

Reinforcing Traditional Gender Norms in Japan? An Analysis of Images in Japanese Men's and Women's Fashion Magazines

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Abstract

This study examined the gender images in Japanese male-targeted and female-targeted fashion magazines from a feminist theoretical framework. With the recent shifts in gender role expectations and norms in Japan, the primary interest was in analyzing whether or not the images of males and females found in the magazines were reflecting these shifts. A textual analysis of the magazines' visuals revealed mixed connotations of gender norm reinforcement and resistance.

Keywords: gender, images, Japanese, feminist theory, magazines

Introduction

Japan has long been characterized as a hierarchical, Confucian-driven society that privileges men over women. Women are expected to take care of children, home, and the elderly, while men are expected to financially provide for the family.¹ From an early age, such expectations are embedded into the minds of both women and men. Even when women enter into the workforce, the presumption remains that they will continue to carry on their traditional caretaking roles. If they opt to get married and have children, a large percentage of women quit their jobs due to societal pressures.²

Traditional gender norms have held relatively steady in Japan even after the implementation of democratic governance following WWII.³ The economic strength that the nation enjoyed for decades during the post-war period had certainly helped to maintain the country's status quo on gender norms. Since the 1990s, however, Japan has faced serious economic challenges. Once considered a global financial epicenter, the country has remained economically stagnated in recent years. With it, the financial security that Japanese companies have traditionally offered to their employees (e.g., lifetime employment benefits)

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has steadily crumbled.⁴ Some observers have argued that Japan's economic disintegration has led to a shift in traditional values and norms amongst the younger generation.⁵

For many young Japanese men, given the diminishing return on fully investing in their company, focusing more on themselves becomes a priority.⁶ They are less ambitious than their "office warrior" fathers, and are more apt to quit a job if they find it unsatisfactory. Personal entertainment is valued, and greater emphasis is placed on external appearances. Young women are now embracing personal independence and long-term careers.⁷ With their knowledge that they will come under pressure to quit their jobs if they marry and have children, an increasing number of Japanese women are now either forgoing marriage and/or having children.⁸

Marketers have capitalized on these social transformations by providing products that promise self-actualization and feed self-indulgence.⁹ Fashion as well as beauty magazines have proliferated since the late 1990s.¹⁰ In particular, self-oriented magazines specifically targeting men have shown noticeable growth. They not only include magazines targeted at early to mid-career businessmen, but also at young male adults.

Given the recent social changes that have taken place in Japan and the increase in self-oriented magazines, the primary objective of this study was to qualitatively analyze, under a feminist framework, the type of gender messages being conveyed by top Japanese fashion magazines in their featured advertisements and editorial fashion spreads. The study's underlying assumption was that these mainstream magazines, through their displayed images, are able to provide valuable insight into the types of gender norms that are being created and circulated in contemporary Japan. It sought to answer the question of whether or not magazine images were either reinforcing or going against the traditional gender norms in Japan through an analysis of gender representations in two female-targeted fashion magazines and two male-targeted fashion magazines.

This paper first introduces the feminist theoretical framework that drove this present study and then reviews past studies that informed the research. It then provides the research questions that were posed before presenting the analytical method used and the findings from the analysis. The paper ends with a discussion of the results and some concluding thoughts.

Feminist Theory and Gender Images in Japanese Mass Media

Several conceptual frameworks exist under the rubric of feminist theory. Part of the reason for this is that meanings associated with feminism has changed over time with differing perspectives emerging along with societal and political changes. Researchers have identified three periods of the feminist movement.¹¹ The first phase appeared in the late 19th and early 20th century when women were fighting for their right to vote. The second "wave" gained notice beginning in the 1960s when feminists inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism called for sexual and reproductive freedom. Radical feminists proposed a dismantling of the patriarchal society and a separation of sexes, while liberal feminists

focused on the restructuring of existing power institutions, appealing for women's rights to play pertinent societal roles and compete on an equal footing with men.¹² Liberal feminists sought, and currently still seek, to expose systematic patriarchal oppression and to liberate women from its hold, with their ultimate goal of loosening the strict gendered boundaries that exist in modern societies and furthering equal participation by men and women.¹³

Around the 1990s, the so-called "third wave" of feminism first emerged. Instead of fighting for gender equality, those operating under the third wave have encouraged others to embrace differences between women and men, and have emphasized free choice and diversity. A sub-group of this perspective has endorsed the idea of women using their own sexuality and femininity to gain societal power.¹⁴ Another group falling under the heading of "postfeminism" has more recently stepped into limelight with their argument that we now reside in a post-patriarchal society and that the rights that second wave feminists fought for have been achieved.¹⁵ Stressing individual responsibility rather than societal obligations, postfeminists celebrate materialism and neoliberalism.

This present study began from a key liberal feminist stance that phallogentrism, understood as the privileging of a male viewpoint to construct meaning,¹⁶ dominates our cultural systems and dictates the social roles of individuals based on biological sex. From an early age, both boys and girls are socialized to look and act in ways consistent with the socially constructed conceptions of what it means to be a "male" or a "female."¹⁷ Ideas regarding "femininity" and "masculinity" are planted into the minds of individuals at an early age and nurtured throughout their lives. Liberal feminists and other critical scholars¹⁸ have recognized, however, that these ideas are fluid and have encouraged rejection of historically accepted notions of gender roles.

Meanings behind the words "female" and "male" can change as societal transformations take place. Mass media have been understood as not only mirroring, but also even perpetuating such transformations.¹⁹ Studies that have analyzed gender images in magazine content have predominantly pertained to U.S. publications. The major conclusion from these studies is that gender-role stereotyping abounds and gender images in U.S. publications have reflected the socially expected roles of males and females. For example, Lindner examined portrayals of women in U.S. advertisements featured in *Vogue* and *Time* from 1955 to 2002, and found that little had changed in the conveyed images.²⁰ Throughout the time period, women were shown as subordinate and having less control than men. In another study, Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, and Zavoina analyzed the depictions of men and women in six U.S. magazine advertisements published in 1983 and in 1993.²¹ The researchers found that sexual depictions (e.g., presentation of partially clad models exposing parts of breast or buttock, sexual innuendos, risqué poses) for both men and women increased from 1983 to 1993. However, the number of sexual portrayals was three times higher for women than for men. In a follow-up study looking at magazine advertisements from 1983 to 2003, Reichert and Carpenter found that the sexual images increased and became more explicit.²²

Few studies exist that have examined media portrayals of men and women in Japan. The research that does exist has found that with regard to men, throughout Japan's post WWII growth period, the primary media depiction was that of a corporate warrior who neglected his outward appearance as well as his family in favor of focusing solely on his company.²³ Men were portrayed as having much more mental as well as physical strength than women. Over the past few years, however, this corporate warrior image has been gradually disappearing in favor of a softer male media image.²⁴ The term "New Man" has been used in describing this alternative image. The concept of New Man grew out of research on British magazines in the late 1980s and describes a man who is sensitive, less focused on work, and open to the idea of taking on traditional female social roles.²⁵ The New Man also shows signs of narcissism and spends time on his external appearance. Offering an alternative expression that essentially describes the New Man, writer Maki Fukasawa coined the phrase "herbivore men" to indicate their relatively passive nature.²⁶

As for portrayals of Japanese women, past research has found that the primary media images of Japanese women have been reflective of traditional gender norms in Japan and have been associated with weakness and subordination.²⁷ Suzuki analyzed Japanese television programs and found that women were most often depicted as emotional, cute, tender, and submissive—characteristics traditionally thought to be ideal for women.²⁸ In their comparative study of teen-targeted *Seventeen magazine*, Maynard and Taylor found that in the Japanese version, girls were often shown as reserved and cute, while girls appearing in the U.S. version were frequently shown to be confident and direct.²⁹ In examining depictions of female models in Japanese advertisements, O'Barr found that the Asian models tended to be shown to be more reserved than the featured Western models.³⁰ He also found that when the advertisers wanted to convey sexuality, they used Western models. The researcher argued that using Japanese women in a sexual manner in mainstream media would be counter to the traditional expectations of Japanese women.

A number of years have passed since these studies on Japanese female portrayals were conducted. The possibility exists that such portrayals have been replaced given the social structural changes that have taken place in Japan. This study sought to reveal the current gender representations in popular Japanese fashion magazines. Through a qualitative analysis, it sought to shed light on the following specific research questions: What representational themes are present in the images of males and females in the Japanese fashion magazines? Are the representations connoting an emergence of new gender norms or a reinforcement of traditional gender norms in Japan? What differences exist in the portrayals of men versus women in the magazines? Do any differences exist in how Asian models are portrayed in comparison to Western models? These questions were explored through a textual analysis.

Method: Textual Analysis of Images

To examine the types of gender norms that are being produced and circulated via mainstream self-oriented magazines, four fashion magazines in Japan were elected for

analysis. The selected magazines consisted of two male-targeted magazines, *Men's Non-No* and *Men's Joker*, and two female-targeted magazines, *CanCam* and *ViVi*. All four are consistently top-selling magazines in Japan.³¹ To see whether the types of images conveyed had been shifting across time, the magazines selected for examination were from the year 2007 and the year 2012. It was around 2007 when the so-called “new man” or “herbivore man” gained mass media attention in Japan and discussion regarding the self-indulging young man who seemed to lack social ambition became prevalent. In order to examine whether the thematic images found in the magazines were consistent across warm and cold seasons, the issues from January (cold) and June (warm) from each selected year were chosen for analysis. Thus, images from a total of 16 magazine issues (eight issues of the female-targeted magazines and eight issues of the male-targeted magazines) were analyzed.

Since the focus of this study was on the visual portrayals of men and women in the magazines, only photos with males and/or female models found in full-page advertisements or full-page editorial fashion spreads were selected for analysis. Textual analysis was the chosen method of examination. For each magazine issue, repeated deep readings of each selected image were conducted in an attempt to decode embedded gender-related messages.³² In analyzing the photographic images, particular attention was placed on the following: overall visual composition of the photo; model's body pose; placement of the model's arms, hands, and legs; model's facial expression; direction of model's gaze; dress of the model; and (if more than one model appeared) placement of models relative to each other.³³ With each reading, notes were taken of the consistent themes that appeared to exist in the issue.

Following the all-encompassing examination, each image from each magazine issue was again carefully examined and an attempt was made to see how the themes might relate to one another and whether or not any finer distinctions could be made among the themes. Differences and similarities in the representational themes between the magazines and issues were also analyzed. After completion of the analysis, using Silverman's work³⁴ as a guideline, two other individuals (one Japanese male and one American female) were asked to also analyze the selected images to see if the themes found by the primary analyst would also be perceived by the other observers. This was done to strengthen the credibility of the qualitative approach that was chosen for this study. It was viewed as a form of triangulation in which two or more investigators with differing backgrounds analyze the same material in order to explore areas of convergence or divergence in the individual readings.³⁵ Any areas of divergence between primary analyst and the observers were thoroughly discussed, resulting in a convergence of ideas and a deciphering of the main themes.

Findings: Predominant Themes in Japanese Men's Fashion Magazines

The presented gender images in the Japanese men's fashion magazines were consistent across the two publications as well as across the two time periods. Only one stark difference was found, which will be discussed at the end of this section. Below are the major themes that were found in the men's magazines.

Coalescing of Masculinity and Femininity

The blurring of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity was the most often recurring theme in the men's fashion magazines. Most of the male models had smooth, hairless skin, and many sported long hair. They were slender and had makeup applied to their faces. These were attributes of both the Asian-appearing models as well as the non-Asian models used.¹ The models were placed in positions that would be considered feminine by traditional standards, such as sitting with their legs crossed or standing and jutting their hips to one side with their hands to their hips. Fashion accessories such as oversized sunglasses and large tote bags also marked a feminization of the male figure.

As an example of the coalescing of masculinity and femininity, in a *Men's Non-No*³⁶ fashion spread with four non-Asian (three White; one Black) models,¹¹ all four men are very thin and come across as effeminate. Their eyes are lined with eyeliner and their lips are glossed in light shades of red. Two of the men are sitting with their legs crossed and appearing clean-cut. The third man is standing and has long hair that falls down his face on one side. Although the fourth man is sitting with his legs spread open, he too appears with makeup and has hair falling over one eye. In another *Men's Non-No*³⁷ fashion spread, the male model is standing with his legs crossed at his thighs, similar to a pose normally reserved for a female model. He has on an almost skirt-like pair of shorts that fall just above his knees with three colorful ankle bracelets, a feminine appearing accessory, decorating one of his angles. He has a mop-top haircut and his slightly parted lips are painted in pink gloss. A hand-in-pocket pose subterfuges the otherwise feminine positioning of his stance. His other hand carries a large feminine tote bag.

An ad for a designer clothing brand featured in a *Men's Joker* issue³⁸ has three separate photos of the same young non-Asian male (White), shot from the waist up. The model is dressed in a red-violet silk jacket with a low-cut t-shirt. His short haircut accentuates his smooth complexion and his rose-painted plump lips are puckered in an alluring fashion that is normally seen in sexualized images of females.³⁹ His eyes are gazing downward as if shying away from the camera. As a final example, in a fashion spread in *Men's Non-No*⁴⁰ an almost androgynous young man wearing a plaid shirt and a green squall-

¹ When models' facial features and skin tone suggested that they were of East Asian (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Korean) or Southeast Asian (e.g., Thai, Indonesian) race/ethnicity, they were viewed as "Asian" in appearance. Although it is impossible to know for certain based on photographic images, all of the models who were viewed as "Asian" in the magazines appeared to be of Japanese descent.

¹¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all models referred to in the findings section were Asian in appearance. When mentioning models that appeared to be of a non-Asian ethnicity, such information is specifically provided.

type jacket peeks from under his bangs toward the camera lens. He has fine features and a slight build. His red-painted lips are pursed into a youthful pout. His only true markers of masculinity are his hands jammed into the pockets of the jacket and his exposed thumbs revealing his short un-manicured nails.

Such images that redefine traditional views on masculinity would resonate with liberal feminists and their efforts at eradicating the gender binary that exists in society. Rather than separating men and women based on notions of masculinity and femininity, these gender-bending images blur the divisional line, thus not only appealing to liberal feminists, but also aligning with calls made by men's liberationists who "promise that by rejecting traditional masculinity, men would live longer, happier, and healthier lives ...".⁴¹ The coalescing of femininity and masculinity in the images found in the magazines, however, is countered by the other thematic images, sexualization and female subordination, that were also found in the magazines. They are the images that tend to participate in modes of patriarchal domination.

Sexualization of Male Figures

The type of sexual objectification that has for years been shown to be present with regard to female models in Western magazines⁴² was present in the Japanese men's magazines with regard to the male models. Muscular males do appear in some of the ads as sexual objects; however, the norm was to sexualize the more effeminate males. As an illustration of a sexualized male, in an ad for a designer clothing brand in *Men's Joker*⁴³, the male model is dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and a jacket; his t-shirt is low enough to reveal his hairless chest partially covered by his hanging necklace. The model's chin is slightly tilted up with his eyelids halfway closed and his lips slightly parted in a pucker, with strands of his long hair falling over his face. It is a facial expression that Ochiai has characterized, in reference to female models, as sexually suggestive.⁴⁴ In an ad for watches featured in *Men's Joker*,⁴⁵ the male model has both hands running through his hair. His head is tilted down as his eyes peer up into the camera. Although he has hints of hair stubbles framing his mouth, his lips are glossed in a pale pink color. He is dressed in only a leather jacket that is unzipped, revealing his chest and the necklaces hanging from his neck.

In a few of the images that sexualized the male figure, a sexualized female was featured as well. Those females were all non-Asian (White). For example, a jeans ad in *Men's Non-No*⁴⁶ features a non-Asian (White) female model wearing black jeans, with no shirt and only a black bra covering her small breasts. She is standing straight with her hands in her jeans' pockets. She is directly staring at the camera with a serious expression and her hair is in the style of a crew cut. Her body is slender and highly toned. A non-Asian (White) male model also appears in the ad. His facial features and toned body are strikingly akin to the female. He, however, exudes more sexuality as he appears with only black jeans and leans seductively on a white horse. His lips are parted and his eyes are closed.

An ad in *Men's Joker*⁴⁷ features a non-Asian (White) female and a non-Asian (White) male model wearing similar jackets with the same type of eye makeup and shade of lip gloss.

The female's jacket, however, is buttoned to the top, while the male's jacket is open revealing his bare, thin, and hairless chest. The female's lips are closed and her face is partially hidden by her hair as she stares into the camera. The male is also staring into the camera, but his lips are parted in a sexual manner. With the close similarity in appearance between the male and female, sexual androgyny is conveyed.

Not many female images appeared in the men's magazines. In fact, the issues from 2012 had half the number of female images in comparison to the issues from 2007. Most of the photos that included a female model also had a male model. Although a few of those ads did sexualize females in a comparable fashion to males and equalized the gender by showing them in similar stances or positions, all of the featured females were non-Asian. The norm was to show women in the men's magazines as conservatively dressed and subordinate to the male. Moreover, most of the women depicted in this manner appeared Asian.

Women as Demure and Subordinate

The female models that were present in the men's fashion magazines were predominantly shown with male models, rather than alone. For the most part, they were shown either below a male figure or being held by a male, thus suggesting subordination. They were also often shown fully dressed and appearing demure. In a *Men's Joker*⁴⁸ fashion spread, for example, a female model is fully facing a male model with one hand touching his shoulder. She is turning her titled head to look into the camera. With her long hair pulled back by a hair band, the model is conservatively dress in a full skirt that falls far below her knees. The male next to her is also fully clothed with his body facing the camera. He is looking away from the model with an irritated expression. In another fashion spread appearing in the same issue, a female model is standing next to a fully dressed male model. Both are directly facing and looking into the camera. She is standing with her head nestled into the male model's neck, and is pressed against him as if he were providing her with protection.

As another example, in an ad for a clothing line appearing in *Men's Joker*⁴⁹, a young non-Asian (White) male and non-Asian (White) female are shown lying in the window display of a pet shop. Puppies surround the couple as the male lies on top of the female caressing and kissing her. She is wearing a simple summer dress that falls below her knees and he is wearing shorts and a shirt. With the male situated on top of the female and appearing ready to make sexual advances toward her, he is placed in a position of control.

In photographs featuring both female and male models, another telling point revolves around gaze. From a feminist perspective, it is important to examine who and what is being looked at when models are otherwise positioned equally. Rarely does any singular gaze dominate contemporary media, but from a feminist theoretical perspective, gaze remains male-dominated and continues to define the female subject.⁵⁰ Laura Mulvey is credited for having brought to the forefront the concept of the male gaze. In her seminal essay on narrative cinema, Mulvey asserted that the camera is coterminous with the voyeuristic male gaze.⁵¹ The camera invites the viewer or "spectator" to take pleasure in the

image of the female as an object of desire, passive and often erotized, thus reinforcing male domination.⁵² Females are positioned to feed the male ego and satiate male yearnings or simply be rejected when not needed. In the examined Japanese men's magazines, the displayed female images were found to be in concert with this understanding of the male gaze.

The Male Gaze

In discussing the male gaze, Philip Green writes that it is "as much a way of reducing women as it is of desiring them, and so can often be satisfied by simply dismissing them from view."⁵³ The male gaze not only refers to the gaze of the viewer of the image, but also the gaze of the male figure within the image. Two distinct male gazes were found in the analyzed ads and fashion spreads within the men's magazines. They were the gazes of irrelevance and invisibility.

The gaze of irrelevance dismisses the female figure as simply unimportant or unwanted. The female, on the other hand, is consumed by the presence of the male. One of the visuals conveying such dismissal was found in *Men's Non-No*.⁵⁴ It is an ad showing a non-Asian (White) female model smiling and leaning into the non-Asian (White) male model as if she were whispering words of affection into his ear. She is elegantly dressed in a formal suit with a string of pearls accentuating her slender neck. The male, dressed in a casual shirt and jacket, is gazing down with a cigarette pressed between his teeth. Although he appears to be listening to the female, his facial expression conveys a sense of irritation by the female presence. Also reflecting a gaze of irrelevance, in an ad for a shaver in *Men's Joker*⁵⁵, a male model and female model are sitting together at a café. The female is lovingly looking up at the male with a smile on her face. Her hand is gently touching his face. Although the male has a slight smile, he is looking off into the distance, almost as if his attention is being drawn to an off-camera individual or object. As a final example of the gaze of irrelevance, in a *Men's Non-No*⁵⁶ fashion spread, a demure-appearing female, dressed in a rain jacket and long jeans, is shown walking behind a male who is dressed in shorts and a long-sleeved shirt. She is holding a video camera and appears engrossed in the male figure. The male looks as if he is attempting to get away from the female; he has his head slightly turned with his eyes in the direction of the camera and appears annoyed.

Closely related to the gaze of irrelevance is the gaze of invisibility, which renders the female image imperceptible. An ad of a wedding magazine appearing in *Men's Non-No*⁵⁷ exhibits this gaze. The male model featured in the ad is dressed in a tuxedo and is shown reclining on a bed in a provocative pose. With his black-lined eyes peering into the camera and his pink glossed lips slightly puckered, he appears as if he were inviting the viewer to join him. His overpowering presence causes the viewer to barely notice the female model sitting on the bed in the background. She is dressed in a wedding gown and is also looking at the camera; her image, however, is out of focus. She warrants no relative power or thought. As another example of the invisibility gaze, in a *Men's Joker*⁵⁸ ad, a male and female are walking together, both dressed in white. He sports sunglasses and is looking off to his right. His stance is that of being in a hurry. The female is a step behind the man and appears to be

trying to catch up to the male. Although both have the same outfits on—white slacks and white jacket covering bare chests—the female is the only one who has a black sheer scarf wrapped around her head and covering her entire face. The scarf is sheer enough that the observer can see her face’s outline, but the scarf seems to signify the lack of her presence relative to the male model.

The concept of the gaze is also related to the only difference found between the 2007 and 2012 issues. As stated above, although the main thematic image of women found in the men’s magazines was that of a modest young woman, it is interesting to note that unlike the 2007 issues, in the 2012 issues of *Men’s Joker*,⁵⁹ a nude female photo spread is included toward the last few pages of each issue. The four-page nude female photo spread is featured under the title “Nice View.” In the January issue, on the first page of the spread, the nude model appears lying on her bed exposing her buttocks; on the next page, the topless model is standing in front of a window pulling down her underwear exposing her buttocks. The third page shows the model on the bed again, licking an apple while bent over and thrusting up her buttocks into the air. The final page is a full frontal nudity shot of the model lying in a bathtub. Similar poses appear in the June issue with a different model. Both female models have coy expressions suggesting a sense of shyness or modesty when, in fact, they both are fully exposing themselves to the viewer. Such a contradiction conveys a lack of agency on the part of the female. They are still innocent at heart, but are being presented for the male gaze, ready to be consumed.

Findings: Images in Japanese Women’s Fashion Magazines

Consistent gender images were found across all of the Japanese women’s fashion magazine issues. No noticeable differences were found between the two time periods examined. Aside from models featured in a few ads, most of the models presented were Asian in appearance. The following are the main themes found in the magazines.

Fun-Loving and Virtuous

The female models that appeared in the fashion spreads were often portrayed as fun, but reserved and innocent at the same time. Several of the shots showed models fashionably, but modestly dressed. They were smiling and displaying gestures that were non-provocative in nature. Many had their heads slightly tilted down as their eyes looked up to the camera, conveying a sense of shyness and sweetness. For example, in a *CanCam*⁶⁰ fashion spread, a model wearing a flower-printed dress is shown standing with her legs together and holding her handbag with one hand. With a child-like grin and her head slightly tilted, she looks directly into the camera while twirling strands of her hair with her other hand. In a *ViVi*⁶¹ ad, two female models are standing behind a kitchen counter, each wearing a colorful 1950s-style apron. Both are smiling widely. One model, with a large pink and blue bow on the top of her head, has her hands together on the counter and is striking a playful pose. The other, with part of her long hair pulled back at the top, is mixing something in a pink and white bowl conveying a sense of old-fashioned values.

These findings resonate with the few past studies on female images in Japanese women's fashion magazines. Those studies suggest that modesty is the image associated with Asian models.⁶² While such modesty was also found in this analysis, the usage of Asian models in a sexual manner was also found. It appears that although modesty still exists, a contradictory sexual message is also now being conveyed through the Asian models.

Sex Kitten versus Sexual Conqueror

In the women's magazines, several of the ads and fashion spreads used Asian models in a sexual manner by scantily dressing them and by placing them in provocative positions with sexually suggestive facial expressions. Two versions of this sexual allusion were present. One version was of the sex kitten type where the model's body was sexualized, but the model still came across as innocent or non-threatening. The other version was the sexual conqueror type where the model also exuded sex, but came across as confident and in power.

As an example of the sex kitten representation, in a *ViVi*⁶³ fashion spread, the featured female model is wearing only a black and red bra, a matching pair of panties, and a pair of red and white sneakers. She is sitting on the floor with her legs crossed close to her body, a sitting position that is normally only culturally accepted for men in Japan. Japanese etiquette calls for women to sit with both legs to one side. The model's long flowing hair falls right above her cleavage and on top of her head sits a toy-like gem-studded crown. She is surrounded by large teddy bears and her expression is that of a little girl. Her head is slightly tilted to the side and she is looking up at the camera with wide eyes. Her lips are lightly colored in pink and slightly pulled together, making her appear as though she is pouting.

In a *CanCam*⁶⁴ fashion spread, a model is standing with her legs spread out. She is wearing a black sweater and jacket and a very short blue skirt that stops right past her crotch area. Her legs are bare, but she is wearing black boots that go up just before her knees. She is thrusting her hips forward toward the camera. With her pink glossed lips parted, she is looking directly into the camera with her eyes wide open. The look comes across as sexual, but also innocent.

Also connoting a sex kitten image, in a *ViVi*⁶⁵ fashion spread, a female model appears in several photographs wearing the same outfit—a black string-bikini panty with a red bowtie on its front, a white-cropped shirt, and white with tulip-print stockings coming up just to the thigh area. The panty is tied at her hip and the strings hang down her bare thighs. In the first photo, the model is sitting on the floor of a dining room with her legs spread wide open, playfully tugging at one of her panty's tie string. She has her head tilted to one side while looking into the camera with heavy eyelids, as if she had just awoken. Sucking on a red lollipop, she strikes a cute but also sexy pose. In another shot, the model is lying on top of the dining room table with her rear-end sticking up and her chest pressing against the table. She has white cupcakes before her on a plate. She again has the same lazy expression, but this time, she has her index finger in her mouth as if she just sampled some of the cupcake frosting. It is a Lolita-type image.

Another example of the Lolita-type image is one that appeared in a fashion spread in *ViVi*.⁶⁶ The model is kneeling on top of a wooden school chair, while thrusting her breasts forward. Her red stilettos are hooked around the back of the chair. A coat length white sweater falls off her shoulders revealing her white tank top that is pulled up to show her abs. She is also wearing a very short pair of denim shorts and black sheer stockings with school-girlish striped knee socks over the stockings. Her shorts are zipped down in the front and the waistband is turned down. She has two of her fingers tucked into the unzipped shorts right at her crotch area. Pink ribbons are tied to the model's thighs and she is wearing a large crucifix around her neck. Portions of her long hair are pulled into a side ponytail. Her head is tilted downward as her eyes peer into the camera. Her pink glossed lips are parted in a slight smile. Although very sexualized, the model also exudes a child-like innocence.

In contrast to the sex kitten image, the sexual conqueror image featured women who came across as in control and powerful. For example, in a *CanCam*⁶⁷ fashion spread, a female model is standing straight with her back to the camera, but turning to look directly into the camera. Her tousled long hair frames her serious expression as she purses her slightly parted glossed lips. Her "barely there" short dress is cut low in the back revealing the model's slender form and the short length reveals her parted legs. Her stance and facial expression conveys strength and confidence. In another issue of *CanCam*⁶⁸, three female models featured in a lingerie ad are shown in their bras and panties. All three have substantial cleavages. Two of the models have their legs open. The model in the middle has her legs crossed and has her right hand resting near her crotch area. The model to her right has one of her hands caressing the bottom of one of her breasts. The third model has one of her arms bent with her hand caressing the back of her head. Her other arm is also bent, pressing against her right breast. All three have their painted lips slightly parted. Two of the models have their eyes closed and their heads tilted back while the third model has her gaze fixed on the breasts of the model to her right. Innocence is in no way suggested. In their upright stances, the women appear strong and in control; with their expressions of pleasure and with one of the models eyeing the breasts of another model, the women appear in control of their sexual identities as well.

As another example of the sexual conqueror, in a *ViVi*⁶⁹ fashion spread, a female model wearing a white jacket with a revealing short black dress and fish-net stockings stands with one leg bent, bringing attention to the thigh of her bent leg. She has one arm around another female model who is sitting on a motorcycle. Dressed in black slacks, a black leather jacket, and black stiletto heels, the model on the motorcycle has her legs spread out in such a way as to envelope the standing model. Both models have the same type of makeup (heavily lined eyes) hairstyle (long, flowing hair), and facial expression (serious with red painted lips slightly parted and staring directly into the camera). Both models have powerful poses signifying they are in charge.

The sexual images of females displayed in the women's magazine might signify a newly found female empowerment. This reading would be in line with assertions made by third wave feminists who argue that in exposing their bodies, women are essentially

celebrating their female form.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the images could be signifying female cooptation into the male-dominated social structure. In concert with feminists who assert that women can only view images of males and females through the male gaze,⁷¹ the sexualized images might suggest that women are being ingrained to believe that their existence can only be acknowledged through such sexualization. When examining the visuals in the Japanese women's magazines that also present male models, however, the images do appear to indicate that some form of female empowerment is surfacing in Japan.

Men as Subordinate and Peripheral

Very few male models were present in the Japanese women's magazines. When they did appear, they were often with a female model and appeared only as an accessory to enhance the female's appearance. For example, in a two-page ad for hairstyling products shown in *CanCam*⁷² a non-Asian (White) male model, dressed in a shirt and jeans and appearing to be a hairdresser, holds a spray hose and is drenching the lathered hair of a female model who is sitting before him. He has his side to the camera and we see from his profile that he is intently looking at the female model. Wearing a black low-cut dress and black stilettos, the female model is leaning back into her chair with one of her hands pressed against her chest as her other hand clutches the arm of the chair. She is smiling with her eyes closed as if she were lost in her own pleasant thoughts. In the photo on the adjoining page, the same model again appears, now with her hair blown into a stylish bouffant. She stands back to back with another Asian model who is wearing a strapless black dress. The original model has her hands placed firmly on her hips, while the other model has her arms crossed in front of her. Both stances are commanding in character. The eyes of both models are heavily lined with black liner also giving them a powerful appearance. The male stylist is an afterthought.

As another example of an image connoting the idea that males are inconsequential to females, in a champagne ad appearing in another issue of *CanCam*,⁷³ a non-Asian (White) female model is sitting at a restaurant table with three non-Asian males (two White; one Black). The males are in the background slightly out of focus with their full attention on the female. The female in the foreground and in full focus is looking off to the right as if she is enjoying the view of another individual off-camera. In another issue of *CanCam*,⁷⁴ a fashion spread shows a female model standing, smiling, and looking directly into the camera. A male model stands facing the female with his full attention on her. It appears the male is unable to capture the female's attention and comes across as secondary to the female model; part of his head and most of his body are cut out of the picture frame.

An ad in *ViVi*⁷⁵ clearly suggests the power of a female relative to a male. It features a female model wearing shorts that barely cover her buttocks and a low-cut shirt that exposes her cleavage. She is lying on top of a male model outfitted in a low-hanging pair of jeans and a leather jacket that is zipped down to expose his bare chest. Both have their heads turned and are staring into the camera. While the male looks visibly irritated by the presence of the camera (or spectator), the female wearing dark eye-makeup that gives her a feline-type

appearance is smiling to the camera in a sly manner, as if she is just about to make her conquest.

The powerful poses and commanding gaze of the females in relation to the male figures would suggest females are being presented as holding authority and agency. Such images, however, must be considered together with the other enfeebling representations of females that also existed in the women's magazines. It appears the magazines are conveying mixed messages regarding female empowerment.

Discussion

This study hoped to add to the available literature on mass media representations of gender by critically analyzing the types of gender images that are found in major fashion magazines in Japan. It also sought to explore the notion that, as part of the mass media, magazines can reflect the cultural or social climate of a country. With women gaining social status in Japan, and many Japanese men opting to focus on their own personal wellbeing and enjoyment, rather than solely on their jobs, this study's main interest was in examining gender images found in Japanese fashion magazines to see whether those images were connoting emergences of new gender norms or were reinforcing traditional gender norms. Deciphering existing differences and/or similarities between the images associated with males and females as well as between non-Asian and Asian individuals was also of interest. Through a textual dissection of the magazine's visuals, certain repeated image-based themes were found.

In the Japanese men's magazines, in contrast to the strong male image that traditionally has been dominant in Japan, a more emasculated image came to light. Although muscular males with facial hair did appear in the magazines, for the most part, the male models that were presented were slender with smooth skin and long hair. Many exuded a combination of masculinity and femininity. Eye makeup and lipstick were visibly present on the male models. This was the case for both Asian and non-Asian models. The images were reminiscent of the "New Man" that Darling-Wolf⁷⁶ has described in her work or the "Herbivore Man" that Fukasawa⁷⁷ has discussed. They also brought to mind the U.S. media-created "metrosexual" male who is said to care a great deal about his looks and does not mind wearing makeup and appearing feminine.⁷⁸

Some of the blurring of masculinity and femininity via the presented models was to a degree that the male models could be viewed as androgynous. Those images featuring androgynous figures may be suggesting that the construction of masculinity has changed in Japan; they may be signifying a new embracement of gender transgressions. Rather than being positioned in a specific category, the possibility exists that males are now being placed on a continuum with masculinity at one extreme and femininity at the other. Such placements would please feminists who have called for the rejection of the male/female binary and who have asserted that humans should be viewed as always moving between male to female or female to male.⁷⁹ At the same time, however, it should be stressed that while androgyny was suggested, many of the males were dressed and posed in a manner that

sexualized them. Thus, the underlying message might be that if Japanese men choose to focus more on their looks and their personal pleasures, sexualization is the price they must pay.

The female representations in the men's magazines were, for the most part, very traditional. Although the number of females that actually appeared in the men's magazines was low, especially in the 2012 issues, when they were present, they were shown as passive and subordinate to their male counterparts. In terms of the visual composition of the photos, the male models were often placed in a higher position than the female models. The male models also were often holding or caressing the female models in a protective fashion, thus signifying power. This representation is very much in line with the findings in past studies⁸⁰ regarding representations of Japanese women in that the women appeared to be inert and subjugated. The finding that in the year 2012, *Men's Joker* featured a nude female photo spread at the end of each issue is an interesting one. The contradictory stance perhaps signifies the notion that women gaining power in society is not acceptable to the male-dominated hierarchy. As women grow more powerful, they are subjected to either being a silent accessory to men or a sexual entity readied for the male gaze.

In the women's magazines, although passive representations of females existed, they were accompanied by images of powerful females. Moreover, with the exception of a few ads that featured non-Asian female models, the models that appeared were predominantly Asian. Certain shots in the fashion spreads and ads showed these female models in modest clothing and smiling sweetly to the camera in a shy manner, while others showed female models standing in a commanding stance and looking directly into the camera, connoting power. Female empowerment was especially conveyed when the female models appeared with male models. The male models were often placed in the background or were blurred in the picture. The representations relayed the message that men were there only to please women. Thus, unlike in the Japanese men's magazines, the Japanese women's magazines were more likely to provide females with a sense of agency and strength. This might indicate that the women's magazines are reinforcing the societal gains Japanese women have made.

Messages of resistance to the increasing social status of women in Japan, however, appeared to be present as well, for photos also existed in which women were being sexually objectified. Dual sexual images were found in the women's magazines. One sexual image was that of the sex kitten. While in sexually provocative positions, they were also dressed in a manner and surrounded by objects that made them appear like innocent young girls. It is interesting to note that the female models conveying this image were anime-like in appearance. They had large eyes with long lashes and their hair was usually dyed blonde or red. The other sexual image was that of the sexual conqueror. Here the women came across as sexual, but also fierce. They appeared in control of their own bodies.

The sexual usage of Western models in Japanese fashion magazines is nothing new. The usage of Asian models in a sexual manner in mainstream Japanese fashion magazines, however, is something new. Perhaps the underlying message, like in the message to men, is that if one chooses to break away from the traditional normative expectations of women,

sexual exploitation will result. As pointed out earlier in this paper, however, some feminists would interpret the sexual images of females as signs of female empowerment. They would emphasize the notion that women are demonstrating that they are in command of their own bodies and are in touch with their own sexuality. Even so, one must question if such signification is truly exhibiting empowerment. One must also ask if the female viewers or spectators of the images are interpreting those sexual images as empowerment. Doane argues that, in their role as female spectator, females are simply adopting the “masculine position” of the male; she writes, “the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one’s own object of desire.”⁸¹ Perhaps at a superficial level, power is conveyed by the female sexual images in the women’s magazines, but ultimately hidden behind the image-capturing lens is the still existing patriarchal structure struggling to maintain Japan’s male-dominated social system.

In order to garner a better understanding of what the intended underlying messages might be, a future study could perhaps pursue in-depth interviews with Japanese fashion magazine editors. Questions could be posed that are designed to elicit responses that would shed light on the intended meanings behind the photographs. Interviews with advertisers and their creative team might also reveal additional information regarding what influences exist on the coding of the images. Finally, focus groups with consumers of these magazines could be carried out to understand their readings of the images within the magazines.

Concluding Remarks

Observers have noted that while Japan’s economy continues to stagger, a “surge in new forms of cultural production and consumption” has occurred in Japan.⁸² The proliferation of Japanese fashion magazines is a testament to this surge. At a practical level, driven by the need for profit, the images, especially the provocative images, in the magazines are no doubt an attempt by the magazines and their advertisers to lure viewers, as has been the case for years with Western magazines.⁸³ However, it should be recognized that the images within the Japanese magazines are also mirroring the social and cultural standards of that country. For as cultural studies scholar Anna Gough-Yates has argued, women’s magazines are a “commercially led, market-oriented” business that “depends heavily on social and cultural processes.”⁸⁴ This can be said regarding men’s magazines as well.

As cultural commodities, Japanese women’s and men’s fashion magazines allow us to peer into the possible evolving changes in Japanese gender norms and expectations. The analysis from this research indicates that Japanese fashion magazines are reflecting a juncture in time when Japanese society is wrestling with meanings associated with males and females. While male-dominated forces continue to be represented by the visuals presented in the magazines, other images also exist that suggest recognition of emerging perspectives on masculinity and femininity. With the changes in gender roles taking place in Japan due to political-economic shifts, the magazines appear to be making attempts to mirror those changes while dealing with the residuals of a patriarchal society. Although still positioned to buttress male dominance and feed the male fetish, in displaying images that suggest a fissure

in the male-female dichotomy, the magazines may in some way be gradually helping to disband the gender binary and its associated inequities that still exist in Japanese society today.

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