

Something's Got to Go: Contrasting Ideologies of Masculinity in Discourse around Men's Intimate Hair Removal in Japan

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Abstract

The current study examines the mobilisation of social ideologies surrounding men's gendered behaviour within discourse around men's intimate hair removal in Japan (known as *vio datsumō*), contrasting the language of advertisements promoting a new concept of *kaigo datsumō* (hair removal for assisting late-in-life caregivers) to men against online discussions of men's *vio datsumō* on the popular Japanese forum Girls Channel. While both data sets show some embrace of new ways of doing masculinity in Japan, frequent clashes between the two are found between distinct traditional images of Japanese heteronormative behaviour for men. As a result, advertising discourse around a so-called “new” practice is found to serve more as stimulation for discussion over gender norms rather than a place where progressive ideologies of gender and sexuality clash with more traditional ones, with the primary disagreements between the two data sets relating to which traditional ideologies of masculinity take precedence over others.

Keywords

online discourse – Japan – pubic hair removal – masculinity – female gaze – aging

1 Introduction

Hair removal for hygienic, social/ritual, and aesthetic reasons runs throughout human history, but advertising-driven cultural normalisation of body hair removal has increased significantly on the global scale since the 1900s (Fernandez et al., 2013). In the Japanese context specifically, body hair was historically often held in “some disfavour” (Miller, 2003: 40), but it wasn’t until the 1980s that a growing industry of hair removal clinics transformed some form of body hair removal into “necessary beauty work” (Miller, 2006: 106) for many Japanese men and women. More recently though, there has been a marked increase in the popularity of permanent treatments for more intimate areas, especially among young Japanese, with the change reflecting broader global trends, increases in regional discourse which treat body hair as a source of embarrassment, and changing beauty standards within the country (Correa, 2023; Kimura, 2023; Miller 2003, 2006; Nishinippon Shimbun, 2022; Saladin, 2015; Tso, 2022; Zhang, 2024). As these more permanent treatments inherently reduce customers’ need for further services, however, specialised clinics and salons have been rapidly attempting to expand their audience through both inventing new services and targeting social groups which have traditionally ignored or avoided professional removal (Hayashi, 2003; Kobayashi, 2021). This, of course, creates new dialogues – and therefore new potential conflicts – surrounding bodies and how certain social groups “should” be, which in turn creates opportunities for better understanding how “different discourses compete for hegemonic status in a particular society or community [... in a manner that] reproduces, challenges or transforms the existing social order” (Piennar and Bekker, 2007: 542) and highlighting “underlying ideals” (Saladin, 2015: 68) supporting gendered practices in Japan.

In the current study, we analyse discourse about a recent strategy for expanding hair removal practices in Japan to explore how gendered Japanese ideologies surrounding men’s social obligations, bodies, and sexuality are mobilised to both support and oppose men’s intimate hair removal. More specifically, we contrast the pragmatic strategies used by Japanese hair removal advertisements promoting “*vIO datsumō* (intimate hair removal, see Figure 1)” to men via emphasising the importance of “*kaigo datsumō* (hair removal for late-in-life-care)” against online discourse regarding men’s intimate hair

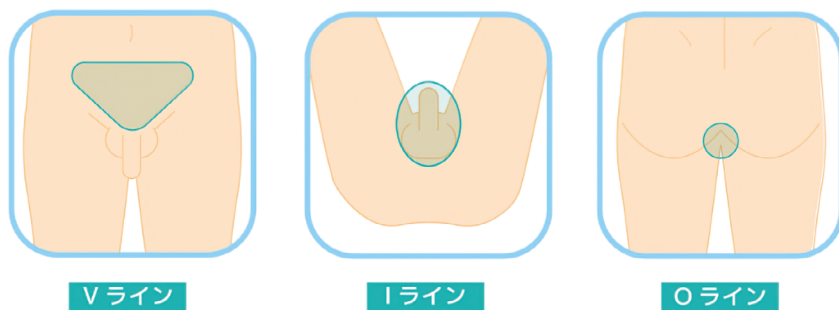


FIGURE 1 An image showing the regions covered by men's VIO hair removal
 HAIR REMOVAL SALON ARCA:
[HTTPS://ARCA-DATSUMOU.COM/COLUMN/NURSING-HAIR-REMOVAL/](https://arca-datsumou.com/column/nursing-hair-removal/)

removal as a cultural practice, looking at how participation in social discourse at “different points on the cultural circuit” (Talbot, 2014: 783) illuminates tensions over “discourses of self” and the “construction of masculinity” (Saladin, 2015: 60) in contemporary Japan. In line with the goals of this special issue, our analysis will particularly highlight how traditional and heteronormative dialogues surrounding men’s social obligations, gender, and sexuality in Japan are often mobilised to both support and oppose men’s hair removal, showcasing how discourse surrounding new social practices, bodies, and norms can often be rooted in battles over traditional social ideologies rather than just between old and new models of gender or sexuality. Before detailing our data and findings, however, we first begin with a background into research on gender and body care, detailing how our study builds on prior work both inside and outside Japan.

2 Advertising, Intimate-Care Practices, and Ideologies of Masculinity in Japan

In the realm of sociocultural linguistics, there has been a marked shift toward analysing personal care practices and advertisements, particularly through the prisms of gender and sexuality. This intensified focus aims to unravel the complexities of how linguistic strategies in advertisements (attempt to) both mirror societal norms and shape individual behaviours, and/or how individuals respond to advertisements’ claims. That is, as a body of research, this work analyses advertising strategies as not merely communicative acts, but rather constructive and highly crafted forms of persuasive discourse designed to influence and resonate deeply with consumers. These individuals can then

respond via multiple channels and to multiple groups, creating an active and stochastic social dialogue which can be “both critically distant and complicit in the identities and community on offer” (Talbot, 2014: 765).

For instance, Eberhardt (2022) explored how the wellness industry, particularly through platforms like Goop, uses language to construct the body as unwell and at risk. In particular, they highlight how wellness discourses encourage individuals to engage in continuous self-surveillance and discipline aimed at achieving idealised health standards through consumerism. Similarly, Woodward (2022) investigated how contemporary brands promote products related to vulval and vaginal self-care through online platforms, looking at the intersection of discourses around feminist research, consumerism, and the modern trend of destigmatising female genitalia to reveal the underlying discourses that shape perceptions of female agency and empowerment. Woodward (2022) especially identified a blend of essentialist feminism, neoliberal post-feminism, and patriarchal tradition in these representations, suggesting that female empowerment is often portrayed as contingent on consumption (see also Windels et al., 2019).

Eberhardt's (2022) and Woodward's (2022) analysis both serve as striking parallels to the marketing techniques observed in male grooming products, as these have also been shown to employ narratives that promote continuous self-improvement and monitoring. But for men this supposed societal obligation towards achieving an idealised state of health and aesthetics often involves distinct advertising strategies, as the advertisements must regularly subvert or sidestep traditional heteronormative discourses wherein men (are expected to) claim “complete disinterest” (Tso, 2022: 552) in grooming. For example, Hiramoto and Kapoor (2023) looked at how male beauty standards are promoted and negotiated in contemporary Indian media through the lens of skin-whitening products, focusing on how colourism influences societal perceptions of masculinity. In doing so, they revealed how advertisements use colourism to align fair skin with attributes of success and desirability, perpetuating a narrow and commercialised vision of male beauty. Milani (2018) instead investigated how consumer culture and neoliberal ideologies exploit male body parts, specifically through the lens of male sex toys and their market. For example, Milani found that products that target the male prostate are promoted not only for sexual pleasure but also as a means of health intervention, reflecting a neoliberal marketing strategy that commodifies intimate aspects of life and encourage consumers to engage in self-monitoring and self-care. These approaches, just like well-recognised attempts to promote men's hair removal via asserting it will increase their attractiveness to women, are all distinct in form but unite in attempting to “protect men's orthodox conceptions

of masculinity” (Tso, 2022: 562) which reject an interest in grooming for one’s own aesthetic preferences.

All these themes have direct relevance to the current study on dialogues surrounding Japanese VIO hair removal, where similar dynamics are at play in the marketing strategies for male grooming products. As we will show, the marketing strategies for VIO hair removal services also commodify body parts and grooming practices for commercial gains under the guise of empowerment and self-care while simultaneously seeking to influence and reshape societal norms and ideals concerning the male body. However, the data we look at here involves a distinct approach, as they engage with Japanese ideologies relating not just to male beauty or heteronormativity, but also male social obligations. Most specifically, since the Meiji era (1868–1912) mainstream narratives of Japanese masculinity have primarily centred on hegemonic ideals such as the Meiji-era patriarch and postwar corporate *sararīman* archetypes, emphasising stoic discipline, provider roles, and heteronormativity (Hidaka, 2010; SturtzSreetharan, 2006). This dominant model was long treated as a cultural norm in Japan until coming “under increasing strain since the early 1990s” (Tso, 2022: 547), and supported by an androcentric language ideology that equated men’s speech and behaviour with standard Japanese-ness (Nakamura, 2008). A particular element of this approach to masculinity of interest to our study is the ideology of “*hito ni meiwaku o kakenai* (not causing trouble to others)”, a principle that encourages Japanese men to be considerate, foster group harmony and well-being, and exhibit respectfulness, courtesy, and composure in public and professional contexts (Hidaka, 2010; Sugimoto, 2014). In contrast, while women in Japan were of course not encouraged to be inconsiderate or trouble others, post-Meiji national discourses of their responsibilities to the society/state centred around the family and home rather than public/professional life, as most clearly articulated in the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* (“good wife wise mother”) that grew in latter half of the 1800s (Kanemoto and Collins, 2017; Shizuko, 2013).

The first waves of Japanese hair removal advertisements were able to oppose or mostly ignore these traditional approaches to masculinity, as their market was focused first on women and then later on men who already embraced more modern and individualistic masculine aesthetics and practices which rose in opposition to traditional *sararīman* stereotypes (Charlebois, 2017; Miller, 2006; Okamoto, 2015; SturtzSreetharan, 2017; Willis, 2023). In attempting to expand their audience through *kaigo datsumō* though, clinics require a new discursive approach, as they inherently marketing to new “micro-markets” (Miller, 2003: 40) of men who have so far rejected contemporary trends around body grooming and potentially embrace older models of male aesthetics and

behaviour. This creates a valuable opportunity for exploring how contrasting ideologies around masculinity are mobilised as advertisers and individuals discuss, advocate for, and oppose various images of men's beauty and behaviour in contemporary Japan.

3 Analysis 1: Japanese Online vIO *Datsumō* Advertising

To begin this analytical process, we now turn to our first data source: Japanese advertising for men's vIO *datsumō*. Our data for this section comes from 30 instances of salon web advertisements derived from Google searches for “*dansei* (men's) *kaigo datsumō*” spanning January to July 2023. A sample of representative examples which highlight the prevalent themes and strategies used on the landing pages for these websites is presented in Table 1, wherein the language use positions readers as “lacking correct information and in need of an expert’s advice and support” (Konstantinovskaia, 2020: 313) via assuming they either doubt the process (e.g., “is *kaigo datsumō* necessary”) or need “basic knowledge”.

TABLE 1 Representative websites used for the study

Source	Source slogan	Webpage title	Website
メンズリゼ Men's Rize	オトコは メンズリゼ Men Use Men's Rize	BASIC KNOWLEDGE メンズ介護脱毛 BASIC KNOWLEDGE: Men's <i>kaigo</i> <i>datsumō</i>	https://www.mens-rize.com/knowledge/kaigodatsumo.html
メンズケアクリニック Men's Care Clinic	EMPOWER MEN	男性の介護 脱毛？ メリットの多 い歳を取る前の vIO 脱毛 <i>Kaigo datsumō</i> for men? The many benefits of vIO <i>datsumō</i> before aging	https://mens-care-clinic.com/medical_column/article_025/

TABLE 1 Representative websites used for the study (*cont.*)

Source	Source slogan	Webpage title	Website
メンズルシア クリニック Men's Lucia Clinic	自分をミガク、 心輝く Polish oneself, and your heart shines	男性の介護脱毛は 必要なのか？メリット や費用相場を解説 <i>Is kaigo datsumō</i> necessary for men? Explaining the benefits and cost standards	https://mens-lucia.com /introduction/column/nur sing-care-hair-removal/
リンクス Rinx	男は脱ぐ Men take it off	40〜50 歳から脱 毛を始めても間に 合う？男性が介護 脱毛をする必要は ある？ <i>Is it too late to start hair removal from ages 40 to 50? Is there a need for men to undergo kaigo datsumō?</i>	https://mens-rinx.jp/con tents/nursing-datsumou
ミツケル Mitsukeru	医師監修: 40 代・50 代が 気になる Doctor- supervised: Concerns of people in their 40s and 50s	介護脱毛を徹底 解説！ Comprehensive explanation of <i>kaigo datsumō!</i>	https://se-ec.co.jp/find_best /datsumou/column/useful /mens-nursing-care-hair -removal/

Across the 30 websites, we identified four key persuasive discourse patterns as part of their “imaginary dialogue” (Talbot, 2014: 759) with the reader: (1) reducing inconvenience to caregivers as social responsibility; (2) promoting personal hygiene; (3) freedom from self-shaving; and (4) a preference by women for hairless men. It should be stressed that these four points are not mutually exclusive. The data reveal significant interplays among them, with

advertisements often leveraging more than one point to enhance the appeal of VIO hair removal. Nevertheless, each pattern involves distinct pragmatic patterns and approaches, which we will analyse below with specific examples to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these advertisements mobilise Japanese ideologies surrounding masculinity to expand the hair removal market.

3.1 (1a) *Minimising Caregiver Burden*

In the analysis of the endorsement behind men's care-receiving VIO hair removal, a preeminent reason emerging from the data focuses on reducing inconvenience for caregivers. The advertisements for *kaigo datsumō* are regularly written through an authoritative and certain “editorial voice [of] the expert with special knowledge” (Talbot, 2014: 759) which presents the idea that men have worries about causing trouble as they age as a fact and norm. As represented in Figure 2, these advertisements then also use both text and images to implicitly frame elderly care, particularly tasks involving intimate hygiene, as inevitable, permanent aspects of life for elderly men, framing caregiver intervention as an intrinsic reality of aging. The inclusion of items such as a wheelchair, electric reclining bed, and adult diaper alongside an illustration of a man's underwear specially reinforces the message that elderly care is a prolonged and ongoing reality distinct from one's current day-to-day, seamlessly



What is male care-receiver's hair removal? VIO hair removal in anticipation of your future care needs

Merits of male *kaigo datsumō*: For the care recipient: easier faecal management, reduced moisture, odour and rash.
For the caregiver: reduced burdens and easier monitoring of skin conditions

FIGURE 2 About male care-receiver's hair removal
MITSUKERU

linking intimate grooming to the broader, long-term demands of caregiving. The text in Figure 2 then draws upon the aforementioned Japanese traditional discourse of men as those who should “not burden others”, as according to these advertisements removing pubic hair has “merits (*meritto*)” in diminishing the manual burden typically faced by caregivers, which in turn significantly reduces psychological burdens which the care recipient currently has in anticipation (*sōtei*) of needing care one day.

Examples 1 and 2 below are representative text examples that highlight these points and showcase their commonality in our data set. For instance, Example 1 presents *kaigo datsumō* as a solution to troublesome “burdens (*futan*)” to your future caregivers and “emotional burdens (*seishinteki na futan*)” of the individuals themselves in a way that reinforces the notion of elderly intimate hygiene care as a permanent, unavoidable aspect of aging.

Example 1: Men’s Lucia Clinic

介護の中でも大変なのが排泄介助です。付着した排泄物の拭き取りやオムツの着脱など、介助者にとっては大きな負担。その悩みを解決してくれるのが介護脱毛です。介護脱毛すると、排泄物が肛門まわりの毛に絡まず拭き取りが楽になり、オムツ交換も簡単にできます。排泄介助の時間を短縮できれば、「介助者の負担が軽減される＋介護される自分自身も精神的な負担を減らせる」でしょう。

One difficult aspect of care-receiving is assisting with excretion. Wiping off stuck excrement and assisting with diapers places a heavy burden on caregivers. Care-receiver’s hair removal solves this problem for you. After *kaigo datsumō*, excrement does not get tangled in the hair around the anus, making it easier to wipe off, and changing diapers becomes simple too. **By reducing the time spent cleaning excrement, surely there will be less burden on the caretaker, and stress as a patient will also decrease.**

Example 2 is then similar but more explicit. The text explicitly foregrounds the persistent, long-term nature of elderly caregiving by stating that “cleaning up one’s excretions is unavoidable as long as one’s alive”. This frames intimate caregiving tasks as a continuous, inevitable, and disgusting reality, thereby reinforcing the discourse that managing bodily hygiene is a lifelong, ongoing source of trouble and responsibility for both care recipients and caregivers alike. This framing contributes to the persuasiveness of the advertisements’ discourse by normalising the inevitability of such care tasks, and positioning VIO hair removal as a practical, compassionate solution to reduce long-term “burdens (again, *futan*)” for “both yourself and others (*jibun to aite sōhō*)”.

Example 2: Men's Care Clinic

あまり気持ちの良い話ではありませんが、自分が大きい方のお漏らしをしてしまった場合、言うまでもなくそこに便は付着しています。介護用のオムツを履いていたとしても、自分で処理できなくなっているケースでは、家族なり介護資格者なりがその後処理をすることになります。この際、初めから肛門周りの毛がキレイにお手入れされていれば、余計な汚物が毛に付着しないので、拭き取りがスムーズになります。お漏らしではなく、普段の排便においても、ウォシュレットの洗浄だけで十分に事足りる可能性が高くなります。排泄作業は**生きている限り避けて通れない**ものですので、ここで自分と相手の双方に負担がかからないのは非常に大きなメリットと言えます。

It's not a very pleasant story, but if you have a larger leak, it goes without saying that there will be faeces attached. Even if the patient is wearing a diaper for care-receiving, if the patient is unable to dispose of the diaper on their own, a family member or a qualified caregiver must take care of it. At this time, if the hair around the anus is properly taken care of from the start, unwanted filth will not stick to the hair, making wiping smoother. This creates a high possibility that just cleaning with a bidet will be sufficient for normal defecation. Cleaning up one's excretions is **unavoidable as long as one's alive**, so we can say that there are immense merits to lowering the burden for both yourself and others.

3.2 (1b) *Minimizing Odours*

Interestingly, this idea of “not causing trouble” to others was also present through the second strategy that appeared throughout our data, which was promotion of permanent hair removal as a way of preventing unpleasant odours. At times, the individuals affected by body odour were once again framed as caregivers, but the data also contained more generalist cultural dialogues seen in Japan which treat smells as reflecting poorly on an individual and/or their self-care practices (Hankins, 2013; Kabe, 2024; Moeran, 2005). This sensitivity extends beyond personal interaction, influencing product development in cosmetics and personal care industries that often prioritise odour-reducing properties (Mainichi Shimbun, 2024). Examples 3 and 4 illustrate this point, respectively discussing how reduced body odour “shows care (*kizukai ni naru*)” and framing it as inherently desirable via stating that the process will reduce odour without further qualification.

Example 3: Rinx

排泄介助が楽になり介護者の負担を減らせる [...] 介護者もあなた自身もお互いに肉体的・精神的な負担が軽減されます。排泄介助では、下着やズ

ボンの着衣サポートや状況に応じて排泄の拭き取りなどがありますが、脱毛しておくくとアンダーヘアが絡まるといった妨げがなくなり介助の手間が減ります。アンダーヘアを脱毛しておくくと陰部の蒸れや不快な臭いなどが予防でき介護者への気遣いになります。[...] 陰部周りは排泄や蒸れやすい影響でアンダーヘアに付着したままにしておくくと、雑菌が繁殖し菌が汗や皮脂と混ざると不快な臭いを放つことがあります。

Makes cleaning excretions easier and reduces the burden on caregivers [...] the physical and mental burden on both you and the caregiver is reduced. Assistance cleaning excretions includes putting on underwear and pants, and wiping up excrement depending on the situation. Removing hair prevents obstructions from pubic hair getting tangled, reducing the effort required for assistance. **Removing pubic hair will prevent sweating and unpleasant odours in the genital area, showing consideration for caregivers.** [...] The genital area is prone to excretion and stuffiness, so if pubic hair is left attached to the pubic area, bacteria can grow and when mixed with sweat and sebum, an unpleasant odour may be emitted.

Example 4: Men's Rize

介護する側： 排泄介助のふき取りが容易になり、おむつ交換などがスムーズになる。菌の増殖を抑えることによって臭いの軽減になる。炎症や感染症の予防になる。

Caregiver's viewpoint: Wiping while helping with excretion becomes easier, and things like changing diapers go more smoothly. **Suppressing the growth of bacteria reduces odour. It prevents inflammation and infection.**

3.3 (2) *Personal Hygiene*

The promotion of personal hygiene emerges as another significant reason for endorsing male VIO hair removal. In contrast to earlier examples, this discourse is more centred around the (future) male self, and often pushes for a more modern ideology of individualistic masculinity seen in prior studies of Japanese hair removal adverts (Miller, 2003, 2006; Tso, 2022). Here, promotional materials like Example 5 highlight that VIO hair removal not only facilitates easier excretion care but also substantially decreases the risk of developing skin-related issues such as infections and irritations, stressing improvements to the overall comfort and health of the individual.

Example 5: Men's Lucia Clinic

介護脱毛すると排泄物を拭き取りやすくなり、デリケートゾーンは衛生的に保てるため、肌トラブルは起こりにくくなります。デリケートゾーン(vio)は、排泄物の影響で菌が繁殖しやすい部位です。拭き残しがあると炎症や感染症のリスクがあります。また、力を入れて拭き取ると、皮膚を傷つけて傷口から菌が侵入する可能性も出てくるでしょう。

After *kaigo datsumō* it is easier to wipe off excrement, and through maintaining the hygiene of sensitive areas skin problems become less likely to occur. The sensitive zone (aka vio) is an area where bacteria can easily grow due to the influence of excrement. If elements are missed during wiping, there is a risk of inflammation and infection. Also, if you use too much force when wiping, you may damage your skin and allow bacteria to enter through the wound.

3.4 (3) *Reduced Burden on Self*

The third strategy for promoting men's *kaigo datsumō* featured across multiple advertisements is to highlight a significant convenience it offers by eliminating the need for self-treatment (e.g., shaving, waxing, or using depilatory creams at home). Compared to the other approaches, this strategy seems aimed at countering other advertising discourse more than social discourse, as the advertisements present clinics as they only viable option for hair removal as individuals age. Example 6 stands as a prototypical case: it stresses that while other methods initially seem cost-effective and private they often come with several personal drawbacks, and presents *kaigo datsumō* as a compelling alternative by reducing the frequency and intensity of maintenance required. That said, as seen in the final sentence, these discourses still frame the reader as concerned for burdening caregivers, albeit in this case with the task of hair removal rather than cleaning up excrement.

Example 6: Rinx

アンダーヘアが不要だという方は脱毛しておくで自己処理の手間から解放されるため将来的に快適に過ごしやすくなるのではないのでしょうか。脱毛すると毛の総量が根本的に減り、生えてくるスピードも次第に遅くなっていきます。介護者に剃毛をお願いするのは忍びなく自身で行うにしても足腰に負担がかかりますから、自身の負担軽減にもなりおすすめです。

If you don't need pubic hair, why not remove it to free yourself from the hassle of self-treatment, making it easier to live comfortably in the

future? When hair is removed, the total amount of hair is fundamentally reduced, and the speed of hair growth gradually slows down. Even if you do it yourself because you are reluctant to ask a caregiver, **it can put a strain on your lower body**, so we recommend it to reduce the burden on yourself.

3.5 (4) *Women’s Approval*

The final persuasive discourse strategy for male VIO hair removal highlighted across our data is emphasising the approval intimate hair removal receives from women, a common strategy seen in many prior studies of advertising for men’s grooming in contemporary Japan (Miller, 2003, 2006; Pellicanò, 2017; Tso, 2022). Our advertisements capitalise on this marketing strategy by presenting hair removal as an unequivocal female preference, thereby enhancing a man’s appeal in intimate settings. While this may seem unrelated to *kaigo datsumō* on paper, it works along with statements that laser hair removal is recommended before men’s hair turns grey to put pressure on potential customers for immediate action. That is, the marketing narrative asserts that by becoming hairless well before the need for a caregiver’s assistance arises, men can see immediate benefits.

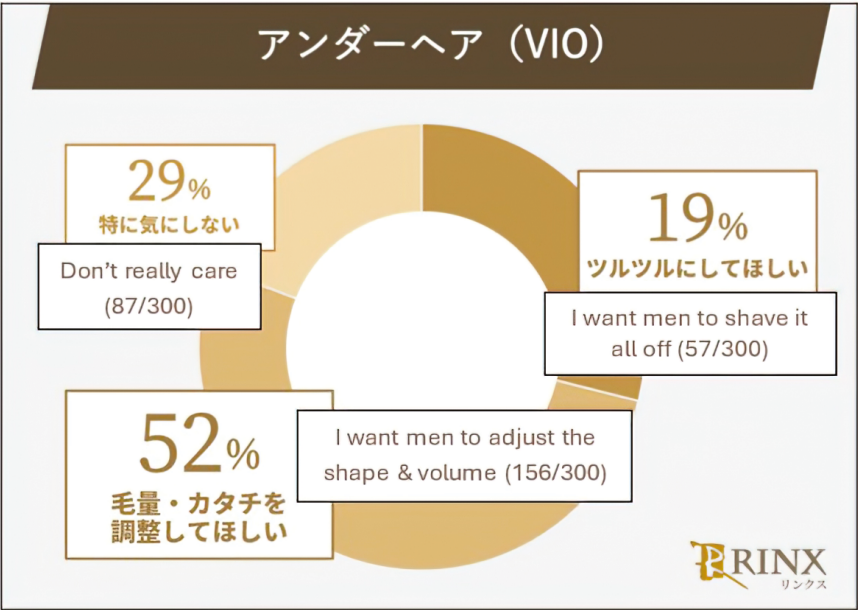


FIGURE 3 Survey of 300 women in their 20s: preferences for hair retention vs. removal in men’s VIO area
RINX

Figure 3 demonstrates a survey result presented by the Rinx salon as part of its persuasive tactics to convince men to engage in VIO hair removal via appealing to their “fear of negative female evaluation of their hairiness” (Miller, 2003: 41). Here, the advertisement claims that according to their survey of 300 women, 52% expressed a preference for men adjusting the amount and shape of their intimate hair, while 19% preferred complete removal. This presents the idea that 71% of women view male VIO hair removal positively as an important and “evidenced” reason to engage in the practice. Women who *prefer* hair are then implied not to exist via framing the remaining 29% as those who just “don’t mind (*ki ni shinai*)”, reducing the diversity of images of female identities.

In summarising the first data set, we see that cultural dialogues emphasising harmony and avoidance of burden on others combine with Japan’s aging demographic to set a particular backdrop for strategies of commodifying male self-care practices. The discourses throughout our data predominantly draw on traditional ideas of not burdening others, attempting to expand into a new sector of the male market via appealing to older beliefs surrounding men’s responsibilities to others. While previously noted strategies of emphasising personal and sexual benefits are also raised, these are often still framed within a narrative that presents reducing (one’s current worries about) burdens on aged care workers as the ultimate goal. This contrasts with the discourses focused on personal beauty that have historically shaped dialogues around women’s grooming. Obviously though, discourses around men’s VIO *datsumō* and *kaigo datsumō* in advertising only represent part of the social dialogues which surround the phenomenon. To more fully understand the interactions between the promotion of men’s hair removal and Japanese cultural discussions around gender, and ensure that we employ a “perspective on media engagement [that] emphasises the agency and creativity of audiences in how they deal with media language” (Androutsopoulos, 2016, p. 286), we now turn to discussions of men’s VIO from Japanese individuals themselves, looking at how the dialogues we’ve seen themselves serve as sources of further social discourse.

4 Analysis 2: Discussion of Men’s Hair Removal on Girls Channel

The data for this section of the study comes from the popular Japanese anonymous message board “Girls Channel” [sic]. Created in 2012, Girls Channel rose quickly in popularity, and now receives billions of page views a year (PRTimes, 2020). The website has therefore unsurprisingly seen substantial prior attention in research which examines Japanese voices “often sidelined in news media”

(Ho, 2024: 1392) to better understand social ideologies surrounding language, gender, and beauty (Ho, 2024; Masuda et al., 2020; Pellicanò, 2017; Robertson, 2020, 2022; Saito, 2020). However, while certainly a “democratizing online space” (Ho, 2024: 1392) for women, Girls Channel is also known for importing a culture of reactionary politics and trolling from its predecessor 2chan (Bals Tokyo, 2020; Johnson, 2023). For instance, the Korean pop culture wiki Namuwiki (2024), which has itself been a locus of controversial misogynistic behaviour (see Kim (2022)), refers to Girls Channel as a right-wing anti-Korean hate site, and the Japanese idol Rino Sashihara called Girls Channel a place where “there are only people with bad personalities” in discussing her addiction to it (Narinari, 2019).

As a result, the data here unquestionably shows both a bias towards women's opinions of men's grooming, the particular cultural identity of Girls Channel which defines how its “users communicate with one another” (Johnson, 2023: 7–8), and even the type of male bodies under discussion (here, younger adult men, typically current or potential romantic partners). Obviously then, the voices from Girls Channel are not representative of the entirety of Japanese women's (much less Japanese) discourse around men's intimate hair removal. But the comments unquestionably provide an active, detailed, and diverse set of discourse around the phenomenon which can be contrasted with that from advertisements, aligning with the current study's goal in exploring the uptake of, engagement with, and resistance to advertising-based dialogues which intersect with gendered social ideologies in Japan. Indeed, the very particular cultural features of Girls Channel also likely facilitated the amount of discussion necessary for the current study to even occur. We searched multiple newspapers, websites, and online forums in preparing this study, and only Girls Channel contained extensive discussion of both men's *vio datsumō* and *kaigo datsumō* across multiple threads. Dialogues explicitly from men, for instance, appeared limited to quotes on hair removal clinic's pages, potentially reflecting Tso's (2022: 557) finding that for Japanese men hair grooming “does not even constitute a topic of conversation”, and which we viewed more as advertising data than authentic insight into “how consumers perceive [...] advertisements or their responses to them” (Windels et al., 2019: 31).

We collected data from Girls Channel by surveying 10 threads that we found by searching for posts including the terms “*dansei* (men)” and “*vio*” on Girls Channel between January of 2022 and July of 2023. Together, these threads contained 4090 comments, which we read in full to identify comments that explicitly focused on men's hair removal. We took screenshots of relevant comments which included any surrounding comments they were replying to in order to preserve context, and saved the screenshots in folders labelled with the

title of the threads they were from. All in all, this created a corpus of 274 overt opinions about male hair removal. For coding, we followed a two-step process. First, we utilised pre-prepared codes of “pro-removal” and “anti-removal”, coding each assertion in each comment into these two sets (comments with multiple assertions could consequently be coded multiple times in one or both sets). We then re-coded the data in an emergent manner, first coding explanations for why an individual did or did not support men’s VIO via the posts’ own words, and then gradually combining these into larger thematic codes. For instance, “positive” comments like “men’s hair around their O gets out of hand; it’s gross so I’m for removal”, “men especially get hair around their butt and poop gets in it so it’s dirty, it’s best to have none”, and “it gives a hygienic feel so I think it’s good, at the very least it’s better than an unruly mass” all ended up coded as “pro: hygienic”; while comments like “I want men to grow their hair out (lol)”, “I want all men to hear me: I love beards and armpit hair!”, or “I agree! Why are people claiming women hate hairy men?” were instead coded as “anti: hair is attractive”. Note that all excerpts are translated into English to align with ethics recommendations to slightly alter online anonymous content so it is more difficult to identify the poster (Androutsopoulos and Stæhr, 2018).

All in all, our data contained a total of 151 (55.1%) comments disparaging men’s VIO, and 123 (44.9%) in favour. While fairly evenly split, the data clearly contrasts with the advertising survey of 300 women we mentioned in the prior section. Furthermore, as visible in Figure 4, the various negative themes of “Not Sexy”, “Looks Silly”, and “Child-Like” all directly oppose men’s VIO due to how it affects their appearance, with the 81 total comments representing 53.6% of the negative explanations and 29.6% of the total data set. In contrast, as we will see in Figure 5, the idea that men’s VIO was attractive presented throughout the advertisements saw little comment or support.

Generally speaking, most of the appearance-linked negative comments were based on aesthetic concerns. Statements that “because my husband has no hair he looks like an alien [...] it’s a little unpleasant”, “my boyfriend got into hair removal and is now hairless ... in my heart I’m disappointed”, “my boyfriend has a muscular wrestler physique and the hair around his crotch and armpits are so manly, I love it”, “lots of women prefer men with hair”, “what would I do with myself if my *oshi* [person I’m a fan of] was hairless [...] eww”, or “the men are hairless like a child but not pretty like a child, so they should use body hair to put a censoring effect on” all reflect this perspective, showing further evidence that “the societal shift towards greater acceptance of diverse masculinities is by no means complete” (Saito, 2020: 300). For instance, comments like “the first time I saw a hairless man it felt so odd and gross I broke up with them” or “hairless men lack manliness” from the “Not Natural” category

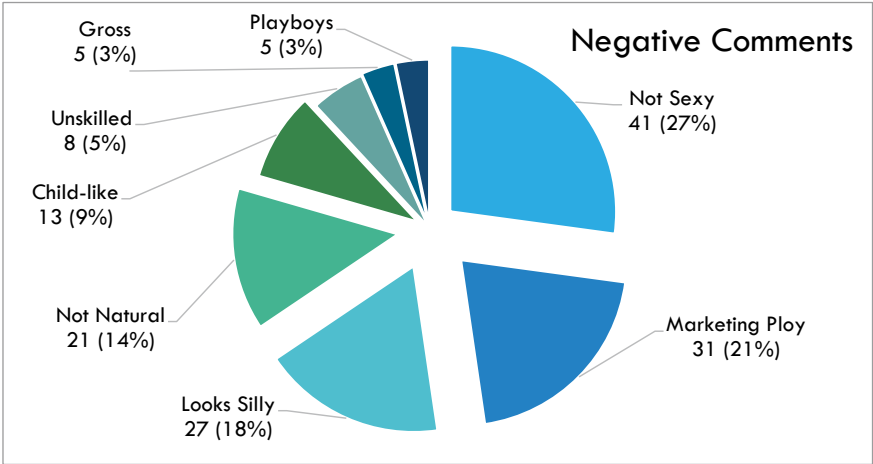


FIGURE 4 Major thematic categories among comments opposing men's VIO datsumō on Girls Channel

all contrast to a recent disgust towards male body hair among Japanese women which Miller (2003, 44; see also Tso, 2022) analyses as “rejection of male dominance and an assertion of an independent sexuality”. Instead, these women align with older, post-war Japanese dialogues which regarded at least some hair as a symbol of masculine sexuality, while rejecting or ignoring the advertising discourses promoting men’s obligation to not burden others.

Indeed, dialogues expressing tacit support for traditional and heteronormative images of Japanese masculinity were dominant across Girls Channel. Comments in the category of “Playboys” are perhaps the most blatant in this regard, as they posited negative links between hairlessness and promiscuous, gay, and/or non-heteronormative men. These connections are evident in statements like “if my husband did hair removal I’d wonder if they were obsessed with aesthetics, or thinking about cheating”, “10 is okay, but v is out; if a man does that I think they are either sexually wild or gay”, “there are lots of gay people who do it as a fetish thing”, and “men are sexier with body hair; if they are hairless it’s faggy (*okama-ppoi*)”.¹ Five comments scattered throughout the various categories also linked hairless men to foreignness (i.e., “non-Japanese-ness”), as in statements that “I had sex with a foreigner and they had no hair LOL”, “it’s good manners overseas”, or “overseas pubic hair removal is treated as normal, but they don’t shave their chests though for some reason”. While this kind of

1 While *okama* can be used in a positive sense, in cases like this use it is “highly derogatory” and implicates “homosexuality to effeminacy” (Maree, 2008: 80–81).

emphasis on (certain patterns of) body hair being part of *Japanese* masculinity was only present to a small extent, it does reflect recognised discourses which define Japanese male norms in part via raising “prejudices about non-Japanese individuals” (Suzuki, 2020: 230), further supporting findings that beliefs about race, sexuality, and gender often intersect. As a result, the Girls Channel posters opposing men's VIO *datsumō* are often in conflict with the advertisements not over whether to support older or newer ideologies around masculinity and male beauty in Japan, but rather which older ideologies are correct or more important, reflecting how online discussions often highlight the “differentiation of cultural identification even from within the same cultural group” (Dong, 2012: 551).

Indeed, the second largest individual category of “Marketing Ploy” shows that many commenters were directly engaging with advertising dialogues, albeit via explicitly dismissing their claims. This can be seen via statements like “as you get older your skin gets weak, so hair removal results in painful friction later” and “whether messes are worse with or without hair is case-by-case for each person” which appeared in threads responding to advertising claims. In many cases, writers employed the same pragmatic strategy we saw in the advertisements of positioning themselves as authorities, directly mentioning their professions in comments like “while I was working part-time as a nurse, I cared about the personality of patients and their families, but I never cared about if they had pubic hair or how thick it was”, “when I was taking care of older people I never thought hair was getting in the way lol”, or assertions like “when people get so old they can't wipe themselves their hair becomes fine [...] so it's not really an issue” which are presented in a matter-of-fact way which attempts to index the author as someone with expertise on the subject. Other writers then instead targeted a perceived cynical motive behind the advertisements, calling articles about men's VIO *datsumō* and *kaigo datsumō* “stealth marketing (*sutema*)” and positing that “the beauty and hair removal industries are obviously trying to pull in young to middle-aged men instead of just women these days”. Importantly, these comments were also highly upvoted by the community (see Figure 5). Throughout these comments, we therefore see that *kaigo datsumō* advertisements like the ones we analysed earlier are directly spawning dialogues about men's grooming, but these are rarely dialogues which simply embrace or even directly engage with the traditional perspectives promoted by the advertisements. Rather, the effect of the advertisements is more to produce discourse around preferences for men's behaviour and/or dialogues about the advertisements themselves, wherein members of the site use its affordances (e.g., upvotes) to confirm and solidify a group identity and ideology.

3. 匿名 2022/10/02(日) 00:17:18

女性は脱毛が浸透してきたからターゲットを男に変えただけでしょ

+1593



-11



3. 匿名 2022/10/02(日) 00:17:18

Hair removal has been normalized for women, so they've just changed the target to men.

+1593



-11



FIGURE 5 A comment asserting that men's VIO is a marketing ploy is highly upvoted by the Girls Channel community

Indeed, this idea that advertising for men's VIO *datsumō* is more successful in spawning discourse about idealised gender norms than obtaining endorsement of specific ideologies is also reflected in the pro-hair removal comments. Across the 123 positive comments, we identified six thematic categories, with the vast majority centring around how VIO *datsumō* is good because it provides personal benefits to the commenter. For example, the largest positive category of "Hygienic/Good" endorsed ideas that hairlessness in men was cleaner and beneficial. In contrast to the similar theme of hygiene within the advertising discourse, however, these positives were presented as beneficial to the person writing. Representative comments from this category like "I guess my husband's VIO hair removal is good because there's less hair everywhere around the house", "it is wonderful not having fallen hairs everywhere", "it gets filthy and covered in poop, so no hair on the butt is better", or "I want them fully hairless; I say 'clean it up yourself' every time but I'm the one with better eyesight so I'm the one who finds them so I'm the one who cleans it up – you all in the 'yay hair' camp will change your opinions when you get married", all position the writer as the primary beneficiary of hair removal. The odd category of "Revenge" is similar, as it consists of one post wherein someone wanted men to remove their hair just to experience the pain women go through doing the same.

The "Attractive/Sexy" category is then similarly centred around self-interest, although more in a manner reflecting the findings prior research on Japanese men's grooming we've discussed elsewhere. Here, Girls Channel users directly disagreed with other comments arguing that hairiness was sexy, instead stating things like "I hate beards and men's hair down there", "I like hairless – I want

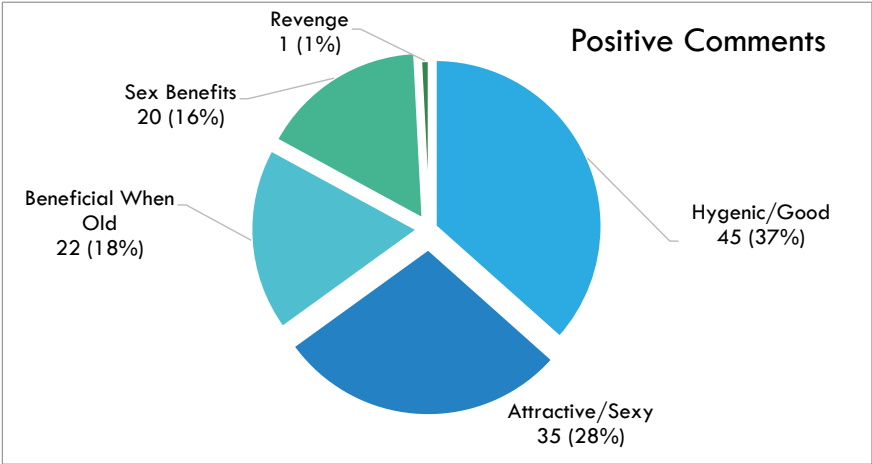


FIGURE 6 Major thematic categories among comments supporting men's VIO datsumō on Girls Channel

them to get rid of everything below the eyebrows, chest hair included”, or “personally I want men to remove their hair, it’s even okay if their ‘delicate zone’ is hairless”. The category of “sex benefits”, however, includes posts that stand in direct opposition to “traditional Japanese constructions of feminine behaviour and language” (Miyazaki, 2004: 262) in Japanese advertising which portray women “as innocent, naive, pure and childlike” (Konstantinovskaia, 2020: 321). These comments on Girls Channel instead explicitly discuss the role of hair in sexual acts in vulgar detail, as in statements that “hair removal means it doesn’t end up in your mouth”, “it makes it easier to give head which is a plus”, “hairy balls are gross”, “when it’s a jungle it gets in your mouth, which is unpleasant”, “if you want someone to lick or suck you off you’d better be smooth”, “the shaft looks like 1.5 times bigger”, or “smooth, hairless skin honestly feels great, it’s so pretty I want to touch it and push myself against it”. The commentators in this category are therefore ignoring the same “abstract desires related to social identity” (Konstantinovskaia, 2020: 306) that the advertisements we discussed attempted to engage, instead embracing a more modern feminine identity (which said advertisements refuse to promote) wherein women are both sexually knowledgeable and concerned about burdens hair creates for them during sexual activity.

All in all then, even among women expressing support for men's VIO *datsumō*, there was little explicit endorsement for any traditional and/or imagined Japanese ideologies wherein “a sense of group of communality [...] over the individual”, “obligation and gratitude”, or “sympathy and compassion for

others" (Caudill, 1973: 244) to justify hair removal. This ideology was embraced only in some comments throughout the category of "beneficial when old", which also included comments focusing instead on how *kaigo datsumō* made men's lives easier. Still, statements like "I'd support my husband doing it if aimed at helping nurses for aged care", "it helps nurses because, and this is gross but, it gets stuck no matter how much you wipe", or "if thinking about the view of medical professionals, when taking care of down there pubic hair or hair around the anus is a bother (discharge gets caught up in it) so there are merits to being smooth" do show some support for *kaigo datsumō* as an act which avoids burdening others. Comments of this type sometimes even echoed the pragmatic strategy of some negative comments in being framed around the author's expertise, as in the claim that "I'm a nurse and, yes, discharge gets stuck on hair and is hard to clean so if you have no objections to VIO removal I'm in the pro-camp", or that "thinking you will only need care when older is false [...] illness, cerebrovascular diseases, and accidents can cause you to lose your ability to move, and you'll lose the ability to shave not just genitals but also your beard [...] I'm a nurse so I don't mind when my patients are hairy or fat or whatever but when I think of myself becoming a patient ... well I've removed some of my hair permanently for that reason". Nevertheless, even within this small pocket of support for the advertisements' claims, Girls Channel members commonly placed preference on personal motives and needs over cultural expectations, as in a post that noted the difficulty pubic hair could cause caregivers but ended with "that said, don't be swayed by *kaigo datsumō* discourse, and instead just act based on a way of thinking that is convincing for you".

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Through contrasting the pragmatic strategies of advertising discourses around men's *kaigo datsumō* against discourse around men's hair removal in the forum Girls Channel, the current study has highlighted several complexities regarding how the circulation of ideologies of gender, sexuality, and tradition can cause social clashes over preferred gendered performances. Plentiful research has shown how advertising employs representations which "reinforce traditional notions" (Konstantinovskaia, 2020: 322), which we certainly noted in the advertisements for *kaigo datsumō*. But looking at the responses to these strategies, we can see advertisements often do more to spawn discourses surrounding sociocultural ideologies than simply spread or reinforce them, creating (further) stimulation of dialogues about men's grooming as part of "a correlational relationship between high levels of discursive consciousness and

active contestation of ideologies" (Kroskrity, 2015: 101). As we saw, this active debate over ideologies then in turn presents opportunities for groups to draw social borders, here by turning the question of which dialogues about men's behaviour and sexuality one embraces and/or lauds into a form of group membership and cohort building. The voices which participate in these debates may also be unexpected by those who begin or are targeted by the dialogues. While hair removal clinics are clearly attempting to speak to a specific group of men, the largest public online discussion we could find was in a forum centred around women.

Secondly, our data shows clearly that the resistance of traditional cultural ideologies regarding gender is not inherently – much less exclusively – motivated by contrasting progressive ideologies. Certainly, advertisements for men's *VIO kaigo datsumō* in Japan did attempt to balance traditional and modern ideologies regarding masculinity to some extent. For instance, we noted clear efforts from advertisers to adjust or override traditional (and often sexist and/or homophobic) Japanese discourses centred around male heteronormativity which critique hair removal or personal care by treating it as something which raises "suspicions about a person's masculinity" (Tso, 2022: 549) as they are either effeminate or giving in "to the demands of women and their desires" (Miller, 2003: 37). On the other hand though, the advertisements actively embraced more traditional approaches to gender and sexuality in both their choices of what to market and what to *not* market, pushing an image of Japanese men as concerned for others while choosing not to recognise women as active sexual beings (much less men as concerned with the sexual desires of women beyond aesthetics). At most, hair removal was positioned as important for obtaining visual "appreciation by the other sex" (Saladin, 2015: 66), which again focuses on positive outcomes for men. Mentions of making sex easier for women, a key concern in the Girls Channel data, are not welcomed despite arguably being "care for others", as they would rebel against traditional discourses encouraging women's sexual modesty which saw increasing legal and moral codification across Japan's medieval period into the current area (McLelland, 2015; Tonomura, 2007). In rejecting the claims of these advertisements, however, the users of Girls Channel did not necessarily embrace new forms of masculinity either. Rather, the most dominant pro-removal narrative promoted a modern and individualistic stance, wherein men's hair removal was supported first and foremost for personal benefits to women, and this discourse was often surrounded by traditional and often homophobic images of male grooming.

Ultimately then, the contrasting discourses around men's *VIO* hair removal we analysed here underscore the dynamic interplay between commercial

narratives and consumer realities, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how cultural ideologies are embraced, contested, and reshaped in contemporary society to transform opposing perspectives into “indices of group membership” (Kroskrity, 2015: 99). Traditional ideologies can be called upon to create new images of gender and sexuality in a way which rejects other images in turn (e.g., men’s obligations to others supports new images of men as people who engage in hair removal, but not women’s sexual liberation), just as traditional ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality can be mobilised to resist new discourses by individuals who embrace other new images of gendered behaviour (e.g., heteronormative images of traditionally masculinity used to oppose *vio datsumō* by those who embrace women’s sexual liberation). By attending to the language use throughout contrasting systems of interaction, here ranging from advertising to reception, we can trace and highlight the complexities of the social ideologies involved, better understanding how new ways of being are proposed, embraced, and rejected as part of how groups define themselves within media-influenced “changes in human communication, cultural practices, and social formations” (Androutsopoulos, 2016: 294).

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