How to Get an American Boyfriend: Japanese Women and Westernization

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ABSTRACT
Since the end of World War II, and even more so since the 1980’s, Japanese women have been gaining more and more independence through jobs and international experience. Part of this move towards liberation can be seen in how brand-focused many Japanese girls and women are and the overt manner in which they try to express themselves in typically western ways. This report will focus on Japanese women and how they try to make themselves appear western as a means of defining their individual identities and how they balance that with their usual prescribed roles as traditionally Japanese mothers and homemakers. Japanese women are succeeding in their attempt to emulate American women while turning their tools into something uniquely Japanese.

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Introduction

Suki enjoys the sound of her high heels as they hit the tiled floor in each station she has to pass through on her way to University. *Click-clack, click-clack* the patter repeats as she hustles to make the next train, clutching her bag tighter to her side in case she has to make a run for it. There are signs that ask her politely not to, but they do not matter in the heat of the moment. Once she makes it to her train, she carefully checks her make-up in the compact that she carries everywhere—there is a sign asking her not to check her make-up, too, saying it is dangerous as the train jostles about, but some things are more important.

Once Suki finally reaches her school, she has maybe a half hour to catch up with her friends and compare their shopping hauls from the previous weekend. Aki managed to get a new Tiffany bracelet, while Megumi got a new bag from Louis Vuitton. Suki then shows off her new pencil bag from Tokyo Disneyland, and then hands out her small *omiyage*.

Some things, like handing out small souvenirs called *omiyage*, are distinctly Japanese, while other things, such as high-end brand recognition has

![Image 1: A sign from inside a train asking for women to do their make-up at home. Image Courtesy: TenguTech on Flickr](image-url)
roots in the western outreach that Europe and the United States of America have been pushing towards Japan since the end of World War II.¹ I chose to research Westernization on Japanese women when, while I was studying at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, I noticed how focused on fashion so many Japanese women tended to be. Brands are a huge deal in Japan and almost no woman goes out without some sort of fashion-forward accessory. This idea was cemented for me, however, when during a meeting of friends, I was asked how specifically to “get an American boyfriend.”

Background

I spent the academic year of 2013-2014 at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in Nisshin, Japan (a well-off suburb of Nagoya). While there, I spent an inordinate amount of time explaining American culture to Japanese students from elementary school to university, as well as to my fellow foreign students who were from China, South Korea, France, Canada, and Australia among other places. A considerable amount of most of my explanations had to do with debunking (or even just proving) myths that people had come to associate with the United States through movies and television.

I have already made my way through the seas of women trekking to school or work. I have seen their shoes and purses and dresses. I have shopped at the same malls that all of these items are bought, seeing the exorbitant prices women are willing to spend on a dress or a jacket while only using their earning from a part time job. I have seen these women and judged these women and

been judged by these women. I know I would not be able to spend the amounts
of money that Japanese women do on maintaining their outward image. While I
was in Japan, it cost about $40.00 to get your eyebrows tweezed. It was $200 to
get your hair done and $275 for that trendy jacket in the store window. Being a
woman anywhere is expensive, but in Japan the price of beauty is lavish.

When women make their way to work and school, commuting hours at a
time, they take more care of their appearance than their comfort. For the average
young Japanese woman, being in fashion usually takes precedence, and being in
fashion is usually having brown hair, large eyes, perfectly done make-up, brand
names, and a flawless manicure. Women reach these beauty standards in
several ways, but usually only for two distinct reasons: to get a job and to get a
partner. Typically, a woman continues to wear make-up to her job, but as
Japanese women usually become homemakers, they tend to wear less and less
make-up as they spend more and more time in their homes taking care of their
children and husbands.

Thinking of the future, the typical Japanese woman continues to look more
toward marriage and motherhood than becoming a career woman. That is not to
say though that Japanese women do not aspire to have both and family and a
career. They just do not typically see it as being a feasible option. The friction
between a role in the home and a role in a formal work environment has been a

\[^2\](Kelsky 85)

\[^3\] Hayazaki, Miharu. Interview. Nicole Puckett. 1 December 2014.

tasked more fully with joining the workforce. It was not until Japan’s bubble economy of the 1980’s that the more cosmopolitan women of the age chose instead to focus their goals on the outside of Japan rather than the inside. The need for independence and something inherently non-Japanese was the impetus of what Kelsky considers the “internationalist woman,” a woman who, through the interaction with western goods and foreign-affiliate employment began to look for “more serious involvement” with foreign ideas.

More women gained jobs in the 1980’s than had previously in Japanese society, and with no ‘independent woman’ precedent, they were typically required by their employers to reside within the home of their parents. Mostly, this was because a woman was considered immodest if she resided outside of the home without yet being married and the companies that hired women tended to take a more conservative approach to what they allowed their employees to do. The parents would then normally maintain the house, leaving the employed woman to keep most if not all of her earnings, giving her one of the highest disposable incomes in the country, creating the wealthiest sector of the population. This increase in income led to an extremely high level of consumption for foreign goods, which some women saw as deliverance from ‘the typical Japanese gendered structure’. It has been suggested that English and the knowledge of other foreign languages are seen as the ‘single most indispensable weapon in

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5 Tanaka also notes that women were pivotal in the workforce of Japan when it was still had a primarily agrarian economy.

6 (Kelsky 86)

7 (Kelsky 85)
women’s battle for advancement’. \(^8\) English is the most common, as it is typically associated with the American lifestyle, “that has made [Japanese women in America] more ‘self-confident,’ ‘self-expressive,’ and ‘self-assertive.’” \(^9\)

Typically, the means by which Japanese women express this newfound forcefulness is through the buying of Western–styled clothes, study abroad, and the adoption of American and European customs. For instance, most Japanese people are Shinto, not Christian, but still celebrate Christmas every year. \(^10\) The fashion itself is pushed onto the Japanese girl now from a young age, seen in television and movie media.

**Trends**

From adolescence onwards, girls are pushed towards identifying more with the Anglo-American-European ideal, mostly in the form of fairy tales and other media. For instance, “blonde, pale-skinned Anglo Cinderella is presented as the epitome of goodness and femininity” but is also a representation of agency to women. \(^11\) Cinderella goes after her own happiness to much success and is thus what many women aspire to be. Despite Japan having its own host of fierce heroines fighting for their right to exist autonomously, Japanese media tends to be more heavily focused on the Cinderella image, especially through the beauty industry. However, much of the other media (mostly comics and Japanese

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\(^8\) (Kelsky 100)  
\(^9\) (Kelsky 106)  
Image 2: The girls in this advertisement do not look traditionally Japanese. They have lightened hair and accentuated eyes, looking more ethnically ambiguous.
television dramas) tends to also imply that the key to reaching this ideal is through consumption of goods and beauty services. Miller notes that “a powerful appeal of the Cinderella story is its claim to egalitarianism – all eligible maids may attempt to wear the glass slipper.” Cinderella also fits well with longstanding Japanese ideas about self-development and discipline.\(^\text{12}\)

A study published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* talks extensively about the influence of western media on a non-western audience. While the study focuses mainly on the positive correlation between exposure to western television and increased instances of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, the applied research is equally damning when looking at the acceptance of general western standards of beauty (typically white, blonde, thin, etc.) in place of more culturally traditional values.\(^\text{13}\) In fact, there was a heavy correlation between women who were considered an ‘ethnic minority’ in the media and the psychological implications of traditional media on the women’s sense of body image.\(^\text{14}\) Those that saw themselves presented as a minority in the media tended to internalize much of what they saw actually represented. They saw white women in the media, and those with darker complexions began to see their skin tone as a flaw. Same with weight—they saw dangerously skinny women and saw what would be considered a natural weight to be “fat.”\(^\text{15}\) Japanese

\(^\text{12}\) (Miller 397)


\(^\text{15}\) Rakhkovskaya
advertisements tend to err on the ethnically ambiguous side and almost exclusively on the thin side.¹⁶ On first glance, the women tend to be fair-haired with large eyes, looking more Anglo than traditionally Japanese.

Much of how Japanese women change their appearance is harmless. The means vary from hair coloring and tanning to the use of circle contact lenses to make your eyes look bigger.¹⁷ Most high schools have rules about hair coloring extensively (you can usually dye your hair brown or blonde, if you can dye it at all), but they are more relaxed with rules regarding make-up. Japanese girls have typically mastered make-up strategies that can make your eyes look bigger, and often times take trips to the arcades, where they can get pictures taken that accentuate everything Japanese women are trying to change about themselves.

A common trend among teenage girls is to have photos done at “print clubs” or purikura. Essentially, girls gather in small groups and for ¥300 (about $3), they take a series of pictures that are all designed to enhance features of your face and body to make you look more aesthetically appealing. Images 3 and 4 show how heavily the purikura images get edited. The edits to the photos are done almost automatically and the whole experience takes about fifteen minutes to complete. At the time of both images being taken, I was wearing no make-up. Image 5 looks as though I have not only fake eyelashes, but also a full face of

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¹⁶ There have been strides recently in the acceptance of plus sized women in Japan. For more information please read the article They’re Not Fat… They’re Marshmallow Girls from the Tokyo Times. http://www.tokyotimes.com/make-way-marshmallows-girls-2/

¹⁷ Tanning is still typically against social norms in Japan, but is practiced heavily by several subcultures in Japan. For more information, please look into B-Style and Gyaru
make-up, extremely enlarged (and re-colored) eyes, and a thinner, more elongated face.

Images 3 and 4: An unedited picture of me from Mt. Fuji next to an image of me taken at a purikura machine in Tokyo.

There is also a huge industry for a variety of contraptions that can change the shape of your face, increase your bust size, or massage away body fat. It ranges from face massagers that supposedly make your face thinner to socks that compress the muscles in your calves for more shapely legs. But there comes a time when constantly being bombarded with images and advertisements promoting temporary solutions become too much. That is when women look towards more permanent solutions. Cosmetic surgery has also become a huge industry in Japan. Most surgery deals with the face, but just like anywhere cosmetic surgery is done, there is also the changes made to the bust and the buttocks.
Image 5: An advertisement for circle contact lenses that change the appearance of the eye’s iris.
A Woman for the Workforce

Miharu Hayazaki is a student at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies who had previously held several part time jobs to put her through school. We discussed many things, but she spoke first of fun times she had with friends. “On the weekends, we used to go to the mall and we’d get purikura done. Sometimes it was a competition to see who looked the most different in their pictures.”

While those pictures were all in good fun, “I would never get surgery, but it is fairly common place. Girls want their eyes to look bigger or their face to look smaller, and they’re willing to pay for it.” She goes on to talk about some of the beauty goods on the market today saying that “sometimes they just make you feel good. Have you ever had a face massage? Sometimes it’s not about making yourself look beautiful, but about feeling beautiful.”

When I asked her whether she believed that the West had a big influence on Japanese beauty standards, she responded “Yeah. It’s really usual for girls

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18 Hayazaki

19 Hayazaki
and guys to want to be like these big movie stars. We have our own movie stars, but everyone knows who Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt are. We try to be more like these huge stars who are popular in Japan but not just Japan. We want to be world renowned like all these celebrities.”

Miharu’s own experience is not much different from what has been discussed. Her mother is a stay at home mom, and her father makes the money to support the family. The opposing roles in the household is how the family has lived and the parents have sent two daughters to university and to study abroad. Her mother made the choice to stay in the home instead of in the workforce and was able to see her kids grow up. Miharu also wants children. “Now it’s not really necessary to choose one or the other. I’ll be able to work and have my family, and it won’t be that big of a deal. When I become a teacher, I’ll be able to see my children grow and I’ll be able to support them more fully if my husband and I both have jobs.”

Conclusions and Limitations

Japanese women are constantly being harangued with the thought of being a certain type of woman. They need to be a wife. They need to be a mother. They need to be a homemaker. But these are pressures to fit into some sort of metaphorical box are faced by women the world over. Even when trying to find independence as a job holder, women were often relegated to living at home with their parents and not given the independence that was sought forthright. As

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20 Hayazaki
21 Hayazaki
Image 4: An advertisement for a clinic that specializes in facial plastic surgery.
more and more women were seeking independence, they were seeking it from outside influences. Now, they begin by being taught at a young age what the ideal “independent” woman is and use that as a model for when they choose to assert their own individuality. More often than not, now, you see girls coloring their hair and getting surgery as a means of expressing themselves and attempting to stand out from what society wants them to become. They move from wanting to be a princess in charge of her own destiny to a woman who does not quit her job just because she has children.

The reason that this is a Japanese phenomenon is because of the sheer degree that it has been taken to. You can see plastic surgery all over the world. It is extremely prevalent in America, as well as Western Europe. But in the East Asian countries, like Japan, the advertisements for the firms that perform the surgeries focus on the eyes, nose, and lips (characteristics that would typically define someone’s race at first glance), as opposed to the stomach, breasts, and buttocks focused on in the West.

The prevalence of western media in the assertion of this ideal raises several issues, mostly concerning body image and how it is held as the one defining feature of a woman’s life. You either become a wife/mother/homemaker or you continue wearing your hair in different styles, doing your make up daily, and maintaining a fashionable persona. It becomes such an issue for the Japanese woman that they even undergo surgery to make sure that they maintain a fashionable air about them to keep their independence.
This research did not take into consideration what the standard of beauty before western influence came to Japan, only what has been influenced the most and to the highest degree in the last nearly forty years. Focusing primarily on characteristics shared between Japan and western countries, the key western country used for comparison was the United States of America. There was also a lack of research done to see the trends of male fashion and how that has also westernized into the present as well.

Therefore, research done in the future should focus on the shift from Japanese styles of dress and make-up to Western styles, including what was considered in vogue before the arrival of Americans in the 1800’s and the events of World War II. This would paint the picture of change more completely, and would not necessarily have to focus on women. It would be beneficial to see a comparison between how and why both men’s fashion and women’s fashion have changed and what sorts of trends they could also see in the future. The scope should be more global in nature as well, bringing in other cultures in different areas of the world experiencing similar phenomena. For instance, in India it is popular for women to use skin whitening creams and in Sub-Saharan Africa many women consider it more fashionable to rid their hair of natural curls in favor of the sleek, straight styles common in the United States and Europe. All in all, a larger scale operation that takes in the backgrounds from several different global areas, possibly including the United States and Western Europe itself would be the best way to look at overarching trends concerning Westernization in the face of a Globalizing world.
References


Appendix

*Interview Summary - Miharu Hayazaki*

Miharu is a student at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies studying abroad at Georgia Southern University. She comes from a standard middle class background and has one sister. Her parents are still together/ not divorced.

She wants to get her degree and move on to her Masters and become a teacher.

We talked briefly about how women go about their careers, and she made it known that her own mother is a homemaker and does not have a job (which is normal), and that while that it is normal for women to quit their jobs upon becoming wives and mothers, it is becoming less so the truth in about the last decade or so.

As of now, Miharu herself must go and apply to jobs for when she graduates, even though she wants to get another degree. She had several part time jobs before she came to study in America but is currently unemployed. Men and women do this because it is a normal thing to do. She says that she is actually running late on the job hunt because she is in the United States at the moment and she was supposed to start sending out resumes and attending job interviews around when her study abroad began.

Everyone at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies studies a foreign language, though they do not necessarily have to study abroad, it is just expected. The Nagoya University of Foreign Studies' student population is a majority female (I head statistics while I was there that it was roughly 85% women, though Miharu was unsure an exact percentage).

Miharu does enjoy doing purikura with friends, and she’s lightened her hair before from black to a dark brown. She says that getting surgery done would be too extreme if it was only to deal with her personal appearance, and not an actual emergency.

Talking more about her hair, she said that her high school had rules against hair coloring, though now that she was a university student, she did not have to worry about it. In fact a lot of students at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies go a little crazy once they become university students and dye their hair purple, blue, green, or bleach it so completely that it is almost entirely white as opposed to a blonde.

We went on to discuss different influences that could contribute to the western influence in Japan, focusing mostly on movies and internationally popular media.