

## The Construction of Gender in Contemporary Japanese Women's Magazines

Richard Edward Campbell

### Abstract

Japanese women's magazines published at the beginning of the twenty-first century are analyzed to determine whether they reflect the subliminal messages in wider society about notions of gender.

### Key Words

Gender equality    Women's Magazine    Subliminal messages  
Global equality    Ubiquitous consumption

This article will analyze examples of Japanese women's magazines that were popular at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The magazine to be examined is *Croissant* (クロワッサン). Since it is beyond the scope of this article to examine a variety of women's magazines in all genres, the objective will be to consider examples of feature articles from one of the most popular women's magazines at the turn of the century in an effort to understand whether the magazine imagery is consistent with wider society's subliminal messages about gender roles and appropriate lifestyles.

The role of women in society continues to be constrained by gender inequities in a variety of social institutions. The seeming intransigence of gender inequality in Japan was made evident by the World Economic Forum's global gender equality rankings for 2017. Japan was ranked at 114<sup>th</sup> for 2017, which is worse than its ranking of 111<sup>th</sup> for 2016 (WEF, p. 190). The 2017 ranking was the lowest among the Group of Seven nations. A myriad of socio-political influences in Japanese society construct notions about appropriate gender roles. The media can also play a role in perpetuation of wider society's notions about gender roles. Subliminal messages tend to perpetuate the tenacity of gender inequality suggested by the World Economic Forum's ranking.

Attitudes about the importance of gender equality have changed during the early twenty-first century as a result of enactment at the end of the previous century of amendments to the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOA) of 1986. The first amendment was in June 1997 and it aimed to eliminate discrimination in recruiting.

\* リチャード・エドワード・キャンベル：大阪国際大学国際教養学部准教授（2017. 12. 1 受理）

hiring, job placement, and promotion. The second amendment, in 2006, sought to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. Furthermore, Prime Minister Abe has made gender equality part of his “Abenomics” policy.

Despite those changes, Japan still ranks low in gender equality in comparison with other nations. In wider society, there appears to be a tenacious cultural infrastructure that defines male and female roles in the household. Prevailing social attitudes still regard women as responsible for the majority of household domestic chores and childcare. Regardless of whether the wife works, she is still expected to shoulder the majority of housework, childcare, and care of elderly parents. Male participation seems to be increasing, but that is constrained by traditional attitudes about men as the primary source of income for the household and women as partial economic contributors. There still persists in wider society the subliminal message that household management is primarily women’s work. That is substantiated by the worsening international comparisons of gender equality.

In the following sections, a descriptive analysis of verbal and visual imagery in feature articles from *Croissant* will be provided. The aim will be to determine whether the verbal and visual imagery reflects the subliminal messages in wider society about gender and lifestyles, or does the imagery attempt to alleviate the social reality of gender inequality through alternative role portrayals. However, this analysis does *not* suggest that there are any intended meanings on behalf of the magazine itself. Instead, the goal is to discover where magazine imagery is consistent with (or different from) wider society’s subliminal messages about gender and lifestyles.

### Magazine Analysis

*Croissant* January 10, 2002 volume 580

Two main feature articles define the magazine’s themes: (1) household economy, and (2) food safety. The first feature article makes comparisons of Japanese with foreigners living in Japan.

“*Muda na okane wa tsukawanai*” (無駄なお金は使わない)

The front cover shows a large cartoon of the possibilities for managing the household economy (e.g. saving at the ‘Bank of Croissant’, buying at sales). Text and visual images all relate to comparisons with foreigners living in Japan. They function as examples to support the article’s apparent generalization that foreigners can live fully in Japan without wasting money. Detailed photographs of economizing in daily life are provided in the manner of instruction for Japanese readers. Two pages are devoted to each of five foreign women and one man who reside in Japan.

A German woman explains the economy of recycling disused items, such as old toothbrushes for cleaning between tiles and brushing eggplants. An Italian woman

shows the false economy of buying cheap household goods which have to be replaced. She encourages readers to invest in high quality which is bought once and used continuously. A Slovakian woman describes the possibilities of living without brand name goods which are coveted by Japanese housewives. A British woman shows readers how to live and 'elegant' lifestyle with nothing other than low cost items. Finally, an American man reveals how he reuses literally everything and even makes use of pet beetles to eat the garbage.

A *zadankai* (座談会), or round table talk, among Japanese housewives married to foreigners more than ten years, follows the interviews with the six foreigners. The *zadankai* is a core feature of Japanese formal and informal organizational behavior which creates an opportunity to build group consensus. Especially in this feature article, the *zadankai* seems to involve the reader in a 'consensus building process' with its message about women's preoccupation with domesticity. Furthermore, in the age of internationalization, foreign lifestyles are portrayed as appropriate for accommodating rather than transforming traditional concepts of Japanese domesticity. Following the *zadankai*, four pages of text and photographs amplify the theme of foreign talent in economizing through the use of traditional Japan.

“*Kowai no wa, Kyogyubyo dake desu ka?*” (怖いのは、狂牛病だけですか)

This issue of *Croissant's* second major feature article begins after the series on beauty. It is about food safety. The article cites potential health hazards associated with a wide range of foreign imports. Even organic imports are not totally free of pesticides and therefore not completely safe. A cartoon image of a housewife removes an organic tomato (which is drawn with eyes and a smile) from her shopping bag and the caption reads in English “Are you safe?” Again, it is women who are portrayed as primarily responsible for the domestic chore of food preparation.

Regulatory relaxation is blamed for increasing the anxiety of Japanese people about food safety. Readers are warned that although a price sticker may contain the much sought after word “home produced,” that does not automatically mean “made in Japan” (e.g. safe). A major example is beef; if an imported cow has been raised in Japan for at least three months, it can be labeled “home produced.” Similarly, instant foods which are marked “made in Japan” often include ingredients which are foreign made. According to this *Croissant* article they are suspect because the ingredients originate in countries which have lower standards than Japan for pesticides, herbicides, and preservatives. As the reader is left wondering whether any foreign food ingredient is safe, a two page supplement asks “Is the pet food which your dog and cat eat safe?”

*Croissant*, December 10, 2002, Volume 602

“*Itsu no ma ni ka kirei ni nareru seikatsu shukan*” (いつの間にかきれいになれる生活習慣)

Ten lifestyle habits are discussed: (1) diet, (2) teeth, (3) face washing, (4) hair care, (5) nails, (6) facial exercises, (7) special foods for improving the condition of the blood, (8) posture improvement exercises, (9) bathing, (10) cosmetics. Interspersed between these ten are interviews with women who have a particular lifestyle habit change that is introduced to the reader.

The stated purpose of the interviews is to encourage readers to start by making at least one change. For example, a fashion consultant (page 69) introduces a product with English imprint “beauty smile trainer.” She claims to have achieved a younger look by improving both posture and contour of the mouth with the bracing device. Instruction is supplemented by consumer products.

*Croissant*, August 10, 2006, Volume 690

“*Jitsu nenrei yori, wakai karada no tsukurikata*” (実年齢より若い体の作り方)

A beauty artisan explains her approach to “anti-aging.” Both English words are written in the Japanese syllabary. The frequent use of English words and interviews with specialists often occurs in the magazine’s feature articles and appears to convey an air of credibility. The beauty artisan’s anti-aging methods are skin care and a ‘good style.’ Photos and text attempt to explain her lifestyle, but the rational connection with youth enhancement and anti-aging is unclear. For example, immediately upon waking, she ventures into the garden to say “good morning” to the flowers and trees. She claims to open-minded about food, but particular about alcohol.

Schematic drawings explain neck massage, hair combing, and finger massage. Teeth cleaning should take fifteen minutes. A photograph of dental paraphernalia includes “Rembrandt toothpaste.” However, that toothpaste, like many consumer products shown in magazine articles, are generally unknown to the average consumer. The final page of advice depicts schematics of “correct” sleeping postures and lower body calisthenics.

### **Analysis and Summary**

The aforementioned feature articles contain role portrayals of women involved in a variety of domestic tasks. Images were found which reflect the ideas of wider society about traditional feminine identity and its concomitant preoccupation with beauty. In general, the feature articles that were considered above present images which encourage behavior patterns that are consistent with traditional concepts of home management and attention to physical appearance. Thus, the subliminal messages in wider society about domesticity being more important for women than men were

reflected in the magazine's verbal and visual imagery.

Concerning lifestyles, there was imagery and discourse in the magazine articles which emphasized acquisition of a wide range of consumer products. That is consistent with wider society' subliminal messages about consumption. In contemporary Japan, consumption has become central in the affairs of everyday life. It can be said that commodification of daily life is ubiquitous. The reality of ubiquitous consumption, whereupon consumerism plays a crucial role in society, permeates the magazine. However, it is important to note that consumption is not restricted to the original use-value of commodities. Commodities can acquire symbolic value by assuming a wide range of associations beyond their original use. In women's magazines, visual images can attach traditional concepts of gender to the commodities so that even the simple introduction of products can convey the traditional ideal the domesticity is the "appropriate" role for women.

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