

Male Gaze and Gender Norms in Japanese Hair Removal Advertising

Rui Dai

*Department of Spanish, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan
u650378b@ecs.osaka-u.ac.jp*

Abstract. This study explores how Japanese hair removal advertisements reproduce gender norms and reflect the logic of the male gaze. Based on the male gaze theory and the gender norms theory, this study analyzes two common advertising forms, short videos and posters, through four case studies. The analysis is mainly conducted from the perspectives of text and vision, as well as the three elements of narration, images and layout. The research results show that whether it is male or female narrators, short video advertisements associate women with men. Emphasize how hair removal positively influences men's feelings and attitudes in relationships. In short videos, women's agency often changes with men's evaluations, which reinforces heterosexual norms, and women are also positioned in passive and compliant roles. Visually, close-up shots of body parts, the use of filters, and multiple depictions of women as cute, innocent or sexy. All these reflect a kind of aesthetic view influenced by the male gaze. Although the advertisements in these three cases were mainly targeted at female consumers, they were actually designed with a male perspective as the assumed audience. In posters, advertisements targeting women often employ "feminine" colors, revealing clothing, and models with exotic styles, further reinforcing the sexualized image of women. In contrast, advertisements targeting men place more emphasis on professionalism and exhibit a more balanced composition between text and visual elements. Overall, this study reveals how hair removal advertisements in Japan constantly reinforce stereotypes about "femininity", prompt women to objectify themselves, and invisibly deepen gender inequality in society.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Gender Norms, Femininity, Hair Culture, Advertising

1. Introduction

The male gaze, how women in film and media are depicted from a heterosexual male perspective, positioning them as objects of visual pleasure and reinforcing patriarchal power relations [1]. Gender norms are socially constructed expectations that define appropriate roles and behaviors for individuals based on their gender [2].

Hair removal has become increasingly popular in Japan, accompanied by the rapid expansion of the hair removal industry. However, intensified competition has pushed some beauty clinics and salons toward bankruptcy [3]. To survive in this industry, they make a lot of advertisements to attract customers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the chaotic situation of the Tokyo Olympics,

Japanese society has experienced various disruptions, leading to an increasing reliance on internet-based communication. In recessionary conditions, and in order to cut budgets, many low-cost short video advertisements have been made. At the same time, because of the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals from the United Nations in Japan, people's awareness of gender issues has also grown. These conditions created new debates around hair removal advertisements that whether these advertisements reinforce gender norms or simply give people more choices.

In recent years, common hair removal advertisements typically appear in two media formats: short videos and posters. Short videos usually appear across various social media and video platforms, such as Instagram Stories advertisements and sponsored posts, Facebook, and advertisements within YouTube videos. Advertisements on Instagram and Facebook appear in portrait format featuring real people, while YouTube videos, appearing primarily within video content, generally follow the landscape format common to regular YouTube videos. However, regardless of portrait or landscape formats, they share remarkably similar narratives and tactics, with the majority preying on people's insecurities or anxieties to attract more customers. Since around 2020, many online voices have claimed that hair removal advertisements—especially those in short video format—make them feel extremely uncomfortable. Following investigations and warnings from the Japan Advertising Review Organization, as well as renewed statements from internet companies like Yahoo emphasizing that this content violates Yahoo's standards, such content is now decreasing across platforms. Nevertheless, some advertisements still employ anxiety-inducing tactics to catch customers.

2. Literature review

The female image presented in films, media and advertisements has always been a subject of feminist research, especially closely related to the concepts of the male gaze and gender norms. Mulvey [1] was the first to propose the concept of the male gaze in film theory. She believes that female characters in films are often presented from the perspective of heterosexual men, objectified as objects of visual pleasure, and the composition of films also reinforces the patriarchal power structure. This framework is now widely used in media and advertising. For instance, through visual techniques such as camera angles, close-ups and picture composition, women are often objectified and their bodies are disassembled into individual sensual parts [4]. These practices have made the dominant and controlling position of men more prominent, while the female role has been portrayed as passive and merely reactive, further reinforcing a social structure centered on male desires and power.

Goffman also conducted a similar study [5]. He pointed out that the way gender is depicted in advertisements is actually systematically reinforcing the established norms of society regarding men and women. Advertisements convey people's expectations for "femininity" and "masculinity" through the display of the body, posture and composition of the picture. These expressions are not neutral; they secretly stipulate how women and men should present themselves and behave. Later, West and Zimmerman further conceptualized this social norm as "gender norms", that is, a set of expectations set by society based on gender, stipulating what roles people should play and what behaviors they should perform [2]. Overall, these theories help us understand how media, especially advertising, actively influence people's views on gender and, in a subtle way, reinforce the structure of inequality in society.

In Japan, the hair removal industry has become highly commercialized and competition is becoming increasingly fierce. With the development of the Internet, especially under the influence of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Tokyo Olympics, low-cost digital advertising -

such as short videos and posters - has spread wider and faster [6]. These advertisements often take advantage of people's anxiety about appearance and sexual attractiveness to secretly pressure women to conform to those idealized standards of beauty. Although some modern advertisements claim to advocate for women's autonomy and empowerment, research has found that these promotions are often based on a "post-feminist" logic - that is, they place more emphasis on sexual appeal and compliance with male-dominated aesthetic standards [7].

Empirical research has further revealed the psychological impact brought about by this materialized expression. Frederickson and Roberts proposed the "objectification theory", arguing that when women are sexualized and objectified, it leads to a kind of "self-objectification" - that is, women internalize the perspective from which others view their bodies and examine themselves with that external perspective. Self-objectification is associated with many negative consequences, such as physical shame, appearance anxiety, eating disorders, and a decline in attention or cognitive abilities [8]. A more recent experimental study found that female college students who only expected to be stared at by men felt more intense body shame and social body shape anxiety than those who expected to be stared at by women, even without being directly stared at. This indicates that even if the "male gaze" is only internalized in the mind, it can still have a significant impact on women's psychology [9].

Advertising research has further confirmed the existence of these problems. In today's advertisements, the sexualized representation of women is actually quietly influencing people's cultural attitudes and values. Depicting women as sexual objects for a long time and repeatedly will make people increasingly numb to such materialized content [10]. Kilbourne pointed out that advertising is not merely for selling products; it is also "educating" the audience, enabling them to gradually accept a complete set of social norms regarding beauty, gender, and sexual orientation [11]. In Japan, Kobayashi found that beauty and hair removal advertisements are almost everywhere - whether on the streets, in subway stations, or online [6]. These advertisements deeply implant gendered expectations into People's Daily lives, influencing the way women view themselves and the roles they play in society. Although some advertisements seem to aim to convey messages of "diversity" or "female empowerment", most of the time, they still cannot escape the traditional heterosexual framework and instead reinforce society's outdated expectations of "femininity" and "sexual attractiveness".

By analyzing the visuals and copywriting of hair removal advertisements, it can be found that there are obvious gender differences in their presentation. For instance, short video advertisements with male voiceovers often emphasize "the body" and "interpersonal relationships", frequently linking women's body care with men's desires and romantic relationships. Women are often portrayed as cute, innocent or sexy in these advertisements. Close-up shots of specific body parts also frequently appear in the frame. This shooting method, in an intangible way, reinforces the impression that women are objectified and passive. Conversely, advertisements with female narrators focus more on the product itself, such as how to use it and whether it is good to use, with an emphasis on the personal benefits, such as making people more comfortable and confident. Posters also have similar differences: Advertisements targeting women usually use bright colors, large areas of exposed skin, and that kind of "standardized" posture to create an idealized female image; Advertisements targeting men, on the other hand, mostly use dark or soft tones, accompanied by light makeup and a professional image. Overall, this type of advertisement tends to highlight the status and ability of men through the combination of text and images rather than their sexual appeal.

These research findings indicate that current hair removal advertisements not only repeat traditional gender norms but also clearly reflect the perspective of the "male gaze". In such

advertisements, women are often placed in situations related to men. Their initiative is not based on their own will but is defined and evaluated through the eyes of men. From those close-up shots of the legs to the scenes that portray women as passive onlookers, these visual techniques are reinforcing the idealized image of women in a heterosexual society, while continuing the notion that a woman's value depends on her physical attractiveness and whether she can please men [1,8]. In addition, long-term and frequent exposure to such images can also have psychological effects, such as making women more prone to self-objectivizing, feeling dissatisfied with their own bodies, and even developing persistent appearance anxiety [8,9].

Although some hair removal advertisements seem to be "encouraging women and making them more powerful" on the surface, in fact, such information is often accompanied by sexual innuendo and repetition and compliance with traditional gender norms [7]. In advertisements, women are repeatedly portrayed as pleasing figures. This is not only for selling products but also to subtly reinforce the hierarchical structure in society, making people unconsciously change their views of themselves and others [4,11]. These phenomena illustrate the significance of critical media literacy and also demonstrate the necessity of educational intervention - only through such education can people learn to identify and resist the internalization of concepts driven by gender bias and the "male gaze" [6].

Overall, the research found that hair removal advertisements in Japan and other regions are closely related to the gender power structure. These advertisements, through visual objectification, narrative methods, and the "normative" information hidden behind them, not only reinforce the so-called "male gaze" but also continuously consolidate gender stereotypes, making it easier for women to fall into a state of self-objectification. To truly promote gender equality, enhance the public's media literacy, and build a society that respects women's autonomy and embraces diverse images, it is essential to understand the operational mechanisms behind these advertisements.

3. Methodology

This research analyzes two advertising formats: short videos and posters. Both formats are divided into two categories: short videos feature either male or female narrators, and posters targeted at female or male customers. This research analyzes the 4 cases from the visual and textual aspects, and examines the various shots, narration or text, as well as the meaning created when images are paired with captions or text and the impressions these elements evoke. Additionally, it employs theories such as the male gaze and gender norms to analyze how these short videos and posters shape and present female images through editing techniques and layout design and what images are shaped and presented.

4. Case studies

4.1. Case 1: short videos with a male narrator

The first short video comes from a small-scale and unknown cosmetic company. According to the Meta library [12], this video is posted on Facebook, Instagram and Messenger. This video talks about a story in which a man claimed his wife's excessive body hair had dampened his desire. After she tried a hair removal cream, her skin became smooth and her allure multiplied, leaving him unable to resist—even worrying she might stray. He recommends this product to all women experiencing a decline in intimacy with their husbands.

In the narration, the product's direct efficacy is mentioned only once. However, the video mentions body- and relationship-related topics seven times. In these 7 sentences, things related to “me”, the male narrator, are also mentioned 7 times, 4 times “I” or my body part as subjects and 3 times what “I” feel or do.

The video contains several segments that do not directly promote products, featuring four women in single shots. As the cover of this video, the woman is centered in the frame through a medium shot; she avoids direct eye contact, appearing somewhat bashful. With the narration, we can know that she feels ashamed because she was told by her husband that her body hair is too wild. Her body was evaluated by her husband, which is why this woman looks cute but ashamed, and she is even crying. The second shot in this video depicts a woman engaging in the childlike, adorable act of blowing bubbles while bathing. This childlike behavior and this slightly downward angle create a weak and small female character. The third image is a woman with cat ears making a peace sign and looking up at the camera. This angle looks like someone is viewing her from above, somehow creating a power imbalance. The last image is a close-up shot, focusing on a woman's legs. The camera goes from the whole body down to the legs and presents the legs in isolation, which objectifies the woman.

When the narrator mentions physical contact, it turns into two-shots of a man and a woman. In the first image, the two people are hugging and the woman is looking at the man. In the second image, the man is kissing the woman's face, and the woman appears to enjoy it. In both shots, the initiators of the actions are all male, while women in the videos merely react to the men's behavior. Women are portrayed as very passive in the video.

4.2. Case 2: short videos with a male narrator

The second video is from a large-scale and famous hair removal salon that also makes hair removal machines. This video was posted on Facebook, Instagram, Audience Network, Messenger and Threads. Since this company has about 80 salons in Japan and has more followers on social media, it can be inferred that the advertisement probably reached a large audience. This video doesn't have as obvious a storyline as the first one, but it also touches on similar topics from the first video, such as how shaving improves women's relationships with their boyfriends and how not shaving is shameful.

The functions of hair removal services and promotion are mentioned 13 times.

While Body- and relationship-related topics are mentioned only 4 times. In these 4 sentences, things related to men are mentioned 3 times.

As the first shot in this video, the woman is wrapped in a bath towel. She looks soft and shy, and she has long, straight hair. With the subtitle, we can know that she is asking “what do you honestly do about your ‘hair under there’?”, which is a sensitive question. No matter what question she is asking, her shyness always gives the impression that she feels someone is watching her. As the second shot, the woman is shaving herself in front of a mirror. She looks cute and she is wearing a white T-shirt. Her underwear seems to slip out “accidentally.” All of these make her not only an innocent but also a sexy character. Compared with the first video, this video contains more real hair removal procedures and counseling. It includes some images of women just after treatment who look confident and happy. Although the images are positive, they suggest that women who remove body hair are perceived as more beautiful.

Two two-shots appear when the narrator mentions “boyfriend”. The first image is a man breaking up with someone. This image shows the result of not going to a hair removal salon to make the skin completely smooth in this story. The second image is a man touching a woman's legs and the

woman is looking at the man. The subjects of these two images are both men. This illustrates the dominant role men play in romantic relationships.

4.3. Comparison of case 1 and case 2

Textual analysis reveals that both videos employ an informal style of narration and frequently reference men in relation to body and relationship topics. When discussing the body or romantic relationships, male narrators refer to men in 100% of the cases, whereas female narrators do so in 75% of the cases. Although this gap is not significant, it indicates that women have internalized the "male gaze" to some extent, and also reflects the generalization of the heterosexual perspective in advertising discourse. Furthermore, in video advertisements with male voiceovers, approximately half of the content involves the body or interpersonal relationships. In videos with female voiceovers, such topics account for only about 24%. The latter places more emphasis on the functions and effects of the product or service itself. Although this study did not include screenshots of the videos, it is worth noting that both of these advertisements highlighted the potential benefits for women to varying degrees, such as alleviating menstrual discomfort or boosting self-confidence. Visually, both videos employ filters to soften the skin and depict women as gentle and idealized images. The female characters in the two videos have similar features. They are portrayed as either extremely cute or sexy, or sometimes both. However, the videos with female narrations contain more operational procedures and consultation scenarios. This difference is likely because the video with a female narrator is introducing a larger company that has more abundant resources and a higher production budget.

4.4. Case 3: posters targeted at women

Through analysis, it was found that these posters have some common points. In terms of composition, the model occupies approximately 80% of the frame, and one poster features a close-up of the legs to enhance its appeal. These posters are mainly in red or pink and models with smooth, fair and radiant skin. Some posters use high-brightness light blue, light green and light yellow, giving people a summer atmosphere or a fresh and clean feeling. All the models were wearing summer clothes that exposed their arms and legs, and one of the posters even showed the armpits. Every model is wearing makeup, and each has a somewhat different style. In two of the three pictures (Figure 1), the models are wearing high heels. The only exception is the model on the left of Figure 1, who is not wearing high heels, which forms a sharp contrast with other mature and sexy female images. This might be to match her image as a "cute girl". It is worth noting the model on the right side of Figure 1. She is of mixed Japanese and Bangladeshi descent. It is different from the typical image of Japanese women that is generally believed. She was portrayed as sexy and had an "exotic charm". This might imply that traditional Japanese femininity should not be overt, such a gender norm.

In terms of textual elements, the poster of the female model only uses a small part of the picture for text. Most of the text content is short slogans or brand concepts. Bold fonts are mainly used to highlight discounts or prices, while softer fonts are used for other content. The layout of the text usually follows the edge of the picture to ensure that the visual focus is always on the model's body.



Figure 1. Advertisements targeted at women on public transportation [13-15]

4.5. Case 4: posters targeted at men

Posters targeting men present a markedly different set of visual and textual characteristics (Figure 2). The dominant color schemes are typically black or blue. Although male models are also depicted with smooth skin, greater visibility of natural skin texture is retained compared to female-oriented posters. The models are most often dressed in suits or shirts rather than summer clothing, and only their faces are exposed. Makeup is minimal, and natural skin tones are emphasized.

In terms of layout, posters aimed at men balance visual and textual elements more evenly. Unlike the female-targeted posters where models dominate the frame, here the text occupies nearly equal space. The main text is generally positioned at the center of the frame and is presented in bold fonts, highlighting the salon's name and achievements.



Figure 2. Advertisements targeted at men on public transportation [16,17]

5. Conclusion

From the analysis, firstly, I found that whether narrated by men or women, no matter it comes from a big or small company, when body or relationship topics are mentioned, the focus always shifts to men. These advertisements always associate women with men and emphasize how women removing their hair positively affects a man's attitude in a relationship.

The positive effects on men or on the relationship are more evaluated than the benefits for women themselves. Female agency shifts based on men's evaluations of their bodies. This not only shows a heteronormative default but also presents submissive and passive female figures that reinforce male dominance, reducing women to objects or tools to please men. Secondly, close-ups of body parts in videos and posters, the singular portrayal of women—cute, innocent, and sexy—all of them reflect an aesthetic shaped by the male gaze. Although targeted at women, these advertisements always assumed a male audience. All these elements collectively reinforce gender norms: women are fragile and compliant; women must be young and beautiful; please men; and feel happy when validated by men.

This study focuses on how hair removal advertisements reproduce gender norms and reflect the logic of the "male gaze". As Mulvey pointed out, the so-called "male gaze" often regards women as objects of visual pleasure rather than individuals with active will and subjectivity [1]. This

phenomenon is still very obvious in contemporary advertisements. Goffman's research further indicates that advertisements constantly reinforce unequal gender roles through postures, body displays, and picture composition [5]. These manifestations not only make the narrow "ideal femininity" seem self-justified but also promote the self-objectification of women, which will have a negative impact on their mental health and body image [8]. Moreover, even though some advertisements seem to be elevating the status of women, in fact, many are still influenced by the "post-feminist" concept, placing sexual appeal and physical charm in the most important position [7]. Therefore, this gender-oriented and gazing driven advertising practice not only perpetuates the original unequal structure in society but also quietly influences people's views of themselves and others in their daily lives.

6. Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, it only examined two forms of hair removal advertisements: short videos and posters. Other forms, such as advertisements in the style of animation or comics, are not within the scope of this study. Secondly, although this study highlights the dominance of traditional gender representations, it is worth noting that some recent advertisements have begun to emphasize women's spontaneity and autonomy. There are many factors driving this trend, such as the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the hosting of the Tokyo Olympics, and the rise of the fourth wave of feminism. Finally, although there have been many advertisements for hair removal involving men's exposed skin recently, the chances of seeing such advertisements in public places are still rare. On the contrary, such advertisements are mainly spread through online platforms.

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