

The Criteria of Ideal Man as Seen from Female Gaze in *Free!*

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ABSTRACT

Japanese animations (anime) are worldwide known. They are targeted to various kinds of audience. A drama-sport anime entitled *Free!* is rarely found as the targeted audience is female audience. Because *Free!* targets female audience, the definition of the ideal men is defined from the point of view of the female audience. Therefore, the gaze which is used to identify the male protagonists is female gaze. By using the theory of male gaze and traditional male sex role themes, I found that there is a combination of masculinity and femininity in the male protagonists in *Free!*. The combined characteristics are shown in the physical appearance, personality traits, and roles. The appearance of this type of an ideal man leads to a new concept in Japan which is called *bishōnen*.

Keywords: Anime, ideal man, masculinity, femininity, female gaze, *bishōnen*.

INTRODUCTION

Japanese animation or anime is one of the popular texts which has unique characteristics. Anime is popular worldwide because it offers variety of stories which can be consumed by children, teenagers, and adults at the same time. Anime comes in different formats such as television series, animated short films, animated full-length films, and advertisements.

Most anime titles use drama as the main genre. In addition to the main genres, there are some sub-genres which are usually connected to major genres such as comedy, fantasy, sport, and so on. Poulton and Roderick (2008) believe that a literature with sport as the genre always has a sport, a sporting occasion, or an athlete as the central focus (p. 107). Drama-sport anime titles usually target male audience with strong-willed main protagonists who yearn for prestigious achievements.

Drama-sport actually presents the aspects which a good story has: a clear boundary between good guys and bad guys, victories and failures, talents and struggles, and drama. Most drama-sport animations do not only provide stories with the sport as the central focus. They also display the characters' life events which lead to a dramatic ending. Poulton and Roderick also state that they have the same sentiment with King and Leonard (2006) who point out that literary works with a sporting focus are rarely taken as works which are worthy enough of critical examination (p. 107). Therefore, by choosing this specific genre, I believe that drama-sport is an interesting piece of art that is worthy of appreciation and analysis.

Among the drama-sport anime titles that aired, I choose a series named *Free!* which now has three seasons. The first season is *Free! - Iwatobi Swim Club*, the second season is *Free!: Eternal Summer*, and the third season is *Free!: Dive to the Future*. The reason that I decide to use this series targets female audience. Although *Free!* is a sport anime with male characters as the protagonists, the male protagonists often display their bodies to please the targeted audience - female audience. The act of showing nudity in anime is called *fanservice*. *Fanservice* in anime, according to Reslie Cortes (2014), is "a form of overtly sexual visual display." (p. 21). In other words, *fanservice* only deals with visuals such as bodies. *Fanservice* is not limited only to

female characters who please male audience. It can also be for male characters who please female audience. In *Free!*, the *fanservice* scenes focus on the male characters only as they are the swimmers who often display their bare chests.

Free! is set in a fictional town called Iwatobi. Although it is a fictional town, the visual is based on a real town in Iwami, Tottori, Japan. Tottori prefecture is actually famous for water recreation sites such as the beach, the hot springs, the fishing and ferry port, and so on. Therefore, the town fits the theme of the anime, which is swimming. This series focuses on five main protagonists in each season. The main characters are Nanase Haruka, Tachibana Makoto, Hazuki Nagisa, Ryugazaki Rei, and Matsuoka Rin. According to this series, these names are usually for girls, yet the names are used for the male characters. All protagonists, who own names which are usually for girls, are competitive swimmers. It is very interesting for *Free!* to purposely decide on girls' names for men with triceps. The five protagonists are also popular among the female characters. As protagonists, they are considered to be the best models of all the male characters in the series.

Based on the summary above, I am interested to know more about the definition of an ideal man from analyzing the male protagonists in *Free!*. Moreover, the definition of an ideal man is taken from the female's perspective. Because *Free!* targets female audience with a lot of *fanservice* scenes, the male protagonists as the ideal figures are portrayed and shaped according to women's liking. Therefore, I want to identify the male protagonists and discover the criteria of an ideal man from the female characters' and female audience's point of view.

To find out the criteria of an ideal man from the female point of view, the first theory that I use is Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze. The theory of male gaze focuses on men as the viewers or the bearers of the gaze and women as the images of the men's desire in cinema. In her article entitled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975) states that in cinema, the woman is regarded as an object of the man as the "active controller" of the gaze (p. 21). Therefore, for Mulvey, the woman is the passive receiver of the gaze and the man is the active spectator who regards the woman as an object of pleasure. Mulvey also mentions that the spectators are "the characters within the screen story" and "the spectator within the auditorium" (p. 19). Thus, the gaze is owned by both the characters of the story and the audience.

In Mulvey's article, *Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'* (1981), she focuses on the important points which she omitted in her previous article, the female spectators. She states that, "Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the *active* point of view, allowing a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis" (Mulvey, p. 31). For Mulvey, it is actually possible for a woman to become a spectator with the *active* point of view. Eva-Maria Jacobsson (1999) has proved that there is a female gaze using *Fatal Attraction* as an example. Jacobsson has proved that in the initial part of *Fatal Attraction*, there is female gaze (p. 13). At some point in the story, the gaze is reverted into the traditional male gaze (p. 16). In addition to Jacobsson's findings, Mulvey defines the bearers of the look as "active" and the object of the desire as "passive". Moreover, Mulvey associates "active" with masculinity and "passive" with femininity (p. 31). A woman who is "active" can also be considered as masculine; thus, making her as the bearer of the gaze who enjoys the man. Jacobsson's paper offers the possibility of a female gaze where men can also be the subjects of the female gaze. In this case, the woman is the active bearer of the gaze who looks upon the man as an object of pleasure. With the possibility that woman can become the possessor of the gaze, I use the theory of male gaze, but converting it to the female gaze.

To assist my using of the female gaze theory within this thesis, I also use Robert Brannon's (1976) four themes of the male sex role. As men are the objects of the gaze, the concept is

required to analyze the masculine traits which are considered to be ideal in *Free!*. Linda Brannon (1996) cites in her book, *Gender Psychological Perspective*, that the four themes of the male sex role are a traditional point of view of masculinity (p. 171), which are:

1. No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.
2. The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
3. The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance.
4. Give 'Em Hell: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring.

The four themes, which are regarded as traditionally masculine themes, are needed to be followed by men if they want to become the “real” men (p. 172). Each characteristic in the themes has to be possessed by men. In determining the ideal type of a man, this concept is needed to find out whether the protagonists follow all the four traditional masculine themes.

In *Free!*, there is a paradigm shift in the definition of an ideal man that now is commonly known as *bishōnen* (beautiful boy) in Japan. *Bishōnen* often becomes the protagonist of *shōjo* (girls) anime and *manga* (comic). Because *Free!* targets female audience, this series adopts this concept and creates main protagonists who are considered as *bishōnen*. This type of man is the physical representation of Japanese women’s ideal guy (Gibbs, 2012). Therefore, by using *bishōnen* as the protagonists, *Free!* wants to please the female audience and re-introduce the protagonists as the Japanese women’s ideal men.

THE CRITERIA OF IDEAL MAN

As a sport anime, *Free!* has male protagonists who are pictured and shaped according to the female gaze. The female gaze is strongly present in this anime as it often shows nudity of the male protagonists. The protagonists are also shown to have specific characteristics and features in different aspects which are seen from a female point of view.

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the criteria of the male protagonists in *Free!*. The criteria are defined from three aspects which are physical appearance, personality traits, and roles. Female gaze is used to identify the ideal characteristics and features from a female point of view. In addition, stereotypical feminine and masculine traits and traditional masculine gender roles are implemented to define the shifted concept of an ideal man which are shown in *Free!*. Therefore, I analyze the three aspects which all male protagonists in *Free!* possess.

The Ideal Physical Appearance

The first thing which is clearly shown in *Free!* is the physical appearance of the male protagonists. Anime characters are drawn by humans; moreover, they are actually the human manifestation of ideal beings. In *Free!*, especially, the male characters have physical appearances that are attractive to the female characters. In the anime, there are some scenes where the camera acts as the female characters’ eyes who observe the male characters from their facial appearance to their bodies. The scenes highlight the importance of a man’s physical appearance from a woman’s point of view.

In this section, I analyze the male protagonists’ physical traits which are considered as ideal by the female characters. I divide the physical appearance into two parts: the face and the body. I discuss the face and the body in accordance to the stereotypical traits that are possessed by the male characters. These traits are regarded as ideal by the female characters from their point of view; therefore, it is a subjective matter.

Feminine face is considered to be an admired facial feature in a man from the female characters’

point of view. From the female characters' point of view, the facial features of an ideal man are the eyebrows, the eyes, the nose, the skin tone, and the hair. The characters' facial appearances are very important because each male character in this series has different overall facial appearances, yet there are similarities. In addition to that, there are numerous scenes of the male characters which use close-up shots. The scenes put stress on how important the facial appearances are.



Figure 1.1

Source: *Free!: Dive to the Future* Episode 12

The protagonists have similar facial features such as thin eyebrows, small and pointy nose, and wide eyes. The male protagonists' facial appearances look feminine in this series because they have feminine eyes. Their eyes look feminine because they have similar eye shapes and gaze with the female characters. Some scenes also highlight the protagonists' charm by putting sparkles around them. The anime is reflecting them as charming figures by making their facial appearances look brighter. They become the objects of the female audience's gaze as well as the objects pictured by the camera.

The protagonists have flat abdomen, wide and sharp shoulders, muscled chest, and other muscles all over their bodies. The physical traits of the bodies which the male characters possess are considered as masculine. Lefkowich, Oliffe, Hurd Clarke, & Hannah-Leith (2016) mention in their article that "In the past 20 years, the dominant ideal body for men has shifted toward muscularity, with an emphasis on lean and well-defined muscle mass." In *Free!*, the male protagonists also have the same features.



Figure 1.2

Source: *Free!: Eternal Summer* Episode 2

The female characters in this series also share the same idea of an ideal man, which is the masculine body. They consider the muscular bodies of the male protagonists as something to be adored and a feast to their eyes.

In one of the scenes, the female character named Matsuoka Gou mentions the word "delicious" when she sees the exposed body of the male protagonist. The word she chooses is a very interesting matter to be discussed. "Delicious" is often used as an expression of satisfaction when eating. In this context, Gou expresses her satisfaction when she sees the male characters' bodies. She not only sees the exposed bodies, but she also regards the male characters' bodies to be the objects of consumption. This corresponds to Mulvey's statement in *Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that a woman can have a reversed gaze as long as she is active and "masculine" (Mulvey, 1981, p. 31).

The male protagonists in *Free!* have feminine facial appearance and muscular body which is considered as masculine. This shows that there is a mixture of feminine and masculine features in their physical appearance. The combination of the male protagonists in *Free!* is commonly known as *bishōnen* or beautiful boys in Japan. As protagonists, they are considered as the best figures.

The Ideal Personality Trait

In *Free!*, only having a very attractive physical appearance does not make a man become the ideal type. An attractive physical appearance of a man has to be followed by traits that are considered to be ideal. Linda Brannon wrote in her paper that one of Robert Brannon's (1976) themes of male sex role – No Sissy Stuff – defines men need to exclude all feminine stereotypical traits, such as vulnerability and openness. For Brannon, the word “sissy” is associated with stereotypical feminine traits. She also cited some feminine stereotypical traits from Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, and Broverman (1968) such as gentle and express tender feelings. Masculine men are expected to hide their tender feelings. They are not allowed to express their emotions and problems. Brannon believes that “the more closely that a man conforms the traits, the closer he is to being a *real man*” (p. 172). Therefore, a real man, according to Brannon, should not have sissy or feminine traits.

The male protagonists in this series have the trait which is considered to be sissy based on Brannon's definition. They own the feminine trait which Brannon pointed out to be sissy, which is vulnerability. According to Brescoll (2016), vulnerability is similar to weakness, such as “distress, worry, guilt, fear, shame, jealousy or sadness” (p. 419). Brescoll believes that women should express positive and negative emotions towards others, especially the negative emotions to show their vulnerability. In addition to Brescoll's definition of vulnerability, Ottoson and Cheng (2012) describe an emotional person as a person who tends to show his feelings both positive and negative feelings (p. 15). In their research, Ottoson and Cheng also categorize emotional as a feminine trait (p. 14). There is a similarity in their definition of emotional, Brescoll's definition of vulnerability, and Linda Brannon's definition of stereotypical feminine trait – express tender feelings. Thus, in this section, I discuss the feminine trait which is owned by the male protagonists: emotional.

The tender feelings of the male protagonists are expressed in different ways, some of which are crying and feeling scared. The male protagonists are considered emotional because they do not hesitate to show their tender feelings of sadness. The other characters, both male characters and female characters, never judge the protagonists as sissy when they cry. The male protagonists never hesitate to express their sadness or happiness by crying which is considered to be taboo for men. For instance, the saddest scene of the second season starts with the very last meeting of the four main protagonists as a team. In that scene, one of the protagonists mentions that the meeting will be the last for them as a team, he starts to cry.

RYUGAZAKI REI. HAZUKI NAGISA.	[...] After tomorrow's tournament, our third-year members are retiring. [...] Next year, it won't be the four of us anymore. (<i>Cries</i>) (<i>Sees REI crying</i>) Rei-chan... (<i>Cries</i>) [...] I want the four of us to keep swimming together forever! (<i>Free!: Eternal Summer</i> Episode 13)
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From the quotation above, it is shown how Rei expresses his sadness of his farewell with two members of the swimming club by openly crying in front of the other male protagonists. Rei's action is also followed by the other male protagonist, Nagisa. They do not seem to consider that

expressing sadness by crying is something taboo or exclusively for women. There is no hint that the male protagonists are considered sissy because they openly cry.

From the examples above, the female gaze is present from the audience's point of view. Mulvey states that the image of the object and the screen space are merged (Mulvey, 19, p. 22).

Therefore, the male protagonists become "the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look." (p. 22). The male protagonists are portrayed as vulnerable beings who do not fulfill Brannon's criteria of masculine or "real" men. This series uses men who have masculine traits as the antagonists. It is an interesting issue to be discussed as masculine men possess Brannon's themes of male sex role. When the antagonists still own the masculine traits, they become the antagonists. However, after the antagonists embrace the feminine traits, such as expressing his feelings and crying, they become the protagonists. An example can be seen from Matsuoka Rin in the first season of the series.

When he was positioned as an antagonist, Matsuoka Rin adopted the traditional masculine traits as he keeps his problem to himself. Brannon also mentions that a man has to have the aura of aggression, violence, and daring which is known as "Give 'Em Hell" (p. 171). Brannon's definition of "Give 'Em Hell" corresponds to Rin's behaviors throughout the first season of the series. He pretended to be tough in front of the protagonists. He even attacked Ryugazaki Rei, the protagonist, verbally when Rei exposed Rin's true desire by saying, "Shut up! I let you talk, and you think you can spout all the stupid logic you want? Why do I have to explain myself to you!" (*Free! – Iwatobi Swim Club*, Episode 11). Having a masculine ideology of individualism and toughness actually makes Rin become the antagonist of the series.

Rin, the fierce antagonist who possessed the traditional masculine traits, becomes a protagonist at the time he embraces the feminine traits. By the end of the season, Matsuoka Rin who never overly showed his expressions starts to explicitly express his true feelings by crying in front of the other protagonists and telling his desire. The tender feelings which he has now is shown as the camera focuses on his facial expressions.

This series, whose target audience is female audience, wants to show that an ideal man is a man who embraces feminine traits rather than masculine traits. This series brings up the concept of *bishōnen* as the main protagonists who typically embrace feminine traits. The concept of *bishōnen* complements female perspective regarding an ideal man as seen from female gaze. In this series, in fact, the male characters who are considered as *bishōnen* and own the feminine traits become the protagonists of the series. Therefore, men with feminine traits are thought to be ideal because they are the protagonists who become the center of the attention.

The Ideal Gender Role

All the male protagonists are successful and powerful men. This fact corresponds with the theory of Big Wheel by Robert Brannon (1976). Linda Brannon (1996) explains the theory in her book that the big wheel has some elements such as success, status and the need to be looked up to (p. 171). Success does not only mean being wealthy, but can also mean earning accomplishments and achievements. Therefore, the traditional masculine men are ambitious, competitive, and successful. They strive for their goals, they want to be the winner, and they are able to achieve their goals in the end.

The ambition, competitiveness, and success are represented in all protagonists in *Free!*. *Free!* anime's genre is sport. Thus, the protagonists strive for achievements in sport, like winning regional and national tournaments. It is clearly represented in Ryugazaki Rei as the protagonist. Rei's ambition to win the national tournament is shown in his attempts to achieve his goal.

"But, it's not over yet! We have to go to the nationals! [...] The regionals are just a

checkpoint for us. What we're aiming for is beyond that. Haruka-*senpai* and the other guys are aiming even higher in the world, after all! [...] We can still aim higher, for the nationals, and even for the world!" (*Free!: Dive to the Future*, Episode 9)

From the quotation above, it is shown that Rei focuses on his highest ambition which is to aim for the world championship. He mentions that "the regionals are just a checkpoint" which means he is not satisfied with winning the regional tournaments. In his mind, he has set a new target such as the national tournaments and the world championship. This proves that Rei is very ambitious about his achievements.

The protagonists are very competitive when they face each other in the tournaments. Not all protagonists are from the same team; thus, they have to compete with each other. Even in the smallest-scale competition, they are still competitive and try to be ahead of the competitors. Their focus – which is to win – also makes them feel disappointed when they are qualified for the finals of the regional tournament, yet they do not get the first place.

HAZUKI NAGISA.	[...] But, why do I still not feel right?
RYUGAZAKI REI.	Obviously, it's because we lost to Samezuka! Makoto- <i>senpai</i> , Nagisa- <i>kun</i> , don't you feel frustrated about it! I'm immensely frustrated!

As the protagonists of a sport anime who aim to become a winner in the sporting event, they are very ambitious about winning. They strive to be the best; thus, they are very competitive.

In the second season, the protagonists win the regional tournament and advance to the national tournament. With that achievement, Iwatobi school creates a huge banner in front of the school to commemorate the success. The protagonists also have gained recognition from the other students and the teachers. All the students and teachers in the school start to recognize the male protagonists. With the recognition they have received, the male protagonists feel proud. The protagonists enjoy the success and fame they have gotten. Brannon mentions that the big wheel man has to have the need to be looked up to (p. 171). One of the protagonists, Nagisa, also states that "we're aiming to be number one in all Japan" which proves that he has the need to be looked up to by the other characters.

As a sport anime, *Free!* wants to show that the protagonists follow one of Brannon's definition of masculine men which is ambitious. The male protagonists are shown as an object to the gaze of the audience by using female gaze. The protagonists are portrayed according to the female perspective of an ideal man. They still focus on their goal of winning swimming competitions. They also still strive for fame and achievements which is considered as traditionally masculine roles. Despite the feminine traits which they possess, they still follow the traditional masculine roles.

CONCLUSION

The discussion shows that in *Free!*, there is a combination of masculine and feminine traits of the male protagonists which are considered as ideal. By using the female gaze, it can be found that there are three points, which cannot be separated, for a man to have to make him ideal: the attractive man, the emotional man, and the man who follows masculine gender role. The male protagonists, as the attractive men, own feminine face and masculine body. The combination gives birth to a concept which is called *bishōnen* in Japanese, and it has become an ideal type of a man in Japan. The male protagonists embrace feminine traits, such as expressing tender feelings and being emotional. Furthermore, the protagonists still follow the traditional masculine role such as being ambitious, competitive, and successful.

This ideal type of a man is often used in contemporary literatures which are targeted for female

audience, even in Japan. The appearance of this type of a man gives birth to a concept which is called *bishōnen*. The concept of *bishōnen* has become a trend in Japanese *shōjo manga* (Japanese comic for girls). *Bishōnen* is a man who has feminine looks, but he does not sacrifice his masculinity. He still owns some of masculine traits alongside with the newly adopted feminine traits. *Bishōnen* often appears as the main character in Japanese *manga* and anime which are targeted for female audience. Although *Free!* series is not a romance series, it still has male protagonists who have the same characteristics and traits as *shōjo manga*'s male protagonists. This is simply because this series' target audience is the same with *shōjo manga*. Therefore, the male protagonists are the embodiment of women's Japanese ideal man. Additionally, the female characters in this series are the representation of the targeted audience; thus the gaze that is used to describe men which are considered to be ideal is the female gaze.

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