

## Psychological Studies of Skincare in Japan: A Review

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After reviewing the historical differences in skincare customs between the Western world and Japan, the present situation of skincare in Japan is discussed. Psychological studies of cosmetics, mainly in relation to skincare, are also reviewed. Many results show a psychophysiological effect of skincare practices, especially esthetic massage, known as the relaxation effect, which is described by the “relaxation and refreshment curve”. The correlation found between skincare, self-consciousness and daily uplift indicates that the positive effect of skincare should be recognized as a valuable means of reducing daily stress.

**Key words:** cosmetics, relaxation, stress, daily hassles, uplifts, Japanese history, moisture balance

### Skincare in the Western world and in Japan: oil versus water

Pigeons bathe in ponds in parks. Cats lick themselves to stay clean. These behaviors are called preening in birds and grooming in mammals. It is a common animal behavior for maintaining hygiene of the body surface, and care of one's own skin is a universal human behavior. In humans it is called skincare.

The chair of the pharaoh of ancient Egypt Tutankhamen, who lived in the 14th century B.C., provides very early evidence of skincare. In the Cairo museum, we can look at a fine relief on the back of the chair depicting his wife applying oil to his body. In ancient Egypt, both skincare and make-up practices were highly developed. It is said that a part of the salaries of royal artisans was paid in massage oil (Strouhal, 1992).

Similarly, in the ancient Western world, cosmetic culture developed very early. The ancient Greeks were fond of applying cosmetics, but also made a clear distinction between skincare and makeup. Paquet (1997) points out that the ancient Greeks called skincare-like practices “kosmêtikê technê” and makeup-like practices “kommôtikê technê”. The former was more highly regarded than the latter. Their practices were taken over by the Romans with “ars ornatrix” as skincare and “ars fucatrix” as makeup. Paquet suggests that the early cosmetic customs of the Western world were suppressed with the ascendancy of Christianity through the Middle Ages, and throughout the historical period, “oil” was the main skincare item in the Western world.

In Japan, there was no religious suppression of cosmetic customs, including skincare. Japanese religion has consistently, throughout history, respected the neatness of the body. Japanese common sense has regarded bodily cleanliness in the same light as spiritual nobility, just as more recently in Western countries it was declared that ‘Cleanliness is next to Godliness’. But

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skincare in Japan was not differentiated from make-up until the last few decades and was primarily thought of as a fundamental procedure of make-up. Furthermore, Japanese custom has always preferred water for skincare: it is customary to wash the face with water every morning, and “pre make-up water” has been in popular use since the 18th century (Abe, 2000).

As shown in Table 1, the points of difference in cosmetic behavior between the Western world and Japan across historic times suggest a “topsy-turvy” conception of skincare.

**Table 1** The historical features of cosmetic custom in the Western world and Japan.

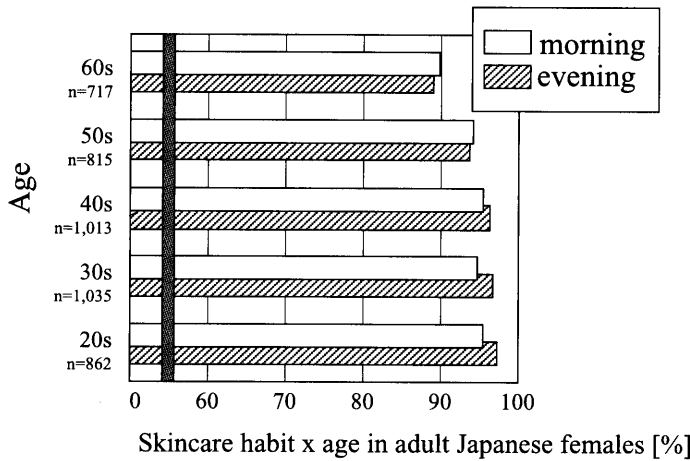
	Western world	Japan
Major category of cosmetics	Skincare / Make-up	Make-up (and skin conditioning as its preparation)
Religious attitudes	Suppression	Facilitation
Main item of skincare	Oil	Water

The Japanese political structure changed fundamentally in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Previously Japan had deliberately isolated itself from the rest of the world, but the new government established by the Meiji Restoration developed an active foreign policy, and thereafter Japan took major steps towards becoming an advanced nation. As a result, Western customs of skincare flowed into Japan. However, the Western approach did not replace the Japanese traditional style of skincare. The Japanese digested it and created a new style of cosmetic behavior (Abe, 2002a). This can be seen in the use by Japanese women of softening lotion - “moisturizing water” - which aims to achieve a *moisture balance* (Ozawa, 1975), rather than the use of toner, which aims to cleanse, that is popular with Western women.

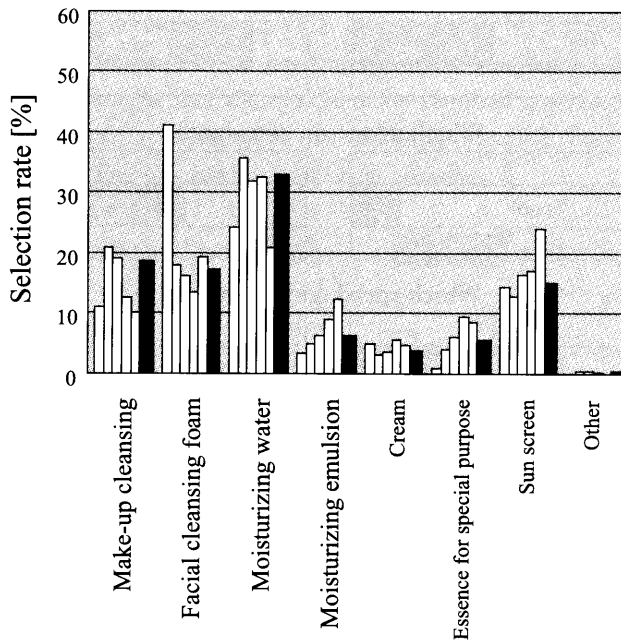
### Modern skincare practice in Japanese females

Figures 1-2 present the results of research on the modern practice of skincare in Japanese females. Figure 1 (Abe, 2001) shows the proportion who habitually practice skincare, using cleansing items for the face only (make-up cleansing and facial cleansing foam or applicative items (e.g. creams). It is obvious that skincare is a very general habit among Japanese females. The mean number of skincare items used was 2.8 (SD: 1.1) in morning, and 3.9 (SD: 1.6) in the evening (excluding non-users). The most popular skincare item was moisturizing water (90.5% in morning, 84.2% in evening). The average time spent on skincare was 6.4 (SD: 4.7) min in the morning and 7.6 min (SD: 5.4) in the evening. Figure 2 (Abe, 2004) shows the results of a nationwide Internet survey in 2004. It shows that Japanese women’s favorite skincare item was moisturizing water. (The single exception was a preference for facial cleansing foam in the age group under 20.)

These research results support the above notion that the traditional preference for water



*Figure 1.* Skincare habit ratio of Japanese adult females. (Abe, 2001)  
 Participants were 4,442 Japanese females from Shiseido panel survey aged 20-69.  
 The original panel was set up by proportional sampling across the nation.  
 This questionnaire research was administered in 2000.



*Figure 2.* Preferred skincare product if allowed only one item. (Abe, 2004)

Participants were required to answer the question: "If you are going to make a journey, which skincare item do you bring? Please select only one among the choices." (It was categorized as "Other" when they could not find from choices and described.)

Participants were 5,013 Japanese females aged 14-80 registered in Shiseido Internet Monitor Members and the research was performed with its original Internet system in 2004.

The black columns show total response, the white columns show responses by age group: from left to right, respondents aged <20, (119 females), 20-29 (2,004), 30-39 (2,221), 40-49 (540), and 50 or over (129).

remains in Japan today, and that skincare is a very common and important custom among modern Japanese women. Care of the skin, regarded as the foundation of make-up in the past, has literally become “skincare” in Japan today.

**Skincare and mood: relaxation effects of esthetic massage**

This important custom appears to have psychological implications, with its effect on mood differing between morning and evening (Figure 3: Abe, 2001). This result suggests that in the morning, it facilitates awakening, while in the evening, it is soothing.

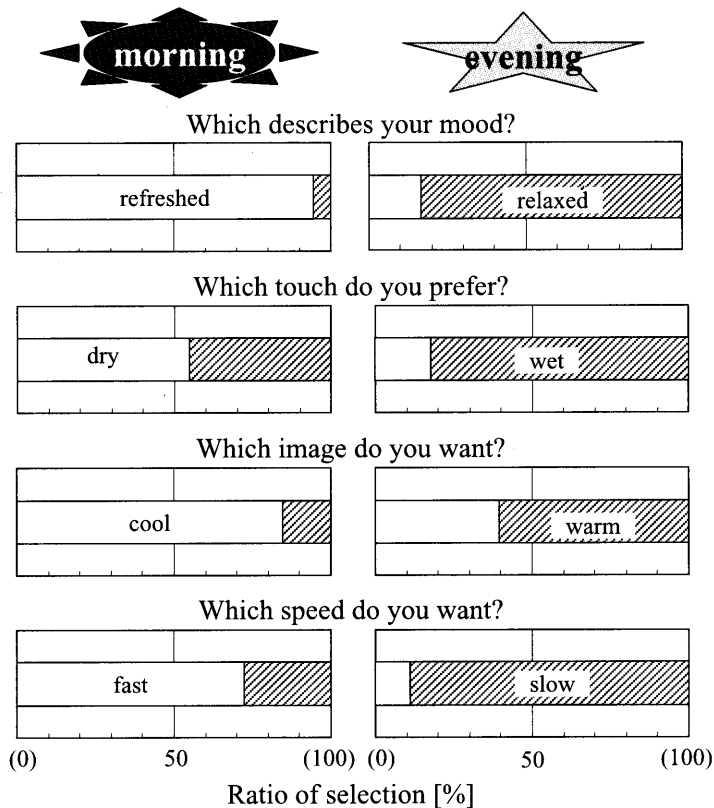


Figure 3. Skincare product preferences in the morning and evening. (Abe, 2001)  
Questionnaire was sent to 500 females aged 15-70. Forced choice was required. 371 replies. (in 1999).

Esthetic massage, sometimes called SPA, has been intensively investigated for its psychophysiological effects. Hatayama, et al. (1986) found a significant decrease in pulse rate after esthetic massage. In addition, a change in subjective state was also observed (Yamada, et al., 1986), with a reduction in tension and an increase in physical comfortableness. Thus it appears that esthetic massage has a sedative effect on both mind and body.

Applying Thayer’s arousal model (1989), Abe (2002b) measured changes in arousal, before and after esthetic massage, using the General Activation Checklist (GACL: Matsuoka & Hatayama, 1989). The result, shown in Figure 4, indicates significant reductions in both tense

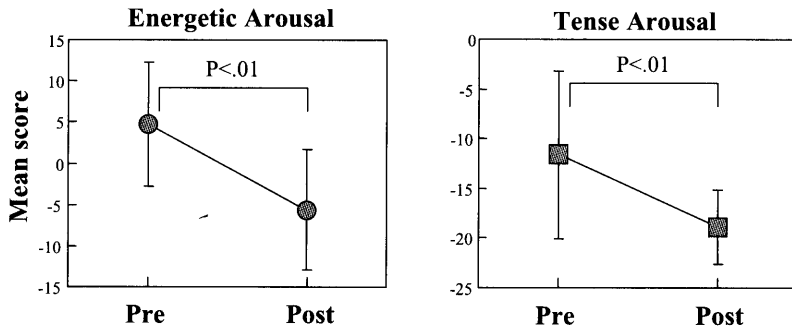


Figure 4. Change in arousal following esthetic facial massage. (Abe, 2002b)

An esthetic facial massage by Shiseido Rethera Method was given to 8 female participant. GACL (General Activation Checklist), a questionnaire developed by Matsuoka and Hatayama (1989) was administered before (Pre) and after (Post) massage. The vertical line is SD.

arousal and energetic arousal.

In the case of physiological sedation, Tagai and Okazaki (1993) found a consistent decrease, followed by a small increase, in heart rate. A similar trend in heart rate with esthetic massage was confirmed in a study using a control group (Abe 2002b: Figure 5). This characteristic change, with palmic deceleration followed by a small acceleration, was named the “*relaxation and refreshment curve*”. It is thought that the consistent deceleration corresponds to the mood of relaxation and the final slight acceleration to that of feeling refreshed. This pattern corresponds with the aims of the canceling procedure in *Autogenic training*.

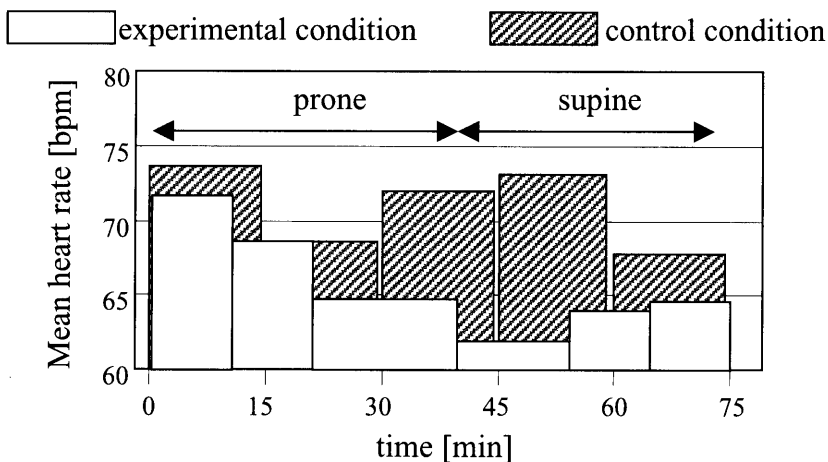


Figure 5. Effect of esthetic body massage on heart rate. (Abe, 2002b)

Participants were 3 females (aged 20-40). Heart rate was compared between 2 conditions. During esthetic body massage by Shiseido Qi-Method (experimental condition), mean heart rate decreased continuously then finally increased. In the control condition, with subjects (3 females) in the same body positions but without massage, heart rate changed at times of posture change.

Bars show average heart rate per time segment.

The involvement by esthetic massage, not only of the sympathoadrenal system, but also of hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis inhibition, has been demonstrated. Field et al. (1992, 1996, 1998), examining therapeutic aspects of massage, reported decreases in salivary cortisol concentration. Abe (1996, 1998) demonstrated the same tendency in the effects of esthetic massage (Abe, 1996, 1998).

In order to investigate the same factors operating in skincare, Abe (2001) and colleagues developed a special skincare procedure which included “scent”, “direct touch” and “closed eyes”. The results of the experiment are shown in Figure 6. It is presumed that the additional procedures were responsible for the appearance of the “relax and refresh curve”.

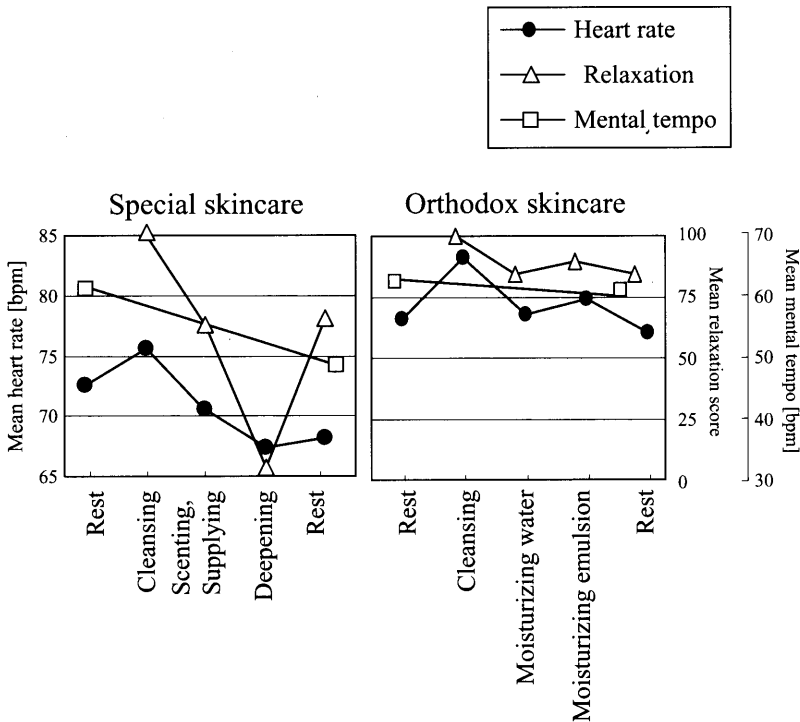


Figure 6. Effect of daily skincare on psychophysiological state. (Abe, 2001)

Participants were 4 females (aged 20-40). In the “Orthodox skincare” condition, subjects used the skincare procedures common in Japan, while in the “Special condition” new procedures were introduced: scenting the skincare product, applying it directly with the fingers, and closing the eyes to concentrate on inner effect.

“Relaxation” was assessed by a subjective rating on a scale of 0-100. “Mental tempo” was the speed of an electrical metronome chosen as feeling best.

The above studies support the proposition that skincare practices, especially when they include massage, produce an effect of psychophysiological relaxation.

### Skincare as a source of relaxation and daily uplift

Figure 7 (Abe, 2002b) shows the results of a questionnaire survey that examined the effect

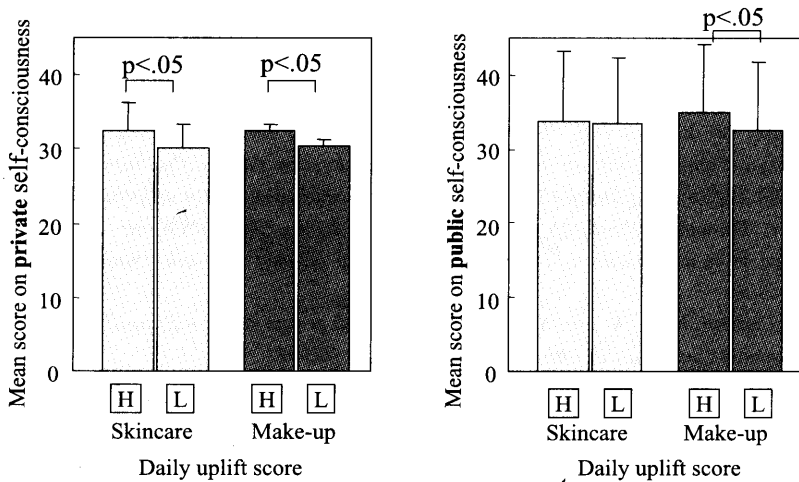


Figure 7. Cross-tabulation of mean scores on daily uplift of skincare and make-up x private and public self-consciousness. (Abe, 2002b)

Questionnaires were completed by 500 females (aged 20-69, 100 in each 10 year age range). The questionnaires included questions on experience of uplift and habits of skincare and make-up, together with a self-consciousness scale (Sugawara, 1984). Daily uplift scores were categorized into 'high' (H) and 'low' (L), depending on position above or below the average. On the self-consciousness scale, private self-consciousness scores ranged from 0-50, and public self-consciousness scores from 0-55. The vertical line represents the SD.

on mind and body of skincare practices, as compared with make-up practices, from the viewpoint of *self-consciousness* (cf. Fenigstein, et al., 1975; Sugawara, 1984). Private self-consciousness is higher in those who regard habits of skincare and make-up as sources of *daily uplift* than in those who regard them as *daily hassles*. By contrast, high public self-consciousness is associated with high regard for make-up only. The strong concern of those with high private self-consciousness with their inner selfhood may relate to their positive attitudes to skincare.

Daily uplifts play an important role in daily stress reduction (Lazarus, et al., 1980; Folkman, et al., 1997). The press of daily life sometimes makes it difficult to find time for ourselves, and the time spent on skincare represents a few precious minutes when we bring the focus back to ourselves. Skincare is caring for ourselves - a tuning of our spiritual "antennae" towards our own needs rather than outward to the needs of others.

Skincare can be a source of daily uplift via the activation of private self-consciousness. The role of skincare may well become more important in today's stressful lives for its effects on adjustment between the body and mind, which have been seen as "self control" or "self healing".

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