................................................................... 26
   3.1 Object of Desire: The Butler ............................................................................................ 27
   3.2 Subject of Desire: The Lady ............................................................................................. 30
   3.3 Place & Space .................................................................................................................... 32

**Conclusion** .......................................................................................................................... 33

**References** .......................................................................................................................... 35
   Literature ................................................................................................................................. 35
   Figures ....................................................................................................................................... 40
List of Figures

Figure 1: Welcome to Pia Carrot!! ................................................................. 6
Figure 2: Ikebukuro Otome Map ................................................................. 14
Figure 3: Twitter: Profile ............................................................................ 16
Figure 4: Menu: Anna Maria .......................................................... 20
Figure 5: Swallowtail: Entrance ................................................................. 22
Figure 6: Swallowtail: Main Hall ................................................................. 22
Figure 7: Menu: Catherine Special Christmas version .................................. 23
Figure 8: Three Levels of Product ................................................................. 26
Figure 9: Kuroshitsuji: Tanaka, cover illustration vol. 10 ................................ 27
Figure 10: Kuroshitsuji: Sebastian, cover illustration vol. 1 ........................... 28
Figure 11: Kuroshitsuji: Sebastian, cover illustration vol. 2 .......................... 28
Figure 12: Swallowtail: Promotional image ................................................. 29
Figure 13: Twitter: Online report ................................................................. 31
Figure 14: Sketch: Swallowtail dessert menu (Cupid) .................................... 32
Introduction

Japanese contemporary popular culture as an academic field has gained increasing attention since its emergence in the 1970s. In recent years, discussion on the topic of fan culture and fandom studies predominate, mainly regarding media texts as strictly 2-dimensional such as from manga (graphic narratives) and anime (drawn animation). From a Western perspective, a certain academic bias toward male fans in Japan seems apparent; but female fan cultural practises flourish and undeniably play an equally significant role in the growth of Japanese contemporary popular culture. Notable female-oriented research tends to favour yaoi works, now considered a mainstream genre that depicts homoerotic relationship between boys and men, intended mainly for a female audience.¹

In addition, it is noteworthy that research has been favouring exceptionally engaged and enthusiastic fans (otaku, nerds, geeks) at the expense of less invested and specialized consumers of the same popular media. Involvement of the ‘ordinary’ fan becomes clear in several instances, one being the appreciation for themed dining, also commonly considered as ‘concept cafés’ in Japan.² One of the most representative examples is the co-called maid café with its waitresses dressed up and acting as Victorian or French maids, largely targeted to the normative cis-gendered heterosexual male fan. But there was also high demand for a female-oriented equivalent and thus Japan’s first permanent ‘butler café’ was established in Tokyo in 2005, named Swallowtail. Much like in maid cafés, the focal point of visiting is to be in the presence of a fictive character, in this case, the butler. As the centre of attention, each customer is assigned a personal butler for the duration of their visit, whom the butler shall be referring to as either their lady or lord of the manor (i.e., the café itself). Although sharing the label of ‘café’ with maid cafés, it could be argued that the butler café Swallowtail is more akin to a tea salon or restaurant since its interior pays immaculate attention to the Victorian aesthetic, exhibiting luxury and refinement. As a European, terms such as ‘café’ and ‘coffee shop’ can easily become terms that are used interchangeably within a contemporary context, so a note on difference in terminology is to be taken into consideration when regarding the Japanese concept of cafés. While modern Japan has had its own variations, such as chamise (‘tea shop’) and chaya (‘tea house’), of what we may consider equivalent to the French kafe (quaint establishments that serve beverages and a small meal, to which one visits in a time of leisure), Japan’s first fully-fledged coffee shop was not installed until 1888 – it then took more than two decades before the very first cafés would open.³

Writing from the perspective of a fan and academic simultaneously, I conducted fieldwork by regular participant observation of the butler café Swallowtail during an eight-month period (December 2019–August 2020), drawing inspiration from cultural anthropologists like Patrick W. Galbraith whose previous studies on the male fans interested in maid cafés has led to significant understanding of an otherwise closed-off fan cultural place. Galbraith has shown that there is more than what meets the eye of these establishments: socially awkward nerds who have the chance to interact with cute girls. Rather, it illustrates a world where men of all sorts who have consciously rejected living life as society expected them to, thus built their own reality in the maid café as an “emergence of alternative

¹ Yaoi (also known as boys’ love) is an acronym for “yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi” (“no climax, no resolution, no meaning”), indicating its pornographic connotations.
³ Takai, Nihon kafe kōbōki (2009), p. 93.
social worlds”. On contrary to common belief that the reason for their visits is sexual in nature or even fetishizing, such is rarely the case, yet they may still be depicted as ‘failures’.

A natural assumption, which has yet to be looked into, would be that the same goes for female fans drawn to butler cafés (while there are few other cafés, Swallowtail may be considered most notable). The motive of this thesis is therefore, first and foremost, to bring awareness to the café beyond that of a tourist attraction as which it is mainly regarded in English as of current. Secondly, this thesis seeks to conjoin various pop cultural media and fan cultural expressions through the single case of butler café Swallowtail, presented from a gendered perspective in order to examine possible similarities and differences to maid cafés as the predecessor. Thirdly, by highlighting the particularities of the butler café, this thesis attempts to identify the imaginative play that occurs, which was previously considered limited to the 2-dimensional space (for example, manga). The research questions are therefore the following:

- How did the concept of a butler café emerge as an object of female attraction, and why?
- How does the singular case of Swallowtail connect to the wider perspective of female-gendered media and female fan culture?
- What does it mean for fan cultural consumption to move from the 2-dimensional media sphere into physical space? In which way is this space 3-dimensional?
- Do concept cafés in general and the butler café in particular shift the attraction from character (2-D) to place (3-D), or rather perform a merger (2.5-D)?

The outline of this thesis deviates slightly from the widespread academic custom to introduce material and method as points of departure. Due to the necessity of describing my observations of the butler café in detail, I decided to tie the introduction of my method of analysis to the case study. Consequently, the structure of the thesis is as follows: Chapter 1 demonstrates the current research situation through fan cultural contexts (originally published in Japanese or English, as well as translations), stating the classical approach to media as text, the visibility of the male fan preceding the female fan, then paying specific attention to the perspective of female fans studied by female scholars in Japan. The subject of Chapter 2 is butler café Swallowtail itself, where I present the material and method for the study, accumulated by an anthropological approach of active participation while visiting the café. Central elements of the findings are then put up for interpretation and analysis in Chapter 3, placed in the context of the fan cultural concepts introduced in Chapter 1 in order to contribute to the larger field of Japanese popular culture studies.

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1. Gendered Fan Cultures

To begin with, it must be stated that my approach has inevitably been shaped by a Western perspective towards fan culture. Regarding female fan cultural practises in the Western Anglosphere, studies conducted by American scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith became staple pieces within the field and received overall positive responses as they were not simply writing about fans but also as fans themselves. Said studies were initially centred around the homoerotic recontextualization and ‘transformation’ of the popular science fiction series Star Trek in the mid-1980s, commonly referred to as slash by using the slash symbol to indicate homoerotic pairings (e.g., ‘Kirk/Spock’). At the time, the name slash was mainly applied to physical objects as creative output by the fans, with particular attention to fan art and fan fiction, and media convergence in recent years has shown that this is still heavily practised. Although not a focal point for this study, similar developments can be observed with regard to Japanese female fan culture, and they shall be briefly looked into further in section 1.2.

Japanese popular culture and fan culture are the main topic of interest for this thesis. It considers various traditional and digitalised media of larger franchises, otherwise known as Japanese media mix which mainly includes but is not limited to anime, manga, dōjinshi (self-published manga), novels, magazines, games, merchandise, cosplay (costume play), theatre and musicals. The theoretical framework encompasses studies in contemporary popular culture and fan culture, seen through a gendered perspective and focused specifically on female fans in Japan. When looking into Japanese fandoms, the term ‘otaku’ is bound to appear sooner or later. Broadly speaking, the definition implies someone, regardless of gender, who is enthusiastic about consuming popular media culture, including but not limited to anime, manga, and video games. Without going into its semantics, the English translation may be similar to that of a ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’. The term otaku (lit. ‘your home’) has evoked conflicted interpretations since its initial usage in the early 1980s, due to the moral panic following serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki (1989) and terrorist group Aum Shinrikyō (1995). Although the term has been somewhat normalised in recent years, both within Japanese and English-speaking communities, it is still rejected as label by some. Due to the past social stigma of the term, this thesis shall refer to enthusiasts simply as ‘fans’ – with the exception of previously conducted studies targeting the otaku specifically.

Japanese fan cultural studies as an academic discipline has been gaining attention since the early 1990s but may still be held to prejudices due to the common perception of it as a form of ‘low culture’ entertainment. In the words of cultural critic Hiroki Azuma regarding his notable book on fans as consumers of fictional narratives, “back in 2001 […] the study of otaku culture was not necessarily a highly valued form of scholarship”. Although a significant stepping-stone in understanding the mind of a then-subcultural community, it largely neglects female individuals in favour of the presumably heterosexual cis-gendered male. This is not uncommon for notable research on fans as consumers of fictional media texts, as seen in further influential studies which have reached global recognition, by authors such as Eiji Ōtsuka (A Theory of Narrative Consumption, 1989), Tamaki Saitō


7 Recent years have seen an increase in slash works being prone to fan activism and identity politics as representation in the media; relying on subtext may be considered ‘queerbaiting’ rather than having characters’ sexuality explicitly stated in the source text itself.

(Psychoanalysis of Beautiful Fighting Girl, 2000), Kaichirō Morikawa (Learning from Akihabara: The Birth of a Personapolis, 2003), and Tōru Honda (Radiowave Man, 2005). Evidently, these are all studies centred around male fans. Popular media texts depicting hardcore fans, like slice-of-life manga series Genshiken (2002–2006) or the early mockumentary Otaku no Video (1991), also showcase a largely male-dominated group. In addition, unless explicitly referred to as ‘female fan’ or ‘female otaku’, women may be referred to as ‘fujoshi’ instead (lit. ‘rotten girls’). This, however, is not necessarily an accurate usage of the term; fujoshi only concerns women who are interested in fictional homoerotica of male-male relationships (including romantic, sexual, or pornographic content), whilst a female otaku’s interest is not necessarily limited to a single genre or medium.¹⁰

The early development of Japan’s media-related fan culture, which can be considered popular- and even mainstream culture to some extent in the 21st century, has had a fascinating progression. Between the late 1960s and the late 1990s, combined factors of the recovering economy and increased development of new technology, enabled the Japanese public to get lost in the pleasure of consumption.¹¹ Locations such as Akihabara in the eastern part of Tokyo, later commonly referred to as Akihabara Electric Town due to its many stores specialising in electronics, became an irreplaceable piece in the expanding growth of the early (mainly male) anime and manga community.¹² Fiction detached from political and social matters became a creative outlet through various media and its characters elicited greatly affectionate responses among fans.¹³ It was, however, largely limited to so-called 2-dimensional media texts (drawn rather than photographed or filmed visuals, rendered in a mangaesque ‘superflat’ style).

— 1.1 Generically male-oriented fictional media

In order to understand the position of the female fan in the context of contemporary popular culture, it is necessary to first examine the role of the male fan who has been at the forefront and thus predominated the generalised image. The typical fan emerged in the 1970s, alongside a shift in the later period of the Japanese post-war economic miracle which challenged previously conventional structures within both family and employment. An increased amount of people rejected the notions of properly contributing to society’s growth, yet had the time and financial means to put effort into their hobby, which both strengthened and undermined the view of the otaku. Mainstream hostility toward excessive media consumers as “social dissenters” grew due to an assumed lack of desire to develop physically ‘real’ intimate relationships in favour of bonding with fictional characters – this then came to ostracise their public image and to make them portrayed as outcasts.¹⁴ Furthermore, the misconception foregrounds declining masculinity for the sake of 2-dimensional creations, and this reinforced the otaku’s assumed failure in the public sphere.¹⁵

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¹⁰ The term itself is a homophone since the Japanese character for ‘fu’ can be written either as 婦 (respectable woman) or 腐 (spoiled, rotten).
¹² Again, there is a clear division when regarding public spaces as areas attracting fans, as Akihabara is mainly targeted toward male fans while Ikebukuro in the north-eastern part of Tokyo is largely considered a female-oriented space.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 217.
In contrast to the common belief that such fans are delusional in their strong affection for fictional characters, they are in fact acutely aware of the distinction between fiction and reality – perhaps more so than the people outside of the community, as research has shown. Some might not even have been seeking a relationship within our current reality. In 2005, author Tōru Honda states that popular culture had brought the common-sense belief of “love = three-dimensional world” to slowly crack. Furthermore, previously mentioned psychologist and critic Tamaki Saitō, known for his research on hikikomori (lit. ‘social recluses’; sometimes used interchangeably with otaku), defines the circumstances as an “attraction to ‘fictional contexts’”. This can be explained by the overwhelming sense of moe, an evoked emotion of deep attraction, often seen as a response toward kawaii (‘cuteness’), which in turn has become an significant part as Japan’s use of soft power. The word moe saw an excessive usage in online forums by fans of anime and manga as a slang word.

Galbraith describes the term as follows:

There are three things to note about this definition. First, moé is a response, a verb, something that is done. Second, as a response, moé is situated in those responding to a character, not the character itself. Third, the response is triggered by fictional characters.

Because of its connotations of cute characteristics, moe is commonly used in relation to bishōjo characters, that is, ‘beautiful girls’, created for the sake of a male audience. It can thus be argued that moe correlates to what cinema studies have investigated as the male gaze. Considered a social construct, it originated in the presumption of patriarchal power imbalances between the genders and has been speculated about since the early to mid-1970s by art critics and film theorists alike. It emphasises the male mind subconsciously establishing the position of an active observer, rendering the female a passive object to be observed, devoid of social agency. Although conceived in view of visual media forms, it can become applicable to both ‘real’ women and fictional women (characters) alike. Related to the concept of the Freudian term ‘scopophilia’, also known as deriving sexual self-indulgence from looking at what is considered aesthetically pleasing by the observer, such media entertain both the voyeuristic and narcissistic elements through objectification and hyper-sexualisation of the object.

— 1.1.1 Young woman as character type in male fan culture: the maid

Although considered a response by the observer, moe has also influenced the creation of ‘moe characters’. One is the contemporary maid in anime and manga. As an equivalent to the female-oriented butler, it is therefore of great interest to examine the traits of the maid. As a 2-dimensional fictional character, it appears fundamentally rooted in the Japanese romanticisation of French and British cultures, particularly inspired by the Rococo and Victorian era. The Japanese maid has adopted visuals similar to the French maid, consisting of short skirts, visible petticoats, decorative aprons, and

23 Although ‘the gaze’ as concept was introduced in 1943 by philosopher and literary critic Jean-Paul Sartre, the designated ‘male gaze’ was not explicitly established until 30 years later by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey.
aesthetic headpieces. Considering that the French maid was a more risqué version of the Victorian maid, it facilitated suggestive themes and undertones.

Maid as character type in Japanese contemporary pop cultural media can be traced back to the late 1970s, to girls’ manga series like Haikara-san ga tooru (Haikara-san: Here Comes Miss Modern) by Waki Yamato as well as early erotic animations like Cream Lemon: Black Cat Manor (ep. 11, 1986). The latter, on which the maid of maid cafés was modelled with the male consumer in mind, was not wholly popularised until the first instalment of PC role-playing game series Welcome to Pia Carrot!! released in 1996, in which the storyline takes place at a fictional restaurant in Akihabara (fig. 1). The title is considered a typical example of an early bishōjo game as it features a selection of beautiful girls, with the main objective for the player to romanticise and form an intimate relationship with each of the characters. Because of the distinguished stylistics and prevalent romance tropes, this type of game has become commonly known in the West by the generalised term ‘dating sim’ or ‘dating simulation’. While various titles of bishōjo games do contain sexual or pornographic content, Pia Carrot included, not all are within the subgenre of eroge (portmanteau of ‘erotic game’). Rather, the games of the 1990s were more likely to be considered “interactive romance novels”. Nevertheless, because the affective response of moe is evoked by juvenilization, the maid’s youthfulness and inexperience became highly valued among male consumers. The character type thereafter adapted towards overly exaggerated traits of kind-heartedness, courtesy, diligence, and compliance, but above all: purity. She has become the epitome of kawaii.

After the years of economic growth had come to an abrupt end, fans of anime and manga could still be seen cashing out on their respective hobbies in the form of niche consumption habits. This eventually led them to become considered “ultraconsumers” as they laid the groundwork for an admirable international image. Honda considers this comparable to a “revolution” since moe paved the way for a prevalence of 2-dimensional attraction. In extension, the maid shifted from a character

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26 It must be noted that although bishōjo is not a genre per se but a set of certain characteristics, it has become nuanced enough for fans to refer to it as such (e.g., ‘bishōjo games’ and ‘bishōjo series’).
27 Early erotic computer games featuring Victorian maids or characters with servant/waitress resembling attire, are included in titles such as Kindan no ketsuzoku (transl. Forbidden Blood Relatives, 1993), Kara no naka no kotori (transl. The Maiden Diaries, alt. Bird in the Cage, 1996), MAID iN HEAVEN (1998), Hinadori no saezuri (transl. Maiden of Deliverance, alt. Song of the Chick, 1999), as well as the game adaptation of episode 11 of Cream Lemon (in 1993). Hinadori no saezuri and Kara no naka no kotori were later released as a bundle with a remake of the latter title.
28 Azuma (2009), p. 79.
29 For differentiation between male and female fans’ approach toward maid as character in particular, see writings by Patrick W. Galbraith on male maid enthusiasts (2013) and Inger Sigrun Brodey on Kaoru Mori’s Ema (2011).
31 Galbraith (2010), p. 211.
of simply 2-dimensional nature to a creature integrated into the ‘real world’ as a ‘real person’, existing within the physical while fictionalised space of maid cafés.

— 1.1.2 Fan cultural place: Akihabara

Since the 1990s, Akihabara has become a hub location for male anime and manga fans. Due to their intensity, they managed to shape an entire neighbourhood of a city to cater to their own love for fictional characters. As per Galbraith’s description, “Akihabara is an otaku’s room blown up to city scale, sexy anime-girl posters and all”.33 While it holds the largest number of maid cafés in the country, it is no surprise that the very first maid café originated through occasional-turned-frequent appearances around the city. As the game *Pia Carrot* grew in popularity considering its recent sequel release in 1997 as well as extending beyond PC-based platform to TV game console Sega Saturn in 1998, a part of its promotional work consisted of bringing the café to life. For a limited amount of time, a so-called ‘pop-up café’ was set up, sparking its already increased popularity, which then resulted in occasional re-appearances of the *Pia Carrot* Restaurant (formerly by Gamers Square, later Café de COSPA) the following year. In 2001, Cure Maid Café was established, and it is considered the first of its kind with a permanent location.34 In contrast to the cute French maid which we might see as the poster example of Japanese maid cafés today, this was not the character type that Cure Maid Café implemented – and subsequently built their brand on. As a fan of previously mentioned *eroge*, founder Masato Matsuzaki is said to have used this as inspiration.35

A significant amount of today’s well-known maid cafés embraces the French-style *kawaii* ambience, more so than the historical Victorian model. This does not omit the number of classically influenced establishments, such as the one previously mentioned, which relies on the Victorian aesthetics in its elegant interior, subdued colours, candles and chandeliers, lacquered bookshelves, along with calm piano and violin music.36 The Victorian maid appears outwardly modest in her humble approach of not bringing attention to herself. The same might not be said for the contemporary French-turned-*kawaii* maid as she exists in the world of dreams, being “eternally 17”.37 This can be seen reflected in reputable establishments, some of which accommodate branches of cafés in multiple locations (all in Akihabara), such as @Home Café, Maidreamin, and Pinafore.

As illustrated in a variety of his studies, Galbraith reports of tucked-away spaces but with a warm welcome, bright colours, cat ears and ribbons, heart shapes stuck to every surface, singing and dancing to upbeat music among squeals and giggles. The initial greeting upon arrival often follows the script of “*okaerinasaimase goshujin-sama*” (welcome home, master).38 An essential part of the visit in addition to set phrases are hand gestures, which shall be done by both the customer and the maid herself in order to bless the food with their magic and love. The women working in these cafés, treat the model of the maid as a way for self-expression.39 The basic characteristics, many found in *moe* characters, are then moulded into personalities of their own with different traits and quirks. The maid becomes the embodiment of self-expression in the moment whilst engaging with the visitors as masters and mistresses within the extension of fictional reality.40 The masters and mistresses play their

33 Galbraith (2010), p. 211.
34 The café is still in business at the time of research (April 2021).
36 For others, see cafés such as Wonder Parlour (Akihabara) and Schatzkiste (Ikebukuro).
role in the imaginative play as well, furthering their own character development through the maid’s existence and their shared mutual exchange. Galbraith correlates this back to the significance of ritualisation for each visit, which can be compared to the game-structure of *bishōjo* games as visual novels;

Regulars engaged in a sort of “level building” in the café. The concept is standard in roleplaying games, where players build characters and work to strengthen them through simple repetitive exercises. The idea that effort results in predictable rewards is psychologically comforting.⁴¹

— 1.2 Generically female-oriented fictional media

As demonstrated so far, available research (originally published in English or translated) regarding the Japanese fans and their fan cultural habits, concerns itself mainly with the male fan as media consumer. Female popular culture and fandom have experienced equally extensive progress over the years. Much of its popularity can be traced back to the spread of *shōjo* manga, also known as girls’ comics (the name of which is due to its intended demographic). Initially drawn by men in the main, the early 1970s marked a radical shift in the creative process as female authors began to steadily enter the workforce. They wrote about topics which previous stories lacked, such as showing ordinary teenagers in love, and they managed to implement the female gaze in manga specifically aimed at teenage girls.⁴² Described as “neglected territory” by the Oxford dictionary, the female gaze opposes the idea of the female character as a mere spectacle and instead reverses the focus toward the male character, establishing the female observer at the centre.⁴³

The 1970s may very well be considered the Golden Age of *shōjo* manga as the women of *Nijūyō-ren gumi* (‘Year 24 Group’; signifying the year *Shōwa* 24, 1949, when most of them were born) popularised distinguished character designs (as well as narratives and page compositions), much of which have greatly contributed to the typical girl tropes of today.⁴⁴ Said characteristics included large starry eyes, curly hair, extravagant fashion with details of frills and ribbons.⁴⁵ Among these authors were Keiko Takemiya (*Kaze to ki no uta; The Poem of Wind and Trees*, 1976–1984) and Moto Hagio (*Tōma no shinzō; The Heart of Thomas*, 1974), whose works pursued topics which had previously been considered taboo or simply too heavy for its intended audience. The male characters were overall depicted as tall, slim and display an otherworldly amount of elegance: the *bishōnen* (lit. ‘beautiful boy’). Japan has had a long history of recognising beauty, particularly in boys and young men, as a key element of *tanbi* (aestheticism), which persists partially to this day. Since their beauty is still perceived as a feminine trait, thus turning it androgynous and ambiguous (e.g., Gilbert Cocteau from *Kaze to ki no uta* whose appearance was inspired by Swedish actor Björn Andrésen⁴⁶), *shōjo* manga researchers believe this to be “both possible anchors for female identification and objects of

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⁴¹ Galbraith (2012), p. 86.
⁴⁶ Andrésen’s role as Tadzio in the critically acclaimed movie *Death in Venice* (dir. Luchino Visconti, 1971) was a success and made his name well-known in Japan. The movie has recently been brought up in the media again with the release of the documentary *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* (2021), which tells of the hardships that followed his surge to fame at a young age.
scopophilic desire”. Questions of gender and sexuality came to the fore in these stories, as well as depictions of strong female friendships and same-sex relationships. These would later develop into subcategories such as mahō shōjo (magical girls), josei (for adult women), otome (maiden; reverse harem), and yaoi/yuri (male-male/female-female romance) – some of which have gained a significantly large amount of research since the start of the 21st century. Significant textual and sociological research has been conducted on several of the topics by female scholars like Yukari Fujimoto (Where Is My Place in the World?, 1998), Akiko Sugawa-Shimada (Girls and magic: How Have Girl Heroes Been Accepted?, 2013), Kazumi Nagaike (Fantasies of Cross-dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica, 2012), Fusami Ogi (Women’s Manga in Asia and Beyond, 2019), and Sonoko Azuma (Takarazuka, Yaoi, and the Replacement for Love: A Sociology of Women and Popular Culture, 2015). Even though some of these works are available in English, they are still not referenced nearly as often as their male counterparts on the topic of anime and manga fandom in Japan.

Although not a main focal point for this thesis, female-oriented homoerotic media play a critical part in influencing the studied location, Ikebukuro (section 1.2.2). Works known as yaoi or boys’ love (BL) contain homoerotic fiction, recontextualised adaptations as well as original works – specifically, intimate male-male relationships, whether of romantic, sexual, or pornographic nature. It has been a topic of extensive research due to its particularity and rapidly increasing popularity, so it shall therefore be mentioned briefly in this section. Similarly to the shōjo genre, it emerged in the mid-1970s and has since been established by critics and scholars alike that it bears no representational value of gay men in real life. Rather, it has been declared a community of interpretation only for women. Since it depicts characters as particularly heteronormative, both in appearance and behaviour, debate has been raised numerous times because of its mainly heterosexual female readers and authors alike. Fans of the genre are commonly referred to as fujoshi (lit. ‘rotten girls’), initially created online as a derogatory term by non-fans. It was later reclaimed by the community in the mid-2000s as they embraced its unfavourable definition seeing them as ‘spoiled for marriage’ for finding pleasure in unorthodox desires. Some yaoi works treat the two male partners as being in interchangeable positions (known as the seme and uke; ‘attacker’ and ‘receiver’ alt. ‘top’ and ‘bottom’), but not all of them. Often yaoi maintains the perspective of female desire through the objectification of the male body for mere viewing pleasure, and the lacking equality between the sexes has spawned claims of sex negativity. Regardless, I say it is a plausible assumption for the creative process of the genre to be considered an epitome of the female gaze. Statistics show a predominant amount of female fans engaging in fan activities such as distributing self-published works.

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48 Strictly speaking, josei (like shōjo) is rather an indicator of its targeted demographic; mahō shōjo (like bishōjo) is a character type; whereas otome and yuri/yaoi may be considered actual genres.
53 They are often seen at Comiket (Comic Market: public convention and largest dōjinshi fair, held biannually, est. Tokyo 1975). The first Comiket had an estimated 700 participants, 90% of whom were female junior high and high school students.
otaku and fujoshi remained the majority throughout the mid-1980s as the yaoi genre grew in popularity. Therefore, it cannot be disregarded that these works have, still do, and most likely will continue to make up a significant part of (female) fan cultural expression.

One significant piece of female-oriented media for this thesis is the best-selling title, Kuroshitsuji (Black Butler). While it was first printed in monthly shōnen magazine Gekkan GFantasy (September issue, 2006) by manga and games company Square Enix, it has since come to gain a predominantly female audience, both in Japan and abroad. Its still-growing popularity has made it subject to media mix, appearing in multiple media such as anime, games, drama CDs, web radio, seiyū (voice actor/actress) events, musicals, merchandise, and various forms of transformative works (dōjinshi etc.). It appears to be particularly popular with fujoshi since the story demonstrates numerous elements of breaching into yaoi territory. The two main characters, Earl Ciel Phantomhive and his butler Sebastian Michaelis’ relationship as master and servant is depicted as heavily eroticised through ‘fan service’ (i.e., implementing suggestive or lewd content to please the fans), yet never to the point of being explicitly labelled as a yaoi text through-and-through. As a bishōnen, Sebastian is portrayed as lean, elegant, but most of all, beautiful. He has thus become the ideal incarnation for the contemporary butler character. He is efficient, diligent, competent, knowledgeable – all while maintaining a sense of grace that no ordinary person could ever possess. Although this is partly because he is a demon, such traits are nevertheless in favour of the bishōnen character type.

— 1.2.1 Young woman as character type in female fan culture: otome

Because of the cultural impact of the yaoi genre, it easily becomes a topic of academic discourse. The desires of fujoshi aside, yaoi is not the only genre worth noticing. What about the girls who simply do not have an interest in seeing Prince Charming settle down with another Prince Charming? Placed in the shadow of yaoi’s prosperity yet equally important are works for girls who simply enjoy frills and ribbons, to be surrounded by decorative ornaments and fantasise about being a princess themselves – if just for a moment.

In recent years, the term otome (maiden) tends to refer to the popular game genre of dating simulators aimed at women. Historically speaking, fashion and cultural studies scholar Masafumi Monden has brought up various critical discourses by highlighting what he calls the nostalgic “maidensque” (otomechikku) style. Otomechikku rabu kome (abbreviated translation for ‘maiden romantic love comedy’) was a shōjo magazine published throughout the 1970s and 1980s with a distinct visual style and aesthetic, seen in works by authors such as A-ko Mutsu (Tasogaredoki ni mitsuketano; I Found it at Dusk, 1975), Yumiko Tabuchi (Marumero jamu o hitosukui; One Scoop of...
Otome saw a revival in the early-2000s, popularised through the medium of games rather than manga. Initially a niche market, ren’ai (romantic love) games have become one of the fastest growing types of applications on the market for mobile devices and smartphones in Japan, as reported by NTT Docomo. The TV console game Angelique released in 1994 (considered first of its kind) which was greatly influenced by shojo manga visuals, was also developed by an all-female team. They sought to create gaming experiences by women for women, devoid of explicit political stances, in an otherwise male-dominated market (i.e., subject of the male gaze) by utilising familiar aesthetics and visuals in combination with easy-to-use controls to make it accessible to a wider audience. Otome game mechanics are similar to previously mentioned bishōjo games – they avoid the complexity of how to proceed in the game as it is mainly told through text onscreen, superimposed to still images of 2-dimensional characters and settings (that is, so-called visual novels). Developers discovered that the structure was befitting a female audience, since it relies largely on conversations between characters, and thus provides opportunities to create and deepen interpersonal relationships within the game. Another significant element to the popularisation of the genre is media mix, which was already practised during the launch of Angelique (it was also a serialised manga at the time). Furthermore, soon it would become customary for otome games to be fully voiced as well, which also increased their popularity since seiyū is another type of entertainment with large fanbases in Japan, mixing with the idol industry. This leads to not only enhancement of the depiction of a voiced character but also opens the possibility for further media mix by CDs, such as character songs and drama CDs (also called ‘situation CD’). Transmedia franchises have brought international recognition to the genre as well, as seen in on-going series such as Hakuoki (Otome, 2008), Uta no Prince-sama (Broccoli, 2010), and Diabolik Lovers (Rejet, 2012). As such, the genealogies of certain character types and the variety of media they are depicted by becomes a significant part of their development.

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63 Fraser and Monden (2017), p. 546.
66 Despite its popularity, only 6 of 26 titles (Hakuoki: 4, Diabolik Lovers: 2) have been officially translated into English (fan discs included).
The player asserts the position of the heroine of the story. More often than not, she is not voiced by seiyū, and refrains from opinionated reactions and thoughts to make her an easily identifiable persona, which then allows the individual player to form their own adventure based on multiple-choice scenarios. Like bishōjo games, the main objective is to build romantic relationships with each character of the opposite sex. Inspired by shōjo manga, male characters are often depicted as bishōnen, each with their own distinct personality. While these characters are clearly male as part of the heteronormative narrative of otome, their gender performance, and by extension the story itself, may come across as ambiguous. Consequently, none of it is supposed to be realistic – it is more likely to be the “last place where ‘real’ love romance is still imagined and desired”. Rather, the medium is to act as a possible tool for transcribing girls’ sexuality, pleasure, and agency. Romanticisation of unknown foreign and fantasised settings is commonplace, as well as the tendency to indulge and extravagance in order to trigger the ‘maiden switch’ for these girlish imaginations. The visuals are therefore a fundamental part to trigger the female gaze.

As mentioned, backdrops of romanticised far-away places tend to be a common setting in shōjo manga. Highly aestheticized, such stories often hold the promise of adventure, mystery, forbidden romance, afternoon tea and dance parties. The growing subfield of neo-Victorian studies examines the appreciation of the Victorian era’s aesthetics found in a contemporary setting, as it is “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians”. Inspiration and themes can be found in contemporary works such as Lady Victorian (1998–2007), Ema (2002–2006), and previously mentioned Kuroshitsuji (2006–present), all which directly and indirectly references world-known names like Sherlock Holmes, Jack the Ripper, Alice in Wonderland and so on. Due to the established importance of visual qualities in shōjo manga, neo-Victorian themes are often presented as elegant and sophisticated as to appeal to a female audience; in comparison to its corresponding male genre shōnen, their varying focuses clearly differ between the external or internal part of the self. The reader is often meant to identify with the emotions of the main character – their mindscape of desire, sentimentality, and heightened emotions. In doing so, it can be argued whether the neo-Victorian could be deemed culturally appropriating as a way to “fetishise the trappings of ‘exotic’ Victorian material culture” which, while may be the case for some, does not necessarily apply to all. Victorian literary scholar Anna Maria Jones argues, rather than simply consuming the aesthetic as ‘exotic’, it allows for a deeper cultural exchange that exceeds transnational boundaries through “multiple textual layers”. Rather than just a recipient, the reader is encouraged to

67 As a young maiden, the heroine tends to be 15–18 years old, with the option of changing her given name in-game for a more personalised experience for the player. Last names are sometimes already set by default as part of the narrative, to which the other characters might refer to by voice.
68 While there certainly are otome games with sexually explicit content, they are not as commonly advertised as e.g., bishōjo games. I would argue that a significant reason for this is the seeming preference for handheld consoles among the community; notable developers such as Otomate, Rejet, and Broccoli tend to limit their releases to either PlayStation or Nintendo devices, none of which allows sexually explicit content on either of their platforms.
71 Hasegawa (2013), pp. 135–150.
76 Ibid., p. 22.
maintain an outsider perspective, as well as simultaneously develop a connection of fellowship to the Victorians. Thus, British history and culture made to appeal to a previously unintended audience, i.e., placed in the context of Japanese contemporary popular culture, has come to create its own niche: the Victorian shōjo.\textsuperscript{77}

1.2.2 Fan cultural place: Ikebukuro’s Otome Road

Since the late 1990s, Ikebukuro has become known as the female equivalent of Akihabara when concerning pop cultural phenomena. Unlike cities such as Akihabara or Shinjuku (the former transformed local communities and the latter constructed by government officials and business companies), it could be plausible to say that Ikebukuro as an area of fan sanctuary emerged through the combination of said circumstances.\textsuperscript{78} It came into being once Toshima ward decidedly demolished Sugamo prison in the eastern part of the district which had been in use since 1895, in favour of founding the Sunshine 60 complex in 1978 – part of which has become the popular shopping centre, Sunshine City. In order to improve the city’s allegedly “sombre and somewhat negative image”, public officials prompted toward a more appealing and family-friendly environment.\textsuperscript{79} This way of active beautification has been reoccurring as numerous local shopping centres, focusing largely on fashion and cosmetics, have been established in recent years too.\textsuperscript{80} Along came shops selling anime goods, manga, toys, trading cards and school supplies, coincidentally at the same times as the “young and cute aesthetic” was gaining popularity among female high school students (following the creation of e.g., Hello Kitty). Anime and manga merchandise retailer Animate introduced their first store (now also headquarters) in the early 1980s, located in East Ikebukuro, although their goods were still mainly targeted toward a male clientele. However, this soon changed as shōjo maintained its popularity and the yaoi genre emerged further. In due time, these were becoming acknowledged outside of already established niche communities, as a considerable amount of older female fans began to advance their activities from Shinjuku to Ikebukuro. In addition to the increasing community of female otaku, the amount of already established all-girls cram schools in the neighbourhood did most likely contribute to this surge of commute as well.\textsuperscript{81}

Over the next few years, various second-hand anime and manga distributors such as K-BOOKS, Lashinbang and Mandarake started appearing in the surrounding area – all of which contributed to the growth of Ikebukuro into becoming the “female otaku sanctuary”.\textsuperscript{82} Upon Animate’s Ikebukuro main store renewal in 2000, it was clear that they, too, had shifted their attention to attract female customers in particular.\textsuperscript{83} Around the same time, Ikebukuro had become recognized by its amassed pilgrimage, and much like the area in Akihabara titled Electric Town, eastern Ikebukuro had established a, nevertheless minuscule, version commonly known as Otome Road (lit. ‘Maiden Road’). It was first officially mentioned by name in the magazine Pafu (Zassōsha, May issue) in 2004 and has since been subject to both national and international media coverage, mainly regarded as a niche cultural tourist attraction for women.\textsuperscript{84} The road itself stretches on for a 225-meter-long pedestrian street on the west side of the Sunshine 60 complex, accommodating ten buildings with multiple floors.

\textsuperscript{77} Jones (2016), p. 305.
\textsuperscript{78} Morikawa, Shuto no tanjô: Moerus toshi Akihabara (2003).
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 293.
\textsuperscript{83} Sugiura, Otaku joshi kenkyû fujoshi shisô taikei (2006).
\textsuperscript{84} Morikawa, “Sûji de miru fujoshi,” Eureka vol. 39, no. 16 (December special issue, 2007), pp. 124–135.
each filled with exclusively female *otaku* goods and memorabilia. While the items used to be divided according to the intended audience by being sold on separate floors, this is hardly seen any longer. Instead, merchandise retailers such as the ones mentioned above, consist of several sub-sections of genre and medium based stores; in the case of K-BOOKS who currently occupy the majority of locations, maintaining stores specialising in *dōjinshi*, *cosplay*, *seiyū*, K-pop, games, movies – and the list goes on.

Throughout the years, K-BOOKS as well as Lashinbang have strategically been relocating and renewing their sub-sections of stores, whereas Animate and Mandarake have stayed consistently located within their designated buildings for a longer period of time. This, however, does not apply to nor include collaborations with other brands, such as officially approved pop-up cafés, lotteries, events with access to pre-releases and limited-edition goods. Other brands which have added to Ikebukuro’s existence as the female *otaku* sanctuary that it has become, combine original and second-hand retailers alike; Comic Toranoana, Melon Books, Rejet shop, Girls’ Game Shop Stellaworth, as well as the countless number of arcade game centres located along Sunshine 60 street (e.g., SEGA, ADORES, Round 1) (fig. 2). Some of them may be advertised for all eyes within the public sphere, yet to find these hidden gems created by and for the *otaku* community, being able to manage urban orienteering of the space becomes fundamental.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 2**: Toshima Ward Tourist Information Pamphlet, “Ikebukuro Otome Map” issued by Toshima Ward, based on information as of October 2015; revised edition issued October 2018.

Furthermore, by bringing the fictional into reality as part of female-oriented media, the concept of 2.5-dimension (*nitengo-jigen*) was brought to my attention. Often told by its full term ‘2.5-dimensional musical’, it was created with the intention to describe previously limited 2-dimensional characters of exclusively anime and manga works brought onto the stage in real life through yet another example of the Japanese media mix.\(^{85}\) While it could be argued that it was first put into practise in the male-oriented maid café as the pioneer of concept cafés, the terminology itself was first developed through the context of musicals, which were specifically intended for a female audience.

Initially done by the Takarazuka Revue in the mid-1970s, the all-female theatre troupe became known for its production of the influential *shōjo* work *The Rose of Versailles* (although it was simply referred to as “anime musical” at the time). The term was then popularised in the early 2000s as other companies created stage productions of series *Hunter x Hunter* and *The Prince of Tennis*, the latter of which has come to gain international recognition. Characterised by exaggerated visuals and acting in order to bring the fictional characters to life, it differs from *cosplay* in that the actors do not just look the part – they have to be able to fully perform, whether that includes singing, dancing, fighting with swords, or imitate cycling with only a handle to work with, sometimes up to three hours straight. It is also different from the so-called live action renditions of anime and manga works since those tend to be limited to either TV or film screenings, thus shown on a flat screen. It is rather the very essence of watching a musical or stage show unfold itself in the moment which allows it to exist in the realm of both 2 and 3-dimensional simultaneously. In addition, even the idea of ‘reverse 2.5-dimension’ has been brought up in recent production (e.g., *Rusted Armors*, performed 2017). The term is used for works that originate as 2.5-musicals/theatre, then are adapted into more traditional media later such as manga and anime. Overall, as a phenomenon even more recent than anime, manga, or concept café culture, it is still a field largely left undiscovered particularly outside of Japan, but certainly a topic worthy of further research.

This first chapter has demonstrated a variety of popular and fan cultural elements throughout the years, its origin and development, with attention to differentiating between male and female-oriented media and its fans. While both appear to romanticise parts of British and French culture, they tend to differ in interpretation and expression. Media mix has clearly acted an invaluable part in expanding certain works, transcending beyond boundaries of 2-dimensional media, and even raised the possible argument of popular and fan cultural expression existing in the 2.5-dimensional realm. Furthermore, by giving the necessary context to the popular character types of the maid and butler seen in Japanese contemporary media, I hope that this section will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the butler café as a concept. In the next chapter, I shall present my material in the form of what an ordinary visit to the butler café Swallowtail looks like, as well as include information surrounding the concept, influences, and bring attention to its emphasised ritualisation.

86 Kohyama, “Presenter Interview: The vision of Makoto Matsuda, the producer behind the “2.5-D Musicals”,” *Performing Arts Network Japan*, blog post (2015).
2. Butler Café Swallowtail

As mentioned in the Introduction, the motivator for gathering my material in the way I did was to follow in the footsteps of critically acclaimed anthropologists such as Patrick W. Galbraith, whose studies of Akihabara’s maid cafés has brought invaluable insights to the academic field in English. With two separate PhDs in Information Studies and Cultural Anthropology, Galbraith has spent over a decade immersed in niched fan communities of maid enthusiasts and *bishōjo* gamers alike (as well as others) to provide an extensive view of such, other than Western media’s seemingly preference for stories about ‘Weird Japan’. Through “peer-learning methods”, his research goes beyond what said fans do as their hobbies – rather, it focuses on gaining further understanding of who the fans are as a collective and individuals, how and why they do what they do, how they are perceived by society and how they see themselves.

With Galbraith’s approach in mind, the material for this study combines several components through various types of medium. It considers netnographic findings (text, imagery, video, voice recordings) as well as the ethnographic study done by participant observation as I regularly visited butler café Swallowtail throughout the duration of eight months (December 2019–August 2020); the latter which was conducted during my one year-stay at Chuo University as a foreign language student. Some of the netnographic material is characterised as aimed at tourists due to its prevalence, but material gathered through fan-based communities has also been taken into consideration. This is partly because of the structure of each visit, which does not enable socialising with other visitors on location – the study therefore relies on digital communication, mainly through social media platforms (e.g., Twitter). I created an online profile (fig. 3) to similarly report and interact with fellow fans (therefore considering more regulars than the first-time/occasional visitors). Descriptions would commonly include preferred title, mentions of one’s first visit, favourite butler(s) as well as some concluding remarks to fellow visitors.

Regarding terminology, the role as participant in this study shall be termed as ‘visitor’ instead of ‘customer’, since the former has less of a commercialised tone and focuses more on the experience and part of the role-play. Compared to Galbraith’s profound commitment to immersion, I encountered certain time limitations to the study as I was able to visit the café only during my free time while in Tokyo – therefore, perhaps rendering my study to be

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88 Cited in Galbraith (2021), no pagination.
89 When stating one’s favourite person/character/type within fan cultural contexts, it is common for Japanese fans to use the term ‘oshi’ (verb: to push), indicating one’s support for them.
more ethnographical than anthropological. What I mean by that is because of my lack of participation with other visitors, the evaluated data became more like a study of the visitors.\textsuperscript{90} Regardless, since I have yet to find academic scholarship pursued in the environment of the female-oriented butler café (and Swallowtail in particular), I hope this study as foregrounded ethnographic data might become a stepping-stone for upcoming studies with more anthropological executions.

While I mainly visited the café by myself, either in the afternoon or evening due to commuting distance, I did occasionally go with friends and acquaintances (like myself, most of them were foreigners in their 20s); on the occasions that some were unfamiliar with the Japanese language, I had told the butlers in charge of our visits upon arrival that we wished to proceed the duration of our stay in English. Instances where dialogue was compromised due to insufficient language ability of understanding keigo (Japanese honorific speech) also occurred. I did not disclose my academic status or motives for my visits since it may have skewed my experiences in the café from the perspective of an ordinary fan. After each of my visits, I would take notes in a similar manner as fellow fans appeared to formulate online that clearly states the presence of which butlers, choice of menu and tableware, conversational topics, and overall highlights of the visit (midokoro). Lastly, it must be stated that this study has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It resulted in Japan’s pending declaration for State of Emergency, particularly in the Tokyo metropolitan area, which came to affect all restaurant establishments by compromising opening hours and services (all activity suspended 7 April 2020–31 May 2020). Once lifted, safety measures were still issued which inarguably came to affect the overall experience of visiting the café as well.

— 2.1 Researching the café

In the subsections of this chapter, I shall first provide an introduction to the café itself through netnographic data (published by both news outlets and the café itself); secondly, a thorough description of visiting the café, seen both from the perspective of a regular as well as first-time visitor, based on my personal experiences and the initial responses by close friends and acquaintances who allowed me to accompany them for their first visits.

Appropriately located at the far end of Otome Road, is the main location of butler café Swallowtail. As media scholar Craig Norris accentuates, a certain amount of “situational awareness and familiarity” of the area is indeed needed – blink and you miss it.\textsuperscript{91} The only indicator that it might be an establishment at the bottom of the staircase of a concrete seven-storey building is the visibly framed reservation schedule of the day placed out front. It stays fixed to a steel fence with a butterfly motif, positioned in an alcove on the corner along a decorative potted flower bed. Much like Cure Maid Café is the first of its kind in terms of permanent residency, the same goes for Swallowtail; it may also arguably be the most successful one until this day.\textsuperscript{92} As mentioned, while maid cafés gained popularity among its intended male audience, young women took to online forums expressing their


\textsuperscript{92} This does not account for pop-up shops, cosplay or danso (women cross-dressing as men) cafés with the occasional butler theme that may have preceded the founding of Swallowtail.
wish to experience equally gratifying moments of being served by equally handsome gentlemen, too – in a setting which was less costly than a host club but more romantic than a nightclub. \(^{93}\)

Butler café Swallowtail opened its doors on 24 March 2005 by previously mentioned retailer K-BOOKS. In the first month, they had already served more than 3,000 customers with an average of 100 visitors per day. \(^{94}\) The vast majority of said customers are as to be expected, women in their 20s and 30s, often visiting in pairs, small groups, or at times, alone. These women are referred to as either ojō-sama (young lady) or oku-sama (madam, ma’am) – or, on the special occasion of visiting during the café’s anniversary period taking place in the latter half of March each year, which I managed to experience myself twice – ohime-sama (princess). \(^{95}\) Although a rare sighting inside the café, male customers are also treated to the same level of courtesy, being referred to as danna-sama (master, lord; similar to maid cafés’ goshujin-sama) or obocchama (young master). Said titles fit into the fantasy of the café being a part of one’s own manor, to spend time of leisure and relaxation, supported by the butlers. Shiina, one of the butlers who has been at the manor since its establishment, states in an interview uploaded to the Japan Food TV’s YouTube channel:

> The view that we, the servants, have is that Swallowtail is a British mansion and we serve the madam, our lady and master who lives there. We see the patrons that enter the premises as princesses coming back to the tea salon, so we, the servants firstly say ‘Welcome back’ to our ladies who are part of our family to serve. So we see ourselves as offering a very unique service. […] Coming back for the first time may be a little nerve-racking for our ladies, so what we always say to them is that this is their home. We are just servants that attend to the princesses. So please relax, get comfortable, and enjoy a great tea time here. \(^{96}\)

Before the butlers are allowed to serve their lady or lord in person, they must undergo a rigorous training period for two months. This includes learning the correct way to walk, talk, bow, memorising table arrangements, as well as recognising the intricate details of beverages such as various tea blends, coffee beans, wine, and champagne by heart. After all, “a waiter may have to know how utensils are set up on a table, but a butler understands why they are set up this particular way”. \(^{97}\) During this period, they train under the guidance of top-class hotel personnel, even including staff members with connections to the imperial family. \(^{98}\) Unlike the childish charm of inexperience that allows for the maid café’s endearing qualities, Swallowtail offers none of that. Their aim toward luxury becomes conspicuous in their certificates belonging to associations such as The Japan Hotel

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\(^{93}\) It is worth noting that although host and hostess clubs have been around since the 1960s, offering seemingly similar services, do not particularly target the anime or manga fanbase. Galbraith further highlights their significant differences in approach, as in the case of hostess clubs which greatly acts upon complimenting and exaggerating achievements in real life, clearly encouraged to inflate one’s ego. As this was never the intention of male-targeted maid cafés, neither did female fans seek an alternative akin to host clubs.

\(^{94}\) A. Nakamura, “For female ‘otaku,’ a coffee house all their own,” The Japan Times (2006).

\(^{95}\) Although Swallowtail themselves have opted to translate ojō-sama as ‘mistress’ on the rare occasion of advertising their establishment for an English-speaking audience, this study regards the translation simply as ‘young lady’ (my translation). This rejection of the originally used term has been made after careful consideration due to its otherwise sexual implications.


and Restaurant Service Development Association (HRS), Japan Sommelier Association (JSA), Sake Service Institute (SSI), as well as the Japan Tea Association (JTA) since 2010.99

Striving further from maid cafés, Swallowtail has also implemented the addition of proper titles to the butlers. When concerning maid cafés, there may be different types; perhaps the most common one being neko mimi maids (maids wearing cat ears).100 However, the concept of maids belonging to different ranks is rarely heard of (more than the common usage of senpai/kōhai among the maids themselves). At most, maids may be ranked by their popularity – officially by the café or unofficially by the fans, which is heavily correlated to Japan’s consumptive pattern of the idol industry.101 At Swallowtail, emphasis on the various positions as butler has been a topic since its grand opening, as it was first mentioned in a butler’s diary entry on 2 August 2006.102 Although it may not come up in conversation while visiting, it is briefly introduced on the café’s website along with the butlers’ profiles (text only). The titles are as follows: House Steward, Second Steward, Groom of the Chamber, Butler Emeritus, Butler, First Footman, Footman, Tea Master, and Cuisinier.103 House Steward Tokitō who has been part of the café since 2009, offers an extensive explanation of the terms in a series of butler’s diary entries titled Oyashiki no zatsugaku (Manor Trivia).104 As there is more than meets the eye, not only does it dispel the common question of the differences between ‘butler’ and ‘footman’, but it specifies even the smallest differences in tailcoats, ties, bows, and the rare jewelled badges pinned to the lapels of their suits. Furthermore, certain ranks require certain criteria. Qualifications are formally distributed by the JTA, the most common one being Tea Advisor, followed by Tea Instructor (acquired by 19 and 3 respectively, regardless of working position).

In addition to the hierarchy of butlers, like many businesses in Japan, there is also a social hierarchy among visitors to show one’s loyalty, distributed as membership cards. The visuals of the cards only differ subtly, although their benefits vary greatly; there is the regular member’s card in standard blue (up to 1,500 points), dark blue (1,500–5,000 points), and black (more than 5,000 points). Throughout my period of visiting, I came to exceed 1,500 points which placed me in the upper third tier of the membership list (maximum being eight levels in total). This allowed me to receive original café limited goods, birth month benefits, participate in seasonal events (limited to members only), request certain teacups from their vast collection for each visit, as well as receive a personalised title (in addition to the standard honorific ojō-sama). Furthermore, by surpassing the two top tiers (5,000 and 10,000 points), the visitor is granted their own cloak key and becomes eligible to receive a handwritten letter from their preferred butler.

As for the food, it distinctly contrasts maid cafés’ staple options of colourful parfaits and omurice (omelette with fried rice). The menu has been developed by Paul Okada, Director of Food and Beverage at the international luxury hotel Four Seasons Tokyo, ever since its opening in 2005.105 They change all items on the menu monthly, as well as offer special versions of their beverages one day of each month (seasonal and monthly selections; tea, coffee, pâtissier’s special, cocktail, wine, sake), and two types of limited ice cream and cake. The cakes appear to be particularly popular with the visitors

99 Cure Maid Café holds the same certificate from JTA since 2011.
101 This is practised in famous maid cafés such as @Home Café and Maidreamin, which features different grades and ranks of their employees (e.g., ‘Super Premium Maid’).
103 As of September 2021, the employee ratio is: House Steward (5), Second Steward (2), Groom of the Chamber (5), Butler Emeritus (1), Butler (3), First Footman (3), Footman (15), Tea Master (4), Cuisinier (1).
and tend to be sold out by afternoon on the day of release. Among their full course meals, arguably the most popular option is the Anna Maria afternoon tea set—appropriately named after the Duchess of Bedford, believed to have been the initiator of the meal in the early 19th century. It is a three-tier cake stand with three different savouries (usually consists of small sandwiches, quiche, omelette, choux salés), two types of scones (plain, Earl Grey, fig, honey, chocolate chip, strawberry/white chocolate, caramel walnut, cherry blossom) with one preserve each (butter, clotted cream, strawberry, seasonal confectionery), and one dessert (option A or B) (fig. 4). A pot of tea is included, served hot or cold, from an assortment of more than 40 original blends which have been developed by the butlers themselves as part of their Tea Research Department. Iori, Second Steward and commonly considered to be the face of Swallowtail, was awarded JTA’s Outstanding Performance Award at the Tea Shop Championship of 2019 for his personal rendition of Darjeeling first flush. In addition to their different tea blends, another detail of importance for the café is their wide assortment of teacups. The cups are sorted into either regular or premium selection, which become available to each visitor depending on their amount of membership points. The regular selection contains about 90 original designs from various collections such as Royal Albert, Richard Ginori, Wedgewood, Noritake, and Aynsley. Although significantly smaller, the premium selection is no less impressive; ca. 25 original cups from previously mentioned collections as well as Baccarat and Okura Art China, the latter which has become synonymous with the Imperial Household’s tableware. Each new addition to the collection is formally introduced on the café’s official Twitter account (@swallowtail_bc).

Lastly, the idea of the café is not limited to existing only in-between the four walls of the location itself. Throughout the years, Swallowtail has done collaborative work and events with Ikemofu animal café (also owned by K-BOOKS), clothing brand Axes Femme, theme park Sanrio Puroland, and attended the annual convention Anime Matsuri, Texas. Furthermore, they have expanded into several sub-branches of business (administered by K-BOOKS): Swallowtail GiftShop, Patisserie Swallowtail, Maji Crepe, Bar Blue Moon, Butlers Opera Troupe (Shitsuji kagekidan), and the Hanaato fan club. While their gift shop is located just across the street from the café itself, crêperie Maji Crepe and Bar Blue Moon are both based not farther than a 5-minute walk down Otome Road. Considering the popularity of various crêperie in places such as Harajuku (particularly along Takeshita dōri), Maji Crepe specialises in presenting visually pleasant products of the same quality as the desserts served in the café. Located right next-door is Bar Blue Moon, said to open only once a

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108 At one point in time, Patisserie Swallowtail was extended into establishing Café White Rose, a less-formal maid inspired café serving Swallowtail’s original baked goods, however, it permanently closed in 2016.
blue moon (in reality: three times a week), where the butlers become bartenders at night. The availability is limited to a total of four butlers and 10 visitors (with a booking fee of JP¥5,500; 90 minutes) and their standard menu consisting of 30 different drinks. Although one might speculate it is increasingly comparable to a host club, more so than the café, it shall remain unsaid for this thesis.

Another area of interest, particularly from a fan cultural perspective, is the Butlers Opera Troupe and its associated Hanaoto fan club (abbr. hana and otome; ‘flower’ and ‘maiden’). Since 2010, the Butlers Opera Troupe (also referred to as Butler’s × Operetta) has been part of the café for the butlers with an inclination towards performing arts. As the troupe hosts various seasonal events limited to the members of the Hanaoto fan club, they also perform an annual song-and-dance performance titled Primavera, held on the main stage of the Sunshine City shopping centre in recent years. Drawing inspiration from classical and jazz music, the subjects of their songs are commonly written from the perspective of the butler about their love and devotion to their lady. During the time of Tokyo’s State of Emergency due to COVID-19, Swallowtail launched their project Goodnight Butterfly; a 17-part series podcast held by Butlers Opera Troupe members Yurino, Nōmi, Iori and Kumagawa with several other butlers as guests. Since January 2021, each Opera Troupe member have also created their personal Twitter account, a significant development for visitors to keep in touch with some of the butlers since previous online communication had been limited to officially regulated butler’s diary entries on the café’s homepage.109

— 2.2 Visiting the café

Entering the café by descending the steep staircase, the outside world ceases to exist; one has now arrived at the manor – specifically, one’s own manor.110 Below ground, one is greeted by a doorman. This tends to be one of the Groom of Chamber, who oversees who is allowed inside and keeps a smooth flow of arrivals and departures so that neither of the two overlaps. Once the doorman has confirmed the details of the booking, they will go further into the back to subtly speak into an earpiece – which all the servants wear – to inform the staff inside the cloakroom.111 There are two separate waiting areas: before being admitted by the groom of the chamber, and after. As soon as the butlers inside are in position, one is expected to simply rise from the embellished sofa and turn to either of the front doors, indicated by the doorman.

Inside, the House Steward formally welcomes one back home by greeting, “okaerinasaimase ojō-sama” (welcome home, young lady) (fig. 5). Behind them stands another servant at hand, who shall be at one’s service for the day. Since the majority of employees belong to the position as Footman, it is more than likely to have one of them as the assigned servant. They are the ones doing the main work around the manor, with the guidance of the First Footman who also assists the Butlers. However, this part of the thesis is going to collectively refer to the assigned servant as ‘butler’ regardless of their title as Butler, First Footman or Footman. Essentially, all three treat the visitors to the same hospitality and procedure. Regardless of the number of visits, the House Steward formally introduces themselves, followed by the butler. Outerwear and luggage are removed and tucked away

109 The accounts of Mizusawa and Hirayama has since been deleted (June 2021), with the recent addition of Kagawa (August 2021). The remaining members are Iori and Yurino (since 2010), Kumagawa (2014), Nōmi and Kageyama (2017), and Furuya (2019).

110 Although the terms manor and mansion can be seen used interchangeably in a neo-Victorian setting, this thesis only uses the word ‘manor’, as to not be confused with the Japanese usage of the term ‘mansion’ (manshon).

111 This is essentially the time when one should inform the groom if anything deviates from the day’s visit; say, if bringing guests who do not speak Japanese. The visit is then made accordingly with a limited vocabulary of English by the servants.
into private lockers inside the hallway wardrobe by the House Steward, and the visitor is then left into the hands of the butler.

“Please mind your step.”
There is a height difference of two steps that separates the main floor from the cloakroom that connects in front of a grand display of the café’s teacup collection. Now, upon seeing the manor in its entirety, it goes beyond the impression of what would be considered a ‘café’ and could be argued to be more of a restaurant or salon. Like clockwork, this is the moment whereupon my foreign companions would turn to me and with an expression of astonishment and disbelief. Along with stylised interior and décor – multiple Swarovski chandeliers, bouquets of red roses on white marble pillars, finely carved woodworks, a crackling fireplace in the far back – faint playing of classical music can also be heard in the background (fig. 6). The indoor lighting is soft and brings a sense of warmth and intimacy. As Galbraith points out, “maid cafés are typically small rooms transformed into fantasy spaces by decorations, music and costumes”. At Swallowtail, there is not a trace of resembling the youth during a school festival or perhaps a kindergarten classroom, as seen in many of the more popular maid cafés. Being led to one’s table (or booth, if a visitor is there on their own or in a company of three), bypassing butlers will bow and greet one welcome home. The total number of booths are twelve (single) and four (party). If sitting inside a booth, the butler will part the ruffled lace (single) or red velvet (party) curtains which provides privacy between each seat. Personal belongings such as handbags are placed on the sofa beside and are covered up by a napkin, fabric similar to the sofa cover, to make it less noticeable. If assigned to one of the tables, the butler will pull out the chair

Figure 6: House Steward Shiina at the entrance of butler café Swallowtail.
Photo by Times CLUB (2016). Copyright © Park24 Co., Ltd.

Figure 5: Main Hall of butler café Swallowtail.
Photo by ONTOMO (2018). Copyright © Ongaku no Tomo Sha Corp.

112 Although I mainly visited the café on my own, I did occasionally bring friends and acquaintances along. Like myself, the majority of them were foreigners in their 20s.
113 Galbraith (2012), p. 79.
and place any personal belongings in a woven basket below the table; these are also covered with a cloth, and as the visitor, one should refrain from reaching for it by oneself. The butler would then excuse themselves before unfolding and putting a napkin on one’s lap (needless to say, the napkins are dark blue, and each has the swallowtail’s silhouette embroidered onto it).

Once properly settled, the butler will ask for a member’s card—they shall then keep it until departure. While they are away to secure the card, this is usually when the House Steward comes by to offer the keyring to one’s personal locker and place it into a neat ceramic jar on the table next to some decorative flowers. As they wish for a pleasant stay at home, the butler returns to offer an oshibori (hot towel) on a silver platter per Japanese service etiquette, along with the menu. First-time visitors are introduced to the rules of the manor which are stated on the first page. Like maid cafés, photography is not allowed inside the manor, however, the popular service of having a polaroid photograph taken (known as cheki) at the end of the meal with one’s assigned servant is not allowed either. In addition to the rules are the bell, perhaps one of the main attributes to the café experience; the bell is the visitor’s initial gesture to communicate with the servants. Whereas calling for a waiter in Japan is an act commonly done by calling out or pressing a button placed atop the table, Swallowtail has implemented the usage of a golden bell. It shall be rung upon scenarios such as wanting a refill, proceeding to the next course of the meal, or even taking a walk to the restroom. A lot of the time, the visitor might not need to ring the bell since the butlers all keep track of their designated guests with meticulous care. Some might pass by and smile, greet one individually, or stop by for a brief chat—even butlers whom I had yet to meet referred to my membership’s granted personal title.

On the menu, they mainly offer their full-course meal Catherine (JP¥5,500), which usually consists of an hors d’oeuvre (appetiser), poisson (fish), viande (meat), and one out of two types of dessert (fig. 7). More commonly ordered, however, is their afternoon tea set Anna Maria (JP¥3,700), to which a pot of tea of one’s choosing is also included. The tea is brought to the table before the meal and the butler will inform the visitor about the name of the cup and collection, as well as tell facts about the tea itself. Because I had surpassed 500 points on my point card, I was allowed to request whichever cup from their regular selection. At times, I left the decision up to the

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115 Because of reinforced COVID-19 restrictions, the butler will not unroll the oshibori but lets the visitor pick it up by themselves from the platter.

116 Due to the Japanese government’s multiple re-issued State of Emergency for the Greater Kantō area, the dinner menu is suspended for the time being (September 2021).
butler since they then base their cup of choice on the visitor’s fashion or mood. Thereupon, the butler makes sure that only 60–70% of the cup gets filled up or it may be too heavy to pick up with one’s thumb and index finger. If they take notice of the visitor being right-handed, the teacup is then placed on the right side of the table, positioned at five o’clock while its spoon is placed at four o’clock.117 As stated in the manor’s rules, it is not allowed to pour one’s own tea – which the butler covers with a tea cosy in the meantime – nor grab one of the plates from the three-tier cake stand. For starters, the butler will ask which course to begin with and place it in front of the visitor.

Once either cup or plate has been finished and/or the visitor desires to proceed, it is expected to ring the bell to call upon the butler. One may not call out for the butlers by using voice – while it is not stated in the manor’s rules, it is considered common courtesy. One may catch eye contact with some of the butlers and have them voluntarily come over for a brief chat. Prior to each of my visits, I attempted to come across numerous pieces of information regarding the café (such as seasonal goods, additions to the teacup collection, entries in the butlers’ diary) in order to further immerse myself into the imagined play of living at the manor. It proved itself to have gained favourable responses, as I was replied to both as part of the role-play and personally. Listening in on the surrounding visitors from time to time, said topics appeared to be popular to initiate dialogue between visitor and butler. Unlike maid cafés where popular culture references are made openly and frequently, this is not the case at Swallowtail – it might even appear frowned upon. Second Steward Iori claims, he avoids such topic as it “would distort [his] image as a butler”.118 Instead, he is more likely to excuse his lack of knowledge and ask about the visitor’s opinion on the matter. Furthermore, the café does not engage in the same manner of communal activities compared to maid cafés, whereas the maids may sing, dance, or do live performances on stage during mealtime.119 As far as staged performances go, the visitor may order the T2 Sherbet (JP¥1,600) from the dessert menu; ice cream created with liquid nitrogen, which the butler prepares right next to one’s table to ensure the visitor can “enjoy it with all five senses”.120 In between breaks during teatime, one might read, write, draw or any other form of idle activity that does not include technical devices.

Another part of the play which some of my acquaintances deemed too restrictive for comfort was the lack of freedom to stand up and walk around on their own. This might have seemed unnecessary at first, however they soon changed their minds upon seeing the number of details decorating the manor. Since it is a space designated for mealtime, naturally the visitor is urged to remain seated the majority of the time. If one wishes to stretch their legs for a bit and perhaps look at the displayed teacup collection at the front, it is required to ring the bell for the butler to escort the visitor accordingly. This also includes the scenario of taking a trip to the restroom, to which the butler will then carry one’s bag or personal belongings. It might come as no surprise that even the restroom lives up to the expectation of a manor. Among decorative flowers framing the large mirror above the sinks, there are no paper towels in sight – only soft tissues, single-use hand towels with butterfly embroidery, and the additional feminine hygiene products hidden inside a drawer reminiscent of a

117 CDawgVA, “I Joined Japan’s #1 Butler Café”, YouTube video (2020).
118 Nakaya, ”Shitsuji kissa de hataraitte mitai! Shigoto naiyō ya taizen’sa koto, yarigai ya muite iru hito nado o kiite mimashita,” Townwork magazine (2021).
119 The only gesture which all visitors partake in simultaneously and collectively is whenever there is a birthday celebration. As the assigned butler formally congratulate said person, the other butlers repeat, followed by a big applause from the rest of the visitors.
120 Swallowtail, menu specification, T2 Sherbet (2021).
Rococo jewellery box. Passing by yet another full-length mirror once outside of the restroom, it is expected of the visitor to wait before being escorted back to their seat.  

At the time of departure, both butler and House Steward will come to escort the visitor. This also acts as part of the fantasy, as they might declare it is time for one’s daily piano lesson or to prepare for tonight’s dance party. While the House Steward claims the keyring from the table and makes light conversation, the butler does the job of pulling out one’s chair and gathering any personal belongings before following suit. Much like upon arrival, it is acknowledged by bypassing butlers as they bow and bid adieu. As soon as the House Steward has fetched any outerwear from the wardrobe, they then assist the visitor in getting dressed in front of the hallway’s full-scale mirror. The butler will hand over any belongings while the House Steward sticks to the script of wishing the best of luck with one’s upcoming piano lesson and that they shall all be awaiting one’s return home. They unlock the front door, hold it open and send one off with the heartfelt expression, “*ki o tsukete itterasshaimase!*” (have a nice day and take care). The phrase is repeated by the butler further down the hallway as well as the doorman, and they give one last simultaneous bow. As I ascended the staircase each time, it was as if time had ceased to exist yet flown by in the blink of an eye. Conclusively, Swallowtail did indeed live up to its promise of offering an enjoyable, relaxed, and truly refined experience.

Because an assigned butler usually maintains two other appointed visitors simultaneously, one might be escorted back by another butler. Regardless, they are incredibly attentive to each visitor’s appointed table, which only further contributes to the familiarity that all of the butlers are one’s personal servants.

When booking the appointment online, the application features the option to choose one of three “escort dialogues”: 1) *Odekake no ojikan degozaimasu* (it is time to go out), 2) *Goshuppatsu no ojikan degozaimasu*, (the time of departure has arrived), 3) *Jōba no ojikan degozaimasu* (the horse-carriage has arrived). The visitor may also leave the decision up to their butler which may result in various responses of violin classes, piano performances, dance parties, etc.

While there are rarely mirrors seen in maid cafés, “both literary and figuratively” as to not “expose the self [but] offer recognition without the self” (Galbraith 2012, p. 95), this is not the case at Swallowtail considering the several full-scale mirrors placed around the café.
3. Butler Café as Female Sanctuary

So far, I have provided some fan cultural contexts which hope to give an insight into both past and present contemporary female-oriented media, to gain further understanding of my observations of butler café Swallowtail. This chapter shall contextualise my impression of the café as a whole, then emphasise its focal points. The café clearly operates as a place where fantasy and reality intermingle by having characters previously constricted in the 2-dimensional space to exist in the ‘real’ world. Concisely, in line with previous studies of the maid cafés of Akihabara, the findings of researching and visiting Swallowtail has in turn demonstrated: i) it is a greatly female-oriented space, and ii) their concepts differ in various ways.

As per the first part of the first research question for this thesis: How did the concept of a butler café emerge as an object of female attraction – additionally, maintain its relevance among fans for over a decade? On contrary to the large number of yaoi works targeted toward female audiences, which elements have the potential to become fluid (one might say, queer in a sense), popular culture presenting heterosexual or overall heteronormative context do also exist. In order to attract the presumably heterosexual cis-gendered female fan (as a direct parallel to the male maid fan), recognizing the value of the bishōnen to then promote the character type becomes a self-explanatory course of action.

Previously, I have demonstrated the significance of media mix among Japanese popular culture, but there is also the use of marketing mix at present. As the café is essentially a product of mixed dimensions, it may come as no surprise – furthermore, it supports the possibility for the butler’s influence to broaden. Corporate diagnoses show that the establishment of Swallowtail in particular offers more than a single product (fig. 8). At the heart of it is, as to be expected, the butler; the physical embodiment of an otherwise fictive 2-dimensional character. Whether the butler in itself is satisfactory enough, the café emphasises the appeal by placing the character in an appropriate setting. What is offered then, is a fully immersive experience of existing within such a space. While the specific location of the café is a critical component of the phenomenon, Swallowtail has also managed to extend the experience beyond the boundary of a single location. By butler-related merchandise and point card benefits, fans have the opportunity to stay occupied and further immerse themselves in planning, collecting and working toward specific milestones and goals. With that being said, the

![Figure 8: The three levels of product. Modified by Yuji Takahashi (Tokyo: Dōyūkan, 2016). Original by Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong, Principles of Marketing (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1980).](image)

subsections of this chapter shall bring attention to those three crucial elements: the butler, the fan, and the space in which the café exists.

— 3.1 Object of Desire: The Butler

Due to the impact that *Kuroshitsuji* had in regards to neo-Victorian media seen in contemporary Japanese popular media, it is plausible to consider it a direct predecessor to the butler café. As the central character type of the story, it portrays the butler as either of two types: the sweet old man (*ojii-san*) and the stunning young gentleman (*bishōnen*). Tanaka, another servant of the Phantomhive manor, categorises as the former (fig. 9). This is due to his role as a minor character, he is not considered an object of scopophilic desire for the female gaze, but rather to invoke a similarly affectionate response seen in *moe*. Throughout my visits, it became particularly clear that Swallowtail also has come to accentuate the two variations of the butler. As seen in K-BOOKS’ recruitment applications online, it is required that the House Stewards are above the age of 50 to be considered employable for the position. Performing the role of offering a warm welcome back home, they rarely do the work of the assigned butler for the duration of one’s visit. As soon as they have soothed one into the atmosphere of the café, they return to the position by the front door and out of sight from the main hall. This is certainly in alignment with *Kuroshitsuji*’s depiction of the character since they are not intended the main attraction for scopophilic desire. However, considering the additional concept of *bichūnen*, meant to describe a ‘beautiful middle-aged male character’, they may hold a certain charm to it. Despite their lacking presence, their comforting role makes them remarkably easy to grow attached to after all.

As for the *bishōnen* on the other hand, created through the context of *shōjo*, it is not unexpected to find that the character possesses a certain amount of “to-be looked at-ness”. While this can lead to arguments of *nijikon*, or *nijigen konpurekkusu* (2-dimensional complex), which is the attraction to the 2-dimensional, “despite it offering things that are unrealistic – or precisely for that reason”, it is yet again a concept which has been largely focused on male fans’ (sexual) attraction to *bishōjo* characters. Said appeal can be discerned from the very first image of the *bishōnen* for this study, that being Sebastian, on the cover of the first tankōbon volume. Graceful and dignified with an alluring smile, he is seen wearing a tailcoat suit while steadfastly pouring tea from a height; his features are slender, presenting an overall refined appearance as the servant of an aristocrat (fig. 10). Similarly seen on the cover of the 2nd and 5th volume of the manga, the character is portrayed

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125 This disregards the *Kuroshitsuji* manga vol. 2 – 3 (Jack the Ripper Arc, ch. 6 – 14) where the character Grell Sutcliff is introduced as a butler. Since it is only a cover for her (female pronouns, biologically male) to reveal her true nature as a *shinigami* (Grim Reaper), she therefore fits into neither of the two categories.

126 This observation is further entertained by the fact that he is rarely depicted like he is on the cover of the 10th volume. Instead, he is most often seen in a super-deformed style; a *chibi*-fied persona (not to be confused with ‘chibikyara’; see Galbraith (2009b), p. 42).

127 To see this type of men depicted in real life, see Aspect, *Karesen – kareta ojisan senka* (2007).


handling chores as an ordinary butler rather than that of a
demon. This includes him preparing a bottle of champagne
with the Phantomhive crest, as well as serving assorted
biscuits and sweets from a three-tier cake stand – a serving
option much associated with afternoon tea for those of high
social status. Along with scones, there appears to be a
mixture of desserts such as a Mont Blanc, strawberry
shortcake, heart-shaped *mille-feuille*, and some macaron (fig.
11). Seen through *Kuroshitsuji* as transnational neo-
Victorian text, Jones describes it as a “an odd sensation of
overlapping (past and present, British, Japanese, and
American) readerships and entangled generic (late-Victorian
detective fiction and contemporary manga) conventions”,
considering that the sweets are from widely separated origin,
yet maintain the appearance of colourful sweets often seen in
Japanese cafés today.  
Without straying off-topic, this
might be worth noting for upcoming studies as a
representation related to Occidentalism, as per the concept
raised by literary and cultural critic Edward W. Said in his

This can be seen recreated by Swallowtail before one
even visits the café itself. Halfway down Otome Road is a
pedestrian crossing and in front of it is a large billboard
attached to the Animate annexe which advertises the café.  
Although not formally a part of the participatory observation
for this thesis, when I would frequent Ikebukuro each
weekend for the duration of a five-month period (September
2015–February 2016), it also advertised the café. The
billboard shows Second Steward Iori at the centre, gesturing
with an open hand to the open space of the café in a
welcoming manner. In similar advertisements, he can also be
seen beckoning the visitor, usually while holding a serving
tray with teacup and saucer (fig. 12). The butler is
undoubtedly at the centre of attention for the visit. With the
framework of the *bishōnen*, the butler as character is
expected to be charming, capable, and loyal. It can be argued
what defines as being ‘loyal’ in a public setting where their
main objective is to serve customers, yet the imaginative

Figure 10: Sebastian, cover illustration of

Figure 11: Sebastian, cover illustration of

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132 This may be different to some maid cafés; whereas maid cafés might advertise themselves by handing out
flyers on crowded streets which then affects the personal preference of the customer (furthermore, some cafés
might have the option to choose which maid to spend time with – not to be confused with hostess
clubs/kyabakura), this is not an option at Swallowtail, nor does their official website provide any pictures of the
butlers.
play allows to gloss it over with sweet words of affirmation. The lack of reality is enhanced by the existence of the butler, who is not to be regarded as a cosplayer or actor, but as a 3-dimensionalisation of a manga character type; thus, one might consider him to be 2.5-dimensional. As stated, the majority of the servants belong to the position of Footman – who, contrary to the House Steward, may be anywhere between the ages of 18 to 50. Doubtlessly, this is favourable for depicting characters as handsome young men, there for an audience’s viewing pleasure. Enhanced for the sake of the female gaze, the visual qualities of the Japanese butler are coincidentally further in accordance with alternative masculinity seen around Japan’s metropolitan areas of today. In Kuroshitsuji as well, the butler is displayed as paying particular attention to his appearance through fashion and make-up as “an ideal attribute that Japanese men should possess if they wish to be attractive to women”. It is possible that part of this masculinity was influenced by the Victorian gentleman since Meiji era literature on etiquette and manners appear to have been translated from British English, although it is still a debated matter.

During my visits, I had the opportunity to meet and interact with a total of 21 butlers of the ca. 40 employed at the time. This offered not only an insight into the world, which was all part of the fantasy, but also the many personalities working there. They all fit the characteristics of bishōnen and/or ojii-san (or perhaps bichūnen), yet there is still variation amongst them. Visually speaking, while appearing overall elegant and graceful, it is certain to be a type for everyone: short, tall, lean, sturdy, feminine/masculine, androgynous, wearing glasses or a monocle, with a moustache or shaven, clean-cut or backcombed hair, longer or even put up in a ponytail (no wigs, which is otherwise commonly used in concept cafés). Generally soft-spoken and generous, at times their individualities seep through and some appear giddy, stoic, suave, timid, mischievous, or sometimes even indirectly humour their visitor (as part of the role-play). They are not as animated as one might expect from a 3-dimensionalisation of a manga character type, unlike in other concept cafés where such tropes

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134 For further studies on contemporary male beauty standards and fashion, see Monden, “The continuum of male beauty in contemporary Japan,” The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture, ed. Coates et al. (2019), pp. 270–278.
become the main attribute (e.g., tsundere or yandere). As a direct parallel to the maid, their appearance and demeanour are conducted entirely different. Constricted to the reality of the 3-dimensional and unable to do some of the exaggerated acts seen in fictional media, some of them (mainly footmen) displayed scenarios of nerves and hesitation. In doing so, they showed that beneath the façade of the otherworldly bishōnen, at the end of the day they are also human.

— 3.2 Subject of Desire: The Lady

On the matter of terminology, perhaps otome is a befitting title for the ladies visiting the café if they so choose to identify as one. Considering the Butler Opera Troupe’s fan club Hanaoto, it is evident that some already do – ultimately, the butlers seem to do the same. Overall, the fans seen visiting this space are indeed women in their 20s and 30s. As I am within the same demographic, it provided me with a sense of comfort and belonging – almost as if justifying the reason for being in such an intimate space. However, what I did not account for though until later through online communication was the increasing number of younger visitors as well, particularly high school students. Then again, perhaps it should not have come as a surprise since looking back at the development of shōjo media, it is targeted at young girls after all. The appearances of these women would be considered fairly modest overall which certainly fits the theme of the location; blouses, skirts and long dresses. In order to acclimatise and fit into the setting, I too purposely developed a similar sense of dressing for each of my visits. On the rare occasion there were (young) men visiting the café, they appeared to be accompanied by either a single or an equal number of female visitors as a party, and it did not go unnoticed by the rest of the room. Simply from hearing the title “obocchama” rather than the usual “ojō-sama”, heads would discreetly turn and eyes would wander. This type of reaction only furthered the impression of the café as an incredibly gendered space, to the point of it resembling a sanctuary for the ladies.

As noted by Baffelli and Yamaki in their study of the maid café, it is all too easy to become ostracised if unaware of the ‘rules’ of the location – not limited to the rules which are explicitly stated by the café, but the unspoken rules as well. I experienced this at the beginning of my visits, and I certainly relate to their description along the lines of “[…] because we didn’t understand the implicit rules of interaction that were in place, our behaviour was largely inappropriate and we felt not only isolated, but also in important ways illiterate”. I was often met with the response by acquaintances as “not being particularly fond of visiting maid cafés in the past” which, by this part of the thesis, has been established that the maid and butler differ in various ways despite their shared terminology of ‘café’. Since there is the reasonable need for a certain familiarity of female-oriented media, the café might appear overwhelming to the unaware – however, attempting to explain their differences to the uninitiated proved itself to be somewhat difficult, partly due to poor impressions or simply a lack of interest. Time and again, there will be reports by first-time visitors and tourists alike stating the clear distinction made visible between those who are considered ‘tourists’ and ‘regulars’. One of the tell-tale signs tends to be according to their observation, “[t]ourists’ usually come in groups, sat at a big table, and spent most of their time talking amongst themselves [whilst] [r]egular customers, by contrast, were usually by themselves”. It can also be recognised from how the visitor interacts with

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137 See Galbraith (2017).
138 At a rough estimate, I only ever saw a handful of male visitors (not including the occasional ones in my own company) throughout my time of visiting the café.
140 It was commonly believed to contain elements of fetishization influenced by BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) communities; whether this was shaped by previous experiences of concept cafés, host/hostess clubs, or just the idea of dressing up for another person’s viewing pleasure, is to be undecided.
141 Study Abroad Tokyo, blog post (2016).
the butler (or maid), or whether one knows the ‘ins and outs’ of the menu. Galbraith raises an example of a regular maid visitor, who would consistently only order tea for himself, which would then provide him with repeated interactions with the maid as she kept coming by to fill up his drink.143 Although Swallowtail does not approve of alterations to one’s initial order (the lack of it considered a common custom in Japanese restaurants), therefore undermining such actions to even occur in the first place, there are instances which allow the visitors to have reoccurring interaction with the butler(s). As mentioned, each month contains special and/or limited types of ice cream and cake. On the café’s official website, it explicitly states which butler created the recipe of the month – they then make a habit of personally serving it to the visitor or stopping by for a brief chat while inquiring about its taste. This, as well as the visitor ordering the T2 Sherbet which is then prepared at the table by one’s assigned butler, is another common move by the café regulars since it allows for an additional moment of the butler’s services.

Because that is perhaps the most fundamental part of it: interaction. Both butler and lady are held by the rules of maintaining a respectable distance between each other, both in conversational topics and physically. What are the “rules” then, in addition to the ones already discussed? What does, or perhaps rather, does not the visitor do? As they respond by acknowledging the significance of the bell, their agency inside the walls of the café is immediately put into question. Seen through patriarchal social structures, it certainly raises the notion of whether the lady maintains a sense of agency (active; masculine) or if the café in itself allows them to remain passive (feminine) by choice. Practises by female shōjo fans (fujoshi included) are often discussed to be considered “both essentially feminine and also at odds with normative gender roles”; the lady can therefore be seen as both the one leading and the one being led since the butler is clearly at the centre of attention whose focus toward the lady offers a fabricated sense of the visitor being in control”.144

Outside of the café, the ladies’ part appeared an active role in their pursuit for self-gratification. Furthermore, they would commonly document their visits in the format of a so-called kitaku repo (abbr. kitaku repōto; ‘returning home report’). It describes either briefly (fig. 13) or in great detail (fig. 14) the certain parts of the visit; who did what, where and how. With time, I got to experience the joy alongside the other ladies as I progressively began to immerse myself into the setting according to the ritualised pattern. It is evidently an important aspect to visiting the café, and made me able to pick up on subtle gestures and efforts by the butlers that otherwise could have been missed since at no point in life did I expect to have someone tell me without an ounce of doubt in their voice, “if the young lady is troubled by sadness, I would be suffering indescribable grievance”, followed by “please be strong, my lady, for all our

143 Galbraith (2012).

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Figure 13: Example of a brief kitaku repo online (the post has been altered for the recreational purpose of this study). Posted to my personal account on Twitter.
sake and mine." If part of their ultimate motive was to render the visitors speechless by bringing fictional scenarios to life, they certainly did succeed. These are things that keep the fans anticipative as they keep raising the ideals for the visits, which in turn leads to the repeated habit of endless consumption.\(^{146}\)

— 3.3 Place & Space

Then, the ritualisation that takes place in the space is a crucial part of each visit.\(^{147}\)

Galbraith points out this resemblance, as well as the importance of “predictable interactions and familiarity” within maid cafés, which allows the visitor to gain further enjoyment of knowing the unspoken rules and etiquette of the specific space.\(^{148}\) The dialogue between butler and visitor is often kept rather short because of the established distance, they do not join at the table by sitting down. Thus, “the interaction is simplified and structured by the rules of consumption”.\(^{149}\)

Although said interactions take place in ‘real life’, the dialogues may appear ‘out of this world’ since conversation tends to flow in a cliché and routinised pattern, and can be traced back to the narrative style used in games, particularly visual novels.\(^{150}\) Rather than being considered tedious and repetitive, this behaviour contributes to the sense of “level building”, as previously mentioned. Such set phrases and responses can be used as an indicator of domestic life, showing the rhythm of living together. Galbraith sums it up as, “the exchange of these greetings is part of a relationship, an obligation to receive and reciprocate, which can make them affectively charged”.\(^{151}\)

In the game, even if the visitor (alt. player) is presented with the opportunity to choose an emotionally loaded response, there is a lack of individualism due to the inability of coming up with one’s personal response. This line between fictional and reality, however, gets reduced to obscurity when placed in a real-life situation as it rather becomes gratifying for the player, as they are playing a role in the café itself. Lastly, it leads to this study’s concluding evaluations of an intriguing concept; a 3-dimensionalised rendition of a 2-dimensional character, somehow managing to exist in the vague space of the 2.5-dimensional realm.

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\(^{145}\) Private conversation while visiting Swallowtail (12 August 2020).


\(^{147}\) In addition to that, as an autistic person, being able to somewhat know beforehand what is about to occur gives a considerable amount of relief – I was met by similar favourable responses from acquaintances who are also on the spectrum. Nevertheless, I do see why the pattern of repetitive interaction can become dull for others, if not monotonous.


\(^{149}\) Galbraith (2012), p. 84.


Conclusion

This thesis has sought to fulfil its role as an ethnographic stepping-stone to the recent rise of popular and fan cultural practises among academic discourses. Rather than adhering to the inclination for male-oriented popular media, this study has asserted the gendered perspective of focusing on female-oriented media with particular attention to space actualised in real-life. Swallowtail is one out of the few successful butler cafés located around Tokyo, which is still considered a lacking amount compared to its male-oriented equivalent, the maid café. By comprehensively introducing related contexts in combination with regular participation and assimilation to the space itself, I have demonstrated that there is far more than meets the eye to this type of establishments which the West tends to categorise as part of ‘Weird Japan.’ Due to the limitations of the study, I was unable to gain an even deeper understanding of the fans on an individual level, but it remains another aspect worth for future research (particularly surrounding the minority of fans who see themselves as outside of the cis- and heteronormative identity which Swallowtail aims at).

In the most condensed manner, this thesis answers the research questions like the following:

How did the concept of a butler café emerge as an object of female attraction, and why?

As per the demand of female media consumers, there was a wish for an equivalent to the popularised male-oriented maid cafés, to which the resulting product, in turn, was influenced by various elements from previous shōjo, otome, yaoi, and neo-Victorian transcultural media.

How does the singular case of Swallowtail connect to the wider perspective of female-gendered media and female fan culture?

A singular case yet not limited to a single medium or space, the potential of the café keeps expanding. It has managed to maintain relevance for more than a decade and has caught the attention of Japanese as well as international visitors of all ages. Therefore, it is safe to say its existence is to be considered a valuable component and more than likely amenable for shaping current developing popular and fan works, whether that be specific character types, dōjinshi, or the overall perception of British culture from a Japanese contemporary perspective. Additionally, while it may appear void of explicit political stances, it still demonstrates an intercultural concept intersecting with gender relations which has yet to be studied at large by English-language research.

What does it mean for fan cultural consumption to move from the 2-dimensional media sphere into physical space? In which way is this space 3-dimensional?

So far, studies tend to favour fan spaces as created around dōjinshi event (often yaoi works) or the Takarazuka theatre, but that still focuses a lot on the stage, fiction and characters itself (largely 2-dimensional concepts) – not the imaginary world that is created in interaction between actor and spectator, or in this case, butler and visitor. Instead of marketing the café as a Western-styled tea salon, Swallowtail has adapted and reconstructed previous 2-dimensional neo-Victorian themes; as an object of fan cultural consumption habits that manages to exist in the liminal realm in-between the two worlds, simultaneously a product of both that is neither entirely British nor Japanese. The organisers and employees of the café have ensured to offer a fully immersive experience, which ultimately the
fans have claimed the location and created their own utopian space that exists in real-life as 3-dimensional.

Do concept cafés in general and the butler café in particular shift the attraction from character (2-D) to place (3-D), or rather perform a merger (2.5-D)?

While the findings of my study do align with certain traits found in the world of the 2-dimensional, the inevitability of reality, thus 3-dimensional, may subside yet simultaneously increase the effect of certain aspects. If disregarding the current associations of the 2.5-dimensional (i.e., musicals and theatre), it would be plausible to consider both the butler café as a place and the butlers working there to be creations of 2.5-dimensional nature. Considering the three elements stated above from the perspective of both 2D and 3D, while they do exist in the realm of 3-dimensional, it cannot be denied its original presence and influence of the 2-dimensional. Moreover, as a fictionalised space come to life, it also raises the question of fans’ potential for escapism.
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— Figures


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Figure 5: Times CLUB. “Neko ni usagi ni shitsuji ni meido?! Ikebukuro omoshiro kafe tokushū dai 2-dan.” *Odekake jōhō o taiken repōto de o todoke itte miyou! Tanoshii machi*. Published 25 February 2016. Copyright by Park24 Co., Ltd. [https://www.timesclub.jp/sp/tanomachi_ex/tokyo/ikebukuro/006.html](https://www.timesclub.jp/sp/tanomachi_ex/tokyo/ikebukuro/006.html) (accessed 19 March 2021)

Figure 6: ONTOMO. “Shitsuji kissa kara koten geinō made! Karuchā ga kōsa suru machi Ikebukuro shiti gaido.” *Ra foru jurune no aratana butai, Ikebukuro o tokoton tanoshimu*. Published 6 April 2018. Copyright by Ongaku no Tomo Sha Corp. [https://ontomo-mag.com/article/column/ikebukuro/](https://ontomo-mag.com/article/column/ikebukuro/) (accessed 19 March 2021)


Figure 9: Yana Toboso. Cover illustration of Kuroshitsuji vol. 10, tankōbon edition. Published 27 September 2010. Copyright by Yana Toboso (Tokyo: Square Enix, 2010).


Figure 12: Butler café Swallowtail. Promotional image. Copyright by K-BOOKS Inc.

Figure 13: Example of an online kitaku repōto (‘returning home report’). Posted to my personal account on Twitter (https://twitter.com/rosetea912); the post has since been deleted.