

## **The Ideal Female Body In Japan**

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## **Introduction**

Around the world women's beauty standards and the beauty industry play an integral part in many globalized societies. While these standards are constantly changing from country to country, such standards undoubtedly negatively contribute to many women's intrapersonal view of themselves as well as their health. Throughout Japan, Japanese women are subjected to these beauty standards wherever they go, whether that be in the office, in the grocery store and even reaching as far as a sick day within the comfort of their own home. Standards are often upheld through the overpowering coverage of western media in westernized countries, but also currently exist within the society itself through previous body standards as well as pressure from one's peers. Forcing women to either conform to the ever changing beauty standards or be considered less than beautiful not only takes a toll on Japanese women's mental health but their physical health as well. This construct leaves women with no choice but to abide by these beauty standards whatever the cost.

### **The Ideal female body in Contemporary Japan**

Just like in many other countries, in Japan there exists a standard of beauty that women are expected to uphold, entertain, and buy into from a very young age. When asked, many Japanese women expressed some of their wants and/or needs in order to consider themselves “beautiful.” Some of these characteristics included the desire to acquire a slender yet toned body, wear more revealing clothing, to modify their single eye-lid anatomy to that of a double eye-lid, to whiten the skin, and additionally to wear make-up to achieve a particular “look” or even send a certain “message” (Kowner, 2004, Miller, 2006). Such reasoning behind these desirable traits differ, but some have distinct causes. Take make-up for example: in Japan, the pressure for

women to wear make-up when in a public space is so immense that Japanese women consider this cosmetic habit to be “common sense” or just basic “etiquette” (Ashikari, 2003). This stance is unique because the average person may not view applying make-up to go outside “common sense,” but may rather feel that common sense would be something along the lines of simply putting clothes on. Ashikari also found that this stance seemed consistent in Japanese women across professions. Office workers, Professors, Part-time and Full-time workers, and even Housewives all stated that wearing make-up was standard for going outside. Even women who identified as single-mothers with no pressure from a husband to perform agreed with this opinion (Ashikari, 2003). Through the viewpoint of Japanese women, make-up is just as essential as getting dressed. Enforcing the idea that applying make-up is not its own separate habit or personal preference, but a requirement to be viewed by the outside world. Widdows argues that this is because anyone that resides within the public sphere is subject to these beauty ideals, perhaps even within private spaces due to the rise of virtuality (Widdows, 2018). In studies done by both Kowner and Darling-Wolf, there also existed a similarity between some of the “ideal body” features within the minds of Japanese women, and common traits of Caucasian or Western people. Among these features were bigger eyes, thinner noses and lips, taller height, the double eyelid, and lighter skin tone (Kowner 2004, Darling-Wolf, 2004). When asked about who Japanese women found beautiful in a fashion magazine, those with western features such as these were pointed out for being particularly beautiful (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Of these characteristics, however, the origin of the desire to whiten the skin is up for debate. While having a lighter skin tone is a core characteristic of the western body ideology, it is also prevalent as a common beauty practice in Japanese history. Historically, those in Japan with lighter skin tones were seen as “more noble” or as holding a higher status (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Whether or not

this specific beauty ideal stems from Japanese history or the idealization of the western body standard is unclear or perhaps is a combination of both influences. Overall it seems as if there is an overarching theme of the Japanese beauty lens to have a tendency to be highly western centralized.

### **The Influences of Western Media on Japan**

The Ideal Japanese Body standard that Japan abides by today has not always been the norm; but rather it has evolved from the seemingly universal domination of the Western body ideology. That being said, why is this the case that the western body ideal is forced upon those who do not even reside within the immediate sphere of influence? Studies show that countries of higher affluence as well as a predominantly western lifestyle tend to show higher levels of body dissatisfaction within its population when surveyed. This phenomenon is partly due to not only the overwhelming coverage of media that comes with being wealthy, but also the type of media that is openly distributed to the public (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2010). The media in more economically prosperous countries differs from their counterparts simply because countries that are wealthier have the luxury of displaying more beauty ideal centered advertisements such as cosmetics, dieting, gym memberships, and beauty practices (i.e. hair removal, dying hair, etc.). Not only that, but the population within these countries oftentimes have more disposable income that enables them to buy into these beauty standards (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2010). It stands to reason that for women who reside in a country where amenities like food, health care and availability to work, that the beauty customs that are prevalent in other countries may be dismissed.

Western television and social media apps also greatly contribute to the distribution of this desirable western body to those within its scope. As Japan is a highly affluent country with

plenty of western influence, many of these western beauty advertisements and ideals reach deep into their society and have a noticeable effect on what the true beauty standard “should be” (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2010). These deeply rooted ideologies have proven to cause increased dysphoria within Japanese women who, when asked, express more dissatisfaction with their body than comparable American women (Kowner, 2002). An example of the western hold on Japan is the rise of Hollywood and American media presence within Japan following the end of WWII. Hollywood often portrayed to audiences the idea of the “perfect housewife,” which was originally targeted towards American women, but came to also target Japanese women through television (Ochiai, 1998). Qualities including trimmed and a highly made-up but yet still modest face, as well as the idealization of passivity in women, were enforced within the minds of middle-aged Japanese housewives, who were the primary consumers of this Hollywood media (Ochiai, 1998). It was after this Hollywood epidemic that the old Japanese beauty standards started to shift from the once big round face, shorter height with sturdy legs, healthy looking figure, and single eyelid to the now highly desirable double eyelid, tall and slender look. What was once considered beauty in Japan was now classified as “fat” (Miller, 2006). Changes to the beauty norm from influences in the west have a stronghold on Japanese women even a wealth of time later. Japanese women feel the need to conform to this western body in order to be considered “beautiful.” Unfortunately, some of these beauty ideas are not mere changes to the application of make-up, but extend to undergoing surgery and even changing one's personality. Some of these practices being unattainable to the average Japanese woman, for instance the double eye-lid surgery, is a large contributor to their body dissatisfaction. This push in the media for those who are non-white to conform to this white beauty standard is problematic (Kowner,

2004). Over exposure to the dominating western media in Japan has been the primary push for Japanese women to seek out and embody these ideologies, in some cases even to the extreme.

### **The Negative Effects of the Ideal Body Image**

The overwhelming consumption and presence of this “ideal body standard” in media and social life has been shown to lead to negative effects in Japanese women and adolescents in both physical and mental well being. According to Jung & Lee, one’s level of body dissatisfaction is highly determined by the surrounding cultural and social environment (Jung & Lee, 2006). Subsequently, the high amount of body image media in highly affluent countries has a greater effect on those within it in comparison to other countries (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2010). Therefore, one can assume that Japan’s high consumption rate of western media has a substantial effect on Japanese women and how they perceive themselves more than other non-westernized countries.

In interviews conducted by Darling-Wolf with Japanese adolescents concerning the content they were consuming in magazines, it was reported that most of them were full of tips about beauty. Make-up application tips, where to find the most recent fashionable clothes, and how to diet in order to see the most effective results were among some of the subjects. Interviewees also stated that a considerable amount of their private conversations were spent discussing such topics in addition to trading hairstyling advice, clothes, and even suggesting they go on diets together (Darling-Wolf, 2004). When most Japanese girl-girl adolescent relationships are based around topics and peer pressure as this from a young age, it is easy to see how influential their environmental and social culture is to their own perception of their body like Jung & Lee suggest. Another example of these pressures put upon Japanese women with society is the constant expectation for middle-aged women to wear make-up when going in public, especially within the workplace. Failure to do so would result in questions and comments by

colleagues on her mental and physical health. They also expressed that along with questioning of their mental and physical health, women might also be mistaken or called feminist activists, or even considered “non-Japanese”, both of which have negative connotations within Japanese society (Ashikari, 2003). It is this constant surrounding of media and advertisements, as well as the imposed pressure from society and peers, that lead Japanese women to believe that in some way they are physically “flawed” or their body is in need of “fixing” in order to be considered beautiful (Miller 2006). Surrounded by immense negative publicity, it is apparent why Japanese women and adolescents might have such a high level of body dissatisfaction. A study done by Kowner found that there was a direct correlation between low body esteem amongst Japanese and less body consciousness, lower self-esteem, and higher social anxiety (Kowner 2004). Such effects have also been linked to mental disorders like depression and eating disorders such as Bulimia and Anorexia-Nervosa (Kowner, 2004, Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Not only does the high level of body dissatisfaction affect Japanese women's intrapersonal view mentally and physically, leading to harmful and potentially life-threatening conditions, but it also poses an extra financial burden for those who feel pressured to subscribe to these expectations. Fueled by the desire to conform, Japanese women are driven into salons, aesthetic surgeries, and drugstores for beauty remedies (Miller 2006). Such services are not often cheap, but the need to conform outweighs the cost for those who want their intrapersonal view as well as their societal view to be considered beautiful. Not only are these services expensive and an unnecessary social requirement that Japanese society has placed on women, but many of these services contain harmful chemicals in the cosmetics or are various types of unnecessary body mutilation. Face make-up often contains carcinogenic chemicals and has even been documented to disrupt hormones. Additionally, some solutions used within common hair products as a solvent have

been linked to contact dermatitis and liver damage. Other beauty practices such as shaving, waxing, plucking, and bleaching of body hair are not only sometimes painful, but physically harmful to the body (Jeffreys, 2014). Constantly surrounded by these subliminal messages that the natural Japanese body is “flawed” and is in need of “fixing” by society, the media and their peers, in a way coerces Japanese women into these beauty standards that otherwise would not happen. In an effort to remedy these “flaws” many Japanese women experience tolls on both their physical and mental well being simply for the peace of mind and satisfaction of fitting in and being beautiful.

### **Conclusion**

The ideal Japanese body that many women are expected to adhere to today is a large contributor to a decrease in mental health within Japanese women. These ideologies which infiltrated Japan through the rise of westernized media following the end of WWII set the stage for the ideal body for years to come. Expectations to be tall and skinny, have extra white skin, wear make-up and adopt personality traits like passivity became the norm. However, these practices cause harm to the intrapersonal view that women have and appear to lead to low body satisfaction, lower self-esteem and higher rates of social anxiety. Other practices, such as hair dying and plucking, may not take a mental toll on Japanese women but rather impose more of a financial burden and associate physical pain with the pursuit of beauty. Despite all this, Japanese women still feel the need to adopt these ideals and put them into practice, as the pressure to conform or consequently be considered less than beautiful outweighs the notion that the natural body is beauty on its own.

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