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Japanskt mál og menning

The Flawless Body

Searching for Women's Self-Image in Japan

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í japönsku máli og menningu

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Abstract

Japan has become one of the world's foremost modernized nations after centuries of isolation and, due to increased globalization, is now impacted by Western culture to a significant degree. In particular, attitudes regarding female attractiveness and beauty seem to draw a noticeable inspiration from Western established standards. However, the distinction between traditional Japanese values and modern, universal views can be obscure. This poses some difficulties to young Japanese women who may find themselves caught between these two sides and pressured to conform to them both. This conflict is likely to have an effect on the manner in which they perceive themselves and their body. The standards of female beauty are significantly influenced by advertisements and the media as well. This paper will examine the self-image of young women in contemporary Japanese society. Additionally, factors which play a key role in shaping the young woman's self-image, and act as determiners of what is to be considered acceptable and attractive, will also be analyzed. Views concerning body weight and shape, skin color and other physical features will be discussed, as well as concerns over fitting in or standing out from the crowd.

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Introduction

For most individuals, discovering one's self and forming a self-image is a strenuous and challenging process that may never be truly completed. Young people often find themselves in need of guidance and social affirmation during their formative years. This is particularly true of young women. While one's self-image is ultimately based on one's own self-evaluation, there are nevertheless countless outside factors which can make an impact upon it. As these numerous outside factors can influence a woman's perception of herself, it may result in the development of an ideal self; a physical form that she must strive to attain. In many cases, this ideal self is so far removed from the actual self that it becomes virtually impossible to achieve without risking one's health or resorting to invasive methods. Should they fail to do so, it will arguably lessen their self-esteem. Even if this ideal appearance were to be achieved, there is no actual guarantee of personal satisfaction. The constant pursuit of predetermined standards of beauty is a struggle for countless women. This thesis will focus on Japan in particular. How do young Japanese women perceive themselves? What is their self-image and what are some of the most common factors that influence it?

1. Body size and satisfaction

In general, Japanese women are often associated with having a slim body figure. It is uncertain whether this is due to genetics, specific diets, a strict public health regimen, or a combination of all three factors. Although obesity is not as common among Japanese women as it is among women in other industrialized countries, they are no less governed by the fear of being fat and the social stigma that follows. In recent years, thin female body figures have become increasingly prominent in media and advertisements, representing the most desirable physical form for women to have. This is reflected in men's preferences, although it is debatable whether they are influenced by the media or some other factors. Swami, Caprario, Tovée, & Furnham (2006), report that when the preferences of British and

Japanese men were compared it was revealed that, while women with a low Body Mass Index (BMI) were considered the most attractive by both groups, the body size preferred by the Japanese participants was significantly smaller than the one selected by the British participants (p. 75).

Women are under considerable pressure to meet these certain standards in order to be accepted by society. This may result in many young women risking their health when resorting to extreme measures to lose or maintain their weight. Evidence suggests that unhealthy weight loss and its associated physical and psychological problems are becoming more prevalent among young Japanese women. An increase in thinness (a BMI < 18.5 kg/m^2) among Japanese women between 15-29 years old, in the 1970s to the 1990s, has been documented (Takimoto, Yoshiike, Kaneda, & Yoshita, 2004). At the same time, there has also been a significant increase in extreme thinness (BMI < 17 kg/m^2) from the 1980s to the 1990s.

Health problems related to being underweight have not been researched as thoroughly as those related to obesity, but extreme thinness in women has been linked to complications regarding bodily functions, such as menstruation and pregnancy. Although estimates vary, the percentage of women with clinically diagnosed eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia is nevertheless considerably low in Japan compared to other industrialized countries, despite the decrease in Body Mass Index (Takimoto et al., 2004). On the other hand, according to Chisuwa and O'Dea (2010), the prevalence of subclinical eating disorders such as excessive exercise, skipping meals and intentionally vomiting is "significant and increasing".

In a study of the eating habits of adult women, Nakamura et al. (1999) found that about 40 percent of the subjects had a history of dieting or fasting behavior, compared to over 50 percent of high school girls who participated in a previous study of similar behavior in adolescent women. According to the previously mentioned studies, the average young Japanese woman has a low Body Mass Index when compared to, for example, the average white American or British woman. At the same time, the rate of

eating disorders and abnormal eating behaviors, such as binge eating and self-induced vomiting, is also very low in Japan when compared to countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom.

It bears noting, however, that most of the data on women's dieting habits is gathered from self-reported behavior. As Hansen (2016) calls attention to, women suffering from eating disorders are very likely to attempt to conceal their condition and may avoid seeking out medical attention altogether. Because of this, many cases may go unreported in Japan (p. 118). She also points out that the strict criteria which must be met in order to be diagnosed with an eating disorder such as anorexia and bulimia in Japan, and that an individual diagnosed in the United States might not necessarily fulfill the criteria for a diagnosis in Japan (Hansen, 2016, p. 118). Therefore, it may very well be that the problem of eating disorders is more widespread among young Japanese women than statistics would suggest. It would be logical to assume that as the ideal and perfect female body is consistently presented as lean, the prevalence of thinness among young women could lead to increased individual happiness. However, as evidence shows, this is does not seem to be the case.

A significantly large group of young Japanese women, whose Body Mass Index falls well within what would be considered healthy parameters, claim to see themselves as being overweight. This could simply be an expression of modesty; not wanting to seem too content with oneself and acknowledging that there is room for improvement. The other possibility would be that they genuinely believe that they are too fat, which is a problematic notion. Evidence suggests that underweight women are no less at risk of being dissatisfied with their body weight than their peers who were of normal weight, and may wish to lose even more weight still.

Mori, Asakura, & Sasaki (2016) published a study examining the dietary habits of young, underweight Japanese women. The results showed that 40.5% of the underweight subjects "had a desire to be thin and more than a half of them had an erroneous self-perceived weight status image" (p. 99). These results are confirmed by Hayashi, Takimoto, Yoshita, & Yoshiike (2006), who report that a

desire for thinness was found to be more common among women who overestimated the size of their own body than among women who did not (p. 1160).

On a similar note, a study comparing Taiwanese and Japanese female college students found that only nine percent of the Japanese women claimed to be satisfied with their body, while the Taiwanese numbered 41 percent (Shih & Kubo, 2005). Furthermore, when asked to rate their body parts, almost 50 percent of the Japanese subjects rated their face as unsatisfactory, 70 percent were dissatisfied with their legs and stomach, and around 40 percent considered their arms and chest unsatisfactory. The reasons listed for their dissatisfaction with these body parts were primarily that they were too fat, fleshy, or short – when asked how they felt about their legs. The chest was the only area which mainly tended to be considered too small.

According to Shih & Kubo, the Japanese group of subjects had "larger discrepancies between body figures, perceived their body shape in the direction of fat, and were dissatisfied with their body and body parts" (2005). Kowner's study (2004) of Japanese men and women reaches the same conclusion concerning discrepancies between the self-perceived body and the ideal body. Kowner claims that the Japanese "are inclined to identify their shortcomings and make efforts at improving themselves", and speculates that, to some extent, this inclination may very well account for the low body satisfaction found in this study (2004).

Be that as it may, while self-improvement is considered positive as an idea, it becomes problematic if it is done at the expense of one's health. The women who do not fit the standard of attractiveness may not necessarily make attempts to change their situation, but are consequently very likely to suffer from a low self-esteem, which in turn will have a negative effect on their quality of life. Furthermore, it can be argued that one's shortcomings are often simply defined as such by advertisements and the media, and sometimes only exaggerated or imagined completely by oneself. It

becomes worrying that what may be perfectly natural and healthy physical characteristics are so frequently declared undesirable and therefore encouraged to be corrected.

1.1 Aesthetic surgery and the 'double eyelid'

For those who wish, cosmetic surgery offers the option to subtly, or drastically, alter one's appearance. Each individual may have their own personal reasons for making this choice. Yet it is a fairly common occurrence that women who desire body modification through surgery may suffer from deep-seated issues concerning the way they perceive their own body. Ishigooka et al. (1998) studied the demographics of 415 Japanese individuals seeking cosmetic surgery and found that about 40 percent of the female subjects of the study could be classified as having a psychological disorder. One of such being body dysmorphic disorder, or dysmorphophobia, when a person is extremely preoccupied with their looks and is often convinced that they are deformed in some way.

Regardless of psychological disorders, a significant number of Japanese women are dissatisfied with their facial features in some way, and may very well seek to have them changed. It is worth mentioning that there are certain traits which seem to be desired by the vast majority of women experiencing disapproval of their appearance. In his study, Kowner notes that the features that both the participant groups of men and women desired to attain bore an undeniable resemblance to that of Caucasians. For example, the women who participated in the study "showed a preference for lighter hair color; lighter and bigger eyes; bigger eyelid size and thinner eyebrows; more narrow, prominent, and longer nose; thinner lips; and lighter skin color" (Kowner, 2004). Moreover, taller height and lower weight were also among the most desired traits.

The notable preference for Western features might be viewed by some as an aspiration to 'become' Caucasian. It is more plausible, however, that it is solely these certain Western features that are desired, while retaining the Japanese identity. An example of Japanese women pursuing Western ideas of beauty, can arguably be found in their preferences in terms of bust size. For centuries, a

modest, flat chest was an ideal physical feature for women to possess. Today, larger busts are considered more desirable, due to their prevalence in Western media, and breast enlargement procedures enjoy a considerable success in Japan.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in demand for blepharoplasty, also known as the 'double eyelid' surgery. This procedure creates the upper eyelid crease that is common to see in Western populations, but less so in Asia. This look can be achieved either through incision or with hidden sutures. Almost exclusive to Asia, the 'double eyelid' surgery has become one of the most popular choice among plastic surgery operations in East Asian countries such as China and South Korea, as well as Japan.

As the world became aware of the Asian blepharoplasty operation, questions arose concerning the motivations behind undergoing such a procedure. It has been frequently been speculated that this is an example of Asian women attempting to Westernize themselves and to alter their ethnicity. For example, Black (2009) claims that the double eyelid surgery is "generally understood to reflect an inappropriate idolization of Caucasian appearance". This view seems to be more prevalent in the West than in Japan itself. In the introduction to the second edition of his book on Asian blepharoplasty, Chen (2016) states that he is aware of this criticism and offers a plausible explanation. He remarks that his European-Asian and Asian-American patients "tend to have a relatively ethnocentric view of themselves as a group and strive to retain some of their cultures and roots." On the other hand, his native Asian patients "often will have a much more modern and Westernized view of themselves when it comes to their sense of fashion and beauty" (p. xiii). Therefore, it is rather difficult to either confirm or deny whether Japanese women who choose to undergo 'double eyelid' surgery are doing so because they are encouraged by Western influences.

While it is true that Asian blepharoplasty has increased in popularity at the same time as Western influence has grown in Japan, the procedure has existed before such influence gained a

foothold. In a description of the work of the Japanese physician Mikamo (who pioneered the blepharoplasty procedure in 1896), it is reported that he "estimated the incidence of the single eyelid in Japanese women to be approximately 17 to 18% and thus concluded that the double eyelid was the physiologically normal appearance" (Nguyen, Hsu, & Dinh, 2009). The emphasis was on recreating the double eyelid which occurred naturally in some Japanese women. Therefore, although the reason behind the current popularity of the procedure may be debatable, it bears noting that the initial operation "was not intended to Westernize the eyelid but to create an overall more expressive look" (Nguyen et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, declaring the double eyelid as the 'natural' standard is bound to be problematic for women who are born with the single eyelid. It may cause them to feel inferior; that they have a flaw which must be corrected. This procedure is often favored by young women seeking to increase their chances in life, such as when it comes to securing a career for themselves. The Asian monolid (also known as a single eyelid), that is, an eyelid without the fold that is commonly seen in Western populations, is believed by some to seem dull and lethargic. The surgically created double eyelid is said to make the individual seem alert, friendly, and more attractive.

For those wishing for an upper eyelid crease, but unwilling to undergo surgery, a solution can be found in specialized cosmetic products such as eyelid tape and eyelid glue, which temporarily recreate the upper eyelid fold (Miller, 2004b, p. 85). Other popular choices in non-surgical body modifications include colored contact lenses (which often are made to also make the iris seem larger), hair dye and curling irons.

Miller (2006) claims that through the influence of media and advertising, many young Japanese women (as well as men) are convinced that they are physically flawed by default and must constantly strive to correct this through, for example, hair removal and the concealment of body odors. The subliminal message sent to young women, assuring them that they are imperfect without certain

products or services, guarantees continuous profit for those providing them. Views have been expressed that women "are being duped by cosmetic surgery and aesthetic salon advertising that appeals to a woman's inferiority complex about her looks" (as cited in Gilman, 2009, p. 104). According to Miller (2006) "their desire to conform to images presented as typical sends them to drugstores, aesthetic salons, and aesthetic surgery clinics to remedy their "personal" problems" (2006, p. 102). Moreover, it has been become clear that bigger and double eye-lidded eyes are not the only physical features associated with Westerners that seem to be currently in high demand in Japan.

2. Skin deep beauty

Many Japanese women of today show a strong preference for having their skin as white as possible. Some make frequent use of sunscreen and cover themselves thoroughly before going outside in order to avoid getting a sun tan, others may attempt to avoid exposure to sunlight altogether. Maintaining the ideal color and texture of the skin is considered a priority in terms of beauty aesthetics, as skin care products dominate the Japanese cosmetics market.

Advances made in cosmetic technology have now led to the creation of skin-lightening products, which have enjoyed a massive success due to the overwhelming desirability of white skin. Young Japanese women now have a wide variety of skin-lightening products to choose from, both produced by Japanese and international brands. Glenn (2008) notes that "a perusal of displays of Japanese cosmetics and skin care products shows that most, even those not explicitly stated to be whitening products, carry names that contain the word "white"" (p. 292).

The concept of the whitening of the skin has gained much popularity in several parts of the world, not only in Japan, but also in countries such as South Africa and India. The demand for skin-lightening products in formerly colonialized countries, where white supremacy was established, has problematic implications. However, in the case of Japan, it is difficult to say whether the popularity of

these products is caused by an adoption of Western ideas of light-skinned beauty or not.

Japan has favored unblemished and pure white skin as a standard of beauty long before any Western presence. For centuries, women would paint their faces white in order to make themselves presentable, as well as pluck their eyebrows and paint their teeth black. Darker skin was considered unsightly and undesirable. It could also serve as an indicator that the person made a living through manual labor outdoors, such as farming, and was therefore of a low status. This bears notable resemblance to European societies centuries ago, where white skin was considered a sign of wealth and noble status. Many Japanese women today still put on a so-called "white face", that is, make-up of a lighter color than that of their skin, before going out in public.

However, according to Ashikari (2005), the preference for white skin is more of an expression of the notion that 'white' represents 'us' and 'black' represents 'them', rather than an attempt to appear Caucasian. The white skin is therefore seen as a unifying trait for the Japanese people, to the point of being called "Japanese skin". Ashikari further describes interviews with Japanese women, many of whom claim their Japanese skin as "superior" to the Western white skin, for example, that it is smoother and deteriorates less with age (2005, p. 82).

She also notes that, despite the notion of white "Japanese skin" acting as a symbol of Japanese identity, none of her informants claimed that as the reason for their favoring white make-up or avoiding tanning in the sun. Instead, they explained that the reason for this preference is that they simply desire to look "pretty" and "proper" (Ashikari, 2005, p. 85). This indicates that white skin has been firmly established as 'beautiful', and therefore 'good'. A study of skin-lightening products in East Asia found the notions of "good skin" and "bad skin" emphasized in skin care advertisements (Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008, p. 446). "Good skin" meant being clear of spots and blemishes, bright, smooth, and (most importantly) white. "Bad skin" was presented as having lines, wrinkles, and pores, as well as being loose, dull, and of a darker hue.

Due to the frequent appearance of skin care advertisements featuring white models, along with the message of being 'natural', white skin has arguably become synonymous with 'naturalness'. Women who have white skin are, according to Li et al., "perceived as "normal" and others who fail to achieve a fair complexion are suggested as failing to manage and control their bodies" (2008, p. 448). This observation is consistent with the significant amount of white models used in advertising these skin lightening products, particularly after international cosmetic brands made an entrance into the Japanese market.

Therefore, one could argue that while a preference for white skin had been established long before Western culture had gained a foothold in Japan, its strong current presence has undoubtedly supported the idealization of white skin. Nonetheless, the considerable idolization of sun tanned skin in Western countries that has endured for the past decades has not reached the same status in Japan. This suggests that although styles and fashions of Western origins are quite influential in Japan, they are not necessarily followed instinctively.

Furthermore, Hunter (2011) argues that age-old practices such as skin-whitening are now less of a method of "decorating or ornamenting" the body, and more of a way of "reshaping the body to present a new body as "natural"" (p. 146). However, the message of white skin being 'natural' can prove problematic as there are numerous minorities who, even if they would like to, are unable to meet this standard.

2.1 The Western 'Other' and the Japanese 'Self' in advertising

As the Second World War came to an end and the American occupation began, the Japanese market was opened to an abundance of various, new-fangled imports from abroad. While things such as Western fashions had enjoyed considerable success in Japan in the 19th century, it was not until the American military occupation in the 20th century that popular Western culture was able to take root in Japan to a significant degree. As the industrialized world became more globalized, various Western ideas

became visible in Japanese advertising.

An example of noticeable globalization in the Japanese market, big franchises began using the Roman alphabet and foreign (mainly English) vocabulary mixed up with Japanese in advertising campaigns during the 1990s. Simultaneously, the number of advertising campaigns using white models to sell various products has also climbed steadily. White women nevertheless remain a very small minority among Japanese citizens. Therefore, because of the lack of a white female target group, it would be logical to assume that these particular advertisements are not meant to reflect any specific part of the Japanese population. Instead, as argued by Creighton (1995), they serve the purpose of constructing and representing "otherness" (p. 136). Creighton further explains that self-identity depends not only on what you are, but also on what you are not (p. 136).

Does this mean that there is no risk of young Japanese women interpreting advertising images featuring white women as something they themselves must attempt to assimilate? Darling-Wolf (2004) conducted interviews of Japanese women in order to discover what characteristics of female attractiveness they considered important to have which, and ultimately found a strong preference for Western features. However, Darling-Wolf notes that at the same time, only a few of the women interviewed "mentioned Western celebrities as the women they found most physically attractive. Instead, they preferred Japanese media figures exhibiting Westernized features" (Darling-Wolf, 2004, p. 339).

Despite being so prevalent in media and commercials, white women are not necessarily idolized by Japanese society. Instead, it favors Japanese women who possess Western physical characteristics. In a study of magazines aimed at Japanese women, Clammer (1995) suggests that there are two main concepts which are being promoted by foreign models, the majority of whom being white. The kind of imagery used in advertising featuring white models is most frequently either "that which is hidden (underwear); or that which is distinctly exotic (such as French perfumes) and, as such, that which is by

definition not Japanese, but enjoyable by the Japanese woman as an indicator of her

internationalization and sophistication" (p. 213).

In terms the representation of Japanese women in media, Clammer argues that the female

figures presented in Japanese women's magazines suppress women's self-hood more than the women

presented in men's magazines. Models appearing in men's magazines often assert their personality

through eye contact, and sometimes have their personal information listed alongside them (1995, p.

208). Models featured in women's magazines are more likely to, according to Clammer (1995), be shown

without self-hood and to have their personality "replaced instead by what are really categories – the

perfect housewife, the young mother, the elegant professional woman" (p. 208).

These gender stereotypes are able to find fertile ground in undeveloped minds. In a study of

Japanese teenagers, Luther (2009) found that a considerably high number of adolescent girls compare

themselves to female figures in advertisements. Furthermore, according to Luther, "significant

associations were found between ad-inspired social comparison behavior and the acceptance of

cosmetic surgery and dieting drugs" (2009). It is clear that images of Western women as well as

Japanese women presented in advertisements can both be very influential in young women's lives.

2.2 *Haafu*: Mixed race in Japan

Japan is a widely regarded as a notably homogenous nation. With centuries of isolation and the strict

immigration policy of today, non-Japanese make up only a small percentage of the population. The

number of children of mixed origins born in Japan is small, but growing. This is in particular due to the

presence of U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan after the end of World War II, as many children

were born between Japanese women and American soldiers in the 1960s.

Contemporary Japanese society refers to those of mixed race as *haafu* (also written as *hafu*); a

somewhat derogatory term derived from the English word 'half'. It implies that the person is only "half"

Japanese as a result of being of mixed parentage, even if that person had been born and raised in Japan

and spoke the language perfectly. It is both applied to those of half-Japanese parentage, as well as those

of fully separate races. Although the term *haafu* has generally had negative implications, it has come to

be embraced by some biracial Japanese who identify with it, as well as being used in scholarly articles.

Therefore it will be applied in this paper as well, with the recognition of its possible implications.

A different skin color may clearly mark a person as a *haafu*, although it is not necessarily the sole

reason for them being marginalized. Simply being considered not "pure" Japanese may result in being

isolated from the rest of society. It could be argued that those who are *haafu* may be socially ranked

lower than *gaijin* (a term which means 'foreigner' or 'outsider'), as they do not fully belong to either

category. This puts biracial Japanese at risk of falling through the cracks. It is a relatively common

occurrence for young Japanese women with a mixed heritage to be overlooked by society and become

virtually unnoticeable as a result. This can arguably lead to a low self-esteem and other psychological

disorders.

In childhood, and during one's formative years, it is important for one to have role models to

whom one can relate; to see some positive representation of oneself. So far, there have only been a few

areas in which *haafu* women have been somewhat visible. The entertainment business is most notable

among them. Several singers and performers, such as the group Golden Half (which was exclusively

made up of *haafu* members), have managed to achieve success in Japan for the past decades.

Interestingly, many *haafu* women have become successful as models, as marketing companies

have recently become especially inclined to use them to promote various goods and services. *Haafu*

models with Western features in particular are an exceptionally popular choice for these

advertisements. However, according to Want (2016), a certain stereotype for *haafu* has now emerged,

and it is perpetuated by the manner in which *haafu* are represented in advertisements. This stereotype

tends to portray them as "exotic, cosmopolitan, friendly, wealthy, good-looking and part-Japanese."

(Want, 2016, p. 91). Needless to say, not everyone will be able to fit this description and thus may be

dismissed as "not *haafu* enough". It implies that *haafu* women only exist as exotified and commercialized bodies to be consumed, not as members of society. For *haafu* girls to have such a narrow stereotype as their sole representation in popular culture, supported by the general public's disregard, means that their sense of not belonging in Japanese society is undoubtedly likely to increase.

It is important to note that the extensive featuring of *haafu* in advertisements does not equal acceptance in society itself. There has been a recent turnaround in these matters, however, as the Miss Universe Japan 2015 contest was won by American-Japanese Ariana Miyamoto. This was a significant turning point, as she became the first woman of a mixed race to represent Japan in an international beauty pageant. Remarkably, the situation repeated itself the following year, when Indian-Japanese Priyanka Yoshikawa was crowned Miss Japan 2016. Both times, the decision was met with somewhat mixed reactions; some praising the acceptance of different races, others expressing their disapproval that women of foreign heritage were to represent Japan at an international beauty pageant. Even after her victory, Miyamoto herself has stated that many major Japanese news outlets showed little interest in reporting on her achievement, and that she feels this is due to her being *haafu* (Wingfield-Hayes, 2015).

Both Miyamoto and Yoshikawa have described being shunned and bullied as children for the color of their skin, and that, due to their ancestry, they were excluded from Japanese society. Interviewed by BBC, Miyamoto says "If I say I am 'Japanese' the reply would be: 'No, you can't be'. People will not believe that. But if I say I am 'hafu', people agree". She also mentions that a friend of hers, who was also *haafu*, was eventually driven to suicide due to bullying and discrimination (Wingfield-Hayes, 2015). Yoshikawa describes the discomfort that she would feel around others, that she would feel "like a germ", and that people would sometimes avoid touching her as if she were "something bad" (McCurry, 2016). Both winners have also spoken of striving to change the perception of those regarded

as *haafu*, a feat which, judging by the results of the last two years' Miss Japan competitions, may eventually become possible.

3. Fitting in: Fashion and conformity

Japan is well known today for its widespread use of uniforms. Be it at school or at work, the average Japanese citizen is very likely to be expected to follow a dress code on a daily basis. The individual's expression of uniqueness is typically not encouraged to the same degree as it is in the United States, for example, and standing out from the crowd can be frowned upon. Therefore, in terms of fashion, young girls are obligated to be synchronized with their peers in order to be included. This is confirmed in a study by Parker, Charles, & Schaefer (2004), who suggest that Japanese teens "may use fashion as a means of conforming and harmonizing with the group, rather than as means for expressing their uniqueness".

Additionally, Parker et al. (2004) reports that while the Japanese and American teenagers interviewed for the study were fashion conscious on a similar level, the Japanese teenagers were more likely to choose style over comfort when it comes to fashion. He speculates that this is due to the expectations of others, as being more concerned with their appearance than their own comfort would suggest that managing how others perceive them is a priority. However, there are some who challenged the pervasiveness of uniform culture and gender stereotypes, and sought to create their own identities instead. During the 20th century, with the rise of consumer culture, Japanese teenage girls established themselves as pioneers of cutting-edge fashion subcultures. This paper will examine two examples: the *kogal* and the *Lolita.* These two trends, although vastly different in aesthetics, both rebelled against societal norms in their own way.

The trend that became known as the *kogal* (or *kogyaru*) took urban Japan by storm in the 1990s, thoroughly shocking the older generations. The term *gyaru* in Japanese is borrowed from the English

word 'gal', as in 'girl', and came to be used to describe young, fashionable girls. Interestingly, the *kogal*

signature look consisted of meticulously tanned skin, which was greatly at odds with the widespread

image of white-skinned beauty. Black (2009) argues against the idea that the *kogal* is simply an attempt

to look "black". More exactly, "it continues an existing preoccupation with racial identities and a shifting

Japanese relationship with them" (Black, 2009). To achieve additional contrast to their darkened skin,

kogals preferred to paint their eyes and lips white, and would often bleach their hair light brown or

blonde. As for fashion, they would mostly favor revealing attire such as miniskirts (often shortened

school uniform skirts), and platform boots. Because of this, the *kogal* image truly clashed with every

aspect of the traditional Japanese definition of female beauty.

Their demeanor was deemed offensive as well; the *kogal* was considered crass, impertinent, and

accused of mutilating the Japanese language by using 'unladylike' slang. They incited "moral panic" in

mainstream media, which struggled to make sense of what appeared to be young girls turned "deviant"

and "degenerate" (Miller, 2004a). Baffled by their behavior and modified language, Japanese media

outlets soon produced sensationalist news stories about *kogal* girls, where they were often ridiculed and

even compared to wild animals or savages, effectively rendering them subhuman in the eyes of the

public. For the most part, the *kogals* were undeterred by this adversity and continued forging their own

unique identities. Yet while separating themselves from the previous generations, they "increasingly

entangle themselves in a culture of escalating consumerism and materialism (Miller, 2004a). This

suggests that the rejection of traditional societal values does not necessarily mean complete

disenfranchisement.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of the Japanese *Lolita*; a movement in street fashion

which would eventually sweep across the globe. *Lolita* fashion draws inspiration from romanticized

Europe on one side, such as *rococo* aesthetics, Marie Antoinette and 18th century French nobility, late

19th century Victorian dresses, and early 20th century Edwardian fashions. On the other side, it is

influenced by more modern themes, from trends such as American teenage fashions of the 1950s, the

1990s Gothic subculture, to plastic toys, cakes and confectionary. *Lolita* splits into numerous different

subcategories, each with a different emphasis on their source of inspiration. Such as one of the most

common ones, the Gothic *Lolita,* is heavily influenced by Western Gothic fashion, while the Sweet *Lolita*

favors more childlike themes such as candy and stuffed animals, as well as pastel colors. Despite their

variances, the *Lolitas*, all share the same core concept of *kawaii*. It is a complex term now used to define

vastly different things, most commonly translated to English simply as "cute". Generally composed of

ruffles, bows, and lace layered on top of knee-length petticoats along with bonnets and parasols, *Lolita*

fashion offered something truly different. Not only did it provide Japanese girls a way to stand out from

the crowd, but it was also a bold statement against the prevalence of increasingly sexualized clothing.

The *Lolita* subculture offered young women an alternative to excessively revealing fashions, yet without

sacrificing any feminine elements (if anything, they were enhanced).

As it happens to have a name in common with Vladimir Nabokov's novel recounting a man's

obsession with a prepubescent girl, the *Lolita* fashion subculture has attracted criticism from those who

assume that these two separate things share more than simply the name. Therefore, it is a somewhat

common misconception that the Japanese *Lolita* subculture embodies childish eroticization in an

attempt to appeal to men through fetishes. However, this is not the case. Gagné (2008) points out that

the vast majority of *Lolita* do not wish to be associated with Nabokov's *Lolita*, and reject the notion of

them being sexualized. Yet despite their best efforts, they have attracted a certain amount of unwanted

attention, and many *Lolitas* "have a very real fear of being appropriated not as a "figure of identity",

expressing their own idea of their authentic self, but instead recirculated as a sexualized, pornographic

"figure of desire"" (Gagné, 2008).

The *Lolita* subculture has sparked a modest controversy both in Japan and abroad. They were

not satirized as boldly in news media as the *kogals* were, but attempts were nonetheless made to show

them as inarticulate, immature, and utterly absorbed in what would simply become a teenage 'phase' (Gagné, 2008). Monden (2013) explains that "*Lolita* fashion stirs criticism in Japanese society less because of its embodiment of infantile eroticization or fetishization, and more because it signifies a form of subversion and resistance to assumed norms" (p. 174).

The historical women's fashions from which *Lolita* fashion draws its inspiration is regarded by many as oppressive of women's freedom, due to restricted mobility caused by clothing such as corsets and hoop skirts. However, as pointed out by Monden (2013), because they are exercising the agency that most 18th and 19th century women did not have, the extravagant and voluminous figure *Lolita* fashion displays can be interpreted as being powerful and distinctly visible in a culture where uniqueness and noticeability is discouraged (p. 167).

Conclusion

It is quite clear that many young Japanese women suffer from a considerable dissatisfaction with their body compared to their peers from other industrialized countries. Additionally, a distorted self-perceived body image is quite common among them, as well as a desire for thinness regardless of actual body size. Standards of attractiveness strongly favor the double eyelid as well, and thus many young women choose to have it surgically created. White skin is, to an overwhelming degree, regarded as a desirable physical trait, as evidenced by the tremendous success of skin-whitening products in Japan. *Haafu* women find themselves exotified by the media, but rejected by Japanese society, unless they fit a certain stereotype portrayed in advertisements. Meanwhile, street fashion subcultures such as the *kogal* and the *Lolita* challenge the female gender stereotype and the rigorous obligations to conform to society.

As they are present during every aspect of our lives, it is clear that media and advertisements play a major part in shaping the way in which young women perceive themselves. The perpetual

dissemination of a very specific female figure as what is to be seen as 'attractive' and 'natural' has the potential to have a negative impact on women who do not – or cannot – meet these standards. To reinforce this, the media has shown a tendency to deride, and sometimes erase, young women who dare to reject gender stereotypes and forge their own identities. The subject of Westernization is inevitable when Japanese culture is discussed, particularly feminine beauty ideals. There is evidence suggesting that some traits which happen to bear resemblance to standard Western ideals of beauty, such as white skin and large eyes, were considered desirable for centuries before any substantial Western influence had been established in Japan. However, these same traits have become more prevalent in female beauty aesthetics alongside the growing Western presence in Japanese culture. It can therefore be argued that young Japanese women may find themselves caught between traditional Japanese ideas of beauty and a more globalized, Western standard. Western influence might not necessarily have brought these ideas of attractiveness to Japan, but it has arguably, at the very least, supported and strengthened them through advertisements as well as the media. In conclusion, if the female figures presented in advertising were of a greater variety regarding body size and shape, skin color and facial features, it might prove beneficial for the self-image of young Japanese women.

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