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**Title: Materializing and Gendering the Japanese *Bijin*:
Historical and Contemporary Analyses of the Socially
Constructed “Beautiful Woman”**

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Introduction

What would a contemporary Japanese *bijinga* look like?

The *bijinga*, or “a painting of a beautiful woman”, appeared in Japan in the seventeenth century and reached its peak influence during the Western Japanisme in the early twentieth century (Lippit, 2019). The “beautiful woman” of the *bijinga* is called the *bijin* (美人). Contrary to popular beliefs of the time—especially of that in the West—the *bijin* posing within the *bijinga* were not mirroring the actual Japanese women in flesh. Instead, the *bijin* was a conceptualized figure representing the aesthetic beauty, refinement, and constructed femininity through the depicted bodies of illustrated Japanese women (Lippit, 2019). The *bijin* of the *bijinga* appeared everywhere, from local magazine covers to paintings hung in Western homes. (Lippit, 2019) As like any other style of art, the *bijinga* gradually lost its momentum of popularity in the later modern era. Yet, the coined term *bijin* still remains as a term, concept, and “person” through various contemporary media. Where is the contemporary *bijin*, and what physical and abstract notions of “beauty” does she embody? One place where the contemporary *bijin* continues to thrive are Japanese women’s magazines. By examining the expression of beauty and bodies depicted in these magazines, this paper will construct a contemporary version of the *bijin*.

The concept of *bijin* has been academically studied by past researchers (井上, 1991; 山田, 2009; 山田, 2017). With an aim to add a new perspective to this theme, this paper studies the *bijin* through two separate yet related analyses. Analysis (1) looks at the history of *bijin* and analyzes the components of the *bijin* who emerged during the Japanese modern period. This section was greatly inspired by Gail Lee Bernstein’s (1991) edited book, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, which is a collection of articles about specific images of women that have existed through Japanese history. In the same way that Robertson (1991) studied the “*Shingaku* woman” and Silverberg (1991) recreated the “Modern girl”, this research aims to analyze the *bijin* of the modern era through evidence in text and other media that had existed in the time. Analysis (2) takes these components and attempts to relocate a contemporary version of the *bijin* in Japanese women’s magazines. The methodology of this section was inspired by Inoue’s (井上, 1989) approach of quantifying the observations in women’s magazines

by manually counting certain themes and comparing the results across different magazines. The intellectual liberty to “reconstruct” an original version of the contemporary *bijin* stems from Berger & Luckmann’s (1980) concept of social constructionism, which suggests that all social phenomena is created and sustained through social practices. In other words, all social concepts (including the figure of *bijin*) start as shapeless thought. It is through the externalization of these “thoughts” through mediums like discourse and art that these ideas become “objects” of consciousness among those who internalize the medium (Berger & Luckmann, 1980). Using this conceptual framework, Analysis (2) takes the components of the modern *bijin* and analyzes the medium of contemporary Japanese women’s magazines to construct a “object” called the contemporary *bijin*. The findings of the two analyses are compared in the “Discussion” section, where the significance of the *bijin* in context to Japanese society is further explored.

1. Analysis (1): Breaking Down the *Bijin* of Modern Japan

The goal of this analysis is to define the figure *bijin* in context to Japanese history, as well as to break down the *bijin* into analyzable components. Although various examples of “beautiful women” have been recorded from as early as the Heian Period (794-1185), this study specifically focuses on the history of the *bijin* (美人; “beautiful woman”) and how the term emerged as a representative image for beautiful women in Japan. For instance, *Ono no Komachi* (小野小町; “Komachi of Ono”) is perhaps one of the most well-known examples of a beautiful Japanese woman. She was a waka poet of the Heian Period who was known for her beauty, so much so that the word *Komachi* later came to define “a beautiful maiden” (井上, 1992, p. 88-90). However, it is unclear whether the people of her time literally used the term “*bijin*” to identify her, and we were unable to find clear evidence that indicated so. Indeed, if the word *Komachi* became used as a synonym for “a beautiful maiden”, then perhaps the term *bijin* was not a widely used concept in the time. In this way, this research traced the earliest *use* of the term *bijin* in Japanese history, ultimately pinpointing its emergence to the late Tokugawa (1600-1868) and early Meiji (1868-1912) era.

1.1 Materialization and Gendering of the Japanese aesthetic of beauty

How, when, and why did the *bijin* come into being? Section 1.1 studies the history of Japanese aesthetics and its materialization through artistic mediums, the use of these mediums in commercial spheres, and the standardization of material beauty through the body of the feminine *bijin*. It analyzes where the *bi* (美; “beauty”) of *bijin* came from and how “beauty” came to embody materialized and gendered beauty standards.

1.1.1 Materialization of “Beautiful” and “Woman” Through Art

While the contemporary use of “beauty” has a strong connotative association with “shape” and “appearance”, this was not always the case in Japanese aesthetics. Fujiwara (藤原, 2014) describes the Japanese aesthetic of beauty as seeing between the lines and having an awareness for something that exists apart from the material world. Indeed, Parkes & Loughnane (2018) identified *mono no aware* (物の哀れ; the pathos of things), *wabi* (侘 《び》; subdued, austere beauty), *sabi* (寂 《ひ》; rustic patina), *yūgen* (幽玄; mysterious profundity), *iki* (粋; refined style), and *kire* (切; cutting) as shapeless notions of beauty and main concepts of Japanese aesthetics. It was through another medium, such as art or its artist, that these notions of shapeless beauty started taking material shape. As Langer (1953) put it, an artwork is a significant form that functions as a symbol for affective feeling that is depicted through its aesthetic quality. It is through artworks that the quality of beauty is experienced. Some examples include the expression of *mono no aware* through the behavior of the beautiful yet lonely protagonist of *Genji Monogatari* (Jackson, 2012) and the depiction of *yūgen* through the mysterious shadows of the Noh play masks (Brazhnikova Tsybizova, 2015). It is through the depiction of beauty through various props and actors that the shapeless notion of beauty materializes.

One such form of art is the *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵; “pictures of the floating world”) which flourished during the Tokugawa Era (Britannica, 2013). It first emerged as screen paintings depicting themes of the

entertainment quarters (known as the “floating world”), such as *kabuki* play actors and *geisha* courtesans (Britannica, 2013). Regarding the notion of “gendering” beauty, Amsden & von Seidlitz (2009) notes the polarity of male and female characters depicted in the *ukiyo-e*. While male characters are often marked by their “roughness, “unattractiveness”, and “tenseness” of their muscles, the female characters are drawn with “fine and smooth” lines and have “gentle expressions” (Amsden & von Seidlitz, 2009, p. 65). The existence of the masculine “other” as a contrast to the *geisha* courtesan may have contributed to the solidification of the “woman” behind these drawing of the beautiful women. These paintings would later be categorized under the *bijinga* (美人画; “paintings of beautiful women”) genre of art by ensuing generations.

1.1.2 Commercial Art and the Trendy Women

The power of the *ukiyo-e* rested in its accessibility to the masses. The mass proliferation of drawings of “beautiful people” can be attributed to the Tokugawa Era (1600-1868) and the rise of the merchant class. Prior to evolution of *ukiyo-e*, when classical Japanese aesthetics blended with colloquial themes like *geisha* courtesans and *kabuki* actors, artistic representations of courtesans were taboo in aristocratic and religious circles (Harris, 2011). Art featured ageless themes like costumes, landscapes, and symbols (Harris, 2011). The *sankin kotai* system of the Tokugawa Era, which required the feudal lords to periodically visit the capital with grand parades, created opportunities for these travelers to spend money on goods and services during their long trips. This not only prompted the rise of merchant class (Britannica, 2016), but it also instigated the flourishing of the Yoshiwara prostitute district (Gordon, 2003).

Simultaneously, this sociocultural environment led to the evolution of *ukiyo-e* to portray up-to-date fashion trends and popular culture, such as those embodied by the *kabuki* actors and the *geisha* courtesans of *Yoshiwara* (Harris, 2011). What made this cultural normalization of beauty and femininity so powerful was its proliferation through mass culture. Brothels commissioned portraits of their pretty girls to display on *noren* (暖簾; “awning”) and to print on fans sold as mementos to clients; companies

commissioned prints of these courtesans to pose with their goods for advertisements; and the fashion-conscious and pleasure-seeking public purchased prints of these beautiful women to see the latest hairstyles, accessories, cosmetics, and textile designs being modeled (Harris, 2011). In such ways, *ukiyo-e* became a commercial artform that was readily available to the mass public and proliferated the drawings of *geisha* courtesans as trendy, beautiful women.

1.1.3 Rise of *Bijin* and the Standardization of Feminine Beauty

How did the “trendy woman” become associated with the “beautiful woman” embodied by the *bijin*? One explanation is the emergence of *iki* (粋), a Japanese aesthetic of beauty that became associated with the *geisha* courtesans during the mid-Tokugawa Era (西山, 1989). As examined more closely in the next section (1.2 Deconstructing the *Bijin*), the aesthetic of *iki* placed various standardized attributes and interpretative frameworks for the “beautiful women” being depicted in the popularizing *ukiyo-e*. In other words, it was this aesthetic of *iki* that associated the characteristics of *geisha* courtesans with notions of beauty. In this social environment, the term *bijin* was brought to life by artist Utamaro Kitagawa (1753-1806), who drew up three *geisha* courtesans and labeled the work as *Toji San Bijin* (当時三美人; “The Three *Bijin* of the Present Day”) in 1793 (Meurer, 2020, p.43).

Figure 1.1 shows the three muses of the artwork— Tomimoto Toyohina, Naniwaya Kita, and Takashima Hisa—whose names are printed on the canvas beside the title, explicitly designating them as the “three *bijin*.”¹

¹ By Utamaro Kitagawa (1753-1806), c. 1793, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. An example of a pre-modern portrayal of the *bijin*

Figure 1.1
Toji San Bijin (当時三美人; “The Three *Bijin* of the Present Day”)



This work, however, was not the first of its kind. *Ukiyo-e* artists like Kaigetsudō Dohan (active 1710–1716), Harunobu Suzuki (1725–1770), and Isoda Koryusai (1735–1790) had already used beautiful women as muses for their *ukiyo-e* (Harris, 2010).

In other words, the standards for beauty of women depicted in *ukiyo-e* had already been set prior to the “Three *Bijin*” in 1793. What Kitagawa pioneered in his famous work was not the use of beautiful women but the labelling of these beautiful women as “*bijin*”. Thus, in this scenario, we witness how standards for feminine beauty preceded the emergence of the term *bijin*. It was upon the foundation of standardized and socially constructed ideas of beauty that the figure of the pre-modern *bijin* was able to materialize.

1.1.4 *Bijin* at the Center of Japanese Modernization and Western Japonisme

Along with the rapid increase of cultural exchange and diplomacy with the Western nations, the Meiji Era (1868–1912) witnessed the formation of words like *bijutsu* (美術; “fine arts”) and *bigaku* (美学; “modern Japanese aesthetics”) that used *bi* (美) as a translation of “beauty” (Lippit, 2019, pp. 8–9). According to Lippit (2019), this modern period was when the term *bijinga* (美人画) appeared as a word to describe the “paintings of beautiful women” (p. 9). Consequently, the motif of the *bijinga*, the *bijin*, also emerged as the subject of discussion regarding modern beauty (Lippit, 2019, p.5). This

phenomenon coincided with the era of Japonisme, marked by European fascination in Japanese aesthetics (Lippit, 2019, p. 5). In the eyes of Western audiences who encountered the *bijin* in the *nihonga* (日本画; “Japanese paintings”), the term *bijin* (美人) was not a compound phrase consisting of two separable terms (“beauty” and “person”), but a single term that embodied a certain type of “a beautiful woman”.

Under this influence, artists and writers of modern Japan also began using the term *bijin* to embody the “beautiful woman”. The *bijin* frequently appeared in debates on *shinbi* (真美), or “true beauty” (Lippit, 2019, p. 78). In the literary world, *Furyu Butsu* (『浮流物』; “The Elegant Buddha,” 1889) by Koda Rohan and “Hanako” (1910) by Mori Ogai explore the notion of *shin bijin* (真美人; “true beauty (*bijin*)”) through the portrayal of the *bijin* as female characters of their story (Lippit, 2019, p. 83). Likewise, artists used the *bijin* as both a motif and title of their works, as seen in the *Shin Bijin* (『真美人』; “True Beauty,” 1897) series by Yoshu Chikanobu (Lippit, 2019, p. 78). In popular culture, magazines like *Bijin* (1889), *Nihon no Bijin* (1891), and *Bijin Gaho* (1910) became a social space where editors and their readers could discuss the notion of the *bijin* in depth (Lippit, 2019, pp. 111-115). In the following section, we will analyze this pioneering version of the *bijin* who appeared through art, literature, and public discourse of the modern era.

1.2 Deconstructing the Modern *Bijin*

Now that we have seen the formation of the *bijin*, let us now focus in on the *bijin* herself and deconstruct her into analyzable and descriptive components. In section 1.2.1, we study the medium upon which the *bijin* was portrayed. Then, in section 1.2.2, we identify various descriptive and visual standards set for the *bijin*, both by their creators and admirers alike.

1.2.1 Portrayal and interpretation of the Modern *Bijin*

Figure 1.2
Moyai Fune Bijin (舳い舟美人; “Bijin of Moored Boats”)



The *bijin* entered the popular consciousness through various mediums—such as *ukiyo-e*, oil paintings, photographs, and magazines—which contributed to the materialization of her visual components and standards. As mentioned above, *ukiyo-e* was arguably the first medium to portray the *bijin*. This statement is arguable, since depictions of women had existed through other earlier forms of art, like the *emakimono* (絵巻物; “painting scrolls”) and its subgenre of *onna-e* (女絵; “paintings of women”) that popularized in the Heian Period (東京芸術大学, 2007). However, as seen in *Genji Mogatari Emaki* (源氏物語絵巻; “painting scrolls of the Tale of

Genji”), the characters of these *emaki* are uniformly depicted with no indication of “beauty standards” being portrayed in the “beautiful” characters (Jackson, 2012, p. 17). On the other hand, the “beautiful women” portrayed in *Ukiyo-e* possessed various similar characteristics, as seen in Kitagawa (Figures 1.1) and Suzuki’s (Figure 1.2)² paintings.

² By Harunobu Suzuki (1725-1770), 鈴木春信 (東京国立博物館所蔵; “Tokyo National Museum collection”) CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

These pre-modern portrayals of the *bijin* shares many similarities with the modern portrayals of the *bijin*, such as Yoshu Chikanobu's "True Beauty (Figure 1.3). Chikanobu was one of the modern Japanese artists who had participated in the debate on "true beauty" (Lippit, 2019, p. 78). Figure 1.3 shows a painting from his "True Beauty" collection, in which a *geisha* courtesan is portrayed on a backdrop of natural scenery.³ Since she was painted in the modern era, the image of the *geisha* courtesan could be considered a *bijin* of the modern era, the titular motif of Analysis (1).

Figure 1.3
Meisho Bijin (名勝美人會; "Bijin of Scenic Places")



³ A *bijin* compared to the beauty of Kanazawa in Musashi Province; by Chikanobu Yōshū (1838-1912), c. 1898, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. An example of the modern portrayal of the *bijin*.

The characteristics of these women depicted in *ukiyo-e* were clear and materialized, so much so that the motif was able to be replicated in other styles of art without losing its essence. Figure 1.4 shows an advertisement for *Sakura Beer* company.⁴ Although the artist uses thick oil paint and a more realistic style of art as compared to the typical *ukiyo-e*, the characteristics and vibe of the motif *bijin* remains unchanged. The ability for the *bijin* to be identifiable across different styles of art suggests the standardization and solidification of characteristics defining the *bijin*.

Figure 1.4
Poster for Sakura Beer



This materialization of “who” the *bijin* portrayed was strengthened by photographic images of real women. The influence of photography can be seen in a contest called the *Tokyo Hyaku Bijin* (『東京百美人』; “One Hundred *bijin* of Tokyo”), which was held in 1891 and is considered the very first beauty contest in Japan (井上, 1992, p.41). The contest was held at the *Ryounkaku*, Japan’s very first Western-styled skyscraper (井上, 1992, p. 42). It aimed to attract customers to the skyscraper by having the visitors rank one hundred pictures of *geisha* courtesans by their beauty (井上, 1992, p. 42).

⁴ By Kitano Tsunetomi, c. 1913, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. An example of the modern *bijin* being portrayed outside the typical *Nihonga* style.

Figure 1.5 shows a sample of the pictures that were used for the event.⁵ In addition to proliferating a photographic image of the *bijin*, the *Tokyo Hyaku Bijin* contest played a role in widely informing the public about the appeal of photography, a new technology at the time (Saeki, 2012). This example raises

Figure 1.5

Tokyo Hyakka Bijin Kyo (東京百花美人鏡; “Photos of One Hundred *Bijin* of Tokyo”)



⁵ Contestants of "Tokyo Hyakubijin" held at Ryounkaku in Asakusa Park, July 1891. By Kazumasa Ogawa, published 1895, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

two patterns in the portrayal of the *bijin*. Firstly, she was portrayed for purposes other than the artistic desire to portray her, which were commercial motives for this particular case. Secondly, she was personified through a particular group of women: the Japanese *geisha* courtesans.

The former of the two patterns strengthened and the latter weakened as the portrayal of *bijin* began to shift in the twentieth century. As mentioned in the previous section, *bijin* began to appear in magazines in the early twentieth century. Several of these magazines were written for female audiences, mostly of the higher to middle class. This fact seems to be reflected in the transformation of the muses behind the *bijin* appearing in the magazines' articles and advertisements. The *bijin* is no longer depicting a *geisha* courtesan, but an average (and well-off) Japanese woman, perhaps a much more relatable *bijin* to the female consumer. While these new portrayals of *bijin* suggests an interesting relationship between consumerism and the portrayal of *bijin*, for the sake of consistency, the analysis of this paper will focus on the earlier depictions of the *bijin* who appeared in the late pre-modern era, reached its peak in the modern era, and maintained the essence of *iki* through their motif of the *geisha* courtesans.

1.2.2 Characteristics of the Modern *Bijin*

This section presents a collection of images and descriptions of the form and standards of the *bijin* of the modern period. What kind of hair did the *bijin* have? Did race, body proportions, or personality matter? How can one identify a *bijin* of the modern period out of all other “beautiful women” being portrayed around the world?

Let us start with various common assumptions about the *bijin* that are expressed among writers and artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In response to the surge of Western fascination in the *bijin*, Japanese writers and artists expanded on the theme of “beautiful Japanese women” to cultivate a feminine visage that served as the face of the nation (Lippit, 2019, p. 46). One such writer was Yoshisaburo Okakura (1868-1936), who listed out the characteristic standards of a beautiful woman in his *The Japanese Spirit* (1905) in the following way:

As a whole, there is only one ideal throughout the Empire. So let me try to enumerate all the qualities usually considered necessary to make a beautiful woman. She is to possess a body not much exceeding five feet in height, with comparatively fair skin⁶ and proportionally well-developed limbs; a head covered with long, thick, and jet-black hair; an oval face with a straight nose, high and narrow; rather large eyes, with large deep-brown pupils and thick eyelashes, a small mouth, hiding behind its red, but not thin, lips, even rows of small white teeth; ears not altogether small; and long and thick eyebrows forming two horizontal but slightly curved lines, with a space left between them and the eyes. Of the four ways in which hair can grow around the upper edge of the forehead, viz. horned, square, round, and Fuji-shaped, one of the last two is preferred, a very high as well as a very low forehead being considered not attractive.

Such are, roughly speaking, the elements of Japanese female beauty. Eyes and eyebrows with the outer ends turning considerably upwards, with which your artists depict us, are due to those Japanese colour prints which strongly accentuate our dislike of the reverse, for straight eyes and eyebrows make a very bad impression on us, suggesting weakness, lasciviousness, and so on.

(Okakura, 1905, p. 29-30)

Two important points can be raised from Okakura's writing. Firstly, he lists out specific characteristics of a "beautiful woman" which, at least in his opinion, was the national standard in modern Japan. His allusion to "Japanese colour prints" is important, since it equates the "beautiful woman" being explained in his text, to the *bijin* being drawn in the *bijinga*. Thus, we can arguably use these descriptions to construct our understanding of the modern *bijin*. Secondly, his assumption that the women depicted in these "colour prints" are all portrayals of Japanese women emphasizes the crucial

⁶ "Fair skin" refers to the lightness of the shade of the skin. This could be equated to the whiteness of skin promoted by the *bihaku* (美白) culture.

fact that the *bijin* in the *bijinga* were, in fact, mostly Japanese. These two points can be used to apply tangible characteristics to the ideological figure of the modern *bijin*.

Another way to pick out both the material and the intangible characteristics of the modern *bijin* is by examining the aesthetic of *iki* said to be embodied by the *geisha* courtesans. This is important because, as mentioned above, the muses of the *bijin* were mainly *geisha* courtesans. An extensive analysis of the aesthetic of *iki* was covered by Shūzō Kuki (1888-1941), who distinguished “moments” of *iki* as beauty being reflected in the seductiveness or coquetry (*bitai*; 媚態), brave composure (*ikiji*; 意気地), and resignation (*akirame*; 諦め) of *geisha* courtesans (Nara, 2004, p. 18-24).

Nishiyama (西山, 1989) gives a more visual interpretation of the aesthetic of *iki*, pointing to the “thin, willowy woman with a slender waist” who were depicted by *ukiyo-e* artists like Suzuki as a visualization of *iki* (p. 8). Coupled with an image of one of Harunobu Suzuki’s paintings, Nishiyama continues with examples of the “bodily expressions” of *iki*:

*... an appearance of just having taken a bath, wearing light clothing, a slender figure with a willow waist, a thin face rather than a round face, streaming eyes, smiling, light makeup, simple hair, watery hair, back collar pulled down on the kimono, bare feet, and hands lightly bent or turned back. Such are examples of bodily expressions of “iki”.*⁷

(西山, 1989, p. 9)

Both Okakura and Nishiyama’s descriptions seem to align with the depictions of the “beautiful women” studied in the previous section (Figures 1.1~1.5). Perhaps the intangible characteristic of *iki* described by Kuki can also be felt through these visual depictions of the *bijin*. Table 1.1 summarizes the findings of section 1.2.2 to summarize the main characteristics of the *bijin* in modern Japan. This concludes the investigation of the *bijin* of the modern era.

⁷ Translated from Japanese to English by the author of this paper.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of the Modern Bijin	
	Description
Skin	<p>Fair skin (Okakura, 1905)</p> <p>Pale; no freckles; no blemishes (Observation of Figures 1.1~1.5)</p>
Hair	<p>Long, thick, and jet-black hair (Okakura, 1905)</p> <p>Simple hair; watery hair (Nishimura, 1989)</p>
Face	<p>oval face; high, narrow, and straight nose; large eyes with large deep-brown pupils and thick eyelashes; eyes slanted slightly up; a small mouth with red and plump lips; even rows of small white teeth; “not small” ears; long and thick eyebrows forming two horizontal and slightly curved lines; round or Fuji-shaped forehead (Okakura, 1905)</p> <p>Thin face, streaming eyes (Nishimura, 1989)</p>
Silhouette	<p>Height less than five feet; proportionally well-developed limbs (Okakura, 1905)</p> <p>Slender figure with a willow waist; back collar pulled down on the kimono; bare feet; hands lightly bent or turned back (Nishimura, 1989)</p>
Behavior	<p>Appearance of just having taken a bath; wearing light clothing; light make up; back collar pulled down on the kimono; bare feet; hands lightly bent or turned back; smiling (Nishimura, 1989)</p>
Other	<p>Japanese (Okakura, 1905; observation of Figures 1.1~1.5)</p> <p>Dressed in a kimono (Nishimura, 1989; observations of Figures 1.1~1.5)</p>

Note: By author

2. On Transitioning from the Study of the Modern to that of the Contemporary *Bijin*

Before moving on to Analysis (2), we will briefly explain the relationship and differences between Analysis (1) and Analysis (2). For the sake of simplicity, the two different figures of *bijin* being studied in each analysis will be nominally differentiated. The original *bijin* studied in Analysis (1) who emerged during the modern era through the *bijinga* will be referred to as the “modern *bijin*”. Respectively, the *bijin* being studied in Analysis (2) through contemporary Japanese women’s magazines will be called the “contemporary *bijin*”.

2.1 The Chronological Skip

This research does not interpret the contemporary *bijin* as a “successor” of the modern *bijin*. Rather than interpreting the *bijin* as a transgenerational being which evolves through time, it perceives the various versions of the *bijin* as independent figures. There is the “most beautiful” *bijin* who emerged from the adaptation of Western pageantry, the Nagoya-*bijin* and Kyoto-*bijin* who appeared on souvenir stamps, and (last but not least) the mask-*bijin* who emerged through the necessity of face masks during the coronavirus pandemic. In the same way that the modern *bijin* emerged through the *bijinga*, these later adaptations of the *bijin* sprang up through its own medium, all with distinct mediums, standards, and purposes.

With that said, the different versions of the *bijin* are all united under the definition of “a beautiful woman”. Thus, the modern *bijin* from the early 20th century and the contemporary *bijin* of 21st century share the same purpose of reflecting the standards of beauty through the depiction of a female body. For this reason, the modern *bijin* and the contemporary *bijin* can be studied independently yet interconnectedly, and both their similarities and differences will prove to be important findings for discussions on the *bijin*.

2.2 Changing the Approach

In the preceding Analysis (1), we analyzed the modern *bijin* from both a birds-eye and a particularized perspective. The bird's-eye view gave the modern *bijin* some context in respect to the sociopolitical and cultural environment of the time. The analysis on the overall aesthetic of beauty in modern Japan helped us to better understand the purpose and causality behind the emergence of the *bijin*. On the other hand, the particularized perspective of the analysis pieced apart the modern *bijin* using specific descriptive texts and images. By focusing on the descriptions and visualization of the modern *bijin*, we could see various “beauty standards” being reflected in her depiction. By relying on both a bird's-eye and particularized perspective, the section took the completed figure of the modern *bijin* and deconstructed her into her functional, aesthetic, and visual components.

Analysis (2) aims to analyze the same components of the *bijin* as studied in Analysis (1). Instead of the *bijinga*, it uses Japanese women's magazines as a medium upon which the *bijin* is being portrayed. In order to obtain a similar bundle of information, however, the analysis on the contemporary *bijin* must restructure the process used to study the modern *bijin*. For instance, the bird's-eye perspective in Analysis (1) took the information from existing literature on the Japanese modern aesthetics of beauty to explain the functions and visual components of the modern *bijin*. In other words, it relied on literature review of works on Japanese modern aesthetics to understand the artistic motives behind the *bijinga* artists' portrayal of the modern *bijin*.

On the other hand, Analysis (2) cannot rely on existing literature on contemporary Japanese aesthetics to understand how “beauty” is conceptualized in the environment surrounding the contemporary *bijin*. This is mainly due to the fact that the creators behind the modern *bijinga* and the contemporary women's magazines come from different fields. While the modern *bijin* was painted by artists, the contemporary *bijin* are “painted” by a team of marketing experts, article editors, and cosmetic and fashion professionals in the publishing industry. Consequently, the creators behind the contemporary *bijin* were deemed to be less proximate to the contemporary aesthetics of beauty explained by researchers in the field of art and aesthetics. Thus, the bird's-eye perspective of Analysis (2) focuses on investigating the aesthetic of beauty being portrayed through discourse in the magazines

themselves. This is done by analyzing how the concept of “beauty” is being used throughout the magazines.

As for the particularized perspective to the investigation of *bijin*, Analysis (2) reverses the process used in Analysis (1). Indeed, instead of starting with the completed figure of a *bijin* and breaking her down into her analyzable components (as done in Analysis (1)), Analysis (2) must piece together the descriptive and visual components found in the women’s magazines to reconstruct a prototypical figure of the contemporary *bijin*. In order to do so, Analysis (2) locates descriptions and visualization of the female body throughout the magazines and uses them to construct the contemporary *bijin*.

2.3 Preparation for Analysis (2)

In preparation for Analysis (2), hardcopies of six Japanese women’s magazines were collected based on four criteria. Firstly, the options were narrowed down to a specific type of women’s magazines called *gekkan fasshon zasshi* (月刊ファッション雑誌) or “monthly fashion magazines”. This classification excluded magazines belonging to other popular genres of women’s magazines like *seikatsu zasshi* (生活雑誌) or “lifestyle magazines”, as well as those categorized as *shukanshi* (週刊誌) or “weekly magazines”. Secondly, the search was narrowed down to June 2022 editions. Thirdly, the titles were each chosen from categories of magazines geared towards various age groups. This opened the scope of the study to include a cross-analysis of the data across different generations of audiences. Lastly, the magazines were selected based on their popularity on various Japanese magazine ranking websites. The summary of the selected titles is shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Summary of Magazines						
Magazine	Cover Title	Publisher	First Published	Target Age Group	Page number	Price (JPY)
<i>nicola</i>	ニコラ	Shinchosha	1997	10's	113	560
<i>non.no</i>	non • no	Shueisha	1971	10's – 20's	155	660
<i>Bijin Hyakka</i>	美人百花	Kadokawa Haruki Corporation	2005	20's – 30's	187	780
<i>LEE</i>	LEE	Shueisha	1983	30's – 40's	203	700
<i>éclat</i>	エクラ	Shueisha	2007	50's	187	980
<i>Sutekina Anohito</i>	素敵なあの人	Takarajimasha	2017	60's	97	1100

Note: By author

The quantitative data collection process was divided into three main steps: counting and recounting the character *bi* (美), charting the frequency on an excel sheet, and counting the frequency of keywords and related concepts across all of the magazines.

In step one, the character *bi* (美) was counted manually. Each time the character *bi* (美) appeared in the magazine, it was circled using a red marker. The total number of the appearance of (美) was written at the bottom corner of each page for reference in the following step. This step was repeated to ensure that all appearances of (美) were properly marked. This re-counting proved crucial since there were several instances where (美) was not marked with a circle in the first round of counting.

In the second step, each phrase or sentence including the circled (美) (referred to as “excerpt” from this point forward) was electronically typed into an excel sheet. A sheet was created for each of the six magazines, in which the rows were labeled by page numbers, and each row was filled with the excerpts found on that page. Pages that did not have (美) were excluded from the sheet, and each excerpt was given its own cell. The length of each excerpt was decided based on the perceived significance of the information. For instance, nuanced words like “a beautiful feeling/vibe” 「美人感」 needed context to analyze what message the word was conveying to the audience. The farthest right column in each sheet was used to keep notes on any observations made about the excerpts.

After the quantitative data was prepared and trends were visualized on tables and figures, we began a qualitative analysis of the keywords in context to the contents of the magazines. The qualitative analysis was used to construct a prototype for the *bijin* being depicted in each of the six magazines. The following section on Analysis (2) explains the methodology, results, and analysis in depth.

3. Analysis (2): Relocating the *Bijin* in Contemporary Japan

The goal of this analysis is to construct a visual and descriptive representation of the *bijin* appearing in each of the six magazines. It is a diachronic study that aims to use the components observed in the *bijin* of the modern era to locate and define the contemporary *bijin* depicted in the women’s fashion magazines. Simultaneously, the cross analysis of six different magazines with varying target age range allows for a synchronic study of the contemporary *bijin* across different age groups.

3.1 The Aesthetic of Beauty Expressed in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Magazines

This section analyzes how the aesthetic of beauty is being depicted in the women’s magazines. It uses the frequency of the character *bi* (美) appearing in the text, as well as patterns of how the character

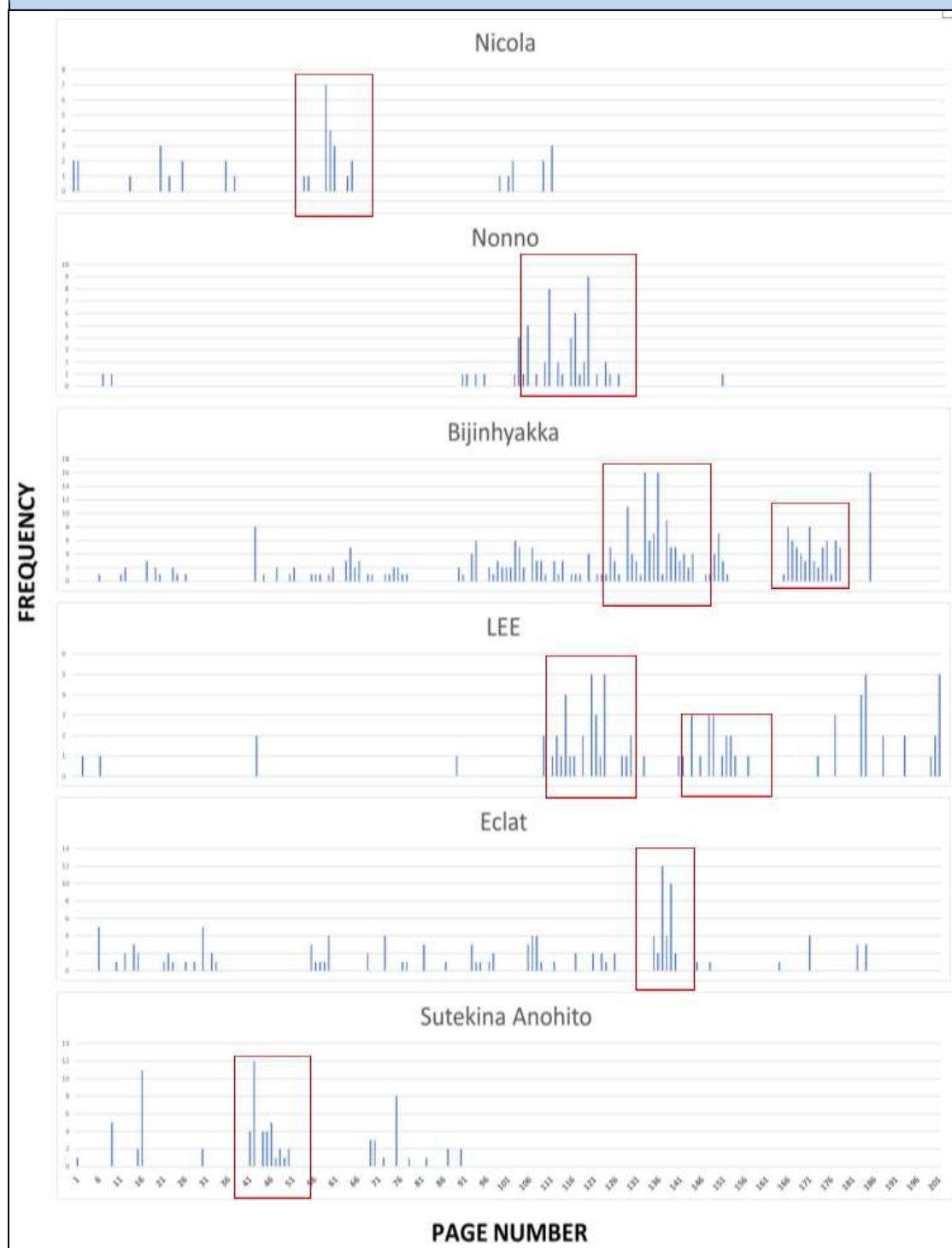
is used in context, to identify characteristics of beauty being shared among editors and readers of the magazines. The key motivation behind this methodology is to objectively pick out the quantitative patterns in the usage of *bi* (美) without relying on the researcher's subjective interpretation of "beauty" being depicted in the magazines. This investigation is important because it clarifies the background upon which the *bijin* is constructed. As seen in Analysis (1), the aesthetic of *iki* coincided, if not preceded, the emergence of the standardized notion of *bijin*. Analysis (2) assumes a similar circumstance for the contemporary *bijin* being portrayed in women's magazines, and it aims to characterize this "contemporary aesthetic of beauty" that is proliferated within this medium.

First, we investigate the patterns in the appearance of the character *bi* (美) throughout the magazines. Figure 3.1 shows the frequency of the appearance of *bi* (美) by page number for all magazines. As indicated by the red boxes, the character *bi* (美) tended to appear in clusters rather evenly across the pages. These clusters showed two notable patterns. Firstly, for all magazines except *éclat*, the pages where these clusters formed were dedicated to topics regarding makeup tutorials or cosmetics advertisements. Secondly, the data for *éclat* and *Sutekina Anohito* showed clusters for pages with articles on the history of the beauty industry. It must be noted that the magazines in the younger half of the "target age" division—*Ninola*, *non.no*, and *Nijin Hyakka*—did not contain any content on history. These two patterns indicate the existence of both similarities and differences in the aesthetic of beauty shared among female readers of different age groups.

3.1.1 Topic-based Clusters of the Frequency of *Bi* (美)

Figure 3.1:

Frequency trend of *bi* (美) across all magazines



Note: By Author

3.1.2 Keywords Associated with *bi* (美)

Table 3.1: Keywords Including <i>bi</i> (美)			
KEYWORD	Pronunciation	Meaning	<i>Yomi</i>
美容	<i>biyo</i>	Cosmetology/cosmetic; of or relating to beauty	<i>On'yomi</i>
美白	<i>bihaku</i>	Skin whitening	<i>On'yomi</i>
美肌	<i>bihada</i>	Beautiful skin	<i>On'yomi</i>
美髪	<i>bihatsu</i>	Beautiful hair	<i>On'yomi</i>
美脚	<i>bikyaku</i>	Beautiful legs	<i>On'yomi</i>
美シルエット	<i>bishiruetto</i>	Beautiful silhouette	<i>On'yomi</i>
美人	<i>bijin</i>	Beautiful person; beautiful woman	<i>On'yomi</i>
美術	<i>bijutsu</i>	Fine arts	<i>On'yomi</i>
美しい	<i>utsukushii</i>	Beautiful (adj.)	<i>Kun'yomi</i>
美しさ	<i>utsukushisa</i>	Beauty; aesthetic (noun)	<i>Kun'yomi</i>
美しく	<i>utsukushiku</i>	Beautifully (adv.)	<i>Kun'yomi</i>

Note: By author

Next, we identify the “keywords” of this study. These are words containing the character (美), has a total frequency greater than five, and appears in more than one magazine. In order to count the frequency of the words containing (美) across all magazines, a new excel sheet was created with columns labeled by the six magazine titles, and rows labeled by all of the potential keywords. The SUMPRODUCT formula was used to count the frequency of each word. Through this process, eleven keywords of the study were identified. Table 3.1 shows the eleven keywords and their descriptions.

One observation that can immediately be made is the presence of the human body in more than half of these entries. As an example of the contrary, words like *biishiki* (美意識; “consciousness towards beauty”) and *bitoku* (美德; “virtue”) did not occur frequently enough to make it onto the list of “keywords.” To what extent, then, did these chosen “keywords” contribute to the contents of each magazine? To start this analysis, Table 3.2 shows the eleven keywords and their frequency in each magazine.

Of all of the magazines, *Bijin Hyakka* had the greatest frequency of keywords, and of all of the keywords, *biyo* (美容; “cosmetic”) appeared most frequently. In the latter case, the word *biyo* was often used in conjunction with another character to make a compound word, the most popular being *biyoekei* (美容液; “beauty serum”, *biyou janarisuto* (美容ジャーナリスト; “cosmetic journalist”), and *biyo seibun* (美容成分; “cosmetic ingredient”). As such, the words containing *biyo* tend to be concrete objects rather than abstract ideas. In fact, with the exception of two cases of *biyotsu* (美容通; “beauty enthusiast/expert”) and two cases of *biyokei* (美容系; “beauty-related”), every word containing *biyo* depicted a tangible object related to cosmetics. Additionally, it is worth noting that the other keywords like *bihada* (美肌; “beautiful skin”), *bikyaku* (美脚; “beautiful legs”), and *bihatsu* (美髪; “beautiful hair”) address tangible body parts of the human body. Thus, from a bird’s-eye perspective of the overall pattern of keyword usage across all magazines, we can conclude that “beauty” tends to be associated with tangible materials, rather than intangible ideas.

Table 3.2:
Frequency of Keywords

KEYWORD	<i>nicola</i>	<i>non.no</i>	<i>Bijin Hyakka</i>	<i>LEE</i>	<i>éclat</i>	<i>Sutekina Anohito</i>	TOTAL
美容	16	28	54	40	19	41	198
美白	5	2	17	5	4	4	37
美肌	6	11	22	4	3	4	50
美髪	1	0	2	4	0	0	7
美脚	6	0	2	1	2	0	11
美シルエット	0	0	16	2	0	0	18
美人	1	13	49*	0	1	1	65
美術	0	0	0	1	4	1	6
美しい	0	1	24	5	24	4	58
美しさ	1	1	5	4	9	4	24
美しく	0	0	25	3	13	3	44
Total	36	56	216	69	79	62	518

Note: By author

**Does not include any references to the name of the magazine, Bijin Hyakka*

3.1.3 Generational Differences in the Ideological Placement of Beauty

Next, we examine how the frequency of these keywords are distributed *within* each magazine. Since these magazines are considered popular choices among its generationally distinct target audiences, we can observe the expression of beauty in these magazines as a suggestive representation of beauty—at least from the perspective of the editor—for each age-range. **Figure 3.2** shows the percentage that each keyword takes up in the magazines.

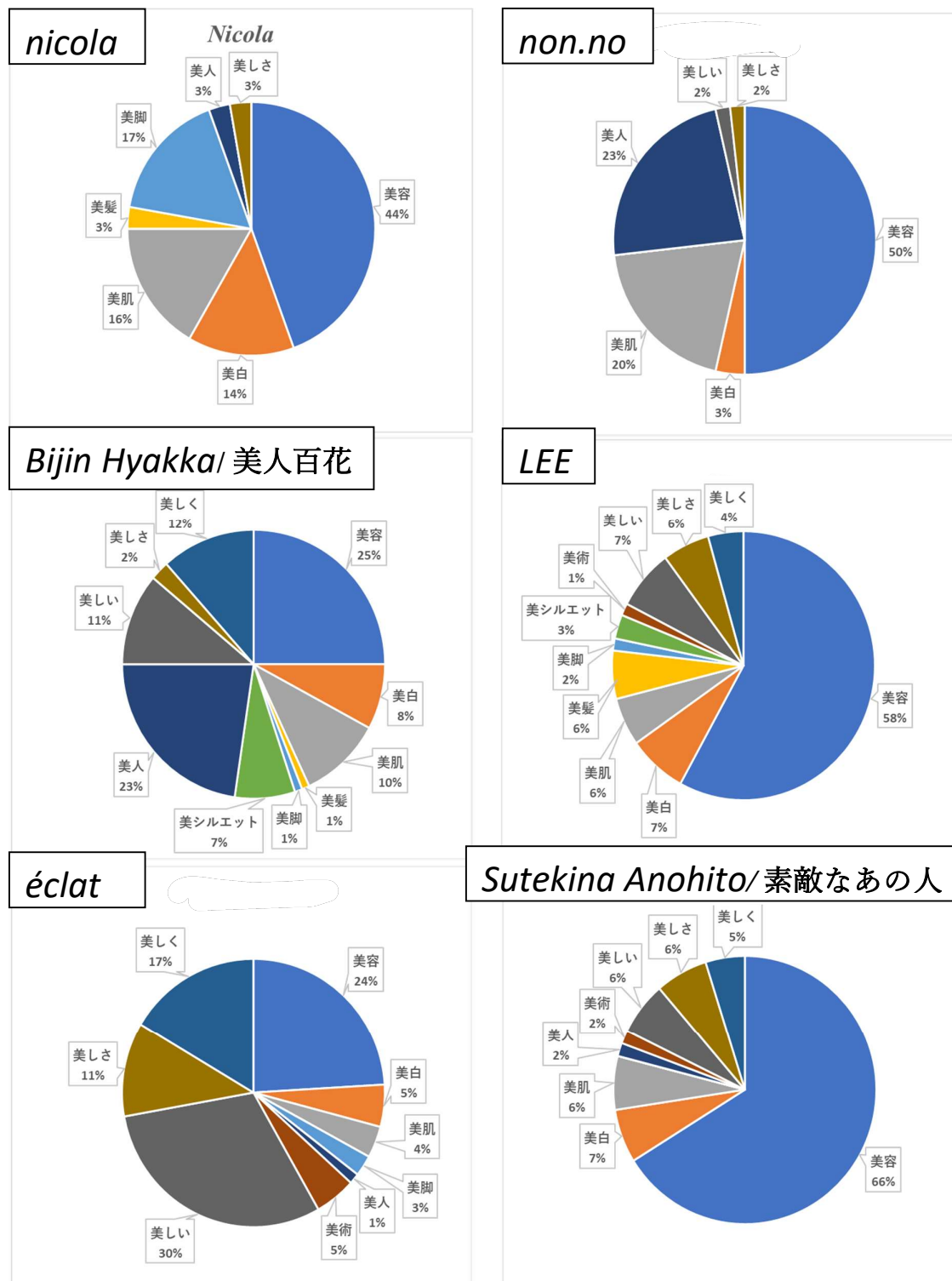
We observe several characteristics regarding the weight of each keyword in each magazine. Firstly, *biyo* (美容; “cosmetic”) takes up a large percentage of the total number of keywords in each of the magazines. It is the most frequently used keyword in all magazines except *éclat* (close second to *utsukushisa*). Some distinctive characteristics that stand out are the large percentage that *bikyaku* takes up in *nicola* and the high percentage that *bijin* takes up in both *non.no* and *Bijin Hyakka*. The distinctively large portion for *utsukushii* (in *éclat* is also eye-catching).

Now, we reexamine these data specifically in respect to age group. Several observations can be made. Firstly, the term for “beauty” in general, *utsukushisa* (美しさ; “beauty”), along with its adverbial form *utsukushiku* (美しく; “beautifully”) and adjective form *utsukushii* (美しい; “beautiful”), take up larger portions of the graph in magazines geared for older audiences. Compared to the other keywords that have the form *bi* (美) + [object], these three keywords have contextual flexibility when used in the magazines. For instance, *Sutekina Anohito* includes phrases like “above all, she has a strong and beautiful heart” (p. 15) and “[we] become more beautiful as [our] age increases” (p. 14), which point to intangible aspects of a woman’s body.

On the other hand, *bihada* (美肌; “beautiful skin”) takes up a larger percentage of magazines geared for younger audiences. Additionally, in the majority of the instances where *biyo* (美容; “cosmetic”) appears in these magazines for younger audiences, the topic tends to revolve around skincare cosmetics and their advertisements. While this may reflect the commercial incentive of editors to focus on topics that each age group would be interested in, it also suggests a characteristic for how each age-group places the notion of beauty in context to a female body.

Figure 3.2:

Percentage of Each Magazine (by Keyword Frequency)



Note: By author. For translations of key words, refer to Table 3.1

The main findings about Japanese women's fashion magazines from the previous part can be summed up by four points: *biyo* (“cosmetic”) is the most popular keyword across all magazines, which indicates the materialistic aspect of beauty; the term for “beauty” in general, *utsukushisa* (美しさ; “beauty”), along with its adverbial form *utsukushiku* (美しく; “beautifully”) and adjective form *utsukushii* (美しい; “beautiful”), appeared most frequently in magazines targeting older audiences, suggesting the flexible interpretation of beauty among older audiences; the physical human body appears frequently in the discourse on beauty; and *bijin* appeared most frequently in the two magazines geared towards women around her twenties. As such, we begin to see patterns that reflect the differences in the conception of “beauty” among various age-groups. In the following section, we deepen the analysis further by examining how each magazine depicts the ideal *bijin* through its text and images.

3.2 Constructing the Contemporary *Bijin*

Finally, we will attempt to construct our version of the contemporary *bijin* as depicted in women's magazines. The six magazines being studied in this section is *nicola*, *non.no*, *Bijin Hyakka*, *LEE*, *éclat*, and *Sutekina Anohito* (see table 2.1 for details). By identifying both the implicit and explicit descriptions of a “beautiful woman” from each magazine, we attempt to create a comprehensive list for the characterizations of the particular contemporary version of the *bijin*. Each analysis will include a table that summarizes its findings.

3.2.1 *nicola*

We start with *nicola*, a magazine for teenaged audiences. One notable characteristic of the magazine is its explicit association of the term *bijin* to material beauty. On a page headed by the phrase “A self that can have confidence in my outer appearance”, the word “*bijin*” is in a bubble that points to the word *gaiken* (外見; “outer appearance”) (小島, 2022, p. 20). In addition to the bubble containing *bijin*, there are several others surrounding the header with phrases pointing to various parts of the line. For

instance, “smooth hair” points to “outer appearance”, “clear skin” points to “confidence”, “thin legs” points to “have”, and “high consciousness for beauty” points to “self” (小島, 2022, p. 20). This single page seems to characterize and standardize what the ideal “self” should strive for. Indeed, next to the heading, there are two teenaged girls with “smooth hair”, “clear skin”, and “thin legs”. This suggests, both to the researcher and the average reader, that these girls represent the beauty standards depicted by the content on the page.

Table 3.3 shows a list of characteristics that were either promoted or praised by the contents of the magazine. The most notable characteristic was the emphasis on “beautiful legs”. One article featured a female teenager who won the *bikyaku* (“beautiful leg”) contest hosted by the publisher (小島, 2022, p. 63). From advertisements on miniskirts to tutorials on leg-shaping exercises, the contents of the magazine focused on portraying “beautiful legs” through comments, side-bubbles, and pictures.

The overarching theme that runs throughout the magazine was “liveliness,” “activeness,” and “youthfulness.” The majority of the models appear in pairs or within a group, and the photos captured them laughing out loud or smiling vibrantly amongst each other. The color scheme of the pages is vibrant, and the colloquial styled language used in the text is light-hearted. The magazine skillfully uses relatable scenarios, like having a crush on a boy or having to study for exams, to appeal to the teenaged reader. Overall, the magazine seems to promote the image of a lively teenaged girl who keeps up with fashion trends, has a vibrant and adventurous personality, and enjoys being with peers.

Table 3.3 Characteristic of <i>nicola's Bijin</i>	
	Description
Skin	White skin (小島, 2022, p. 22); no blemishes (小島, 2022, p. 58)
Hair	Smooth and long hair (小島, 2022, p. 59)
Face	Sparkly yet light eyeshadow (小島, 2022, p. 38)
Silhouette	White and smooth legs (小島, 2022, p. 13), smooth and glossy legs (小島, 2022, p. 63) thin legs (小島, 2022, p. 63) tall stature (小島, 2022, p. 110)
Behavior	Using fashion to bring out beautiful qualities, like “white collared shirt to emphasize <i>bihaku</i> face” (小島, 2022, p. 22) Outdoors in casual clothes with friends (小島, 2022, p. 24) In a classroom, smiling with classmates (小島, 2022, p. 16) At a shopping center with a friend (小島, 2022, p. 14)
Other	<i>Ike kan</i> (イケ感) (小島, 2022, p. 54) Lively, active and youthful (author's observation)

Note: Translated and created by Author

Perhaps the *bijinga* of the contemporary *bijin* being depicted in *nicola* would have the teenaged *bijin* enjoying a conversation with friends, wearing a colorful top with a miniskirt to show off her smooth and slim legs, and have long and smooth hair that willows in the wind. The background may a high school classroom during break, a shopping mall on a weekend, or at a park where she can move freely with her friends.

3.2.2 *non.no*

Next, we move on to *non.no* for readers in their teens and twenties. The most notable aspect of the magazine was the segment titled “Baby-face despite being a *bijin*” (俵理, 2022, p.93). The “despite” in this line reveals an interesting fact about the editor's understanding of the *bijin*. That is, she is the opposite of “baby-face”. The segment introduces the idol Yuka Suzuki as the model of this concept and

gives makeup advice on how to achieve the look. It draws a parallel between “maturity” and “*bijin*” and contrasts it to the similarly paralleled “baby-face” to “pure”. Instead of promoting the “*bijin*” who is mature and edgy, the magazine constructs an original version of a *bijin* that includes elements of immaturity and purity.

Table 3.4 shows a list of characteristics that were either promoted or praised by the contents of the magazines. An interesting observation is the absence of descriptions on “hair” and “silhouette” throughout the magazines. However, although not explicitly stated, the general standards for a “hair” could be gathered from the characteristics shared amongst the models. Unlike the models of *nicola* who all had black or dark brown hair, this magazine included models who had hair dyed in lighter shades of brown. This difference seemed to reflect the freedom of self-expression that women experience upon leaving adolescence and entering adulthood.

Table 3.4 Characteristic of <i>non.no</i>'s <i>Bijin</i>	
	Description
Skin	White skin (俵理, 2022, p. 116) glowing skin (俵理, 2022, p. 149)
Hair	Shiny and neatly set hair; lightly dyed hair (author's observation)
Face	<i>Bijin insho feisu</i> (美人印象フェイス; “face that gives an impression of <i>bijin</i> ”) → smoky colored eye makeup with timid eyes (俵理, 2022, p. 93) Lips that are “moist and soft” (俵理, 2022, p.110) Painted with color (俵理, 2022, p. 109)
Silhouette	---
Behavior	Lip care (俵理, 2022, p. 110), hair removal (俵理, 2022, p.120) go to beauty salon (俵理, 2022, p. 125)
Other	Balancing softness with edge (俵理, 2022, pp. 103-105)

Note: Translated and created by Author

Perhaps the *bijinga* of the contemporary *bijin* being depicted in *non.no* would be a woman in her early twenties with white and glowing skin. The artist would emphasize her face, which has edgy lines

and smokey eye shadow to emphasize her maturity. Yet, the *bijin* would have timid eyes and plump lips that draw out her “baby-like” qualities. She represents a transition from adolescence into adulthood.

3.2.3 *Bijin Hyakka*/ 美人百花

As the title suggests, *Bijin Hyakka* had plenty to share about their ideal *bijin*. This magazine, geared towards female audiences in their twenties and thirties, had the most variety when using the term *bijin*. Some examples include “*bijin* vibe” (美人感), “*bijin* degree” (美人度), “clean *Bijin*” (清楚美人), “detail *bijin*” (ディテール美人), “cool *bijin*” (涼しげ美人), “style *bijin*” (スタイル美人), and many more. The magazine had the tendency to use *bijin* as a catchphrase for their logo, such as “*bijin* delivery service” (美人通販) and “*bijin* salon” (美人 Salon). The magazine also seemed to promote a product using the term *bijin*, such as in “*bijin* in a dress” (ドレス美人), “one-piece *bijin*” (美人ワンピース), and “*bijin* clothes” (美人服). Despite their tendency to use the term *bijin* like a catchphrase, they also included references to actual images of beautiful women, such as their depiction of the “sexy *bijin*” (色っぽ美人) and the “no-makeup *bijin*” (すっぴん美人). The oversaturation in the appearance of the term “*bijin*” makes it difficult to differentiate a meaningless catchphrase from a portrayal of the *bijin*. Figure 3.5 shows a list of characteristics that were either promoted or praised by the contents of the magazines.

There are two themes that reflect those seen in the modern *bijin*. Firstly, this magazine emphasizes the function of a “mermaid-styled skirt” in bringing out the beautiful silhouette of a woman (金井, 2022, p. 42). It associates a “tight” and “high” waistline as the standard of a beautiful silhouette. This description seems to reflect the “willowy waist” depicted by Nishimura (1989) and portrayed by artists like Suzuki (Figure 1.2) for the modern *bijin*. The second theme is the topic on artificial versus natural beauty. As discussed in section 1.1.4, various writers and artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used the debate of *shinbijin* (真美人; “true beauty”), as the motif of their works. The various types of *bijin* mentioned throughout the magazine seems to ironically emphasize the importance of the one “true” *bijin* who is “natural” and “real.” This juxtaposition of the artificial versus natural is

reflected in the advertisements of skincare products and clothing, which claim to bring out the “natural” beauty of the beholder.

Table 3.5 Characteristic of <i>Bijin Hyakka</i>’s <i>Bijin</i>	
	Description
Skin	No blemished and translucent (金井, 2022, p. 19) natural and “real” (金井, 2022, p. 132) naked skin (金井, 2022, p. 137)
Hair	Glossy, smooth (金井, 2022, p. 149)
Face	Small face (金井, 2022, p. 126) plump eye bags and large “kind” eyes (金井, 2022, p. 139)
Silhouette	Mermaid-style skirt, tights at waist (金井, 2022, p. 42) high waist (金井, 2022, p. 97) good posture (金井, 2022, p. 124)
Behavior	Creates “real” beauty instead of artificial beauty → <i>suppin bijin</i> (すっぴん美人; “beauty without makeup”) (金井, 2022, p. 166) → does not use digital face-editing applications (金井, 2022, p. 132)
Other	Various versions of the <i>bijin</i> (author’s observation)

Note: Translated and created by Author

Perhaps the *bijinga* of the contemporary *bijin* being depicted in *Bijin Hyakka* would be wearing a simple, mermaid-style dress that emphasizes her thin and high waistline. She would be in her twenties and have a small face with light makeup that emphasizes her plump eyebags and large, kind eyes. The emphasis would be placed on the translucent, glowing, and white quality of her natural skin. She is the “real” *bijin* who, if need be, has the capability of acting the role of a specific “type” of *bijin*.

3.3.4 *LEE*

Next, we move onto *LEE*, a magazine for women in their thirties to forties. This magazine seemed to promote simplistic beauty, not just in human bodies, but in clothes, shoes, and even vacuum cleaner designs. The beauty of a woman seemed to lie in her lifestyle and behaviors, rather than her outer appearance or fashion. Two themes were evident throughout the magazine.

Firstly, the magazine focused on addressing a “mature” audience. It explicitly calls out the beauty of an “independent” adult woman (喜田, 2022, p. 30) and implicitly depicts calmness and maturity through its beige and toned-down color scheme. An advertisement about a plain t-shirt claims that the shirt makes “adults look beautiful” through its simple design (喜田, 2022, p. 43). Additionally, the tone of the writing which mainly uses *keigo*, or formal Japanese, is very calm and not authoritative. The tone implicates the equal, if not higher, social standing of the “mature” audience. The same tone is used to describe and address the women appearing in the magazine, emphasizing their intellectual and behavioral maturity.

The second theme of this magazine is the emphasis on the beauty expressed through “lifestyle” and “habits” rather than physical appearance. Even in advertisements for cosmetics, the magazine barely touches on subjects of physical characteristics or beauty standards, and instead focuses on the *shuukan* (習慣; “habits”) of using these products that makes a woman beautiful. Beyond being a physical standard for beauty, clear and translucent skin is something that reflects the beautiful lifestyle of a woman who diligently practices skincare. In contrast to *nicola*’s implicit association of *biishiki* (美意識; “consciousness for beauty”) with physical beauty and adventurism, *LEE* seems to associate *biishiki* with the beauty of lifestyle and the sense of responsibility. For instance, the advertisements for beauty serum claims that it provides “elasticity” and “sheen,” but it does not directly claim that these physical characteristics are standards for beauty (喜田, 2022, p. 152). The editor takes a distanced approach to the advertisement by “mentioning” the products to the mature reader, rather than “promoting” or “recommending” them.

Table 3.6 shows a list of characteristics that were upheld by the contents of the magazines. The most notable point of the *bijin* constructed from the descriptions in *Lee* is depicted by the substantial weight of the “behavior” section of the chart. The *bijin* that is promoted by this magazine is a responsible and independent adult woman who likes to cook healthy meals, uses *biyokaden* (美容家電; “household beauty appliances”) ranging from air fresheners to “beautiful” vacuum cleaners, and has refined taste in literature and movies.

Table 3.6 Characteristic of LEE’s <i>Bijin</i>	
	Description
Skin	No pimples (喜田, 2022, p. 109) white skin (喜田, 2022, p. 113) no blemishes (喜田, 2022, p.114) no wrinkles (喜田, 2022, p. 123) translucent quality (喜田, 2022, p. 198)
Hair	<i>Tsuya</i> (“smoothness”) that is gained through washing hair with care (喜田, 2022, p. 118)
Face	--
Silhouette	Create a “beautiful silhouette” using a skirt (hides the calves, pinching at the waist, and flowing out) (喜田, 2022, p. 89) Trimmed nails is a part of the “beautiful silhouette” (喜田, 2022, p. 127)
Behavior	“independent” adult (喜田, 2022, p. 30), Cooks healthy and nutritious meals (author’s observation) Uses <i>biyokaden</i> (“household beauty appliances”), Interested in foreign movies and literature (喜田, 2022, p. 176)
Other	Healthy lifestyle and diet (喜田, 2022, p. 182) practices skincare and scalp care (author’s observation)

Note: Translated and created by Author

If an artist was to draw a *bijinga* of the contemporary *bijin* depicted in *LEE*, she may take the artistic liberty of drawing her facing away from the painting, suggesting the unnecessary of the face to judge a woman's beauty. The middle-aged *bijin* would be dressed in a long skirt that falls below her calves, and her jewelry and clothing would be simple. Her arms could be extended away from her body to show her clear skin and trimmed fingernails. She could be cooking a healthy meal in a clean kitchen, using a sleek vacuum cleaner to fix up her organized room, or reading a foreign novel in a city café.

3.3.5 *éclat*

Next, we have *éclat*, a magazine for female readers in their fifties. Once again, this magazine does not place weight on defining physical beauty standards. An advertisement on long and baggy khaki pants captions its image as “clothes that make an independent woman look beautiful” (工藤, 2022, p. 30). The bagginess of the pants, which hides the physical silhouette of the woman's body, suggests that the advertisement is addressing a non-physical beauty of the beholder. The use of the term “independent” to describe the woman, as well as the depiction of the model wearing the pants in an open desert, suggests the feeling of “freedom” and “comfort” with the notion of beauty.

Table 3.7 shows the characteristics of the *bijin* that is constructed based on the contents of the magazine. The overall theme of these characteristics is the emphasis on simplicity. Rather than having an extensive list of meticulous characteristics of a beautiful woman, the magazine implicates the beauty of negative space. The minimalistic portrayal of beauty promotes clean skin, damage-free hair, and a silhouette that is *sukkiri* (“clean” or “simple”) (工藤, 2022, p. 59).

Table 3.7 Characteristic of <i>éclat's Bijin</i>	
	Description
Skin	clean
Hair	Soft, damage-free (工藤, 2022, p. 125) dyed (工藤, 2022, p. 124)
Face	Cleanly shaped eyebrows (author's observation)
Silhouette	<i>Sukkiri</i> ("clean and simple") body line (工藤, 2022, p. 59)
Behavior	Lives freely and comfortably while clean and beautiful (author's observation)
Other	Standing alone in open space (工藤, 2022, p.50, p. 52-53, p. 57, p. 93, p. 95, p. 97)

Note: Translated and created by Author

If an artist were to paint a *bijinga* based on the contemporary *bijin* portrayed in this magazine, the artist may choose to emphasize simplicity by making it a black and white pencil drawing. The *bijin* would be in her fifties and be wearing a simple white t-shirt with baggy, long pants that does not highlight her silhouette. Her skin and hair would be clean and spotless, and her eyebrows would be shaped cleanly. The background could be an open desert, a spacious room, or a large field, and the *bijin* would be posed with hands dangling freely in the air.

3.3.6 *Sutekina Anohito*/ 素敵なのの人

Finally, we analyze the *bijin* depicted in *Sutekina Anohito*, a women's magazine written for audiences above the age sixty. The concept of "aging beautifully" is a notion that is revisited many times throughout the magazine. In the beginning portion, the editor explicitly states, "there is beauty that develops as you age" (神下, 2022, p. 14). This statement becomes a recurring motif throughout the magazine, and "aging" is portrayed as something that brings out beautiful qualities in a woman. For instance, while the magazine promotes the use of cosmetic serum to maintain beautiful skin, it never uses the term "anti-aging" and uses notions like "booster serum" (神下, 2022, p. 44). There are various instances when the magazine equates "aging" with "natural beauty," and the readers are encouraged to

find “natural beauty” through a healthy lifestyle. For instance, one article encourages the consumption of fermented foods for skincare (神下, 2022, p. 43), while another portrays a healthy lifestyle as the key to obtaining beauty (神下, 2022, p. 68).

Table 3.8 shows the characteristics of a *bijin* who is constructed from the portrayals of beautiful women in *Sutekina Anohito*. This *bijin* has white and natural skin (p. 47; p. 49); possesses short, light, and dyed hair; and has a “supple body” (*shinayakana karada*; しなやかな体) that is healthy and active (神下, 2022, p. 15). She puts on light makeup, wears a pleasant smile, and is a kind and active grandmother for her family.

Table 3.8 Characteristic of Sutekina Ahnohito’s Bijin	
	Description
Skin	White skin (神下, 2022, p. 41)
	Skincare through fermented food (神下, 2022, p. 43)
	Not genetics but skincare (神下, 2022, p. 43)
	Make naked skin look beautiful (神下, 2022, p. 47)
	Not powdery, but natural skin (神下, 2022, p. 49)
Hair	Short, shoulder-length hair that is dyed into single color (author’s observation)
Face	Smiling (author’s observation)
Silhouette	“beautiful and <i>shinayaka</i> (“supple”) body” (神下, 2022, p. 15)
Behavior	“eating is also a part of <i>biyo</i> ”; “edible <i>biyo</i> ” (神下, 2022, p. 8)
	“monthly visit to the hairdresser” (神下, 2022, p. 29)
	“consciousness for beauty” (神下, 2022, p. 41)
	Take care of skin (神下, 2022, p. 43)
	Light makeup (神下, 2022, p. 49)
Other	Beauty is associated with <i>kenko</i> (“health”) (神下, 2022, p. 68)
	Portrayed as an active grandmother to her family (author’s observation)

Note: Translated and created by Author

Perhaps, the portrayal of the *bijin* in *Sutekina Anohito* would be drawn as an active woman in her sixties who is smiling with her family. The depiction of “aging beautifully” could be depicted through eye-wrinkles formed from smiling and the lightness of her thin yet bouncy hair. This image of “aging” would be juxtaposed by the soft curves of her “supple” body, as well as the clearness of her skin. This *bijin* is a woman who accepts the fact that she is aging and finds ways to see the beauty within the process.

3.3 Themes of the Constructed Contemporary *Bijin*

In the previous section, the interpretation of the contemporary *bijin* was constructed for each of the six magazines. Several characteristics are shared among all versions of the contemporary *bijin*, regardless of the target age range. Firstly, the standard for “beautiful skin” is similar across all magazines. These standards include *bihaku* (“white skin”), clear skin without blemishes, and preference for smooth and naked over powdery and matte skin. While *éclat* and *Sutekina Anohito* include concepts of caring for aging skin and tackling wrinkles, the ultimate standard for beautiful skin is the same as those expressed in magazine for younger age groups.

Secondly, all magazines promote a beautiful woman who has high *biishiki* (美意識) or “consciousness towards beauty.” There are explicit uses of the word *biishiki*, as well as implicit phrases like “monthly visits to the hairdresser” (*Sutekina Anohito*, p. 29) and “habits for a beautiful body” (*Bijin Hyakka*, p. 183) that encourage the readers to adopt a lifestyle that places emphasis on beauty routines. These aspects suggest a certain lifestyle that differentiate these women from the others, revealing that behaviors also shape a *bijin*. Indeed, the modern *bijin* could be recognized as a *geisha* courtesan, not only by her body and fashion, but by the background on which she was portrayed. The *bijin*, regardless of the time period, is an image of a beautiful woman that is constructed both on standardized characteristics and upon a particular background.

The most prevalent characteristic shared amongst the contents of the magazines was the universal assumption that the readers are not the *bijin* being portrayed by the magazines. Rather, the readers are

the “other” who are trying to emulate the characteristics of the *bijin*. The advertisements and articles send a message that the reader should “try this” or “buy that” in order to enhance the qualities that mark a beautiful woman. The commercial function of *bijin* to act as an ultimate emulation of what is “beautiful” seems to be a powerful tool for advertising products and lifestyles.

This concludes the construction and analysis of the contemporary *bijin(s)* portrayed in Japanese women’s magazines. The next section cross-analyzes the results found in both Analysis (1) and Analysis (2) of this paper. The discussion is extended to address the figure of *bijin* in general, suggesting its significance in context to the study of Japanese society.

4. Discussions on the *Bijin*

As seen through Analysis (1) of the modern *bijin* and Analysis (2) of the contemporary *bijin*, the figure called the *bijin* is neither a static images nor a person in flesh. Instead, the *bijin* is a socially constructed figure who embodies the lifelike and standardized characteristics of a “beautiful woman.” Indeed, it could arguably be claimed that the *bijin* is a collection of socially set beauty standards that takes shape through mediums like art, discourse, and media. In turn, the *bijin* becomes an “ambassador” of these beauty standards and contributes to materializing and strengthening the standards through her portrayal. She is both an embodiment and a proliferator of beauty standards, which reflect both traditional aesthetics and contemporary trends in society.

It is because standards precede the formulation of the *bijin* that this paper was able to differentiate between the modern and the contemporary *bijin*. In other words, since the *bijin* is defined by her attributed characteristics, as trends and standards for beauty change with time, so too does the characteristic of the *bijin*. This can be seen in the various differences in the characterization of the *bijin* in each era. While the modern *bijin* was portrayed as having an “oval face” and often wore a kimono, the contemporary *bijin* is characterized by her “small face” and fashion that enhances her silhouette.

Despite these differences, there are several shared characteristics that can be observed between the modern and contemporary *bijin*. Firstly, some physical beauty standards like *bihaku* (“white skin”),

“silky hair”, and “thin waistline” has remained the same. The emphasis of “natural” beauty as opposed to artificial depictions of beauty is another similar thread running through the two versions. Secondly, both genres of *bijin* are association with specified lifestyles and behaviors. While the modern *bijin* embodies the *iki* quality and lifestyle of *geisha* courtesans, and the various contemporary *bijin* represent women in various stages of life and social settings. Lastly, because of this life-like quality of the behavioral standards, both the modern and the contemporary *bijin* are powerful tool to advertise certain products and services. While a *geisha* courtesan holding Sakura Beer (Figure 1.4) associates the alcoholic beverage with the pleasures of the “floating world,” the ‘independent’ woman modeling a pair of khaki pants in an open desert suggests the comfortable and non-constraining quality of the pants.

Now that both versions of the *bijin* have been compared and cross-analyzed, the paper will introduce three brief discussions about the theoretical and practical significance of the *bijin*. Together, the discussions unravel the ideological and academic significance of the study of the *bijin* in respect to gender and society.

4.1 When the *Bijin* Comes to Life

We open Discussion 4.1 with a question: if a living woman fully embodies the standards of a *bijin*, then can she be considered a living *bijin*? The answer that this discussion ultimately arrives to is that no living women can fully “become” the *bijin*. We arrive at this conclusion for two main reasons.

Firstly, the construct of the *bijin* is fundamentally different from that of a living person. While the *bijin* is a figure that is constructed by beauty standards, the existence of living person can precede the internalization of such standards. In other words, while beauty standards ‘define’ a *bijin*, they only ‘describe’ a living person. For instance, suppose that a model who is portrayed a women’s magazine appears to embody all of the standards of a *bijin* as understood through the magazine’s content. Would she be considered a living *bijin* as defined by the realm of the magazine?

This paper argues that the model cannot be a living *bijin*. This is because, while the beauty of the model is subjective, the beauty of the *bijin* is absolute. For instance, if the white-faced beauty of the *bijinga* appeared in a contemporary Japanese train station, she would be noticed for her peculiarity

rather than her beauty. Similarly, if the *bikyaku* model appeared in a miniskirt in a market of Meiji Japan, she would be condemned for her indecency rather than praised for her beauty. Even within the same time period, the interpretation for who is and is not beautiful depends on individual preference. What does not change, be it through time or the filter of individual consciousness, is the absolute fact that the *bijin* defines a beautiful woman.

As we have seen, the word *bijin* composed of descriptive characteristics. It is like a collection of adjectives about a woman that is ideologically materialized into the figure of a woman. Perhaps the same can be said for any other socially constructed images of a conceptual object. Just as an adjective can never be equated with the noun it describes, so too can a socially constructed image never define a person for her entirety. This is what marks the difference between “a beautiful woman” in flesh and the *bijin*, and here lies the first reason why the *bijin* should not be considered as a living person.

As for the second reason, while the standardized characteristics for the *bijin* (as in, the socially constructed figure) has the ability to remain non-measurable, the characteristics of a woman in flesh, no matter how beautiful, can be measured and scrutinized. Moreover, portrayals of these beauty standards through descriptive writings and art seem to protect the ambiguity of these characteristic, while the depiction through a human body does not. A similar argument was made by Ōgai Mori in his *Shinbiron* (“Theory of Aesthetics”):

The emotions the bijin inspires in those who view it cannot be calculated mathematically. That said, what are the true emotions of the viewer? They should be the same emotions one has toward an object of beauty, an actual bijin.

(Ōgai, 1892; translated in Lippit, 2019, p. 89)

For instance, take the claim by Okakura (1905) that “fair skin” was a beauty standard in modern Japan. If Okakura’s observation was true, then we can assume that the majority of the Japanese people who read Okakura’s written depiction of the *bijin* as having “fair skin” would have nodded in agreement. This is because the term “fair skin” is internalized by the audience as a shapeless idea, and this idea of “fair skin” has the ability to be as fair or as dark as one desires for the *bijin*.

Similarly, although the tone and sheen on their skin seem to vary, the four *bijin* depicted in Figures 1.1~1.4 all appear to embody the standard of “fair skinned” beauty. Indeed, in actuality, the color used to paint the skin of the *bijin* in Figure 1.4 looks much fairer than the one used for Figure 1.2. However, the viewers understand that both paintings are only representations of the *bijin* existing in the artists’ mind. It is the *intention* of the artist to depict fair skin—as seen in the fairness of the skin in contrast to other components of the painting—which has meaning for the viewers.

On the contrary, the beauty standards being portrayed on a living person is neither shapeless nor representative. Once the standards of a beautiful woman become embodied by a living woman, they become the physical traits of a tangible being, materializing the *bijin* to an extent that leaves room for neither ambiguity nor artistic interpretation. The physical characteristic of the human *bijin* would be directly compared with the conceptual figure of the *bijin* drifting within and between the consciousness of individuals in society. While writers and artists can depict the characteristic of a beautiful woman without including features that may counter an audience’s interpretation of beauty, a woman who embodies the same characteristics must materialize the standards on her physical body. It is the ambiguity of beauty standards in literary and artistic mediums that gives the motif of the *bijin* the power to captivate the masses.

Before closing this portion of the discussion, one disclaimer must be addressed about the captivating powers of the *bijin*: the *bijin* is beautiful only to those who agree with the beauty standards. Indeed, since the *bijin* is socially constructed by values and aesthetics shared by the masses of society, a third-party perspective that does not share the same cultural values may fail to see the beauty of the *bijin* being portrayed in text or art. Take, for instance, the bewilderment for Japanese *geisha* courtesans expressed by British diplomat John Rutherford in his *Capital of the Tycoon* (1863):

They have painted cheeks and lips, and powdered all the face and neck with rice flour until they look like painted Twelfth-night Queens done in pastry and white lead.

(Alcock, 1863, p. 179)

In the above excerpt, Alcock (1863) is referring to the use of *shironuri* (白塗り; “painting white”) makeup technique used by *geisha* courtesans to achieve the “fair skinned” look.⁸ An example of the *shironuri* is shown in Figure 4.1. Although the woman’s white skin is inarguably “fair” to a large extent, the question of its beauty leaves arguable ambiguity. Alcock could not understand the beauty of the *geisha* courtesan because 1) the Japanese aesthetics behind the *geisha* courtesan’s beauty standards were foreign to him, and 2) because the motif of the *bijin* was materialized onto the body of a living woman. Perhaps in the eyes of Western visitors like Alcock, this foreign creature, with her face painted white for the sake of portraying paranormal beauty standards, was something too unnatural to label as “beautiful.”

Figure 4.1

Geisha Courtesan with Shironuri Makeup



Note: by Unknown Author, licensed under CC BY-SA

⁸ Obtained from an online article titled *Maiko Taiken no Meiku* (舞妓体験のメイク; “Experience the Maiko Makeup”) on the website *Maiko Taiken Kyoto Giwon no Aya* (舞妓体験 京都 ギwonの彩; “Maiko Experience, Kyoto, Aya of Giwon”) https://kyoto-maiko.com/maiko_experience/japanese_makeup

4.2 *Bijin* in Practical Use

The analyses and discussions up to this point have dealt mainly with theoretical concepts. Discussion 4.2 looks at the practical usage of the term *bijin* in context to contemporary Japanese society. Indeed, although the main motivation behind this paper has been to analyze the theoretical significance of the existence and usage of the term *bijin*, it is most likely the case that these theoretically heavy meanings are not implied when the term is colloquially used in daily conversation. What does the term *bijin* imply for people in Japanese society as a whole? How does that affect the way its components, *bi* (“beauty”) and *jin* (“person”), are interpreted in society?

To borrow Lippit’s (2019) term, the modern *bijin* was a “figure” that had functions and a social identity in relation to her environment. For instance, in the sociopolitical sphere, the *bijin* of the modern era had both international and domestic faces. Internationally, the images of *bijin* in the *Nihonga* and *bijinga* became a symbol of Japan for Western artists and travelers, so much that Japan eventually gained a reputation as a feminine nation (Lippit, 2019, 66-67). Domestically, the *bijin* were often categorized as poor achievers with low moral character. The logic was that, since they relied on their looks rather than their work ethic, they were intellectually incompetent and needed to marry early (井上, 1991, p. 13). Indeed, in the Meiji and Taisho Eras, socially powerful individuals would come to girl’s schools to pick out wives for their young sons (井上, 1991, p. 25). In this case, we see how living girls who shared common characteristics with the *bijin* were categorized and exploited by society. This morphing of the *bijin* “figure” into a “label” for certain individuals in society is the exact pattern we observe for a commercial function in the Japanese women’s magazine industry.

Indeed, the commercial function of *bijin* is a thread of commonality that runs across the modern and the contemporary *bijin*, not just ideologically but historically, as well. As mentioned in Section 1.1.2, the use of the *bijin* on posters and labels to sell products was something that had existed since the Tokugawa era. Figure 1.4 is an example of how this trend continued on and existed in the modern era. During the postwar era, in the age of mass consumption, women’s fashion magazines became popularized in Japan. The 1970’s saw a global rise of discourse on liberation of women and women’s

empowerment, making women new target consumers for the publishing industry (諸橋, 2002, p. 71). The publishing of the magazine *An.an* in 1970 and *non.no* in 1971 is considered the start of the women's fashion magazine trend (井上, 1989, p. 37).

As an increasing number of women began extending out into various roles in the public sphere, this genre of magazines needed to segment itself to provide content that properly catered towards all types of female audiences (古田, 2008). Consequently, the ideal “beautiful woman” being depicted in these women's magazines—each specializing in a specific target age and occupation group—also began to diversify. The results of this trend are reflected in the way different versions of the contemporary *bijin* appeared in Section 3 of this paper. Each of these contemporary *bijin* are designed by marketers to be relatable to the audience. In this way, the “beautiful person” being portrayed in the magazine comes to feel like an attainable dream. It sends the message that, if a woman buys products and practices the habits being promoted, she too can become the “beautiful woman” being portrayed in the magazine (Kyo, 2012, p. 230). But in reality, as Cho (2012) points out, the message is not “you can be beautiful”, but “you can get closer to the beauty standards”. And this “beauty standard,” as argued multiple times throughout the paper, is embodied by the *bijin* who dwells in the consciousness of Japanese society.

4.3 *Bijin*, Gender, and Commercialism

Lastly, because society is what constructs these conceptual figures like the *bijin*, analyzing the construction of these figures reveals interesting aspects about the society which created them. The exclusion of “man” from the *jin* (人; “person”) in *bijin* (美人) is one such instance. Indeed, if the artists and intellectuals of the Meiji Era needed a term to label the “beautiful woman” posing in the *ukiyo-e* paintings, why did they not call them *bijo* (美女; “beautiful woman”) and the painting “*bijoga*” (美女画)? Based on the discussions in Analysis (1), one plausible answer is that there existed no male equivalent to the beautiful woman being depicted in these paintings, thus eliminating the need to clarify the *bijin* in the *bijinga* as women. This exclusivity of beauty across gender suggests that the appreciation of aesthetics has gendered divisions: while women embodied beauty, the men appreciated it. Indeed,

the artists and critics of the modern *bijin* mentioned in Analysis (1) of the paper were all men. While the contribution of women in shaping beauty standards—such as the *geisha* women becoming fashion icons during the late Tokugawa Period (see section 1.1.2)—cannot be denied, the fact that these standards were materialized onto artistic and literary mediums by men implies the significance of the masculine gaze in the shaping of the modern *bijin*.

Why was this the case? Perhaps the answer lies not in the individual abilities of these men in depicting feminine beauty, but in their identification as a “man”. Indeed, as Simone de Beauvoir’s work *The Second Sex* (1949) argues, the concept of “man” and “woman” as gender is a socially constructed notion in and of itself. The commonality running across the artists and critics of the modern *bijin* was that they identified as a “man,” and this commonality was what gave them the sociopolitical position to create works that could be legitimized as portrayals of beautiful women.

Thus, it is not necessarily the matter of sex, but the matter of who holds sociopolitical power. For the contemporary *bijin* of women’s magazines, this power to “paint” the *bijin* rests in the advertisers, editors, and brand marketers who control the content within the pages. In other words, the “sellers” are the dominant powers over the submissive “buyers”. Through this transgenerational study of the *bijin*, we see how those who hold sociopolitical power shape the “ideal” images of certain groups in society.

5. Conclusion

At first glance, the term *bijin* (美人) is the Japanese equivalent for the English “beautiful person.” Those who understand its colloquial usage may translate *bijin* as a “beautiful woman.” However, this research paper showed that the *bijin* is not just any beautiful woman, but a conceptual figure of a certain standard for a “beautiful woman” that is shared among members in Japanese society. In Analysis (1), we saw the rise of this specific “beautiful woman” through the depiction of *iki* in the motif of *geisha* courtesans portrayed in the *ukiyo*e paintings. It was during the age of modernization that the term *bijin* emerged as a label for the “beautiful women” appearing in these paintings, and thus the genre became widely known as the *bijinga*. Indeed, the most crucial finding in Analysis (1) was that standardization

of material beauty preceded the emergence of the label *bijin*. Analysis (2) used this characteristic of the *bijin* who emerged in the modern era to rationalize the original construction of a “contemporary *bijin*.” It picked out various notions of beauty and beauty standards being depicted in contemporary Japanese women’s magazines to textually construct the contemporary *bijin* for each target age group. Lastly, we discussed the significance of understanding the *bijin* in context to society. By materializing a list of characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of a “beautiful woman” into the figure of a *bijin*, society collectively creates an illusion of a living *bijin* who embodies what it means to be “beautiful.” In reality, the *bijin* is merely a collection of socially constructed beauty standards that depends on the approval of majority to maintain its status as “beautiful.”

This study on the *bijin* revealed only one of the many instances when a conceptual object embodies a collection of socially constructed standards. Future research on this topic could expand the discussion by analyzing other images of “beauty” being depicted through portrayals of the human body. A similar study on the *binan* (美男; “beautiful man”) and a comparative analysis of the *bijin* and the *binan* could deepen the understanding of the role of gender behind images of beauty.

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