

The visual language of Japanese youth's self-expression and self-promotion on TikTok

TikTok, a short-form video platform that originated in China in 2016, became prominent in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic when users spread light-hearted videos and joined viral dance and singing challenges. As of 2023, it is Japan's fifth most-used social media app, with younger audiences pivoting to the short-video formats to create fun videos and use content sharing as a pathway to their digital career.

Research suggests that platform filters, sound effects and songs, and other visual features facilitate creative self-expression on the app. While the scholarship on TikTok youth cultures is growing, there is little research on how TikTok is received in Japan or used for self-presenting and performance. This article argues that the users' practices of crafting their online persona are deeply intertwined with the Japanese visual culture of photo-taking, selfies and costume play while affording new avenues for presenting oneself in a compact video format and via engagement with the platform's algorithm.

Japanese visual culture

Japanese Internet culture has been at the forefront of visual communication developments. In 1999, the rise of mobile phone messaging gave young users control over how they self-present via expressive linguistic features and visual language to curate their identities without social pressure. In 2004, Japanese social network Mixi allowed users to freely share their emotional expression and interests under the 'Japanese Cell Phone only' policy. In 2011, Japanese users turned to LINE, Japan's most popular messaging app, to express nuanced emotions via app stickers, a large-format emoji that can be gifted and sent during chats.

The arrival of photo-sharing apps like Instagram in 2014 opened avenues for self-expression via beautifying self-representation in photographic form. The omnipresent selfie practices on Instagram revitalised Japan's *purikura* photo sticker booths from the late 90s, which included predesigned effects and backdrops to modify and beautify the self. Following Instagram, audio-visual platforms such as

YouTube and TikTok have consolidated a position in Japan's diverse online media landscape, paving the way for live streaming and vlogging trends and new visual communication patterns, which this article explores.

My research

Social media spaces have propagated avenues for self-expression and self-promotion. Sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of 'performed self' or self-presentation as a selective disclosure and continual adjustment of one's expression can be applied to online spaces where users express their identities through customisation. Online visual practices can blur conventional boundaries between public and private selves and contribute to the emergence of fluid and multiple identities. On TikTok, Japanese users oscillate between their public and private selves by utilising platform affordances for anonymity and self-promotion—thus suggesting a visual turn in Japanese internet culture.

This article is based on a digital ethnography conducted in January-June 2023 (as part of an ongoing research project) to observe TikTok cultures and users' practices while experimenting with the app's features to understand the opportunities they provide users to self-present. *All users are given pseudonyms in lieu of their actual screen names on TikTok.

TikTok as a continuation of visual practices

Cosplay and e-girl aesthetics

TikTok describes itself as a 'platform for creative self-expression', and its exponential growth marks the rise of the short video in social media and the prominence of formats characterised by a higher degree of sociality, immediacy and playfulness. Editing features allow users to create and elevate their content and express their identities through customisation—platform features for creative manipulation and playfulness open avenues for Japanese TikTokers to reinvent themselves online.

The make-up-based TikToker *Hana garnered 20.2 million likes on her account, regularly sharing make-up tutorials for different occasions and for 'multiple face personalities' as stated in the user's bio section. Instead of relying purely on platform features, such as filters and effects, the user employs a Do-It-Yourself (DIY)

approach to recreate the make-up of celebrities and anime characters, walking us through her significant makeover, from bare face look to *e-girl aesthetic* characterised by heavy make-up, dyed hair and cosplay outfits. TikTok, Instagram and Twitch popularised the e-girl[1] subculture, which refers to a social group of young women and girl gamers whose online personas challenge normative ideals of femininity in a space once dominated by men. Although Hana does not openly identify as an e-girl, the bold make-up looks, cosplay, and transgression from cute and docile femininity, as standard features of the e-girl subculture, signifies that the user showcases online persona to push DIY make-up videos in the spotlight of TikTok's For You page and achieve visibility on the app, while also displaying a 'bad girl' gender non-conformity.

As a performative medium, TikTok is a popular outlet for cosplay enthusiasts and influencers who rely on imitation and replication to self-express and impersonate their favourite anime and video game characters. Besides signifying membership within fandom communities, creators use TikTok to showcase their aestheticised identities corresponding to their favourite characters. In doing so, users share make-up tips and before/after videos to elucidate how much effort goes into cosplaying. Adding catchy songs, various effects, and video references via the caption feature contribute to users' actualisation of different personae, creativity, and self-expression. Furthermore, the app's transition feature, in combination with beautifying filters and effects, some of which involve enhancing eyes, slimming and brightening the face and adding make-up, work together to assist exploration of one's identity. TikToker *Izumi who has 17.5 million likes on their account, turn to *cross-play*, a practice of dressing up as characters regardless of gender, making gender a less relevant category for inhabiting the character from anime and manga series. On one occasion, the user shows up without costume or heavy make-up, asking their followers whether they form different impressions of them without cosplay; thus suggesting the notion of a 'different, cosplay persona' as an addition or reworked version of the user's 'true' self.

The visual expression on TikTok stems from and extends the existing practices of Japanese popular culture, including cosplay, as the visual expression of anime and manga fandom, but also broader Internet trends like e-girl aesthetics, which enable young women to assert their individuality and manifest subtle revolt against cute femininity and heteronormativity. These practices of playfulness with identities underline TikTok's affordances to showcase novel, or reworked versions of self, for identity play or communal belonging while communicating a genuine interest in

cosplay by sharing their work.

Self-fashioning through self-concealment

Another predecessor to self-fashioning on TikTok is in long-established photo-taking practices and sharing among Japanese teenagers and the aesthetics of kawaii culture. In Japan's pre-digital photography culture, purikura photo booths supported the self-expression of young people, particularly young women. Purikura, short for 'print club', included group or solo practices of posing in a booth, following suggested poses and predesigned backdrops, frames, and editing tools to make the image cute. These earlier visual practices included substantial modification of one's face and body by using various aestheticising processes, including brightening, slimming, enhancing, shrinking, recolouring, and sharpening, which happens automatically and within the built-in features of the medium. Young women in Japan embraced playful aspects of purikura and photo manipulation to resist Japanese cultural ideology about proper female behaviour and norms of gender and corporeal display. These self-fashioning practices are carried over to TikTok, as seen in the app's wide range of advanced effects and filters that help users transform into a new persona and enhance or manipulate aspects of the self. Like cosplay, users project different facets of the self through the platform's features and attempt to recreate viral trends, sounds or filters to boost their visibility on the app's For You video feed.

AI manga filter is a micro trend on TikTok that shows users transform into manga characters. Unlike other effects on the app that are applied to users' videos to add flair and customise the individual's face, body or backdrop, the *AI manga* filter generates a cartoon version of the image. It prompts users to experiment with AI to achieve their desired manga portrait. This entails a challenge for users as they compete to produce the most elevated version of the self. Some observed practices include users who play with AI filters to achieve overly emphasised body attributes, such as young women placing toilet paper rolls or bowls on their chests to get large breasts or men holding an egg carton or bread buns to make AI generate abs and 'masculine' body.

These are shared as hacks for tricking AI into generating an 'idealised' image and creating content that is intentionally meant to mimic and replicate. The rendition of the trend shows that users strive to fit into prescribed formats of self-presentation to achieve visibility on the platform. However, these playful practices can be read as users' emphasis on the societal bias that AI filter perpetuates by over-sexualising

users' bodies, altering their physical features and appearance, and presenting them as conventionally desirable. Young women intentionally mock big breasts through exaggerated displays to reclaim agency and critique compulsory feminine looks and bodies. Similar instances are found among Japanese young women who used '*eropuri*' or erotic photos in *purikura* to denaturalise sexualised presentation through overtly sexual appearance and manipulation of erotic conventions.

Interestingly, the self-fashioning practices originating from *purikura* culture are used for self-concealment and obscuring one's identity. In some cases, we see how modification and manipulation of facial and bodily features obscure young women's physical characteristics and identity. In this way, enlarged eyes, blurred, and brightened faces, combined with other visual features and effects, give users control over aspects of personality they want to present to their audience. 'Self as decoration' serves not only to facilitate self-expression through aesthetics but conceals actual identities and makes them unknown to the audience. Fabrication and camouflage of one's private or true self can be seen as a way of young women's inclination to participate in the culture of public visibility on their terms, especially considering TikTok's emphasis on visuality.

In Japanese virtual space, anonymising and concealing one's appearance is considered ordinary and a culturally situated practice. Similarly, in TikTok, young women employ different techniques of concealing certain aspects of their identities, using costumes and masks, cute visually incorporated elements, blurring the face or image, avoiding close-ups through certain compositional arrangements, and obscuring one's voice, supported with sound effects and lip-syncing centrality on TikTok. Through creating different strategies to self-disguise and deliberately camouflaging their identity, these young women engage in self-fashioning and create an online persona with agency and reality.

However, girls' anonymity practices are not absolute, and they pick and choose the level of anonymity they want to present as part of *self-governed visibility* contingent on users' choices of how much of their 'actual' self they want to share on the app. Interestingly, Japanese TikTok and its visual language entail young women's desire to be seen and validated on the platform, as seen in their intentional self-staging to navigate the platform's algorithmic recommender system and various tactics of boosting visibility. Alongside its potential to support young women's creative self-fashioning practices, TikTok is directing identity practices in ways that are profitable to the platform, and often characterised by the quantified, standardised presentation

of the self, driven by aspirations for social and economic capital.

Algorithmic, fame-seeking self

The defining feature of TikTok is the algorithmically curated For You page, which shapes how content is discovered based on users' previous engagements and activity on the app. Scholars Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo suggest the term *algorithmised self* to explain that algorithm is pertinent to presenting users with access to content that *'reflects their interests, likes, and personality, and which might be seen as a curated collection representing their inner "self.'* Through the personalised For You page algorithm, central to their experience of the platform, users engage with versions of their identities, thus presenting a new idea of the self and modes of sociality on the app.

In addition to the individually customised video feed, For You's algorithm implicates how users' videos achieve virality. Users look for various ways to engage with TikTok's algorithms which can support recognition and fame-seeking, and it opens the possibility of becoming TikTok famous. The most common user practices to ensure visibility are likes, comments and shares, and specific algorithm-related hashtags such as #fyp, #foryou and viral trends. In this way, users' self-fashioning practices are heavily guided by the algorithm and users' desire to be 'seen' and validated on the platform. Young women playfully express themselves with the aim of developing a social media following as an influencer, which entails replicable and normative practices on the platform. One of the most prominent hashtags that reflect users' active role in interacting with the algorithm is # おすすめ short version of おすすめのりたい [I want to be recommended as featured video] and aimed at garnering followers and increasing the content's visibility. In most videos, users showcase skills such as singing and dancing but often ask for feedback which indicates users' desire for validation by, and dependence on, other users for affirmation and content visibility. The features of duetting (side-by-side response to existing video), stitching viral videos (clipping and integrating scenes from existing video into one's own), creating memes or joining trending challenges accommodate forms of engagement on TikTok that can enhance the visibility of user's content.

A notable example is 19-year-old *Kiyomi who uses TikTok to promote her original songs and cover others' popular Japanese songs. Interestingly, this user relies on a plain background and expression, despite the abundant effects and filters that the platform offers, and employs various other tactics to attain visibility. In almost all

videos, the user engages in ‘algorithmic practices’, in the belief that patterned actions will drive up the engagement. This user engages in self-promotion and showcases personal skills by utilising existing or predetermined practices to boost visibility and monetise her online performance. The most prominent is using the ‘please recommend’ hashtag or seeking attribution and acknowledgment from other users on the songs she made (‘please duet this video’ or ‘please use this song’). This visual language that involves user’s time and effort to employ different strategies to become noticed and prominent on the platform, including engaging with the algorithm, can be seen as a new form of self-expression in these short-video format platforms—*an algorithmic fame-seeking self*.

In addition, practices aimed at attaining popularity and seeking fame to monetise work require young women to invest time and effort to maintain their online media presence and leverage platform features to pick up new viral trends. However, the labour young women invest in developing their digital DIY careers, which promise creativity, autonomy and self-expression, is often misrecognised as leisure and exploited by these platforms.

Young women self-staging and new modes of empowerment

The visual language of the Japanese Internet remediates previous practices of photo-taking, selfies, and costume play, while users strive to camouflage certain aspects of their private selves. I suggest the concept of *self-governed visibility* to capture users’ practices of navigating between complete visual anonymity and self-promotion, which often includes their effort to consistently post, interact and garner followers while pivoting and being in disguise. There is no conventional separation of private and public space on TikTok, as users’ practices show they can simultaneously conceal and promote or over-share aspects of the self or create a way for self-exploration beyond the binaries of public and private. I argue that the shift in visual language on TikTok entails more agency for young users, especially young women, to explore the visual terrain and video formats creatively and autonomously, experimenting with the movable concept of identity. TikTok allows Japanese young women to find new forms of self-expression through anonymity, manipulation and hyperbolic self-promotion while manoeuvring how their bodies and identities are represented. These self-governing practices present the next step in a well-established Japanese girl culture, as seen in how young women utilise the platform

to assert individuality and publicly empower themselves by crafting their narratives while critiquing and challenging gender stereotypes and norms.

Although TikTok allows young women in Japan to be creative and embrace their self-expression, the app prioritises conventional and normative ideas of the self and lures users to rework aspects of identities to fit within the standardised frameworks of social identities. Additionally, given their vulnerable role in the Japanese digital economy, young women have a special position in the shift to immaterial forms of labour. Their work and practices in the online space should be seen beyond the frivolous self-promotion and play as a career and novel form of labour that often has exploitative aspects. This study finds that the visual language of Japanese TikTok entails the duality of discrete self-presenting under the veil of anonymity and users' desire to attract social currency through replicable and viral trends, which is observed as a gendered phenomenon and a continuation of young women's playful use of language via adopting new technology.

[1] The term was first used as derogatory to young girls and women, for objectifying and sexualising girl gamers.

Main image credit: Matthew Kenwick/Flickr.