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## Revisiting the Creation of Meaning by Media: A Perspective from Japan

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## Revisiting the Creation of Meaning by Media: A Perspective from Japan

### Introduction

In 2006, a social phenomenon – the so called “Ebi-chan phenomenon” – appeared in Japan. Ebi-chan is the nickname of a fashion model, Yuri Ebihara. At the time, she modeled for the fashion magazine, *CanCam*, one of the leading magazines targeting young women in early 20s. She became an iconic figure — everything that she wore, from knit cardigan to handbag, was instantly sold out. The cities were filled with young women copying Ebi-chan’s style. What role did *CanCam* play in creating this phenomenon? Consumer behavior research has oftentimes regarded the media as gatekeepers in the consumption meaning system (McCracken 1986). For the emergence of “Ebi-chan phenomenon,” however, *CanCam* was definitely not simply a gatekeeper but also a creator of meanings. *CanCam* promoted Yuri Ebihara heavily, a model under exclusive contract to the magazine, as a popular, cute (*mote-kawaii*) character. Using the persona of Yuri, *CanCam* created ‘Ebi-chan,’ an iconic figure for young women. In fact, the editors of fashion magazines consider themselves as the style mentors for their readers. They create fashion pages and role models to propose what to wear, how to behave, and so on – items of advice on becoming an ideal woman (Dimant 2012; Nast 2012). *CanCam* did not act as an intermediary between creative artists and consumers (Negus 2002); rather, the magazine acted as the fabricator and inventor of the fashion persona ‘Ebi-chan.’

This paper revisits the role of the media in the consumption meaning systems. Journalists have been considered as “cultural intermediaries” who disseminate the consumption meanings to consumers (McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Traditionally, the media’s objectivity is more naturalized and thus, its observational role is often emphasized. More recently, however, the media’s role in shaping meanings are receiving attention (Humphreys 2010; Humphreys and Latour 2013). This study further extends the discussion by evaluating the role the media plays not only in shaping but also in creating the consumption meanings. In other words, contrary to McCracken’s (1986) argument of division of labor in the consumption meaning system (i.e., creating and disseminating meanings), this paper argues that multiple actors share the role of creating meanings. Furthermore, this study aims to show that the women’s magazines were playing a pivotal role in liberating and empowering Japanese women. By creating and providing a

new female image, the women's magazines have freed Japanese women from the traditional gender image. The women's magazines also granted a power to Japanese women by justifying and allowing them to conduct the act of self-reward. Taking a broader perspective, this relationship between the women's magazines and Japanese women is one example where markets are contributing to better human lives and advancing our society, as stated by Dholakia and Atik (2016), the founding editors of *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* (MGDR), in the very first issue of the journal.

## **Conceptual Background**

### ***Role of Media in Consumption Meaning Systems***

McCracken (1986) introduced the meaning transfer model that posited that the media are cultural intermediaries or gatekeepers – the conveyor belts of meaning transfer. Using the fashion system as an example, he argued that cultural meanings are newly created by opinion leaders or radically reformed by the groups at the margins of society such as hippies, punks, or gays. The media, represented by fashion journalists, are the agents who observe the mass of cultural innovation, decide what will endure or not, and disseminate their decisions.

Since McCracken (1986), many researchers have considered the media as cultural intermediaries (e.g., Atik and Firat 2013; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Zhao and Belk 2008). More recently, however, Humphreys and her colleague showed that the media, particularly newspaper journalism, plays the role of not simply gatekeeping or persuading but also of shaping ideas. Humphreys and Latour (2013) showed empirically that newspapers can shift consumer judgment. Newspapers shape ideas about consumption in three ways: selection, valuation, and realization (Humphreys 2010). Selection is choosing information such as sources, quotations, or examples to include in a newspaper article. Selection determines what is known about the consumption practice. In other words, the selections by journalists can influence and shape debates on consumption. Valuation is using narratives to frame a topic as either congruent or incongruent with cultural norms and values. Valuation can determine the valence with which consumers regard the consumption practice and the degree to which the practice aligns with preexisting cultural values. Finally, realization is covering a topic in the newspaper pages. Realization determines the awareness of a consumption practice's existence in the world. These three techniques are used differently by different genres (e.g., straight news, lifestyle reporting, and editorial writing) to shape consumer perception.

Using an approach similar to the one adopted by Humphreys and associates, this paper adopts the perspective that the media can shape cultural meanings. Furthermore, this paper argues that the media not only shape the consumption meanings but also create the symbolic meanings of consumption. Specifically, this paper highlights how the women's magazines changed the meaning of consumption practice that was valued as incongruent with cultural norms and values by the newspaper. In other words, within the media, there are multiple actors with different motivations and each has different role.

### ***Symbolism in Consumption***

Symbols are fundamental communication vehicles that connect objects in human actions and reactions (Mick 1986). The discussion on symbolism and consumer behavior can be traced back to 1950s, spearheaded by the works of Levy (e.g., 1959, 1971) and Belk (e.g., 1976; see Mick 1986 for a summary). Products possess symbolic features and consumption provides not only the functional utility but also the social meaning (Solomon 1983). For example, gift-giving is not simply about giving an object or service to someone. It is a symbolic exchange to maintain human relationships, what Mauss (1954) has called as a self-perpetuating system of reciprocity (see also, Sherry 1983).

Symbols are humanly created (Peirce 1931-58). Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), in their ethnographic work on the flea market, detailed how consumption can become a type of symbolic experience. They showed that in consumption contexts such as the flea market, the secular can be sacralized. Study of religion suggest that a fundamental distinction structuring social life is via the categories of 'sacred' and 'profane' (Durkheim 1975/1896; Eliade 1958). Just as elements of religion are set apart in sacred/profane distinction, elements of contemporary consumption can also be separated into these two domains.

Belk et al. (1989) focus on how consumers sacralize their consumption experiences. They argue that consumers construe meaning in consumption. Consumers can define certain objects or consumption experiences as representing something sacred. Belk et al. (1989) identify seven processes by which particular consumption becomes and remains sacralized: ritual, pilgrimage, quintessence, gift-giving, collecting, inheritance, and external sanction.

This paper shows that media can also construe symbolic meanings in consumption.

## The Japan Study

To study the role of the media as a meaning-creator, this paper focuses on the women's magazines. There are two reasons for this selection. First, in Japan, women's magazines have a strong influence on their female readers (Kumagai 2003; Ozawa et al. 2005). Each magazine is differentiated according to the gender, age, and/or taste. For example, in Japan, women's magazines are categorized into general, life-design, life-culture, information, and comics. Life-design magazines are then sub-categorized by age: teens, young, young adults, middle-age, and senior (Japan Magazine Advertising Association 2017). Magazines shape the ways of thinking and behaviors of their target readers (Clammer 1997). Junko Matsubara wrote in *Croissant*<sup>1</sup> *Shokogun* [Croissant Syndrome] (1988) that when magazines present a way of living, their messages are more powerful than religion – and penetrate deep into their readers' minds. In other words, the women's magazines are very similar to opinion leaders who are sources of meaning for individuals of low standing (McCracken 1986). Second, the concept of *jibun e no gohoubi* [self-reward] was considered to have been created and used by the women's magazines. For example, in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of the major national newspapers in Japan, a reporter said: "There is a phrase '*jibun e no gohoubi*'. In fact, my colleagues use this phrase, somewhat jokingly... Most likely, the women's magazines are its source" (November 21, 1990). A novelist Usagi Nakamura also mentioned in *Asahi Shimbun*, another major national newspaper, that "I often see the words '*jibun sagashi*' [search for self] and '*jibun e no gohoubi*' in the women's magazines" (October 15, 1998). This paper examines how the women's magazines created the meanings of the self-reward consumption in Japan.

### **Context of the Study: '*Jibun e no Gohoubi*' in Japan**

First, a brief history on the development of the self-reward consumption in Japan is useful. The self-rewarding appeared in the Japanese society during the late 1980s. When it first appeared, it referred to the working women purchasing luxuries to reward themselves for working hard. In 1990, the self-reward consumption was featured as "*imadoki yougo*" [trendy words] and it quickly penetrated among working women (Yoshiyama, *Nikkei Ryuutsuu Shimbun*, October 24, 1991). By the early 2000s, it became a social trend, among working women, to give a Christmas present to themselves as a reward for working hard over the year.

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<sup>1</sup> *Croissant* is a title of the popular female life-design magazine.

As illustrated above, the majority of self-rewarding consumers were the working single women in 1980s and 1990s. Since 2000, however, this consumer segment has gradually enlarged. One of the new segment consists of senior women above 60 years. As a reward for working hard for a long time, they spent their saving on vacations and/or hobbies. Another new segment was erstwhile-frugal housewives, now spending money on lessons such as cooking and luxury desserts. Finally, self-rewarding practices penetrated among men in the mid-2000s.

In addition to the increasing adopters of the self-reward consumption, the Japanese society's general view toward self-rewarding had also changed over the past 20 years. In the early 1990s, a general opinion toward the self-reward consumption had been very critical:

I don't like this phrase [*jibun e no gohoubi*]. It sounds very fake. It is elegantly rephrasing the notion of "I shopped a lot and relieved my stress." "Reward" is something you should be receiving from "others." (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 21, 1990, p. 3).

According to the research in cultural anthropology and cultural psychology in Japan, self-praising acts were not in accordance with Japanese traditional values. For example, an ideal person in the Japanese society is one that respects interpersonal harmony and suppresses the self (Heine et al. 1999). In moral education, the importance of endurance was emphasized and students were taught to refrain from self-centered acts (Kondo 1992). These research studies suggest that the self-praising acts such as self-rewarding were not socially acceptable. Over time, however, the self-reward consumption gained legitimacy and social criticism lessened. Today, the word 'self-rewarding' is used without any explanation.

Many actors were involved in legitimizing the self-reward consumption in Japan. For instance, a former marathon runner, Yuko Arimori, commented, "I want to praise myself for the first time" after winning 1996 Atlanta Olympic bronze medal, employing the phrase "*jibun e no gohoubi*", and it became the buzzword-of-the-year, and many firms used the phrase "*jibun e no gohoubi*" in their advertisements (Suzuki 2013). This paper will show that the media, particularly the women's magazines, also played a role in creating the meaning and legitimizing the self-reward consumption. The women's magazines played a different role from the newspapers in the case of the self-reward consumption. As apparent in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* November 21, 1990 article, the newspaper had valued the self-rewarding as incongruent with Japanese cultural norms and values (Humphreys 2010). However, the women's



magazines added symbolic meanings to make self-rewarding acceptable in the Japanese society.

### **Methodology**

To collect data for analysis, to select the articles, a three-stage procedure was adopted (Zhao and Belk 2008). First, the women's magazine articles featuring the self-reward consumption were collected. The magazine-article index search called "Web OYA-bunko" was used to identify the articles including the word "reward" in their title. For the period 1987 to 2009, 1,001 articles were identified. Then, using Japan Magazine Publishers Association's categorization of magazines, women's magazines were identified from the magazine titles. In total, 515 women's magazine articles were collected. Second, a pool of 60 articles for the current analysis was selected based on how conceptually interesting and rich each article was in revealing the creation of symbolic meanings by the women's magazines. Appendix 1 lists the 30 articles that expressed the self-reward consumption as sacred consumption and Appendix 2 lists another 30 articles characterizing self-reward activities as profane consumption. The selection, of course, is not meant to be representative of all the Japanese women's magazine articles on the self-reward consumption but rather to exemplify the women's magazines' symbolic creation approaches. Third, other supplementary information was collected to enrich the analysis. Using the database called "Nikkei Telecom 21," the newspaper articles and other public information that included the phrase "*jibun e no gohoubi (or 'houbi'<sup>2</sup>)*" were identified. For the period 1988 to 2009, 2,094 articles were identified. Then, an historical analysis (Golder 2000) of the self-reward consumption in Japan was conducted.

The analysis proceeded systematically through an iterative process. The focus was on how the symbolic meanings were transferred to the self-reward consumption (McCracken 1986). Being constrained by the historical nature of this study, this paper does not offer an account of consumers' actualized meanings. It is assumed, however, that only those created meanings survive across time wherein consumers perceive the meanings as relevant (Zwick et al. 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> '*houbi*' is '*gohoubi*' without '*go*' and also means reward.

## Findings

### ***Sacralization of the Self-Reward Consumption***

How did the media sacralize self-reward consumption? The data indicate that there were at least six ways through which the self-reward consumption was sacralized by the Japanese women's magazines: selecting special objects, providing mystique, personalizing self-rewarding, specializing self-rewarding time, labelling self-rewarding as self-gifting, and supporting with charismatic leaders.

***Selecting Special Objects.*** The Japanese women's magazines featured non-ordinary goods in their self-reward consumption articles. Non-ordinary goods are often treated as sacred (Clark 1986; Eliade 1958). Some examples of featured special objects were jewelry, watches, and luxury brand goods. The women's magazines emphasized the objects' specialness by describing them as authentic, precious, special, rare, high-quality, beautiful, luxurious, or expensive. For instance, the first special long article featuring the self-reward consumption<sup>3</sup> introduced luxury brand bags and accessories, jewelry items, and watches as the objects for self-rewarding. The article portrayed these objects as "a bag that has a firm beauty," "goods having high prestige," "authentic," and "beautiful form". Rarity and beauty differentiate non-ordinary goods from ordinary and make them into sacred goods (Clark 1986). Authenticity, distinguishing itself from counterfeit, is also an aspect of sacredness (Belk et al. 1989).

***Providing Mystique.*** In the special article on self-reward consumption, the self-rewarding objects were described as possessing special power that brings happiness to consumers. For instance, *Hanako*<sup>4</sup>, in their first self-reward consumption special article, labelled the self-rewarding object as "lucky item" that provides happiness to the possessor:

Goods purchased as a reward for "[I] worked hard this year too" are excellent if they have a good taste, are useful, you can **become happy** every time you use them, and make you feel that 1996 was a good year. You will definitely come across such **lucky items** in this book. (November 28, 1996, italic bold added)

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<sup>3</sup> The article was published by *MORE*, the women's magazine having one of the largest circulation in Japan, in January 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Hanako* is an information magazine that was very influential in the late 1980s. In 1989, the target reader image of *Hanako* was considered as the female identity representing the era. The phrase "*Hanako*" and "*Hanako-zoku*" [*Hanako* tribe] won the 1989 buzzword-of-the-year award.

Furthermore, the self-rewarding object was sometimes described as a charm. Charms are something worn or carried for their supposed magical effect such as warding off evil or ensuring good fortune. In the self-rewarding articles, jewelry pieces were especially emphasized for their mystique as the guardian stones.

Mystique (mystery) is one of the properties of sacredness (Belk et al. 1989). Mystique is a characteristic that does not fit quotidian human behavior, and raises the sacred and mystical item above the ordinary (Pickering 1984). When something loses mystique, it loses its sacredness and becomes ordinary (Belk et al. 1989). Thus, the addition of mystique to the self-reward consumption by the women's magazines was very important in sacralizing the self-reward consumption.

**Personalizing Self-Rewarding.** In order to recommend self-rewarding to their readers, the women's magazines emphasized personalization of the self-reward consumption. Personalization is an individualization of objects and can be achieved through investments and divestitures of meaning associated with a consumer's relationship with an object (Kopytoff 1986). It allows consumers to bring order to their goods and make sacralization a possibility (Belk et al. 1989). Personalization allows a commodity to become decommoditized (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986).

Analysis revealed three ways that the women's magazines employed to personalize the self-reward consumption. First, the women's magazines recommended readers to purchase the self-rewarding goods as a proof for working hard. They had put forth the self-rewarding object as a symbol for self-success. For instance, the first special long article on the self-reward consumption explained self-rewarding as follows:

Self-gifting a gift that ***gives a shape to this year's efforts*** and makes you feel good. If possible, a fine piece that ***resembles your career*** is preferred [as a self-rewarding object]. Something that has a certainty that you can hang out for many years. Also, something that ***symbolizes your growth***. (*MORE*, January 1990, p. 75)

*MORE* recommended their readers to "shape" their efforts by conducting the self-reward consumption. Here, the self-rewarding objects played a role to symbolize a matured self.

Second, the women's magazines told their readers that the self-rewarding objects expressed the possessors' characteristics, and described the object as if it were an extended self of the possessor. For instance, *MORE* spoke of a bag as woman's "alter ego." The accessories such as a pocket notebook and a card-case were said to "eloquently

narrate the possessors' characteristics." Similarly, jewelry and watch were considered to symbolize the possessors:

When selecting a lifetime's worth jewelry or watch, you may want to consider **what kind of woman you want to be**. It is **your symbol** and look over you most nearby in future, encourage you, and sometimes give you a feeling of pride. (*ef*, January 2000, p. 116)

In this way, the women's magazines proposed that the self-rewarding objects had a close relationship with one's self.

Finally, the women's magazines personified the self-reward objects, and made the relationship between the possessor and self-reward object very intimate. For instance, a watch was often compared to a woman's partner. *with*, another women's magazine having one of the largest circulations in Japan, described the self-rewarding watch as follow:

Watch that is with you always is like your **best partner**. So, you want to obtain the good quality one. Let's examine closely the classic and new models of four admiring brands, and find the important now and future partner. (*with*, December 1999, p. 248)

When a good has a meaning related to oneself, it becomes something special for its possessor. The women's magazines used one of the three methods to provide a personalized meaning to the self-rewarding goods. As a consequence, the self-rewarding goods became decommoditized and sacralized.

**Specializing Self-Rewarding Time.** The women's magazines positioned the self-reward consumption as a rare occasion. It was a special consumption, an activity that was not performed frequently. The article titles often included the words that emphasized that the self-reward consumption is a once-a-year act: "Once a year extravagant reward..." (*Hanako*, November 28, 1996) and "Self-reward for working hard this year..." (*MORE*, January 1998). The women's magazines made an impression that the self-reward consumption was not an ordinary act.

In addition, the women's magazines separated the self-rewarding times from the ordinary times. This was particularly evident in self-rewarding visits to the restaurants and beauty salons. For instance, *Nikkei Women's* special article on the rewarding restaurants described the rewarding bar as follow:

Darkness is the first impression. But, this darkness somehow calms you down. It is because you can be immersed into a "solitary mood" and absorbed in the conversation with a bartender. [...] The spotlight shines only on the seated places and you can be in the

center of spotlight. Good thing about the bar is that there is nothing that reminds of reality, like a clock. It is an **unordinary** space and you can spend a comfortable time. (*Nikkei Women*, October 2000, p. 158).

This article distinguishes the self-rewarding time from the ordinary time and suggests that consumers can escape from the reality by visiting the bar.

Time can be separated into sacred and profane as well (Belk et al. 1989). The women's magazines sacralized the self-reward consumption by making the self-rewarding time sacred.

**Labelling Self-Rewarding as Self-Gifting.** The women's magazines often expressed self-rewarding as self-gifting. The self-reward consumption was considered as gifting and distinguished from the ordinary shopping.

Gifts have special meanings and the gift consumption is clearly different from the commodity consumption. They are considered to be sacred because they have the value-expressive nature (Belk et al. 1989). In interpersonal gift-giving, the gifts often express the human relationships. In self-gifting, a consumer communicates with oneself through the act and gifts represent self-esteem or self-identity (Mick and DeMoss 1990). The women's magazines suggested that consumers can express their feelings through the self-reward consumption. For instance, *ef* narrated the relationship between the self-reward consumption and expression of feelings:

**LOVE LETTER FOR ME.** Placing a special memory to each jewelry. [...] The first time I bought a decent accessory is the year I joined the company. [...] In its glitter, a piece of jewelry may be a time capsule that can freeze "myself" to that slice of time. Since I realized this, I became to like **self-gifting**, saying to me "you worked hard." (*ef*, January 1998, p. 114)

*ef* illustrates the self-reward consumption as self-communication. Furthermore, the self-rewarding jewelry is expressed as the "time capsule that can freeze myself" and depicted as a symbol of self-identity.

As such, the women's magazines created an impression that the self-reward consumption is a gift to oneself and is a special type of (therefore sacred) consumption.

**Supporting with Charismatic Leaders.** The women's magazines used popular celebrities and models (i.e., charismatic leaders) to promote the self-reward consumption to their readers. For instance, *ef* had Toko

Furuuchi, a singer-songwriter, talk about the self-reward consumption in her essay:

The self-reward consumption is something that fulfills materialistic needs. When viewed from the outside, it may not be a necessity. But, there is a meaning in buying it yourself. I can sincerely understand why office ladies desire Hermes' Kelly bag or Birkin bag. Men may question the spending of few hundred thousand yen on a bag; however, it's self-satisfaction for women. They probably saved money to buy the bag — they seem like someone who worked hard. Women have a goal, wish to become a woman who can wear that item, and when they obtain it, they feel that they have moved one level higher. The self-reward consumption is a result for doing something; but I feel that it is also a preparing material to move up to the next level. (ef, August 1999, p. 45)

This technique of supporting the self-rewarding consumption with charismatic leaders was commonly seen in other women's magazines as well. *Hanako* named the title of serial column by Marina Watanabe, the former iconic idol, as "Marina Watanabe's honeydew reward" and made her support the self-rewarding consumption trends. *non no* also used the popular idols of the time — Hikaru Nishida and Rie Miyazawa — for its first self-reward consumption article.

People can be divided into sacred and profane as well, and there are special people in this world (Belk et al. 1989). Some people have prophetic charisma that gives them magical power over followers (Weber 1968). The women's magazines sacralized the self-reward consumption by having charismatic leaders support it.

As shown above, the close reading of magazine articles suggested that the women's magazines sacralized the self-reward consumption by using these six strategies.

### ***Desacralization of Self-Reward Consumption***

As the self-reward consumption penetrated into the Japanese society, new moves were taken by the women's magazines to add other symbolic meanings. Since 2000, the women's magazines began to desacralize the self-reward consumption. When taking away sacredness from the sacred consumption or mixing the sacred with profane, the act of consumption becomes a profane one. The women's magazines took one of the four ways to add the meanings of profaneness to the self-reward consumption: selecting commodity goods, emphasizing cheap price, de-specializing self-rewarding time, and de-personalizing self-rewarding.

**Selecting Commodity Goods.** In the self-reward consumption articles, special objects such as luxury brand goods, jewelry, and watch were commonly featured. Since 2000, however, commodity goods were also getting featured as the self-rewarding objects. Examples include mass foods and daily necessities.

When the women's magazines featured the commodity goods as the self-rewarding objects, they did not describe them as authentic, rare, high-quality, or luxury. Rather, those objects were described as opposite of rare and expensive goods. For instance, *chouchou* featured ramen as the self-rewarding object and emphasized its "good deal price" and "common people" associations.

Ladies working hard every day while feeling stressed, let's give ourselves a reward saying "you're great!" Recommendation is a luxury atmosphere ramen shop which has sophisticated dishes besides ramen. **Good deal price** for this great taste is because it's **ramen, the supporter of common people**. Cheers to ourselves working hard with lovely ramen! (*chouchou*, October 22, 2009, p. 97).

In the above article, the luxury atmosphere ramen shop is featured; however, this ramen shop is kitsch. Although the article says that ramen is a food for common people, it adds luxury to it. This gives a sense of fakeness. Fake is opposite of authenticity, the characteristic of sacredness. With a creation of fakeness, sacredness was removed from the self-reward consumption. Belk et al. (1989) point out that kitsch has a relation with desacralization.

Furthermore, the women's magazines began to pick up the daily necessities for the special article of the self-reward consumption and set forth that it was not always special. When the sacred objects become ordinary, they become profane (Belk et al. 1989). The women's magazines attached the meaning of profane to the self-reward consumption by featuring commodity goods.

**Emphasizing Cheap Price.** The women's magazines sometimes emphasized the cheap price in the self-reward consumption article after 2000. For instance, *OZmagazine* emphasized a discounted price in the self-reward consumption article:

**60 minutes relaxation salon experience for 5,800 yen** starts at OZmall! Limited for *OZmagazine* readers, a special plan of **additional 15 minutes with the same price** is offered now! Give yourself a supreme rest for working hard! (*OZmagazine*, May 8, 2006, p. 83).

*OZmagazine* put forth the possibility to experience the salon with a discount price.

The women's magazines told their readers that consumers can conduct the self-reward consumption with an affordable price. For instance, *MORE* spoke about the affordability of some of the self-rewarding jewelry:

Selecting a steady jewelry below 100,000 yen. Severely selected items available at **affordable price**. Check-out your favorite item optimal for everyday use! (*MORE*, July 2007, p. 266)

Focus on the discount and affordable prices suggested that the self-rewarding objects are now approachable.

According to Belk et al. (1989), an expensive price is a way to confirm the sacredness. The expensiveness allows the sacred objects not to be seen or characterized as profane. Furthermore, consumers are showing respect toward sacredness by accepting its expensive price. In contrast, the cheap price functions to lead toward the profane world. Thus, by emphasizing the cheap price, the women's magazines created the profane meaning toward the self-reward consumption.

***De-Specializing the Self-Rewarding Time.*** Initially, the women's magazines sacralized the self-reward consumption by specializing the self-rewarding time. Later, however, they also recommended their readers to engage routinely in self-reward consumption in daily lives. For instance, *ef* recommended to spend a weekend at a hotel as a reward:

We live every day filled with the stress. There is no time for us to go on a trip; but why not heal the fatigue using the hotel plan on a small break like a **weekend**? A big special issue on hotel plans that are kind to women — from the newly opened hotels that are topic of conversation to the aspiring long-established ones. (*ef*, March 2004, p. 146).

*an an* featured and positioned skincare products that are used everyday as self-rewarding objects. By featuring daily goods, it positioned the self-rewarding time not as extraordinary but as ordinary time. As such, the women's magazines desacralized the self-reward consumption by introducing it into their readers' daily lives.

***De-Specializing Self-Rewarding.*** The women's magazines sacralized the self-reward consumption by positioning it as self-gifting. They later desacralized it by describing it as a normal shopping. In such cases, the women's magazines did not use the gift concept. Instead, they used the shopping concept. For instance, *Hanako* used the self-reward



consumption in the Shinjuku shopping guide (2008). Such articles considered the self-reward consumption as an ordinary shopping and not necessarily a special act.

## **General Discussion**

This paper discussed how media could create consumption meanings. The analysis showed that the Japanese women's magazines created the sacred meanings for the self-reward consumption in the 1990s and later created profane meanings – for such consumption – since 2000. Six strategic actions were identified as sacralizing, and four actions were identified as desacralizing, in terms of the self-reward consumption of women.

Thompson and Haytko (1997) showed that the consumption meaning system is not monolithic as presumed in McCracken's (1986) model. They focused on the role of consumers; meaning transfer is consumer-centered, as consumers appropriate cultural meanings and derive personalized consumption meanings to incorporate them into individual life projects and life themes. This paper also viewed multiple stakeholders that are involved in consumption meaning creation. It highlighted the media as being proactive in creating the meanings. Past literature often considered the media as disseminator of the consumption meanings to consumers (McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The analysis here showed, however, that media could also be creators of the meanings.

It is important to realize that different meanings for the self-reward consumption existed in Japan in the 1990s. When the phenomenon was first featured in the newspapers in 1990, the act of self-rewarding, mainly performed by the working women, was criticized. Self-rewarding was framed as incongruent with cultural values. The women's magazines, however, provided a new meaning for the self-reward consumption by sacralizing it, as illustrated in this paper. Thus, in 1990s, there were contradicting views, bad versus good, toward the self-rewarding.

The media's sacralization and desacralization of the self-reward consumption also suggest their influence over legitimation and penetration of a consumption practice in a society. Legitimation is the process of making a practice socially, culturally, and politically acceptable within a particular context (Johnson et al. 2006; Suchman 1995). There are three types of legitimacy: regulative, normative, and cultural cognitive (Scott 1995; Suchman 1995); however, since regulative legitimacy is overseen and enforced by superordinate institutions such as government or regulatory agencies, this paper examines the media's influence over latter

two types of legitimacy. Normative legitimacy is the degree to which a practice adheres to the norms and values in the social environment. Over time, as self-rewarding becomes legitimate, its positive evaluation is expected to stabilize by either going up or remaining constant, while negative evaluation should decrease. In this way, a practice can become normatively legitimate by becoming positively viewed (i.e., endorsed) or by becoming less negatively viewed (i.e., tolerated). The sacralization of self-rewarding by the women's magazines provided normative legitimacy and helped the penetration of self-rewarding in the early stage. Still, the penetration of a practice in the generalized environment requires that a practice be adopted by a broad range of population, not only by trendsetters but also by followers and by those who are uncertain about the practice. To involve laggards, the desacralization of self-rewarding became necessary to deemphasize the specialness and add the ordinariness and casualness. The desacralization of self-rewarding provided cultural-cognitive legitimacy, the degree to which a practice is known and understood in a society. Cultural-cognitive legitimacy is often measured as the quality of being "taken for granted" – a practice is preconscious and common.

The women's magazines' sacralization of self-rewarding parallels with the increasing independence of women in Japan. Three reasons existed in the emergence of the self-reward consumption in Japan (Nikkei Marketing Journal 1991). First, men's gift-giving had declined after the burst of bubble economy and women had to fulfill their materialism needs themselves. Second, women desired to possess goods that suited their tastes (gifted goods often did not suit their tastes). Third, women needed motivation to continue working as they faced the hardships of work. As illustrated in these three reasons, women were becoming independent as they pursued their career following the enactment of Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986. They also began to have high disposable income — for comparable work, they earned salary equal to men. Hence, working women acquired luxury goods and services such as jewelry, luxury brands, beauty spas, stays at luxury hotels, and travels for themselves.

In Japan, self-rewarding consumption had been used in a consistent way throughout — women engaged in non-necessity consumption to reward themselves for their hard work. However, the act changed over time – from culturally inappropriate to acceptable. Women's magazines justified the self-reward consumption and contributed in legitimizing the act. Women were then able to reward themselves without eliciting criticism from others. The findings suggest that the media

can function to create meanings and change social opinions and social climate.

In this way, the women's magazines were playing a pivotal role in liberating women in Japan. They portrayed new female images where women lived strongly and beautifully, pushing aside the traditional restrictions. Japanese women now were empowered – they were able to take actions that were solely to serve them. In postwar Japan, the women were expected to be “professional housewife,” the concept developed and promoted by state and society who pushed the standardization of the postwar Japanese family to grow the Japanese economy (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Ideal female identity was a “perfect” mother and wife. Professional housewife was to prioritize family than herself; it was not appropriate for her to consider about herself. Hence, the act of self-rewarding was an empowerment for Japanese women.

Today, self-reward consumption has become particularly important for professional housewives in Japan. Japanese mothers sometimes feel ignored because there is not much recognitions and compliments from the family members (Barnlund and Araki 1985; Matsuura 2004). Japanese husbands and children often do not praise mothers. This is closely related to the Japanese cultural view of *uchi* (inside) versus *soto* (outside) (Bachnik 1994). Japanese often consider family members as insider and feel that compliments are not necessary for insiders (Matsuura 2004). Japanese professional housewives acknowledge that housekeeping and child-raising are not special and are not worthy of being praised. Still, they work hard for their family and desire to be appreciated by the family members. Globally, women are feeling more pressures at home—it has become hard work. Many working women are finding work to be a refuge from home (Hochschild 2007). However, professional housewives do not have such refuge. Thus, self-rewarding represents the agency of marginalized mothers. Spending money on themselves grants mothers the power to care about themselves. Because there is no evaluating-mechanism for mothering in the society, mothers created the mechanism themselves—namely, self-rewarding (Suzuki and Kanno forthcoming).

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## Appendix 1: 30 Articles Expressing the Self-Reward Consumption as Sacred Consumption

**Article:** “Reward to myself who worked hard. Severe selection of 80 authentic valuable goods that you want to buy with your bonus”, *MORE*, January 1990, pp. 75-87. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Reward to myself. Third ring”, *LEE*, March 1990, pp. 177-181. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Memory of love. My only ring. Petit diamond that we gifted each other with Rie-chan is a reward to ourselves”, *non no*, April 1993, p. 112. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Once a year extravagant reward. What I want for Christmas collection!”, *Hanako*, November 28 1996, pp. 8-43. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Bag, Shoes, Jewelry, Watch, Furniture, Accessory.

**Article:** “PRESENT FOR ME. The one product that I select for a self-reward”, *ef*, December 1996, pp. 78-87. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Because it’s Christmas season, let’s be honest to our desire and give ourselves a reward. Which one do you want now!”, *Hanako*, November 26 1997, pp. 8-39. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Bag, Shoes, Jewelry, Watch, Fragrance, Accessory.

**Article:** “Self-reward to myself who worked hard this year! Diamond, jewelry, pearl, etc. 230 big reference book of thrilling jewelry”, *MORE*, January 1998, pp. 168-183. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Reward to gift myself who worked hard this year. This superb object”, *ef*, January 1998, pp. 105-119. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Stress is relieved. Total 12 chapters to heal mind and body. Chapter 9: reward to myself who worked hard cheers tired mind. Ms. Aya Miyauchi”, *ef*, January 1998, p. 84. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** -.

**Article:** “Self-reward that I want to gift myself as a proof of working hard. Jewellery and watch”, *ef*, July 1998, pp. 68-77. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “X’mas season is when things that I want overflows. Reward to myself who worked hard, this year too!”, *Hanako*, November 25 1998, pp.



8-35. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Jewelry, Watch, Accessory.

**Article:** “X’mas season is when things that I want overflows. Reward to myself who worked hard, this year too!”, *Hanako*, November 25 1998, pp. 124-135. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Restaurant.

**Article:** “Obtaining the favorite accessory with bonus & Christmas”, *ef*, December 1998, pp. 125-133. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Now is the time. One level up shopping catalogue 1). 130 ‘reward-bag’ and ‘reward-shoes.’ GET the aspiring brands and trendy designs with bonus”, *MORE*, January 1999, pp. 42-51. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Bag, Shoes.

**Article:** “Jewelry & watch to gift myself as a reward of a year”, *ef*, January 1999, pp. 104-113. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Hint for healing the mind and body. 2) Hedonic ‘rewarding salon’ that promises happy moment”, *CREA*, February 1999, pp. 98-102. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

**Article:** “99 summer. 120 special WATCH”, *ef*, July 1999, pp. 101-116. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Watch.

**Article:** “Toko Furuuchi’s happiness essence. Self-reward is an important preparing material to move up to the next level”, *ef*, August 1999, p. 45. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** -.

**Article:** “Check now! Popular brands’ latest catalogue of ‘jewelry & watch.’ Best-buy reference book by brands. ‘Reward-watch’ for myself who worked hard”, *with*, December 1999, pp. 245-252. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Watch.

**Article:** “‘Reward’ ring reference book. Authentic good that you can wear for lifetime is good for ‘gifting to myself’ or ‘being gifted’”, *non no*, December 20 1999, pp. 63-68. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Reward jewelry big reference book. To me from my beloved boyfriend. To me from myself who worked hard”, *MORE*, January 2000, pp. 162-179. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “I will tell you what you really want! What are you going to buy as a reward for working hard this year?”, *ef*, January 2000, pp. 113-120. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand good, Jewelry, Watch, Accessory.

**Article:** “Reward that shines on treasured time”, *ef*, January 2000, pp. 147-153. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Good job this year. Reward to ‘myself’ to work hard again in the year 2000. For me who is tired! OL relaxation News”, *JJ*, February 2000, pp. 239-241. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

**Article:** “watch & jewelry for self-reward”, *ef*, July 2000, pp. 126-133. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry, Watch.

**Article:** “Self-rewarding summer accessory is white matrix”, *ef*, July 2000, pp. 139-141. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Found the store that woman wants to enter alone! New way of thinking café at Tokyo. Restaurants and bars that you want to go for self-reward”, *Nikkei Woman*, October 2000, pp. 154-159. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Restaurant.

**Article:** “Self-reward 2) 21st century fragrance. I, who is wearing it, is most happy! Happiness of fragrance”, *COSMOPOLITAN*, November 2000, pp. 48-49. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Fragrance.

**Article:** “Self-reward. I want the luxury brand pocket book that makes working me look beautiful!”, *COSMOPOLITAN*, December 2000, pp. 78-83. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand goods.

**Article:** “Check now! Popular brands’ ‘watch & jewelry’ latest catalogue 2000. I want it for 20th century’s memory! ‘Steady watch’ as a self-reward”, *with*, December 2000, pp. 223-230. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Watch.

**Article:** “Gift to me once a year. Pleasure of heavenly esthetique as an once-a-year reward”, *croissant*, December 10 2000, pp. 24-27. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

## Appendix 2: 30 Articles Expressing the Self-Reward Consumption as Profane Consumption

**Article:** “Lovely hotel plan for ladies. One night reward with your friend”, *ef*, March 2004, pp. 146-149. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Hotel.

**Article:** “Petit-reward. Little bit expensive but the effect is large! "Self-reward" to become beautiful”, *an an*, March 10 2004, pp. 96-99. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Cosmetics, Esthetique.

**Article:** “Jewelry, leather accessories, Christmas coffrets... Self-reward for the end-of-the-year. Heart flutters with a happy mood! Luxury brand accessories”, *LEE*, December 2005, pp. 44-55, 57, 59. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Luxury-brand goods, Jewelry, Cosmetics.

**Article:** “Reward to me? Ask your boyfriend! No. 3. ‘Cute’ animal objects for adults who graduated stuffed animals”, *Hanako*, February 23 2006, p. 91. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Animal objects.

**Article:** “Reward to me? Ask your boyfriend! No. 4. Pleasant aroma from morning till evening. Colorful espresso machine”, *Hanako*, March 9 2006, p. 13. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Espresso machine.

**Article:** “Reward to me? Ask your boyfriend! No. 7. Choosing by your mood. Having a break with ‘my mug’”, *Hanako*, April 27 2006, p. 51. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Mug.

**Article:** “Ozsmall ‘reward relaxation for 5,800 yen’ x Ozmagazine collaboration plan. Holiday of my only healing salon”, *OZmagazine*, May 8 2006, pp. 83-93. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

**Article:** “Loving body. Let's give myself a superb reward! Beauty revolution with Golden Week gorgeous care”, *an an*, May 10 2006, pp. 46-47. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

**Article:** “Reward to me. From beloved person. Girl's favorite thing. That is... love diamond 2006”, *with*, June 2006, pp. 240-245. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Reward-lunch on holiday”, *OZmagazine*, September 4 2006, pp. 22-61. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Lunch.

**Article:** “Why not start ‘morning time’? Morning environment. Self-reward to awaken me is delicious morning café time. Morning dessert”, *OZmagazine*, May 21 2007, p. 54. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Dessert.

**Article:** “To reborn Roppongi. Tokyo Midtown. Gracefully spending time at reward café with only dessert & food that you can only taste here”, *OZmagazine*, June 25 2007, pp. 38-39. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Café.

**Article:** “Summer reward reference book. Target it with an admiring brand? Find it under 100,000 yen? Summer favorite jewelry 98 that makes your fashion appear one rank up”, *MORE*, July 2007, pp. 260-269. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “‘Celebrity mood’ is a secret behind its popularity. How about ‘reward breakfast’ at hotel?”, *JJ*, October 2007, pp. 282-285. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Breakfast.

**Article:** “I can be more wonderful me! Love at first sight jewelry (heart mark) BOOK”, *non no*, December 5 2007, pp. 95-102, 111-118. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “You can use this much! How to enjoy ‘10,000 yen.’ Extravagance for your mind as a self-reward, once in a while”, *Yuu yuu*, March 2008, pp. 162-167. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** -.

**Article:** “Our ‘rewarding’ salon that those in the know, know it very well found at Ebisu, Daikanyama, and Nakameguro”, *Hanako*, April 24 2008, pp. 70-73. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Esthetique.

**Article:** “Reward reference book. From the latest of admiring high brands to the trendy design of under 50,000 yen! Upgrade your fashion! Summer finest jewelry 138”, *MORE*, July 2008, pp. 264-273. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Jewelry.

**Article:** “Lifestyle. Tell us the perfect book, music, and movie for a summer champaign. Hiromi Uehara. Outdoor champaign with a music as hors d'oeuvre. This is a reward to myself”, *marie claire*, July 2008, pp. 180-181. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Champagne.

**Article:** “Tokyo OL society. No. 60. Snack at workplace--we pick according to the objectives”, *Hanako*, July 10 2008, pp. 112-113. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Snack.

**Article:** “What I bought recently 01. Ms. Nagisa Osada. Shoes for staying out late at night. Shopping is ‘encounter.’ Time to wear this shoes is the reward to busy me”, *croissant premium*, October 2008, p. 11. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Shoes.

**Article:** “Shinjuku guide. Exhaustively enjoy the powerful city! Rewarding items to buy at Shinjuku as a gift to me”, *Hanako*, November 27 2008, pp. 81-89. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Clothes.

**Article:** “Self-reward when become tired. Recommendation of petit extravagance to upgrade womanness”, *an an*, January 28 2009, pp. 73-80. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Clothes, Accessory, Stationary goods, Cosmetics.

**Article:** “To the end of the world to visit the ‘taste of the season.’ Delicious pilgrimage. No. 26. The finest reward to mind and skin. I think it could be. Yakiniku for a beautiful woman”, *STORY*, March 2009, pp. 189-193. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Yakiniku.

**Article:** “Rising up! Summer new colors & limited ‘reward cosmetics.’ I wish to become more beautiful”, *non no*, June 20 2009, pp. 10-15. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Cosmetics.

**Article:** “Swallowing reward for the skin at the end of hot day. Sheet mask at the mid-summer evening”, *JJ*, October 2009, pp. 163-166. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Cosmetics.

**Article:** “Girl’s ramen club. Women’s ramen guide for women by women. No. 13. Gorgeous! Reward-ramen”, *chou chou*, October 22 2009, p. 97. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Ramen.

**Article:** “Koji Uematsu & Ayako Ono go! Beauty, beauty, beauty expedition team. No. 21. Huge strategy of the ‘first move reward’ for a summer fatigue!”, *GRAZIA*, November 2009, pp. 256-257. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Hair salon.

**Article:** “Reward for myself working hard this year is this, just as I thought. Can’t wait until the holy night. X’mas coffret”, *Bi STORY*, December 2009, pp. 132-135. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Cosmetics.

**Article:** “Chiharu Tominaga’s cosmetic lesson to brush up woman! No. 38. Becoming beautiful with Christmas coffret as a reward to myself who worked hard”, *Nikkei Woman*, December 2009, pp. 96-97. **Self-Reward Objects Mentioned:** Cosmetics.