

Breaking Free from Beauty's Captivity? ---“Anti-Beauty Duty” Influencer Culture

by

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Defense Date: March 28, 2025

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts
in the Program in Critical Asian Humanities
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

My thesis focuses on the beauty and “anti- beauty” influencer culture in Japan and mainland China. The Japanese beauty influencer has become an important trend in the beauty industry by promoting a cute image, an aesthetic deeply rooted in Japanese culture’s emphasis on feminine softness and youthfulness. The commercialization of kawaii culture is reflected in the cooperation with beauty brands, where influencers drive sales and attract consumers. Now, contrast that with China’s Xiaohongshu, where we see the rise of “anti-beauty duty” activism symbolizes women's liberation and challenging postfeminist consumerism with acts such as shaving inches, which has gradually been infiltrated by commercial forces. This brings me to the core question I am trying to answer, which is how kawaii culture reinforces female body regulation through beauty bloggers. Besides, compared with the Japanese beauty industry, while the “anti-beauty duty” activism has emerged in influencer culture, there is a complex social and commercial logic behind it. Does the activism truly challenge platform capitalism, or have they been commercially deconstructed to become new traffic codes?

To answer these questions, I conducted a comparative study using digital ethnography, in-depth interviews with influencers on Xiaohongshu, and online content observation and analysis. I argue that firstly, influencers make money by selling “authenticity” through the processes of affective labor. Secondly, even when people try to resist beauty norms, platforms, and brands redirect that energy back into consumerism. Digital feminism in China is caught in a loop where rebellion is quickly absorbed, repackaged, and resold, making it difficult to escape the cycle of capitalism.

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1. Introduction

South Korea's high number of plastic surgeons reflects the country's strong beauty culture. This culture also fuels the rise of beauty influencers like Pony, who gained fame for her exceptional makeup skills. Together, these factors show how South Korea has become a global hub for both plastic surgery and beauty trends. The rise of "lookism" in South Korea has resulted in a social hierarchy based on physical appearance. In this highly competitive society, the notion that "your looks are your abilities" has become deeply radiated.

Interestingly, this phenomenon runs parallel to the fact that South Korean women are often referred to as the "pioneers of women's awakening" by other nations. The reason is that Korean women have played a significant role in propelling the feminist movement in East Asia.

6B4T is a feminist event promoted by radical Korean feminists. In the Korean-language abbreviation, "6B" refers to not buying sexist products and supporting fellow single women practicing the movement, while "4T" refers to rejecting strict beauty standards and hypersexual depictions of women in Japanese otaku culture, religion, and idol culture. Except for South Korea, "beauty" and "anti-beauty" cultures could also be seen in other East Asian countries. This shows that even in the same region, beauty culture and "anti-beauty" cultures can coexist and interact. South Korea serves as a useful reference point for analyzing other East Asia countries, such as China and Japan.

Japan has a substantial beauty industry, with a wide array of skincare products, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery being extensively marketed. Advertisements and the media

frequently perpetuate specific beauty standards, resulting in women experiencing pressure in their ongoing quest for beauty. Kawaii Culture (cute culture) significantly impacts the beauty industry, as many women are expected to embody an image of sensitivity, innocence, and reliance. Cuteness encompasses visual appearance, attitude, behavior, and social roles. In Japan, the drugstore is stocked with various brand-new beauty goods every year. Instagram has replaced people's old-fashioned fashion magazines flipping through. Meanwhile, the woman who constantly introduces her attire delicately and exquisitely has never disappeared. Some of the social media platforms commonly used today, such as YouTube and Instagram, have allowed beauty culture to influence people's daily practices in more subtle ways.

Beauty culture is also an important part of Chinese social networks. In China, Japanese fashion periodicals and beauty trends are also widely circulated and imitated. Japanese video plays, anime, and other cultural items permeated mainland China, hence impacting the beauty culture of Chinese youth. The appearance of Japanese idols, celebrities, and performers has become a model for imitation among many young Chinese individuals. The cosmetics aesthetic of Japanese actresses, characterized by vibrant eye makeups, gentle eyebrow forms, and subtle blushes, has inspired numerous Chinese women's beauty styles. With the advent of social media and cross-border e-commerce, numerous Japanese beauty businesses have penetrated the Chinese market via platforms such as Taobao, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, hence facilitating the dissemination of Japanese beauty culture. A multitude of Japanese beauty bloggers and key opinion leaders have garnered the interest and purchases of numerous Chinese consumers through the dissemination of makeup advice, product reviews, and related information. However, recently, there has been a trend on a beauty-focused

Chinese social media platform, Xiaohongshu, to “脱美役” (anti-beauty duty, tuomeiyi) “Anti-beauty” is an extension of the ‘6B4T’ action initiative proposed by radical feminists in South Korea. It is a metaphor for oppressive behaviors that force women to dress up, including makeup, long hair, nail art, dresses, accessories, and all other activities that hinder women’s freedom.

This thesis aims to compare the “beauty practice” and “anti-beauty” discourses in influencer culture, as well as the related transformation of influencer status and labor issues and the distinct features of YouTube and Xiaohongshu platforms, through a comparative study of China and Japan. The first chapter discusses Japanese beauty practices. Fashion magazines were the beginning of the influence of mass media on women’s beauty practices, and cute culture still plays an important role today. With the development of social media, influencer culture has replaced traditional media and continues to influence the audience’s aesthetic concepts and life practices. In addition, through the case analysis of Japanese beauty bloggers, this chapter attempts to analyze the content of the content published by Japanese beauty influencers, the operation mechanism of the platform, and their audience to discuss the problems and dilemmas arising from the process of beauty influencers as labor. The economic model of YouTube, the primary platform examined in the Japanese context, is centered on several strategies, including advertising, subscriptions, bonuses, and brand collaborations, all of which generate large profits for platforms and creators. Meanwhile, it derives the problems and dilemmas faced by beauty bloggers as laborers in this process. The second chapter compares and analyzes the phenomenon of “anti-beauty” activism on the Chinese Internet with Japanese beauty practices. Japanese beauty culture has been imitated and then criticized

by Chinese social media. Rising on platforms like Xiaohongshu, the “anti-beauty duty” movement questions conventional beauty standards and criticizes the pressure on women to fit appearance expectations. The movement, part of digital feminism, reflects broader societal shifts where women embrace freedom from beauty norms, such as shaving their heads or rejecting makeup. YouTube is not widely used in public life in Mainland China because of Internet regulations. Nonetheless, Xiaohongshu, a distinct and well-known social media platform in mainland China, shares YouTube’s commercialization and features a user base dominated by young women and a high level of interaction. It has created an environment for the birth of the “anti-beauty duty” movement, but it has also fostered debate. For instance, it faces complexities within commercialized environments, where activism also intersects with consumerism. Feminist influencers use platforms like Xiaohongshu for personal branding, blending activism with business interests, raising questions about the authenticity of digital feminism when financial incentives are involved.

Throughout the research process, I examined a substantial quantity of influencer-related texts, images, publicly accessible web videos, and user comments. Certain resources originate from academic specialists, while others are just the opinions of ordinary users.

Initial analyses of mass media culture in Japan primarily relied on Japanese sources. Terue Ohashi (1984) offers a study of the historical background of the evolution of female consciousness molded by the popular press. Ohashi studies the several channels of communication by which mass media affects public consciousness, concentrating mostly on advertising. A key characteristic of the Japanese context, she argues, is the recurrent amplification of masculine values as universal concepts within the media, which, in turn,

engenders a deeper gender discourse. Another research concentrates on a different category of mass media: Japanese women's magazines. Ayū Ishida (2004) examines the evolving representation of Japanese feminine beauty in the cosmetics advertising of the women's magazine *Shufu no Tomo* from 1931 to 1943. Ishida asserts that in a consumer society, the association between makeup and the portrayal of Japanese women in cosmetics commercials has experienced a significant alteration. This thesis is based on Ohashi and Ishida's analysis of the history of mass media in Japan. It further explores how social media has continued and reconstructed the narrative of beauty in traditional media and focuses on the role and significance of influencer culture in this transformation.

Before discussing the social media format, it is essential to highlight one of the most significant influences on Japanese beauty practices: kawaii culture. Anne Allison (2004) examines Pokémon in her research, analyzing how "kawaisa" (cuteness) established a distinctive case for the gaming environment. Though Allison's work does not specifically address the context of beauty practices, her study of the term "kawaii" and her investigation of the relevance of kawaii culture inside Japanese pop culture, especially among millennials, have set the stage for a more general conversation on the topic. Despite the global fascination with Japanese "kawaii culture," the majority of research predominantly centers on Japanese anime and other facets of pop culture. Maikiko Iseri (2015) incorporates "kawaii culture" into the discussion of femininity. She contends that interpretations of "kawaii" seldom address the essence of Japanese girl culture. Consequently, she examines the intricate relationship between the distinctive manner of female gender presentation in Japanese girl culture and the politics of corporeal flexibility. Iseri goes beyond merely defining "kawaii" to explore its

portrayal in contemporary media as “flexible” within the current social and economic context. She also examines the potential risks associated with this “non-normative” or “unconventional” femininity achieving the esteemed status of a “flexible body”. An examination of “kawaii culture” through the lens of beauty practices and gender discourse, before it emerged as a prominent element of popular culture, suggests that it initially represented an unsuccessful form of “girl culture rebellion.” This contrasts sharply with the “kawaii culture” as it is now perceived, which has become an integral part of Japan’s representative cultural identity. Christine Yano, who studies the worldwide spread of kawaii culture, has a similar viewpoint. Examining how Sanrio’s Hello Kitty became Japan’s soft power, she contends that kawaii is more than a visual style; it is a reflection of social behavior and identity. She addresses the historical roots and relevance of kawaii in Japanese society as well as how, as an aesthetic of obedience, kawaii is linked to feminine traits like docility and dependency, particularly in terms of gender (2013).

One of the works that is important in the context of Japanese influencer culture is Gabriella Lukács’ work called *Invisibility by Design* (2020). In this piece, Lukács discusses women and labor in the Japanese digital economy. She also analyzes different user identities in the digital economy, such as online traders or internet novelists. The analysis of net idols and bloggers was the most inspiring aspect of this research. In this context, Lukács applies the concept of affective labor to the digital economy, specifically localizing the role of bloggers within the Japanese context. This has been a key source of inspiration in developing the framework for this paper. Hector Postigo’s (2014) paper examines game bloggers as the subject of study to elucidate the platform regulations and technical social systems that

capitalize on YouTube traffic. It is an established reality that money and platforms generate influencers with increased followers via various promotional techniques and algorithms. Nevertheless, the paper also examines how content creators are alienated by these push mechanisms within the context of traffic monetization. Thomas Lamarre (2017) begins by addressing the challenges that waves of subaltern, colonial, postcolonial, and critical race studies pose to the normative geopolitical tendencies of area studies. He discusses the deadlock that re-media studies encounter when dealing with geopolitical forms and functions. By emphasizing the dynamic nature of media and the passivity, historical immutability, and cultural inertia of place, Lamarre proposes an alternative way of approaching the relationship between place and platform: platformivity. He argues that the concept of platformivity considers how media infrastructures function in parallel with national and regional forms to produce signifying modes of being that relay between disciplinary, sovereign, and biopolitical structures. Here, he uses mukbang as a case study, proposing the idea that mukbang bloggers are producing a supply of products to meet the pre-existing needs of solitary eaters. Abidin and Zoe Glatt's research on influencers is more focused on the female demographic. Crystal examines the influencer economy, the cute economy, fandom culture, and meme culture. Zoe Glatt, on the other hand, pays more attention to Twitch's live streaming culture, OnlyFans, and gender and platform labor. For example, he explores affective labor in the OnlyFans economy and how female creators make a living by "selling intimacy" (2024). This section on affective labor and the economy of intimacy will be discussed in more detail later.

The discourses of platform mechanisms and commodification are also relevant to the group of beauty bloggers. Rebecca Mardon, Mike Molesworth, and Georgiana Grigore (2018)

focus on the emotional bond between consumers and YouTube. Through a network ethnography of YouTube beauty gurus as tribal entrepreneurs, and by combining the concept of emotional labor with the theory of moral emotions, they demonstrate the importance of emotional labor for the success of tribal entrepreneurs. They also suggest that the new forms of emotional labor exhibited by tribal entrepreneurs are related to the expression of moral emotions of self-consciousness and admiration for others. These findings also extend broader emotion theories and contribute to discussions of immaterial labor. Especially in the field of beauty bloggers, the topic of closeness between influencers and their audiences offers a framework for investigating emotional labor. Transformational ideas form the essence of affective work. This relates to the transfer of emotional work, emotional rules, and social interactions from the private sphere to the public sphere, where they are processed, standardized, and subject to hierarchical control. Hochschild (2012[1983]) notes.

Transformation occurs when workers' emotional systems are designed for use in commercial and organizational settings for financial gain (Hochschild, 2012[1983]). According to her, affective conversion occurs on three levels: 1) when affective work is transferred from the private to the public sphere; 2) when affective rules are no longer about personal direction but negotiated with others; and 3) when social exchange occurs in narrow, forced channels, for example, within a specific cultural recognition (Harris, 2002) or following organizational guidelines (Hochschild, 2012[1983]). In short, when an influencer's private "emotional work" is made public and monetized (Hochschild, 2012), it becomes "affective labor." Hochschild's theory of emotional labor provides the methodological foundation for my research. This study combines emotional labor theory with the case study of beauty influencers to analyze how

they balance the contradiction between personal emotional expression and economic gains in the platform economy.

Postfeminism is an important concept in the discussion of “anti-beauty duty” activism in China. Emphasizing pluralism, intersectionality, and questions to popular culture, a third wave of feminism developed in the 1990s. Scholars in this era also changed the meaning of postfeminism. Scholars now view feminism as a rereading, re-adaptation, and transforming tool rather than as its ultimate termination. Rosalind Gill (2007) points out that postfeminist society stresses a mix of personal choice, erotic empowerment, and consumerism but may also hide systemic inequalities. Urszula M. Pruchniewska (2018) analyzes three ways in which feminist influencers reconcile the individualistic behaviors and collective feminist values needed to succeed in the digital economy through interviews with eleven feminist online authors. This is because, in today’s increasingly unstable neoliberal economy, freelancers who create content online need to self-brand, self-promote, and maintain constant interaction with their audience in order to be successful. Creating feminist content in a digital environment requires a trade-off between personal branding and promotion and the advancement of collective feminist politics. Emma Tennent and Sue Jackson discuss the relationship between celebrity feminism and other feminist genres and its impact on feminist practice and identity. The study argues that celebrities have not always been placed in the position of the “other” and that there is a growing realization that, as women, they, like all women, face many contradictions and demands in post-feminist media culture (2019).

“Anti-beauty duty” can be categorized as one of the activities of digital feminism in China. In the existing research, Jia Tan (2017) conducted interviews with various feminist and

queer media practitioners, participant observation at community events, and detailed analysis of various media forms such as social media, e-journals, digital filmmaking, film festivals, and dating app videos. Charting a new wave of feminist and Kool-Aid media activism in post-millennial China, this is a poignant and unique analysis of the convergence of digital media, feminist and queer culture, and rights consciousness in China. In the Chinese context, digital feminism cannot be separated from the issue of regulation. Yingyue Sun and Runze Ding (2024) utilize Weibo as a research platform, and by qualitatively analyzing feminist-related posts shared by Chinese beauty bloggers on Weibo, this study explores their political potential in digital feminism and its limitations.

This thesis takes a critical stance on “anti-beauty duty”, acknowledging its post-feminist challenges while questioning the legitimacy of its commercialization process. Feminist potential as a platform while also examining the limitations of Instagram as a space for feminist action. Considering the normative boundaries imposed by mainstream neoliberal capitalist discourse and Instagram's own rules and regulations, the article also further explores the limitations of feminism on Instagram. Yuejie Gu et al. (2024) take a commodified feminist perspective and use menstrual shame as a case study to explore the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu’s feminist expression. This study considers the uniqueness of feminist activism on a social media platform centered on consumption.

At present, not much attention is paid to the topic of beauty bloggers and their affective labor in the Japanese context of second sources. However, as a global phenomenon, beauty bloggers are also a hot topic in Japan. Meanwhile, the cultural background of kawaii culture and Japanese beauty practices makes the topic of beauty bloggers unique in Japan.

There are many different articles or arguments about influencers or beauty bloggers in the online environment as the first source. Therefore, this paper aims to collect these contents and conduct a more formal analysis using the experiences and opinions of real online users. For example, some videos of well-known beauty bloggers and the comment sections of their fans.

Currently, in the field of digital feminism, secondary sources in the Chinese context mostly focus on the discussion of post-feminism itself. However, this study aims to go a step further by constructing a narrative through the online activism of “anti-beauty duty”, which challenges post-feminism but may ultimately fall back into the trap of neoliberalism.

Therefore, as a cross-regional comparative study, this research is first based on secondary material. At the same time, it uses online interviews as a support of argument. Regarding the recently developed online activism of “anti-beauty duty”, this study adopts the methodology of online ethnography and conducts interviews with three influencers on Xiaohongshu who are involved in feminist activism. I use Xiaohongshu’s private chat option to get in touch with respondents when I am looking for interview subjects. Initially, I would want to present my academic background and the primary goal of my academic project. To say “hello” to new users (non-friends), Xiaohongshu has a private messaging tool. This allows me to send a message requesting permission before doing so. And the discussion may only go if the respondent has responded to my communication.

I inquire about the influencer’s particular work, opinions on the Chinese “anti-beauty duty” movement, and digital feminism during the interview, with the interviewee’s permission. “What was your original intention for the account?” is one example. What is the duration required to film or produce a post (also referred to as Xiaohongshu notes for posts)?

Which demographic makes up the majority of your fan base? What aspects of the stuff on your account do you believe fans enjoy? Do you modify the content you provide based on the tastes of your fans? And additional inquiries that have a direct bearing on the activities of influencers. Questions have also been raised about Xiaohongshu's actual purpose and the corporate partnership model. For instance, "Have you benefited from any commercial sources through your account? Is it a bandwagon, brand partnership, or something else entirely?" "Did you choose Xiaohongshu as the main platform because of its community atmosphere, which is more suitable for spreading anti-beauty narratives?" is one of the feminist activism-related questions that I use to highlight the uniqueness of Xiaohongshu as the primary platform for digital feminism. In contrast to Weibo and Douyin, what are the benefits and drawbacks of having a conversation on feminism here? Or "What are your thoughts on the claim that feminist bloggers should not accept advertisements?" The majority of these inquiries are made in audio or video format.

Since influencers are a highly influential, public-facing group, they have different views and understandings of the same thing than the general audience (Internet users). Although I have thought of a series of questions, they are not fixed and I improvise some follow-up questions based on the responses received. By engaging with participants in the movement as well as their audience, this study collects firsthand data in a more direct and accurate manner, allowing for a comparative analysis with the Japanese segment of the research.

My personal experience in Japanese studies has informed the foundation of this work within the Japanese environment. Due to the advanced development of social media, East

Asia has achieved unprecedented interconnectedness. As a participant in both the Chinese and Japanese internet, I seek to create a connection and facilitate discourse within the realm of regional research, examining the portrayal of the same internet culture across diverse contexts. Kawaii culture and beauty bloggers have become well-established subjects of academic inquiry. However, within the Chinese context, there exists a diverse array of cultural expressions that stem from this phenomenon. Consequently, I intend to utilize mainland China as an additional research site and highlight the limitations of the prevailing influencer phenomena that may be disregarded.

2. Beauty practice in Japan

2.1 Start with fashion magazines

According to Terue Ohashi (1984), the first baby boom generation of women in Japan, born between 1947 and 1949, were the first to actively embrace post-World War II lifestyles and products such as television, miniskirts, and the Beatles, and were seen as pioneers of post-war fashion. Even though they were referred to as the forerunners of post-war fashion, they could still clearly recall the material shortages and hardship they had known as kids. They differed in this respect from the younger generation born around 1980, who were raised during a period of prosperity and have seen their fortunes grow over time. Baby boomer women yearned for new goods and a new culture since they had witnessed a sharp rise in material wealth and a strong rejection of the previous environment and beliefs. Young individuals who follow in their footsteps, however, are perceived as less politically conscious than their predecessors because they are dominated by the “logic of consumption”. There is a perception that this generation has a very high degree of acceptance and compliance with the mainstream media because they were born during a period when television was getting more and more popular, especially among teenage girls and even women in their thirties at that time. Rather than promoting a diversity of minority viewpoints, the mass media has often reinforced the perspectives of the establishment and the majority. As a result, the media’s consumerist logic has exerted total control over these new generations of Japanese women.

A second wave of new publications was introduced in 1977 by women's periodicals, and the intended readership shifted as well. With the emergence of magazines like *More* and

Croissant, the gossipy tone of conventional women's periodicals was abandoned. Instead, they suggested a glamorous lifestyle for women (Ohashi, 1984). According to a 2001 study that examined body representations in beauty advertisements, criteria of beauty were represented as having a small face, a thin form, and a pale complexion. Furthermore, the reverse of these traits was also made explicit: a chubby body, particularly with unpolished faces, arms, legs, waists, buttocks, and skin that is dry, discolored, and dull. Individuals possessing these traits were viewed as incomplete and characterized as "just a little feminine". This kind of woman is considered incomplete since she is sometimes described as "a woman who is just a little bit perfect" (Zhou, 2001). Regarding cosmetics, Ishida (2004) examined advertisements for cosmetics from 1931 to 1945 and explained how the representation of feminine beauty evolved. Cosmetics are now considered a daily necessity rather than a frivolity or luxury. Women have been molding their bodies to fit the ideal body shape since they are told that this is the standard of beauty that society has placed on them.

2.2 Kawaii culture of attempted rebellion

Mass media, such as TV dramas and publications, play a significant role in shaping and propagating Japan's stereotypical aesthetic values for women. One of the most influential cultural phenomena in this regard is "kawaii culture", which has greatly impacted women's behavioral norms. One of the initial turning moments for women to break free from the stereotype of singular beauty was the emergence of kawaii culture. In Japan, "kawaii" first appeared as a modern cultural movement in the 1970s, and by the 1980s, it had spread across the country (Cheek and Fernando, 2012). Sharon Kinsella (1995) adds that kawaii culture

promotes social behavior and appearance that is sweet, cute, innocent, pure, simple, sincere, gentle, fragile, weak, and inexperienced. This style rejects maturity in favor of naivety, often accompanied by an intentional display of childishness, dependence, and weakness. This may seem confusing, but in fact, “cute” fashion can be seen as a form of rebellion—an act of rejecting traditional social values and established norms. This particular model of femininity specifically opposes the dominance of the ideal or traditional femininity required of women in Japanese society (Iseri, 2015). It is a kind of petty rebellion, not the conscious, aggressive, and sexually provocative rebellion typical of Western youth culture. Instead of emphasizing their maturity and independence through sexual provocation, Japanese youth show their immaturity and inability to shoulder social responsibilities by appearing pre-sexual and vulnerable (Monden, 2011).

By dismantling some of the gender stereotypes in capitalist organizations, the kawaii movement has worked to increase diversity from the 1970s and 1980s. The democratization of media creation and production is the main goal of the capitalist system. Women are the primary producers and consumers in this setting. Consequently, a nationwide cute craze that includes apparel, accessories, TV series, animation, comics, and music was made possible by kawaii culture. Kawaii culture allows for the expression of more feminine, youthful, individual, and playful behaviors, even while it also has characteristics that may be objectionable to women (Ribeiro, 2021). In a way, it also challenged what is deemed grownup, attractive, seductive, and feminine, challenging the dominant sex and beauty paradigms influenced by the media.

Harajuku is the “sacred place” or origin of kawaii culture. Koga Reiko (2009) defines Harajuku kawaii fashion as “a fashion style that yearns for anarchy and weirdness”. The typical Harajuku girl’s fashion often incorporates elements of “mix and match,” “kitsch,” “anarchy,” or “punk”. They may wear mismatched outfits, “for example, a vintage sweatshirt with a frilly short skirt and a toy tiara on their heads” (Koga, 2009). Harajuku girls’ kawaii fashion aims to establish their own style, deliberately deviating from mainstream culture and standardized fashion as much as possible. By redefining aesthetic standards, it becomes a tool for self-expression. “kawaii culture” shows a strong spirit of independence, a rebellion against patriarchy, and a desire to assert one’s own role. It thus allows more people to enjoy the feminine qualities they want to embody (Iseri, 2015). Megan Catherine Rose also points to the role of Harajuku kawaii fashion as a fashion choice in providing emotional and imaginative avenues of expression and individualization (2020).

However, as the culture of cuteness spread around the world with the popularity of manga and anime, the concept of cuteness began to be fixed again by the mass media and became rigid once more. Contemporary Japanese society is full of kawaii images and styles. This aesthetic is found in all forms of mass media: manga, anime, and highbrow pop art; fashion and all types of entertainment, including pornography; advertising and public relations; industrial design, including robots; instruction manuals and street signs, etc (Macpherson and Bryant, 2018). Japan’s national public broadcaster NHK launched a program called “Tokyo Kawaii TV” in 2008. This program was aimed at young Japanese women and introduced popular products and topics related to kawaii culture in Shibuya or Harajuku (Iseri, 2015). Japanese idols from the Showa era (1926-1989) to the Heisei and

Reiwa eras all had similar appearances in terms of design. Many idols have bangs, natural black or dark brown hair, and flat eyebrows that are attractive to men (Yoshikawa, 2021). Among the popular beauty and fashion styles of the moment, “landmine style” (地雷系, jirai kei) and “mass-produced” (量産型, ryōsan-gata) are the two most prominent. The term "mass production type" refers to women who share similar makeup, outfits, and hairstyles, as if they were produced on the same assembly line. This style is characterized by a cute, princess-like aesthetic, incorporating elements like lace, ribbons, bows, and pastel pinks. It exudes a soft, sweet aura. The makeup typically features ultra-white skin, heavy blush, and droopy eyeliner, further enhancing the delicate, childlike appearance. Shoes with thick soles and lace bows help create the illusion of slimmer, more slender legs. The color palette typically includes pink, black, blue, and white, and outfits often feature Sanrio cartoon elements, adding to the overall adorable aesthetic. Pale makeup that creates the impression of having just cried, featuring dark red lower eyeshadow and heavy blush, gives off a fragile, almost pitiable appearance. In summary, the charming, well-behaved image is still strongly associated with cute culture, regardless of whether it is the popular “mass production type” or the more specialized “landmine style”.

More importantly, kawaii culture has now become one of the iconic products of Japanese pop culture diplomacy. In 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed three women as “Kawaii Taishi” (ambassadors of cuteness) to promote Japanese pop culture overseas as part of the “Cool Japan” policy by showcasing specific clothing types that represent Japanese kawaii: Lolita, Harajuku fashion, and schoolgirl uniforms. The police departments of Japan’s 47 prefectures have designed their own original mascots. These

mascots convey a cute and beautiful aesthetic and are used to promote the close relationship between the people, observers, and brands, and to attract potential customers (Allison, 2004). In addition, the closing ceremony of the 2016 Rio Olympics featured a short promotional film for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The video showcased not only athletes and iconic Japanese landmarks like Shibuya Crossing and Tokyo Tower, but also included cute images of characters such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, and Pac-Man (Borggreen, 2011). At the end of the promotional video, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe appears as an animated video game character, Super Mario, who “jumps” through the tunnel connecting the Tokyo and Rio Olympics closing ceremonies (NHK Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 2016). As can be seen, kawaii culture was widely used at this time by government agencies and the mass media to promote ideas, foster civil cooperation, and even become part of the country’s soft power. As kawaii culture has moved from subculture to mainstream, it has become inextricably linked with the female body and a specific Japanese image (Iseri, 2015).

2.3 Beauty culture in the era of social media

Media consumption has changed significantly as social media's expansion and the rise of influencers occurred (Abidin, 2018). Social media has grown ever more crucial in the Japanese media scene. The epidemic of Covid-19 underlined even more the social and economic value of digital networks. In 2019, digital advertising revenue in Japan surpassed TV advertising for the first time (Senden Kaigi, 2020; AdverTimes, 2022). One crucial element in this is social media's role in society (Eckstein, 2021). “Interactivity” is social media's defining feature. In addition to communicating with one another, users can work

together to produce content. More rapidly, broadly, and dramatically than in conventional media, social media spreads knowledge (Ting, 2021). Influencers—who present their personal identities on social media—represent a part of a more independent, neoliberal society in which celebrity permeates daily technology activities.

Influencers create content on video games, radio, food, travel, and beauty among other topics. Especially in the early days of social media, beauty products started to be a popular subject for material, and woman consumers still find this intriguing. By producing and disseminating material about makeup application methods and product evaluations, influencers in this industry aim to establish enduring bonds with their audience. These individuals are referred to as personal media, beauty influencers, or beauty producers (Kim, 2017). Another way to classify influencers is based on how many followers they have. According to Gilpark (2018), super influencers have over a million followers, macro influencers have between 100,000 and 1,000,000 followers, micro-influencers have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers, and nano influencers, often referred to as potential influencers, have less than 1,000 followers.

YouTube is a leading social media site for users to create, modify, and disseminate user-generated content, and beauty vloggers occupy a central position. The main reason for choosing YouTube as the platform for the case study in this research is precisely that: the video-driven model of YouTube and its strong commercialization features. By use of visual material, the platform provides a dynamic approach to include audiences, hence allowing producers to show their work more vividly and interactively. Furthermore, YouTube's proven revenue system gives creators a clear road to development and sustainability, so

appealing platform for both users and artists. Based on the above background on the development of Japanese kawaii culture in the mass media, it is not difficult to conclude that appearance is defined and disseminated through traditional and social media. The rise and success of beauty YouTubers have reinforced the emphasis on ideal body standards in the current media ecosystem, making YouTube an ideal platform for product marketing (Rosara, 2020). The beauty influencer market is phenomenal; in 2019, its global market size was estimated at 8 billion USD (Forbes, 2020). This highlights the significant earning potential of the industry and its value to companies aiming to persuade consumers to buy and use their products (Berkowitz, 2017). Furthermore, users' and influencers' activities and behaviors in the digital realm have intensified the need for a flawless appearance, and they are concentrating more on employing digital processing, image enhancement, and filters to achieve these ideal looks (Castillo-Abdul, 2021). The standardization and enhancement of photographs through "beauty practices" have reached unprecedented levels, with a wide range of products now available to help achieve this idealized look.

The creative styles and channel content of Japan's million-level beauty YouTubers are diverse. According to the popularity on YouTube, this thesis selects three beauty YouTubers with very different but typical development paths for case analysis. The first influencer, Saaya さあや, with 1.08 million subscribers, was formerly a model for the teen fashion magazine Popteen, making her particularly popular among high school students. Saaya's makeup works are mainly cute. In addition to makeup videos, Saaya's content primarily focuses on recommending beauty products. Since the general feedback from viewers on these products is "good quality and low price" and "the effect is as promised", she

has gained many followers. The second is a totally different style, called *またそ* (maataso). She refers to herself as the “miracle ugly girl born in Okayama” and is well-known online as the queen of “fraudulent makeup”. Her fan following is growing at an impressive rate, with one of her makeup videos reaching a staggering 10 million views, making it her most-watched content. By showcasing her exceptional makeup skills and highlighting the striking contrast between her bare skin and the finished look, she sets herself apart from other “natural beauty” makeup influencers. Finally, Akari Yoshida is a member of the Japanese girl idol group NMB48 and opened her own YouTube channel in 2016. Most of her video sharing focuses on makeup tutorials, sharing of favorite products, and shopping. As a member of a girl idol group, her role as a video blogger has brought her closer to her fans, creating a sense of intimacy and connection.

After switching from a fashion magazine to a YouTube platform, Saaya continues to post Japanese makeup in a very usual cutesy manner. Her videos are filled with pink, white, and cute elements, including “hearts”, which can be seen in everything from her account avatar to the background and video covers. This playful and charming aesthetic helps reinforce her personal brand and appeal. Topics like “the ideal way to draw eyeliner”, “making hydrated and translucent lips”, “getting radiant skin”, and more are covered in Saaya’s beauty videos. Since the YouTube platform has created a definition of what is an acceptable aesthetic feature, it has also become the primary space for creating and disseminating various beauty-related content (Castillo-Abdul, 2021). By appealing to the pursuit of beauty, people gather in the field of short beauty videos with the goal of understanding fashion, improving their image, and reinventing themselves. The keywords

“beauty” posted by these influential YouTubers will quickly be noticed by the public and widely spread on social media, thus further influencing real-life aesthetic standards. The introduction of makeup goods is another crucial aspect of the Saaya channel, in addition to films showing fundamental makeup techniques. Since it is difficult for people to know the real effect of the product before buying, the UGC (user-generated content) communication model of short makeup videos came into being. This model allows ordinary people to also publish product evaluation videos of their own trials and comparisons in the makeup community and become makeup bloggers.



Figure 1: The home page of Saaya’s YouTube channel¹

In this user-generated content (UGC) model, if Saaya focuses on recommending affordable and high-quality products, she is likely to earn the admiration and loyalty of her fans. However, the case of Maataso, which emphasizes the sense of contrast, is more convincing. The title of the first video on Maataso’s homepage is “A major transformation without plastic surgery, a makeup animation with a plastic surgery-level effect”, and the cover

¹ The homepage of Saaya’s Youtube channel. See: <https://www.youtube.com/@saaya3831>

shows the strong contrast between Maatasa's representative plain, even somewhat unattractive, bare face and her cute image. If we say that short beauty videos provide the public with beauty information, what else do they provide? The role models presenting in short beauty videos can provide the audience with more psychological satisfaction and self-expectations as a form of encouragement. The "sense of self-efficacy" proposed by American psychologist Bandura refers to the degree of confidence people have in their ability to use their skills to complete a task. The alternative experience provided by social role models, i.e., the demonstration effect, is one of the important ways in which efficacy is formed. Moreover, the greater the similarity between the role model and the observer in terms of age, gender, education, physical characteristics, status, and experience, the more relevant the work is to the observer's own life. This increases the impact on the observer's sense of self-similarity and enhances their self-efficacy, making them more likely to believe in their ability to achieve similar outcomes. If people see others who are like themselves succeed through sustained effort, they will believe that they, too, can achieve success. In contrast, in unretouched videos that show real people with flaws, products or beauty techniques that produce significant results are more likely to resonate with the audience and strengthen individuals' self-confidence, creating a strong expectation of self-image. In short videos, the products being tested and the impressive makeup skills on display create the illusion of achieving the desired appearance with just a few simple steps. The stark contrast between the "before" and "after" looks creates a sense of identification with the person in the video, capturing the audience's attention and sparking intense interest.



Figure 2: Maataso’s video of the “before” and “after” makeup²

Through certain emotional reactions, YouTubers can build a relationship with their audience because of the platform’s interactive capabilities. In addition to becoming a popular beauty blogger, Akari Yoshida was formerly a member of the girl idol group NMB48 Team. Following her 2010 debut, Yoshida started to question whether she should graduate (卒業, *sotsugyō*), which refers to a Japanese idol quitting a group or an artist leaving a program, from NMB48 because of the growing number of gifted newcomers arriving. She had the notion to put her cosmetic films online at that time, though, after she unexpectedly realized how popular the videos, she periodically shared on Twitter appeared to be. Yoshida declared that she became a YouTuber on February 2, 2016, when she started uploading videos to the platform. By regularly sharing her own opinions on “femininity” (女子力, *joshi-ryoku*) and creating her stance, Yoshida’s YouTube channel has gradually attracted a steady following of female viewers. In addition to videos of beauty tutorials, Yoshida’s channel also often features videos of her chatting with her fans, which brings her closer to them. As a beauty blogger with very high femininity, many fans evaluate her videos as healing. This is closely

² Maataso's video covers on her YouTube channel usually feature a strong contrast between the 'before' and 'after' makeup. See: <https://www.youtube.com/@maataso591>

related to the affective labor generated by the audience and will be further elaborated in the following content.

2.4 Behind the scenes with a beauty blogger

Originally drawing followers with their objective, often critical, assessments of cosmetic products or makeup procedures, beauty bloggers have become key influencers in the industry. But as they get more well-known, they start directly targeting the audience (Mardon, R., Molesworth, M., & Grigore, G., 2018) via sponsored content on their YouTube channels, blogs, and social media. Additionally, they launch their own brands of beauty and non-beauty products, such as books, magazines, clothing, and more. At this point, the emotional connection between YouTubers and followers becomes particularly important, which provides the context for talking about affective labor in the context of beauty bloggers. From the theoretical framework of affective labor, people can see the central role of private emotions in performing labor tasks. In the context of influencers, beauty blogger's affective labor practices are reflected in the complexity of managing emotions and shaping self-branding. They do this by self-branding in some way, interacting with followers on an emotional level, and gaining quantifiable and monetizable attention (Hopkins, 2019). Self-branding refers to the strategic use of content and the specific ways in which it is presented on camera and communicated to an audience to attract attention and gain publicity. In Theresa M. Senft's work about microcelebrity and the branded self, she describes self-branding as, "As with branded merchandise, there is a commitment to developing and maintaining one's own online identity" (2013, 70). YouTube plays a crucial role as a platform by constantly

encouraging users to compete for attention and status and rewarding them financially for self-promotion.

On the one hand, beauty bloggers' self-branding is demanded by the ever-changing tactility and experience of the YouTube platform. The instrumental value of affective labor at this point is the method of reconsidering content output by increasing followers and likes and based on reader feedback" (Glatt, 2024). After all, the influencer industry is built on advertisers, social media marketers, and algorithmic systems, all of which follow the "principle of quantification, where bigger usually means better" (Duffy, 2016). In this context, beauty bloggers' self-branding is included in the attention economy. Bloggers in this business model must continuously draw and keep their viewers' attention as digital platforms consider attention as a limited resource. By encouraging increased watching time, interaction, and sharing, platform algorithms help to enable this and hence strengthen the importance of contact between bloggers and their followers. In addition, some functional mechanisms in the YouTube platform profoundly influence bloggers' behavior and content creation. For example, YouTube's long-form video format and instant feedback mechanisms enable bloggers to build deep relationships with their viewers, continuously providing and adapting content to suit viewer needs. The video's comment section, live-streaming feature, and interactive formats such as likes and stumps provide bloggers with instant viewer feedback that helps them optimize and adjust their content. These platform features not only promote viewer engagement and interaction, but also further personalization and differentiation of brands. In addition, the analytics tools provided by YouTube allow bloggers to track viewer behavior and optimize their content strategy to maximize the appeal and spread of attention.

On the other hand, by appealing to a broader audience through commoditization and establishing commercial agreements with beauty product advertisers, beauty bloggers can increase their earnings and supplement their income (Raun, 2018). As described above, algorithmically governed visibility is widely recognized as one of the key factors in measuring online success. It not only influences the pricing of online celebrities but also plays a crucial role in shaping influencer rates in significant ways. Brands rely on visibility numbers to select collaborators and evaluate influencer profiles and efforts. The level of visibility is closely tied to a brand's negotiating power, and the sense of control that influencers perceive they have over the algorithms on each social media platform significantly impacts the types of content they choose to work on (Fan, 2024).

YouTube has popularized the celebrity effect, encouraging “self-presentation” as well as commodification. Amidst YouTube's high level of commercialization in recent years, many beauty bloggers now make YouTube video productions their primary profession, constantly adapting their social media content to the expectations and desires of their audience (including fans and corporate sponsors), as their income depends on dynamic, plastic, “real” social media content (Davenport, 2021). According to statistics, Japanese YouTubers earn an average of 100-300 yen (about \$0.7-2.1) per 1,000 views from advertisement shares, which is lower than the global average of \$2-5 per 1,000 for beauty bloggers, forcing creators to rely more on sponsorship partnerships. Therefore, the immediate question is how to “sell yourself” or how to create an emotional link with your audience. In this context, the affective labor of Japanese beauty bloggers is manifested in the following ways.

First, the sense of self-expression by beauty bloggers can be seen as a form of affective labor. Turning what would otherwise be considered private into a public display of self, gives a sense of authenticity, immediacy, and intimacy, as if it were based on authentic self-communication (Ibrahim, 2021). Crawford discusses the formation of an “ambient intimacy” which can be extended to the relationship between YouTubers and their followers, i.e., a shared emotional experience in which beauty bloggers develop an intimate connection with audiences they have never met outside of their social platform (similar to the friendship) (Crawford, 2009). However, as with “real world” friendships, these relationships depend on trust and a degree of openness and transparency. This makes it important for YouTubers to build trusting relationships with their followers and to appear authentic and trustworthy (Davenport, 2021). Maataso has always faced her viewers with a veiled image, creating a relaxed, approachable image. The themes of her videos are mostly funny, such as “What’s it like to put on makeup on a crazy bumpy car” or “Putting on makeup on a weight-loss machine”. These themes are not intended to uphold an elegant or dignified image. Instead, the moments when Maataso humorously makes a fool of herself while creating these videos are designed to make herself more relatable to the average viewer.

In addition, expressing embarrassment publicly constitutes a way of expressing the affective labor of self-consciousness. For example, in the video entitled, “Roasting Makeup Remarks from a Year Ago,” the narration includes phrases such as “ugly girl who was scared by her past self,” “disgusting,” “black history,” “cannot read katakana at all,” and so on, etc. These moral feelings of self-consciousness, such as guilt and embarrassment, are brought into the public sphere through public expression and are often praised by followers for their

honesty and integrity. In the comments on Maataso's trolling videos, there are many positive comments such as "I can't help but feel good about it, it's very real and cute," and "I can see that you have a good personality".

Second, beauty bloggers put in the effort to try to establish intimacy with their audience in addition to sharing their "authentic selves". "Intimacy is an important and necessary relationship between video form and content as well as the relationship between creator and viewer", claims Raun (2018). These beauty bloggers nevertheless need to project a "down-to-earth" image or somehow make the audience relate to them, even with their sizable fan bases and aggressive "self-branding" tactics (Duffy & Hund, 2015). They still often need to portray themselves as "down-to-earth" or find ways to make their audience feel connected to them (Abidin, 2015). For Akari Yoshida, an idol-turned-YouTuber and beauty blogger, making her audience feel closer to her has become even more crucial.

As a result, in addition to beauty videos, Q&A sessions, and similar content are often featured. In Q&A videos, Akari Yoshida discusses very personal issues such as marriage, love, and relationships with her fans. For instance, "How to deal with interpersonal relationships when you're new to the workplace", "Whom to marry", "I like the idol I support so much that I don't feel like I can fall in love in real life", and other topics like that. Discussing love and relationships is a very delicate and intimate subject in the Japanese idol industry. By being honest with her admirers, Akari Yoshida becomes quite popular.

Beauty bloggers are skilled in performing authenticity and building intimacy with their audience. According to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2022, 73% of women aged 15-34 admitted to having purchased blogger-recommended products, but 41%

of them said that they “found that they did not need the product after purchasing it” or that “the result was lower than expected”. The primary goal of this affective labor is to increase their follower count and generate more income through commercial opportunities. Data from Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications shows that the conversion rate of live-streamed takeaways by the Top 100 beauty YouTubers is as high as 12.8%, far exceeding the average 3% click-to-purchase rate on e-commerce platforms. In these commercial activities, beauty bloggers have successfully gained supporters and increased their income through selling goods and advertising. However, the audience can become confused by the affective labor of YouTubers, often purchasing products they do not need or that may not be as effective as advertised. Additionally, they may engage with a YouTuber’s content by liking videos, which, in turn, can contribute to increasing the YouTuber’s revenue.

2.5 Conclusion

Viewing Japanese beauty practices through the prism of kawaii and influencer culture exposes a dynamic interaction between consumerism, tradition, and rebellion. Originally a subversive kind of "girl culture rebellion," kawaii aesthetics embraced youth, fragility, and nonconformism to question strict gender roles. But mass media and state-sponsored campaigns like "Cool Japan" appropriated this style, turning it into a popular cultural product supporting idealized femininity anchored in innocence and passivity.

Particularly YouTube, social media has changed beauty standards by democratizing content creation and still supporting homogeneity of aesthetics. Influencers like Saaya, Maatso, and Akari Yoshida reflect the neoliberal pressures of self-branding and algorithmic

visibility while yet empowering audiences through relevant self-expression and transforming narratives—managing emotions, fostering intimacy, and commodifying authenticity. Kawaii culture and influencer-driven beauty practices thus exist in a paradoxical space: they both empower and confine women.

3. “Anti- beauty” in China

3.1 Anti-beauty Duty

The Mori girl (森ガール, Morigāru) was a Japanese fashion concept that emerged at the start of the new millennium. It was distinguished by a minimalist look, with light cosmetics colors, like earthy tones, and simple cotton and linen clothing. This fashion style was later introduced to China and became hugely popular due to the influence of well-known actresses' personal styles and works, such as Aoi Yū's *All About Lily Chou-Chou*, Miyazaki Aoi serving as the ambassador for the store “earth music & ecology”, a pioneer of the Mori style, and the spread of pop culture through manga like *Honey and Clover*. This style was adopted at the time by bloggers on well-known Chinese social media sites like Douban and Weibo, and Taobao, China's biggest e-commerce site, saw the emergence of numerous Mori-style shops. However, the well-liked Mori girls progressively graduated as they grew older during the 2008–2021 decade. Since the Mori girls were now mature women in their early 30s, most of them decided to modify their style to fit their own age, and one by one, Mori girl apparel outlets closed or changed in 2012. The transition from hot to cold in Mori girl fashion.

Instead of the Mori style, which used to be popular among young Chinese women, Japanese fashion is now dominated by sweet and cute styles such as the “landmine style” described above. However, this kind of clothes has been dubbed “Easy-to-get-married style” by a blogger called 马小婷的好嫁风³ (Ma Xiaoting's Easy-to-get-married style, maxiaoting de haojiafeng), which has altered the evaluation of this kind of charming Japanese fashion on

³ Ma Xiaoting's weibo homepage: <https://weibo.com/u/1827344001>

the Internet. Young ladies of marriageable age are the primary target audience for blogger Ma Xiaoting, who provides several “tips” to assist them in meeting suitable men for marriage and transforming their lives. For instance, she has created her own Taobao store and frequently advises her female fans on how to entice possible marriage partners by dressing in adorable, lace-trimmed, and sweet ensembles. The items at Ma Xiaoting’s store are called “Goody Collar Wool Knit Cardigan” and “Dainty Cow Corner Button Coat”. She also does not hide the fact that these clothes, which display women’s tender side and give off a protective vibe, are more likely to attract men's attention in her account.

Ma Xiaoting has tens of thousands of fans on her Taobao store and over 600,000 on her Weibo account. While some internet users seem to find Ma Xiaoting’s advice to be highly useful, others accuse her of “flattering men” and “objectifying women” in her remarks. These primarily female internet users stated that “women do not need to dwarf themselves in exchange for love” and that “women are not objects and do not owe anyone beauty”.

Additionally, it was noted that most of the clothing in Ma Xiaoting’s Taobao store was a copy of Japanese sweet-style women’s clothing brands like Lily Brown and Snidel. On the Internet, remarks regarding adorable and charming attire have progressively turned unfavorable, in contrast to the Mori Girl fashion that was so popular in the past. There has also been criticism of other beauty practices on Chinese social media. In the post “How much weight do I need to lose to look good at 165cm?” For instance, “Women’s bodies do not need to be ornamental, and there is no weight standard to look good”, said netizens. Or, for the short-haired female athletes on the network to be photoshopped with long hair and beauty pictures, netizens accused: “Women do not have to be linked to beauty; perseverance and

strength themselves are enough to be admired. These critical netizens see these demands and restrictions on women as a form of forced “beauty duty”. “服美役” (serving beauty duty, fumeiyi) is one of the “stripping off” items in the “6B4T” action initiative proposed by radical feminism in South Korea. It is an extension of the concept of “removing corsets,” one of the action initiatives proposed by radical feminists in Korea and is a metaphor for the oppressive behavior of forcing women to dress up. This includes makeup, long hair, nails, dresses, jewelry, and all other activities that impede women’s freedom.

Xiaohongshu and the content ecosystem it promotes are often initially perceived by many as being sophisticated, beautiful, and petit bourgeoisie. However, a wind of “anti-beauty duty” is blowing through Xiaohongshu, where beauty is at the center of several competitions, against the backdrop of the Internet's condemnation of the term “serving beauty duty”. Women remove their long skirts, switch off their filters, show their faces, cut their hair short, or even shave it to the buzz cut, and appear comfortable and loose. According to their statements, the most noticeable emotions they experienced after altering their appearance were relief and calmness.

At the end of 2020, a blogger named 他塔拉 Tatar posted a video. In it, Tatar explained to her followers why she decided to cut her long hair to the buzz-cut and demonstrated the entire head-shaving procedure. In her Xiaohongshu account, she identifies herself as a buzz-cut girl/sex educator and highlights her experience as a gender studies student in Australia. The blogger 安揪 Anjiu shared a brief video in early 2022 with the caption, “After 28 years of being a girl, I still haven't gotten the standard of a girl”. In the video, Anjiu pulls on the “girls should have long hair” “high education what is the use of”,

and other comments to refute them, and at the same time puts on her long hair and buzz-cut head period of two photos to emphasize the main thing is that “it is best to be a girl at ease”. The following videos were posted earlier: “The end of elegance is the buzz-cut girl”. “What should a buzz cut girl wear to her wedding?” and “The whole family to see the real reaction of the pink color buzz cut”. Anjiu also released a video of her long hair shaved into a buzz-cut head.

3.2 Digital feminism

Taking Xiaohongshu as an example, the actions on its platform amply demonstrate how the internet has evolved into a significant sphere of interaction for feminist debate. Previous studies have claimed that the simplicity of digital platforms’ communication has driven the exponential expansion of many kinds of activism, ranging from collective condemnation to hashtag feminism and online demonstrations (Baer, 2021). As Jackson and others (2020) write, “hashtag activism” can lead to tangible results both online and offline. Via their algorithmic heat systems, digital platforms transcend social and geographical limits, providing gender concerns with hitherto unheard-of reach and visibility (Clark-Parsons, 2019). “Anti-beauty duty” activism on China’s Xiaohongshu platform and the phenomenon of global feminist movements such as #MeToo have been defined as digital feminism. Beginning their initial research on digital feminism in the early 2010s, scholars Jessalynn Keller and Kaitlynn Mendes investigated how social media has evolved into a feminist activist new venue for feminist activity and have looked at young women using social media sites such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Though there is no one definition, generally speaking, digital

feminism is the use of the Internet, social media, and digital technology by feminists to advocate, protest, distribute knowledge, and create community in order to forward gender equality. Digital feminism is thus very platform-dependent, and distributed, i.e., lacks a central leadership structure, depends on user-generated content (UGC), and is emotionally motivated, among other traits. This section intends to examine the features of digital feminism, particularly some of the conditions that have emerged in China's particular setting, utilizing an analysis of the case study of the online activism "anti-beauty duty".

China's digital feminism deals with severe misogyny that has gotten somewhat ingrained on internet platforms. The phantomization of misogyny involves vilifying feminism as a form of radical misandry to generate engagement and increase platform traffic (Liao, 2024). Many variations of anti-feminism and feminist phobia have lately grown very common on social media. For instance, the first to be questioned and refuted from inside the female community even while the "anti-duty beauty" internet movement was gathering steam. Some individuals may not fully recognize the ways in which their habitual practices of makeup and dressing up are influenced by and, in turn, contribute to prevailing gendered norms, including those shaped by the male gaze. Rather, they defended their decisions and refuted the notion that they participated in a kind of gendered work by using slogans like "makeup freedom" and "pleasing oneself". Simultaneously, individuals who supported the "anti-beauty duty" viewpoint occasionally used it too forcefully to examine and criticize other women. Some also felt cultural superiority, believing they were more "awakened" than others in their attempts to question beauty obligation. This dynamic highlights the difficulties of negotiating

feminist activity in digital environments, reflecting a complicated conflict within feminist debate where criticism could occasionally merge with moral policing.

One could perhaps consider the online activity of the “anti-beauty duty” as a critique of postfeminism. The concept of postfeminism first appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s and was heavily influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, especially the deconstruction of the concepts of identity, discourse, power, etc. Rosalind Gill, one of the leading scholars of postfeminism, argues that postfeminism is not a single theory but a cultural phenomenon, a “discourse”. In her 2017 study, *Theorizing Femininities in the Neoliberal Moment*, she further links postfeminism to neoliberalism, arguing that postfeminism is centered on individual choice, autonomy, and self-governance, masking structural inequalities (2017). Gill and Favaro (2019) define postfeminism as a “gendered neoliberalism,” whose central imperatives include “self-determination, entrepreneurship, competition, and elitism”. As previously stated, the nature of Xiaohongshu’s software makes it an ideal tool for users to document and gain recognition for their neoliberal traits. Users can show their dedication to the “endless self-management” needed for neoliberal subjectivity by uploading images of attractiveness or body control (Gill, 2017). Usually establishing themselves as “ideal neoliberal subjects” and providing their followers with tactics of mimicry, beauty bloggers describe their lifestyles and consuming patterns. Xiaohongshu might also turn into a possible venue for opposition to neoliberal rhetoric in the movement of “anti-beauty duty” (Mahoney, 2022). The pillar of the “anti-beauty duty” critiques the trap of consumerism underlying post-feminism in addition to challenging the popular aesthetic suppression. In posts under the “anti-beauty duty” topic, there are comments such as, “I used

to save money for a long time just to buy equipment or makeup to look good in photos”.

Similarly, some users in the “buzz-cut bloggers” category have stated, “From now on, I will never go to a hair salon again. I take care of my hairstyle entirely by myself—saving money, time, and effort. Is there any hairstyle better than a buzz cut in this world?”

3.3 The Commodification Paradox of Digital Feminism

Online content creators find themselves in a progressively unstable neoliberal environment (Gill, 2010). While stressing the need for personal responsibility, autonomy, and choice in economic success, neoliberalism supports market liberalization and privatization. In fact, this does not only affect beauty influencers but also those who engage in personal branding, promotion, and audience interaction as part of their career development. Likewise, some of the feminist content creators in the digital space—including bloggers active in the “anti-beauty duty” activism—have also adopted promotional practices in pursuit of career success. Such actions have led viewers to question whether these practices conflict with their values, identities, and even the content they produce.

In her analysis of the relationship between feminism and consumer culture, Banet-Weiser (2012) notes that modern feminism has become intricately entwined with—and even appropriated by—commercial interests, leading to a form of feminism known as “commodified feminism”, where feminism concepts are promoted and consumed without actually challenging larger systems of inequality. This indicates that feminist concepts are commercialized and consumed without actually opposing more extensive systems of inequality. Although we assume that the original intention of the “anti-beauty duty” was to

resist this contradiction. However, because of their mostly visual content, social media sites like Xiaohongshu could turn into venues for feminist “performances”, which would undermine the transformational power of feminist action and encourage a superficial engagement with feminist concepts. This has a bearing on the traits of Xiaohongshu’s user base and platform. Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform aimed at women, bases itself fundamentally on business. Targeting young, metropolitan women mostly, the platform fits the changing female consumption pattern (Lian, Chen, & Zhang, 2021). With a worth of more than \$10 billion, this digital media advertising platform is the most commercially valuable one available in China (Lian et al., 2020). The user base of Xiaohongshu exhibits a unique gender composition, contrasting with the dominant patriarchal characteristics of Chinese society. As a result, the platform enables women to construct identities that gain recognition from others (Shi, Sui, Tang, & Wang, 2021). Xiaohongshu’s predominantly female user base challenges the male-dominated norms of mainstream Chinese society, enabling women to express themselves more freely and build identities that gain recognition in a supportive community. However, when these dynamics unfold within a highly commercialized environment, women’s self-expression on Xiaohongshu often takes on distinctive characteristics and is consequently subject to criticism regarding its limitations.

This chapter features interviews with Massa, 孜孜(Zizi), and Grace, three female bloggers on the Xiaohongshu platform. Grace manages a feminist academic account dedicated to disseminating feminist works and theories. The content of Zizi's account mainly consists of DIY remake projects for old clothing, but she describes her account as being dedicated to “breaking the constraints imposed on women”. At the same time, Zizi is also a

scholar specializing in Internet sociology. Massa, a high school student, shares her outfits and makeup looks in her free time, positioning her account primarily as a “Lolita fashion enthusiast”. Although their account themes and personal backgrounds differ, all three individuals shared their perspectives on current feminist activities on Xiaohongshu, as well as their views on the “anti-beauty duty” activism during interviews. The following words intend to conduct a thorough and impartial analysis of the current condition of digital feminist business in China by integrating professional and popular discussion on the topic.

To compare and analyze the commercial practices and labor content of beauty influencers, it is first necessary to examine the commercial interaction models of feminist bloggers on Xiaohongshu. The majority of the posts in the activism of “anti-beauty duty” that is the subject of this research are about product marketing, whether it be influencers’ recommendations or brand placement. The behavior of beauty bloggers on the YouTube platform, as examined in the previous part, is very similar. Influencers in the “anti-beauty duty” activism use feminism to market their goods. The three bloggers interviewed all have four-digit or higher follower counts, but they said that large-scale and frequent commercial collaborations are mainly for head bloggers. This is because Xiaohongshu’s cash flow is closely related to a blogger's background data, i.e., the number of followers, the number of likes and favorites, and the number of post views. Based on their popularity index, Xiaohongshu bloggers can make public cooperation offers for “graphic notes” and “video notes”, so as to cooperate with advertisers to make profits. The income of bloggers is generally determined by the number of followers, and the real statistics on the correlation between the cash flow of Xiaohongshu bloggers and data indicators are limited. However, for

reference, according to the income of some publicly quoted bloggers, Xiaohongshu bloggers with 10,000-100,000 followers are offered RMB 500 to RMB 5,000 for a single graphic when cooperating with a brand; for bloggers with more than 100,000 followers, the offer for a video note is usually more than RMB 3,000, or even tens of thousands of yuan. For instance, a brand of sex toys was advertised in the most recent #Girlstalk #FemaleGrowth post on Anjiu's account. "The world's consumer products deserve to be redesigned from a female perspective", Anjiu states in this commercial promotion, which revolves around the idea of "gynocentrism". At this point, online collaborations can also be further extended to offline partnerships for promotion. Anjiu visited the business as part of the campaign to speak with them about their condoms and the creation of their gynocentrism sex toys and promote the company's cultural philosophy. Additionally, they will share their line of condoms, sex toys, and other things throughout the live streaming. On Xiaohongshu's account homepage, viewers can see options for "Store" and "Live Streaming". This means that after browsing the homepage, they can directly purchase products to support the account or join live-streaming sessions for shopping. This setup is closely tied to Xiaohongshu's commercialized tone and further reflects the pervasiveness of its commercial atmosphere.



Figure 3: Anjiu’s account homepage ⁴

Just like beauty influencers, gaining more exposure opportunities to compete for business corporations requires affective labor. Both Zizi and Grace noted that niche-focused accounts have a greater advantage on Xiaohongshu, meaning that establishing a strong personal brand identity helps increase platform visibility. This aligns closely with the “self-branding” strategies mentioned in the previous chapter. Feminist bloggers take this a step further by engaging in emotional labor through self-expression and personal awareness. Moreover, Zizi further emphasized Xiaohongshu’s highly interactive nature. This differs from her experience in Bilibili before shifting her focus to Xiaohongshu. Bilibili is a comprehensive video platform for young users in China, initially focusing on ACG

⁴https://www.xiaohongshu.com/user/profile/5f24e21200000000101fd78?xsec_token=AB2dNga203XZ-QMRcQBfDVHiT0qrEbp5oSNZrmCI2iylc%3D&xsec_source=pc_search

(animation, comics, and games) content, and has now developed into a diverse content community covering entertainment, education, and life, with an emphasis on pop-up interactions and a culture of user creation. She noted that while Bilibili has many feminist content creators, its long-form video format makes it an output-driven platform where fans cannot interact with influencers in real time. Given that digital feminism is inherently emotion-driven, feminist bloggers in the “anti-beauty duty” movement leverage Xiaohongshu’s interactivity and community-building features to foster a sense of female solidarity through resonance and emotional connection. For example, they collectively use the hashtag #女性成长 (women's growth, nvxingchengzhang) #Girlstalk under relevant discussions. With Xiaohongshu’s focus on images and short videos as primary modes of communication, these formats allow digital feminists to convey emotions more directly, further enhancing users’ sense of immersion. For instance, influencers share their “anti-beauty duty” experiences through short videos, allowing viewers to intuitively perceive their emotions, making it easier to generate empathy and resonance.

Examining user comments also enabled us to better grasp audience reactions to this encounter. From the comments on the platform, some individuals attacked the behavior of the feminist influencer. Some users believed that the conduct of buzzcut was entirely pointless and driven purely for attention and buzz generation. Instead, by gaining attention through this behavior and then engaging in commercial collaborations, they are trying to profit from attracting traffic and clicks. In the commercialized environment of Xiaohongshu, some users are highly alert to feminist arguments (Gu, 2024).

Therefore, the key question is whether the resistance efforts of the “anti-beauty duty” movement constitute an effective protest against postfeminism. Xiaohongshu is a marketed platform, hence its economic framework naturally limits these feminist expressions. While the movement challenges beauty norms and the power structures of neoliberal platforms, at the same time, it also appears to rely on and utilize these very structures to maintain its visibility (Mahoney, 2022).

The intricacy of feminist bloggers’ predicament between commercialization and idea transmission is evident from in-depth interviews with three Xiaohongshu bloggers. It is difficult to realize the money on the Xiaohongshu platform, despite its reputation for having a strong commercialization culture. Massa is the most commercially active blogger among the three interviewees. She has collaborated with brands, opened an online store on Xiaohongshu, and explored various business opportunities. However, Massa’s experience has been that “there are so many talented people on the internet that standing out is difficult. Without a commercial team or an MCN company, it requiring significant time and money investment for individual creators.” Massa initially attempted to create her own store on Xiaohongshu, but after studying more about it, she discovered that the platform party had a somewhat high commission rate, greater than that of Douyin, another social media platform of the same kind, or even Taobao, an online marketplace. Zizi added that dealers in Xiaohongshu are subject to severe restrictions and that their deposits must be appropriate for the kind of items they sell. Distinct forms of commodities trafficking have distinct deposit requirements. Simultaneously, the management policy is quite strict; during the trafficking period, if the merchant looks to

be late with delivery or if the user rushes the platform's delivery, the deposit may be taken away to pay a fine, which is uncommon on other platforms.

Furthermore, Grace, a knowledge-sharing blogger who is exclusively feminist and gender-focused, openly admitted, "My account is interest-driven, and the rewards are wholly out of proportion to the work". According to her, beauty bloggers continue to be the most lucrative group on the Xiaohongshu platform. The reason for this is the broader business environment, where companies specifically target beauty bloggers to work with and promote goods that represent women's femininity. Nonetheless, the dissemination of feminist concepts has not been impeded by this marketing trend. On the contrary, bloggers have helped to popularize feminist speech through the practice of "self-branding". Despite being distinct from the conventional academic or activist route, this dissemination strategy is more pertinent. For example, Anjiu produces a series of videos on sex toys and invites industry insiders to conduct interviews on women's health and emotional life, as well as popularizing women's physiological organs and related knowledge.



Figure 4: Anjiu’s popular science videos

Although most of the interviewees identify as feminists and actively emphasize the necessity of gender equality and the negative impact of gender discrimination on women’s daily lives, when asked, “What does feminism mean to you?” they did not adopt traditional academic or activist definitions. Instead, they expanded and personalized the definition of feminism (Urszula, 2018). When I asked Grace how she identifies with her role as a feminist influencer, whether she feels the pressure to be “perfect”? For example, not showing vulnerability or having to take a stance on all gender issues. She responded, “My account is not very ‘feminist.’ I just hope to use the Xiaohongshu platform to spread knowledge. Many people in mainland China, especially younger individuals, learn about feminism through Xiaohongshu and become feminists, so it is important to protect this channel.” Grace views the feminist influencer category as abstract and downplays the label of “feminist influencer.” She focuses more on using the platform to share knowledge and allows feminism to naturally

integrate into the audience's lives. This “subtle” dissemination strategy makes feminism no longer limited to the theoretical realm but instead closely intertwined with daily life, giving it more practical significance (Urszula, 2018). As a graduate student, Zizi expresses concern that engaging in consumerist feminism might fall into the trap of “profiting from feminism”. However, she also wants to share content that aligns with her academic background. While she has not chosen a direct opinion-based approach, she hopes to use her “remake fashion” videos to promote the idea that women should have the freedom to make their own choices. Finally, when asked about the part feminism plays in their life, the respondents underlined that feminism is reflected in real behavior rather than necessarily in language expression: “The core of feminism is not about what you say, but what you do”. This practice-oriented perspective of feminism not only captures the traits of the digital age but also emphasizes the special route of feminist evolution in the Chinese environment.

3.4 Conclusion

Emphasizing the autonomy of the body and opposition to gendered consumerism, the “anti-beauty duty” movement that has evolved in China via venues like Xiaohongshu shows a critical pushback against established beauty standards and neoliberal post-feminism. Digital feminism's entanglement with commercialized platforms also presents a paradox-activist content often goes hand-in-hand with commodified self-branding and algorithmic visibility pressures, even while it allows underprivileged voices to challenge patriarchal norms through grassroots activity and community building. This paradox draws attention to the limits imposed by neoliberal logic that run the danger of cooptation of resistance into marketized

performances as well as the emancipatory potential of digital environments to democratize feminist debate. In the end, the movement emphasizes the conflict between subversive feminist actions and the capitalist systems that define online visibility, therefore promoting a sophisticated knowledge of empowerment in a technologically mediated, consumer-oriented society.

4. Conclusion

This thesis reveals the complex reconfiguration of gender power relations in the social media era by comparing the similarities and differences between Japan and China in beauty culture and digital feminist practices. As the paradoxical reality unfolds in South Korea - at once the center of the global beauty industry and the vanguard of the radical feminist movement - East Asian gender politics is always in dialectical tension. The study finds that the two countries exhibit a coexistence of cross-cultural interaction and localization in aesthetic norms and resistance strategies. From a subcultural revolt to a multifarious phenomenon combining a (sub)cultural expression strongly ingrained in the local community and a representation of the country's soft power, Japan's "kawaii culture" has developed. Its fundamental paradox, therefore, is the conflict between the liberating quality of "flexible femininity" and its commercialization. While their content creation seems to be digitally empowered for women, YouTube beauty bloggers like Saaya and Maatso build close relationships with viewers via affective labor (Hochschild, 2012) and are actually disciplined by algorithmic traffic and brand cooperation strategies. This "performatization of resistance" supports Gill's claim that late feminism has closely linked personal decisions to consumerism, hence hiding systemic inequities (Gill, 2007).

China's "anti-beauty duty" movement displays a more conflictual platform politics. Xiaohongshu bloggers have transformed the Korean concept of "6B4T" into a localized symbol of resistance through radical bodily practices such as shaving their hair and displaying their face. However, the logic of commercialization has had a profound impact on the

direction of the movement - bloggers such as Anjiu have embedded feminist discourse in the marketing of sex toys, which is another form of “commodified feminist” dilemma.

On this basis, the Korean experience provides an inspiring reference point for this study. Korea not only has a highly developed plastic surgery and beauty industry, but is also a concentrated manifestation of the intersection of feminism and “face valueism” due to its unique social structure and gender culture. On the one hand, from the global spread of Pony and other beauty celebrities to the radical resistance reflected in the 6B4T movement, South Korea shows the coexistence of beauty culture and anti-beauty culture. On the other hand, this cultural tension also stems from the highly competitive and unequal gender structure of Korean society - “your face value is your ability” has become a widely accepted social consensus, while Korean women have been called the “awakening women of East Asia”. At the same time, Korean women have been called the “pioneers of women's awakening in East Asia,” reflecting their key position in the formation of regional feminist discourse.

Especially in the context of digital social media, these multiple cultural tensions have accelerated. Platform algorithms not only determine the visibility of content, but also invisibly regulate which bodies, words, and expressions are “encouraged”. In this process, the expression of female creators is caught up in algorithmic governance and commercial logic, gradually revealing a new mechanism. In other words, digital platforms are not mere tools for “empowerment”, but rather spaces for reproducing gender power relations.

The core conflict I am arguing in this work is between the quest for bodily autonomy and the platform's commercial interests. Moving forward, I would like to track the capital closed loop from beauty brands to MCN agencies, influencers, and fans. Analyze the interest

connections and power struggles among each link, from brand marketing strategies and agency operation models to influencer content creation and fan consumption behaviors, to comprehensively dissect the beauty industry ecosystem.

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