

Zettai Ryouiki: The Use of Female Body Parts in Japanese Advertising

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Abstract—Advertising develops its creative process attract the public to new innovations and products. One recent change is the use of female body as advertising media. An advertising agency in Tokyo, Japan, called Zettai Ryouiki Koukoku, has made female body parts an advertising media. This phenomenon in Japan is called zettai ryouiki. This research collected data by conducting a literature review to identify, explore, and analyze the role of advertising media using the female body and the changing values that apply to young women as subjects of the zettai ryouiki phenomenon. The first part of this study focuses on the role of advertising media, based on Foucault's bio-power theory to explain how a media controlled female body becomes a docile body. The second part of the study focuses on changes in values that apply to women as subjects of the zettai ryouiki phenomenon. This research shows how women as subjects of zettai ryouiki present themselves by showing their thighs as a representation of female sexuality, which is both created and consumed by a desire unique self-expression.

Keywords—Female Body, New Japanese Advertising Phenomenon, Zettai Ryouiki, Subculture

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern everyday society, people are presented with advertisements and images that underpin issues such as the exploitation of women in the mass media. Women's bodies have been used to market almost all consumer products including food, household, cosmetics and even outbound products. Global print and visual media continue to position the female body as an object. Concern about the impact of advertising on society is not new. Since the 1970s, research in Japan has shown that advertising in all media promotes and reinforces stereotyped gender roles. The status of women reported in contemporary Japan indicates the *danson johi* attitude (the notion that men rule over women, which insults women) continues to be reinforced through the traditional Japanese value system (Mioko & Jennison, 1985). In Japanese TV commercials, many ads promote alcohol products such as beer and whiskey, by featuring beautiful women holding the product and smiling at the camera. Ads like these that use women as symbolic characters seem traditional. Every year, many Japanese alcohol companies compete to recruit young women for their "girl campaigns" or to promote a product using young women. This demonstrates that in Japanese advertising women are still depicted as sexual objects to sell commercial products.

Advertising develops new creative processes to sell new products and innovations in the market. One advertising innovation that has arisen is using female body parts as advertising media. Various methods are used by certain community producers to ensure their products attract the attention of consumers. Jean Kilbourne (2017), a media activist, explains how advertising splits women's bodies into sections using different places for various products to deliver a message that can be easily accessed by society. However, this has been transformed recently by an advertising agency in Tokyo, Japan, that had the idea of using women's body parts as ad space (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Commercial promotion of an album by rock band, Green Day. printed on women's thigh. Source: <http://www.zettaipr.com/pr/pr000025.php>

Using women's body parts for advertising began in Japan in 2012. This advertising technique is called *zettai ryouiki*, which permits women to rent out areas of themselves as advertising space. *Zettai Ryouiki*, if we see it in Japanese kanji 絶対領域 is a term used to refer to the thigh area seen in the gap between socks that reach the knees, and a skirt or shorts. Kaneda (2009) mentions that the term was first born in Otaku culture (fans of Japanese subcultures such as animations (*anime*) and comics (*manga*)) where female characters in *manga* and *anime* dress in high socks and leave a visible thigh area between the skirt and socks. Inspired by *manga* and *anime*, a Japanese advertising agency had the idea of using the female thigh as an advertising space (Hidenori in Weekly Magazine, 2013).

The advertising agency Hidenori, started recruiting young women to promote ads affixed to their thigh. Hidenori in Weekly Magazine (2013) revealed that the thigh

is a great place to put an ad, because men will be interested in looking at the ad and women feel the thighs are not a problem if seen. This strategy uses women as an advertising space by utilizing body shape and sexiness. This utilization depicts women as sexual objects and a tool to lure the attention of consumers. Popular public spaces such as crowded centers in Tokyo Shibuya are used to promote ads affixed to women's thighs. Wearing short skirts and high socks, young women circulate in public places so that people can see advertisements on their thighs.

On the other hand, some women are happy to use their own body as an advertising space. A woman named Miho Matsumoto, for example, had an advertising contract in Japan to launch a DVD and had an ad sticker placed on her thigh. Miho in Netmediatama (2013) revealed that she was not ashamed of the ad sticker being taped to her thigh. The women themselves consciously permit their thighs to be used as advertising space. According to Masuda (2012), the number of women who participate in advertising by leasing their thighs has increased day by day. In November 2012, the Daily Mail reported more than 1,300 young women had registered their thighs as advertising space. The ad system requirement is for women aged 18 years and over rent their thighs as a location for the ads. The types of ads affixed to thighs include be game ads, the latest music CDs, book launches, and so on. They wear short skirts or pants so the ads can be seen easily. They will take a walk into the center of a crowd and display ads on their thighs for eight hours a day or more. Masuda adds that women can earn between 1000 and 10,000 yen for one business day by renting their thighs.

The use of women's thighs as an advertising space was also backed by the Okinawa prefectural government as stated in Japan Today (2013). However, the Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau (OCVB) reversed this decision, saying that the Bureau along with the prefectural government had canceled its plan to use women's thigh space to advertise the Okinawa islands, to promote the area as a students' graduation destination for people outside Okinawa prefecture. OCVB and the prefectural government said that a temporary tattoo or stickers on young women's thighs advertising Okinawa was not in line with the prefecture's image.

In the cases mentioned above, ads displayed on thighs as advertising spaces are used to sell products that have nothing to do with the female body. Exposure of the female body part is used to attract the public's attention. Based on the above background, the authors argue that this is an interesting research subject, because women's bodies are exploited by this advertising agency phenomenon and women consciously rent their own body parts to be used as advertising space. The author, as a woman, feels uncomfortable about this development in the advertising world. The utilization of female body parts as an advertising space motivated the author to research the subject. Therefore, the question explored in this research is "what is the role of advertising when it uses the female body as advertising media, and how values are changing due to women becoming subjects of the *zettai ryouiki* phenomenon?" This research will identify, explore, and analyze the role of advertising that uses the female body as an advertising space, as well as changes in values that apply to women as subjects of the *zettai ryouiki* phenomenon.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies were identified to be used when conducting this research. However, so far, studies that specifically examine the phenomena of *zettai ryouiki* have not focused on the consequences of the phenomenon. Articles that were used are listed as follows:

Amy Michelle Kawecki's research entitled *Beauty is Pain: The Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Impact of Female Images in Media* was published in 2010 in UMI Dissertation Publishing ProQuest LLC. Kawecki elaborated the physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of the representation of female sexuality in the media. Kawecki stated that culture has played a powerful role in influencing women's feelings toward themselves. She found that many women do not feel confident in their own natural skin, while the ads shown on television, movies, and magazines continue to promote insecurity deep in the female soul. According to her, it is important to review the history of the representation of women's bodies cross-culturally, to understand what is happening today. Throughout history, the female body has been seen as a commodity that elicits sexual pleasure. In the 21st century, regardless of women's progress, we inadvertently continue to be exploited by visual media. Women's bodies are also used to sell products intended to perfect women's bodies, such as make-up, fashion items, and so forth.

The media target ads at women that promise to provide what women want. Actually, this is media manipulation of women to do what the media wants. Advertising media want women to feel insecure about themselves and then buy a product to solve the problem. In addition, when using semi-naked female bodies to sell products like cars, the ads are obviously targeted at men, even though women also buy cars. Half-naked women do not have any relationship with cars because they do not offer information about the product. Female sexuality does not indicate how the product functions, what it does, and how to finance it if they want to buy it. Therefore, this form of sexual exploitation reinforces the view of women's pervasive sexual availability to men. The media's sexual influence not only undermines the dignity of women, but has been normalized to an unhealthy level.

Kawecki's research uses a heuristic methodology to explore the psychological and emotional effects of images of women in the media. She also discusses the importance of developing a person's positive self-image, especially when women are bombarded with negative messages, and asserts the need for public awareness. Kawecki used a psychological approach, however; the authors of this study use a sociological approach to their research. Kawecki's ultimate goal was to provide an overview of the role of the media in shaping images of women.

Sumita Sarkar's research entitled *Media and Women: A Feminist Discourse* was published in 2014 in the Journal of Media and Communication Studies. Sarkar raised the issue of socio-cultural and economic-political debates on female bodies in the media. Sarkar's research focuses on Indian society. Her thematic discourse reflects on how both visual and printed media are used in the promotion of popular culture, by projecting images of women that primarily focus on men's sensual pleasure when seeing women's bodies. Sarkar's research highlighted several themes including gender

stereotypes, gender commodification, commercialization, objectification, body exploitation images of women as gender politics, and gender inequality. The global media has reconstructed the image of women to maximize commercial benefits and make a profit by placing a wedge between real women and the image being reconstructed. It promotes normative stereotypes by projecting dichotomies such as a desired object versus women's participation in an incessant gender struggle within the social structure. The results of her research found that prior to Indian independence, as well as post-independence, and during the era of globalization, women have been urged to reconstruct their body image to fit male perceptions and popular culture. According to Sarkar, the media have reconstructed the image of the beautiful Indian woman as gentle and benign.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research uses the qualitative method of descriptive analysis. The author conducted a literature review to analyze the research object in textual materials in the form of textbooks, e-books, journals, articles, previous research reports in form of dissertations, theses, and online media. The primary data sources obtained were zettai ryouiki videos and news from a video entitled "Ad Promotion on Female Thighs in Japan." In addition, the study also used data from several websites concerned with zettai ryouiki such as the Japan Times, Japan Today, and the website of Absolute Territory PR, Facebook, and Twitter to support the research. All data related to this study were collected and used to inform a descriptive analysis of the relevant literature. Furthermore, a descriptive analysis was conducted by describing the problem based on the data and information obtained. Qualitative data analysis takes place during and after data collection. The process of analysis flows from the initial stage to the conclusion, therefore as stated by Miles & Huberman (Salim, 2006) the analysis of qualitative data is expressed as a flow model. Therefore, the analytical process is not limited by chronological constraints.

The authors used a sociological perspective to examine the problems in this study. The authors explored the media's continuing objectification of women and its impact on society. When analyzing a problem, references to theories or concepts are needed to assist the author's discovery of empirical answers. The authors used Michel Foucault's theory of power to understand how power operates to form a dutiful body. Mass media, in particular advertising, is part of a power network that confronts the body with a set of rules that determine the ideal body. The concept of subculture is used to analyze the change in values in Japanese women, especially young women as subjects of the zettai ryouiki phenomenon. Women are not only objects that have their body parts used, but the women themselves want to offer their thighs as advertising space.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. *The Phenomenon of Zettai Ryouiki*

Zettai Ryouiki translates as absolute territory, referring to the exposed thigh area in the gap between a short skirt or shorts and socks over the knee. Anime "Neon Genesis Evangelion" was the first to use the term zettai ryouiki. However, Kaneda (2009) mentioned that the term was first widespread in Otaku groups (fans of Japanese subcultures such as anime and manga) as one of the Moe character

attributes. Moe referred to a sacred area that is not affected by anyone [10]. According to Atsumi (Daily Mail, 2013), zettai ryouiki became popular in Otaku culture due to these fictional characters in manga and anime, and shortly after it became a popular fashion trend in Japan.

Despite its strong popularity in Japanese society, girls dressed to resemble manga and anime characters are immortalized. In 2012 a Japanese advertising agency took advantage of zettai ryouiki's pantheon style to conduct an advertising campaign and launched Absolute Territory PR (Zettai Ryouiki Koukoku). Absolute Territory PR employs young, beautiful, and attractive women who are required to wear short skirts or pants, high socks up to the knees to highlight the thigh area, and use temporary tattoos/stickers on their thighs to promote various products. Women who participate in advertising by attaching temporary ad tattoos to the thigh area will stroll downtown for more than eight hours a day and also post advertisements on their thighs in social media, so this draws the audience's eye to the "thigh area."

B. *Advertising Media and Authority Over Female Body*

Advertising is a social practice that involves a number of relationships between people and objects, symbols, power, communication, and satisfaction (Jhally, 1987, p. 22). Research conducted by Bratu (2013) showed that ads use stereotyped images of women to convey messages about women as sexual objects. The images of women that dominate advertisements in magazines and television are of a weak, childish creature, only able to display her physical body. Bungin (2006) added that such women are not depicted as intelligent, but obedient and submissive to men. Sullivan and O'Connor (1988) argued that there is a 60% increase in ads depicting women in decorative roles. Advertising's utilization of the female body is common in many magazine ads, television, and new types of ads that are affixed to the female body itself. In this way, media images of the female body become a benchmark for the assessment of women. A woman who has a sexy body, clear and smooth thighs, and a beautiful face can be hired by advertising agencies. As a result, many products that are not related to women's body issues are promoted such as the launching of the latest music album of rock band Green Day, an ad promoting a futsal spot, ads launching rocket news24 domain, ads launching a book, all on the female thigh (see Fig 2). This is based on the assumption that women with all their biological beauty draw attention to various types of products. The use of a woman's thigh is based on the belief that women's value depends on their physical body.

The body belongs to each individual subject, it is not public, because it is the responsibility of the owner to regulate and maintain the body. However, reality challenges this view. Nowadays, many anxieties are expressed through women's bodies, which have been objectified as fallen bodies, subjugated, and overpowered. Women have been deprived of bodily freedom since they secured equal economic and political opportunities by advertising agencies as rulers and owners of capital (Foucault, 1979). The control imposed on women by advertising agencies as owners of capital has resulted in gender injustice. Women appear as objects in mass media advertisements more and more often, due to a low position of women in Japanese society (Ford,

Kramer, Honeycutt, & Casey, 1998). Some ads depict ideal

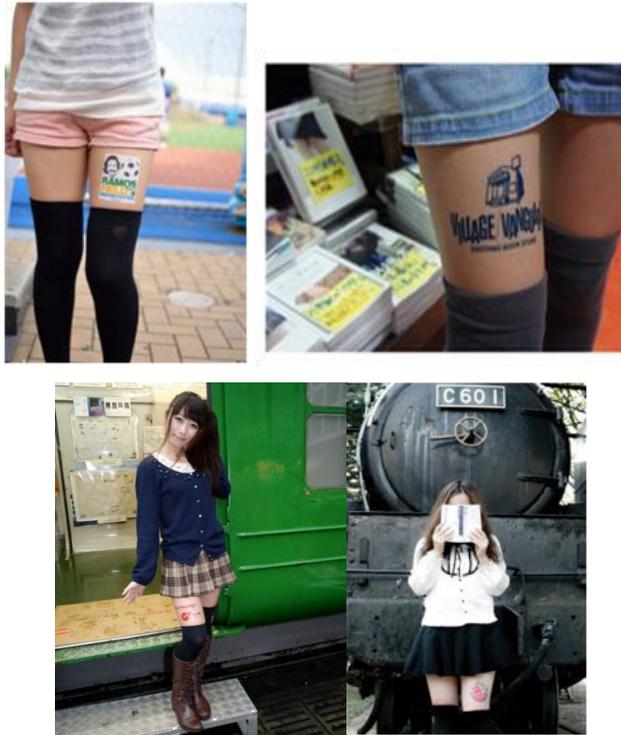


Fig. 2. Some examples of advertisements placed on a woman's thigh

female body standards to reinforce men's role in manipulating women to fulfill their sexual fantasies. Female models are objects created to achieve this fantasy, while the male is the creator. This stereotype puts women at a serious disadvantage. Ads affixed to the women's thighs have become an object of public consumption as an advertising space. In line with Bartky's ideas in his writings "Foucault, Modernization and Patriarchal Power" women are positioned in society as benign and obedient bodies. Power is internalized by our bodies, and institutions shape our lives by controlling our bodies (Foucault in Bartky, 1998). Bartky argued that this situation is so entrenched that all societies are disciplined this way, and ultimately, discipline perpetuates those things that are considered valuable. Society seeks to change women's minds. Women have more freedom to move and do what they want, but social pressures compel women to look beautiful, have the ideal body size by adopting the appropriate gestures and adorning the appearance of each body part seen. Bartky claimed that women have been subjected to a new method of control, which they have adopted without struggle or resistance [1].

In harmony with Foucault, Bartky asserts that the body is deemed a more useful force if it is obedient and submissive. Coleman (2001) argued that one's behavior in response to power relations can be understood as follows: there is a power relationship between one principal actor and another taking place, where the former has the right to control certain actions of the latter. Here the advertising agency has become the controller of the female body. Although the body structurally belongs to an individual whose ownership rights cannot be transferred, advertising agencies can control it because they have the authority to subdue the body. They regulate women's bodies through clothes, at work, through

behavior, appearance, and so on. The advertising agency is subject to no rules or policies that regulate this control.

The prominent appearance in the female body of the *zettai ryouiki* actor uses minimal clothing that has been regulated by advertising, indicating that the physical beauty of the female body is paramount to attract the attention of the public, especially men. Until now, depictions of the female body in the mass media have remained an objectified display to lure male attention. In the *zettai ryouiki* phenomenon, the female body is represented as a creature subject to the authority of the owner of capital. In other words, women and their sexuality are seen by the media as commodity. Women's sexuality is directed and disciplined to fulfill men's desires and to attract consumers in the capitalist system engraved by the mass media. The system of media driven capitalism is closely related to the patriarchal system that is deeply rooted in Japanese society, and influences mass media culture. In the *zettai ryouiki* phenomenon, the female body is displayed as an advertising space because the female body is used by powerful advertising agencies to attract the attention of anyone who sees the advertisement. Power is used to shape women into advertising models. Women are still the main choice because men basically like women who look sexy. Sensual imagery is often used to strengthen this attraction.

In this case, the utilization of female body emphasizes the patriarchal ideology of femininity, and encourages a relationship between women and their bodies to produce a benign body caught in the rules. Historically, the disciplinary normalization of the female body has been part of a social control strategy. The use of young female models attempts to persuade the target market by using sexy clothes as an attraction. The sexy body attracts attention therefore, an ad affixed to a woman's thigh is a strategy that attracts the public's attention. Data from male respondents on NET24 impressions related to "Ad Promotion on Women's Thighs" in Japan May 7, 2017, showed that the feet and thighs are important indicators of women's sexual attractiveness for Japanese men.

Knee-high socks emphasize these parts of the female body, and therefore, the men admitted they became very interested. *Zettai ryouiki* not only derives from the field of fashion. In *manga* and *anime* series, the female fictional characters wearing knee-high socks and short skirts are very popular among male audiences, and cater to men's desires who recognize their attractiveness. The attractiveness of the female body is used to enhance the power of advertising, to convey the message of advertising, and to evoke an emotional response, such as pleasure, even lust [21]. Therefore, advertising often depicts an interesting model in a sensual pose. Research conducted by Japanese advertising has explained the reason for using the female body in advertising is to enhance the appeal of messages (Lazer et al., 1985; Ramaprasad & Hasegawa, 1990).

On the other hand, there are some women who feel happy to rent their body parts as advertising space. For example, a woman named Miho Matsumoto was at an advertising event in Japan for the launch of DVD *Ted* and offered to put a *Ted* DVD ad sticker on her thigh. Miho in *Netmediatama* (2013) revealed that she was not ashamed of the ad sticker taped to her thigh. According to Bungin (2006, p. 357) this challenges the other side of women's subjectivity and sexual behavior which refers to the stereotype of women

and their desire to please others, especially men. Kawecki (2010) added that women feel they should look attractive and are pleased to make themselves happy by sacrificing their body and mind; at least this is a stereotype created by the media to facilitate the acceptance of ideas that have been formed inappropriately and unjustly.

C. Zettai Ryouiki as Young Women Subculture in Japan

Zettai ryouiki is a young women's clothing style in Japan. Researchers have studied the groups that appear to be associated with *zettai ryouiki* including *Otaku*, *cosplayer* (people who like costumes that resemble characters in *manga* and *anime*), and café waiters. The *Otaku* classification emerged in the 1980s and refers to individuals with a deep interest in something such as *manga* and *anime*. *Otaku* fans actively seek comprehensive knowledge and have erotic fantasies about textual and visual products, thus distinguishing themselves from 'normal' consumers. Tamaki in Kinsella (1998) proposed his idea that *manga* and *anime* were produced in a world of imaginary autonomous representations separate from the world of reality. Therefore, people dressing themselves to resemble *manga* and *anime* characters does not always result from desires projected at the consumer, but rather from the representation of sexuality created and consumed by autonomous desires.

The importance of *Otaku* fans appearance as a fictitious character is highlighted by the tendency to embrace the *kawaii* esthetic concept (cuteness), especially when mixed with sweet, flirty, and childish qualities. The use of clothing resembling characters in *manga* and *anime* demonstrates the dominant expression of Japanese femininity and female sexuality is the 'cute' and 'pretty' style. Kinsella (1995) has conducted a scientific analysis of the *kawaii* phenomena in Japan since the 1970s. He traces the emergence of the *kawaii* cultural style in the development of youth culture. The relationship between cuteness and cultural attitudes toward adolescent girls forms the basis of desire. Women who have an *Otaku* hobby began using *zettai ryouiki* by following fictitious female characters in *manga* and *anime*. Young women who look cute also adopt the fashionable *zettai ryouiki* style on special occasions as *cosplay*.



Fig. 3. Three women promoted the news24 recketnews24rocket domain on their thighs

The three women in Fig. 3 are Anna Tachibana, Mari Watanabe, and Erina Kamiya, who helped to promote a domain on their thighs. The *perpak* style displayed by the three women above resembles fictitious characters in the *manga* and *anime kawaii*. As Tamaki (Kinsella, 1998) has said, women presenting themselves as *manga* and *anime* characters does not always result from projections of desire

at consumers, but from the representation of sexuality created and consumed by autonomous desires. They mimic the clothing style of fictitious characters in public with the intention of appearing unique, plus the sticker ad patch on their thigh adds a unique dimension to their appearance. A young woman named Umezu (26 years old) who was interviewed by one of the journalists via a Weekly Magazine website, gave her opinion about women who become hosts of *zettai ryouiki* advertising, as follows:

「テレビの情報番組を見て知り、興味を持ちました。シールを足に貼るだけでいいなら、簡単だと思って。普段からこういう服装が多いので、抵抗はなかったです。シールも色やデザインのバリエーションがあるので、応募の際にどの服にあわせるかを考えて決めています。ファッションの一部として楽しめるのがいいですね」

(Interviewed on June 27th 2013)

Source: <http://myvaio.sony.jp/magazine/130627/>

Umezu stated that she was initially interested after watching information on TV. Simply placing an ad sticker on one of her legs seemed very easy to do. Besides, she also has many fashion clothes like *zettai ryouiki*. As the ad stickers have a variety of colors and designs, she can coordinate them with the appropriate clothes at the time of enrollment. Umezu added that this kind of advertising technique can be enjoyed as a part of fashion. In this case, the dressing style is seen as an ideal way to achieve pleasure and what is desired can be achieved, such as popularity. Advertising agencies publish photos on social media accounts, so the followers of *zettai ryouiki* compete to look attractive and increase their popularity in cyberspace. According to data in the Daily Mail (2012) more than 1,300 young Japanese women aged 18 and above have registered their thighs as advertising space. It can be said that young women aged 18 years and above are experiencing a period of change, both physically and psychologically. In addition, several attributes are inherent in young women in general, namely great curiosity and an interest in trying new things.

Images of fictional characters are also an important influence on the image of Japanese women. Café waiters use an *zettai ryouiki* style, and various characters in *manga* and *anime* also provide inspiration for the lifestyle adopted by young Japanese women. This was confirmed by Galbraith (2013) who describes how young women look at pictures of fictitious characters as an ideal picture that they want to emulate. Young women no longer explore and reflect their true identity, but imitate other identities. Therefore, young women adhere to a subculture that benefits capitalist advertising agencies.

Given the power of the media tends to dominate women, women are encouraged to be sweet and submissive figures. The capitalist system has manipulated women into becoming victims of all forms of commodification. Through advertising campaigns on women's thighs, the formation of a young woman's life has been reduced to merely taking care of her appearance and body shape. As a transitional group

growing into adult women, women in their late teens are considered appropriate targets for capitalists.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the existence of ads displayed on women's thighs has claimed the female body as a host of public advertising. The *zettai ryouiki* advertising campaign uses its own selling and attraction points to exercise power over women's bodies. Another observation is that women are happy to rent their body part as advertising space. This is motivated by the *zettai ryouiki* style of *kawaii* (cute) looks which resemble fictitious *manga* and *anime* characters. In addition, women display their thighs as a representation of sexuality created by the desire to make a unique impression and increase their popularity.

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