

**Pop Idols in Social Media:  
A Comparative study of Japanese and American College Students' Perceptions**

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**Abstract**

In today's world, social media has become ingrained into everything we do, so the boom in social media usage by the music industry is expected. Now artists, or musicians, use social media as a powerful tool to grow and connect with their fans. In our study we focused on how artists and the industry's use of social media is perceived by college students in both Japan and America. To this end, we surveyed 62 college students (31 American and 31 Japanese) in order to answer the two research questions which pertain to pop idols and the industry in social media as well as their promotions therein. Our results revealed that both groups feel artists have a large impact through social media, but the Japanese respondents were more easily influenced. On the other hand, American respondents held stronger opinions in terms of political commentary while Japanese were more ambivalent. Moreover, Japanese respondents were more open about following artists on social media than Americans. The Americans were more aware of the artists than the recording label while the Japanese felt that the recording label have some control over an artist's life. Lastly, they all believed there should be more restrictions on advertising in social media. Nonetheless, it was clear to see that the respondents have positive feelings towards artists who effectively communicate with the audience through social media.

**Introduction**

Over time, pop idols have gained influence through their notoriety, the methods they utilize (which varies for each country, as well as over the decades), and the growth of the internet. With the advent of the internet, and later social media, it became easier than ever for pop idols to spread their music and opinions while connecting with fans in a way that has never been done before. This also holds true of the industry they work in. This brings to question; how much impact do these idols and their industry have through social media today? In this study, we will further research the influence of a pop idol through social media and the industry's usage

thereof. Additionally, we will explore how the music industry utilizes social media for promotional purposes. We chose to work with college students because they are the group we are currently the most familiar with and have the largest access to.

### **Significance of the Study**

We have a shared love of pop music and mediums in which it takes place, whether that be concerts, animation, or online media. What really struck us was the culture and industry surrounding pop music and idols. Within this field of interest, we have taken classes both at CSUMB and abroad, such as Visual Arts, Japanese Art History, Cool Japan Today, and Japanese Pop Culture. Through this research we would love to explore beyond that and look into the role and perception of the pop music industry and idols in both Japan and America.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the perceptions of pop idols within social media and their usage thereof?
2. What are the perceptions of the pop idol industry and its methods of promotions through social media?

### **Research Background**

#### **Development of Pop Idols**

In this paper we will be using the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of “popular music”, which is “music written and marketed with the intention of achieving mass distribution and sales” (popular music, n.d.). In other words, it is mainstream music or music that is listened to by a majority of people. The category known as “popular music”, which has in recent decades become heavily associated with idols, has no clear starting point in the American music industry,

but became close to how we know it today as recently as the 80's and 90's (Glauser, 2017). Over time various flavors of pop music have come and gone, with the current trend leaning toward R&B and EDM sounds. On top of this, with the interconnectivity of the world through the internet and social media, pop music has started to cross national borders and has become a major powerhouse in the entertainment industry.

As for Japan, while traces of Pop could be found in Jazz in the 20's-50's, the origins really were in *kayoukyoku*, or "lyrical singing music". After World War two during the US occupation, there was a heavy influx of American pop music, which over time started to be covered in Japanese, then sparking original songs (Nagaoka, 2017). This eventually gave birth to female idols, which further developed into male and group idol industry. This genre has grown into a multi-billion yen industry and has become an export and a cultural phenomenon of and within Japan (Fukuya, 2013).

### **How the Pop Industry Functions**

The focus changes now to, how the pop music industry actually works. We are going to look at four key components: the label companies, how contracts work, how public image is handled, and fan interaction. In America, while many labels exist, many are actually under a small number of umbrella companies. These large companies include Warner Brothers Records, BGM, and Sony Records. Almost every other recording label, outside of some independent labels such as Fueled by Ramen, are actually owned by these companies. Under these companies, the artists sign contracts under which they receive support from the company in return for a percentage of the profit and some control. The contracts generally focus on royalties and creative rights. They can also be legally binding for term length and exclusivity, meaning

that the artist cannot perform or make music with any other label. However, they do not typically have any input on the artist's' personal life. (Klein, 2003)

The intersection of public image and fan interaction are where modern technology has really changed the game. While many artists have publicists and managers to help, generally an artist will shape their own image via social media, relationships, and independent interactions. In terms of company created events, they mostly contain concerts, merchandise, and the label's social media. Sometimes a label also has control over the social media accounts of the artist, but generally artists use the platforms freely.

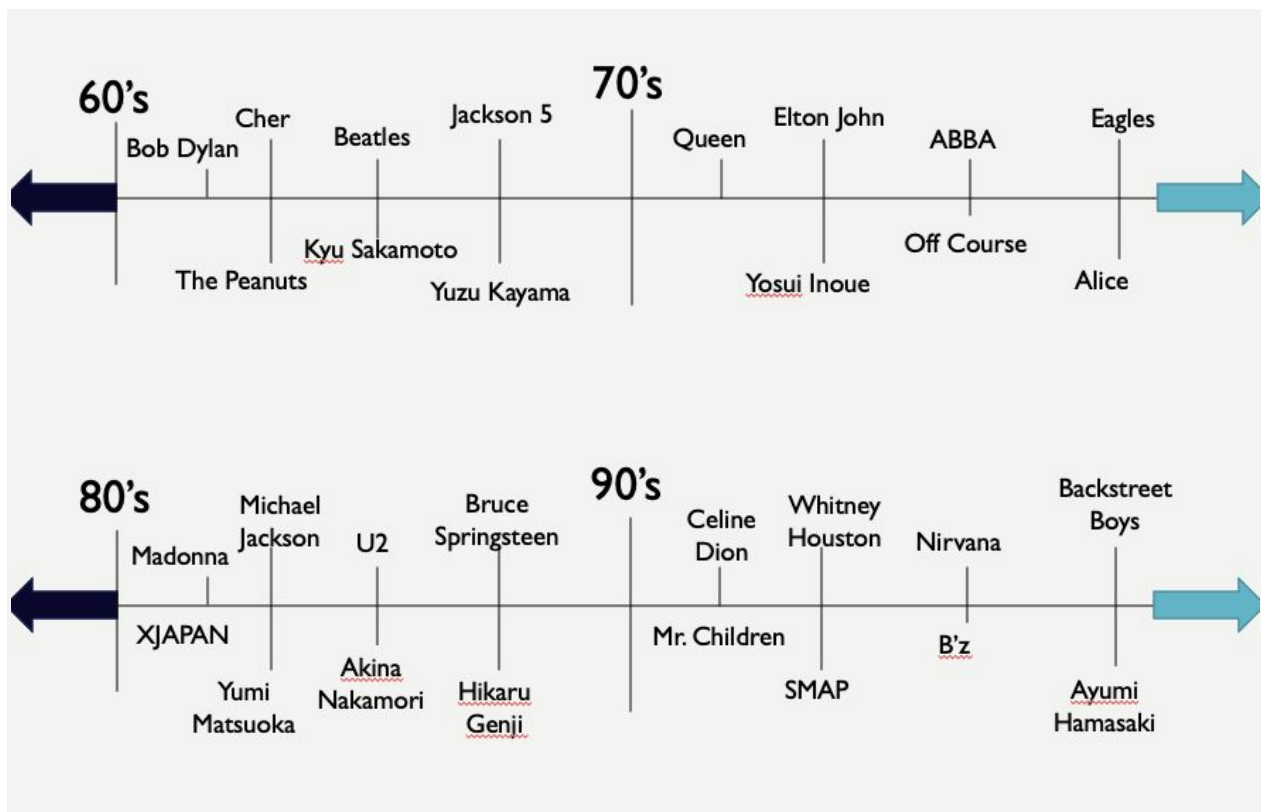
In Japan the function of labels is a little different. Though some small independent labels exist, large labels such as Warner Music Japan Inc., Avex Entertainment Inc./Avex Marketing Inc., JVC Kenwood Victor Entertainment Corp., Sony Music Entertainment (Japan) Inc., and Johnny and Associates dominate the market. They also hold a greater deal of control over the artists they sign. Their contracts, depending on the record, can cover everything from music and creative rights, to public image and personal life (esp. dating, etc.). There are many cases of idols in particular being forbidden from dating.

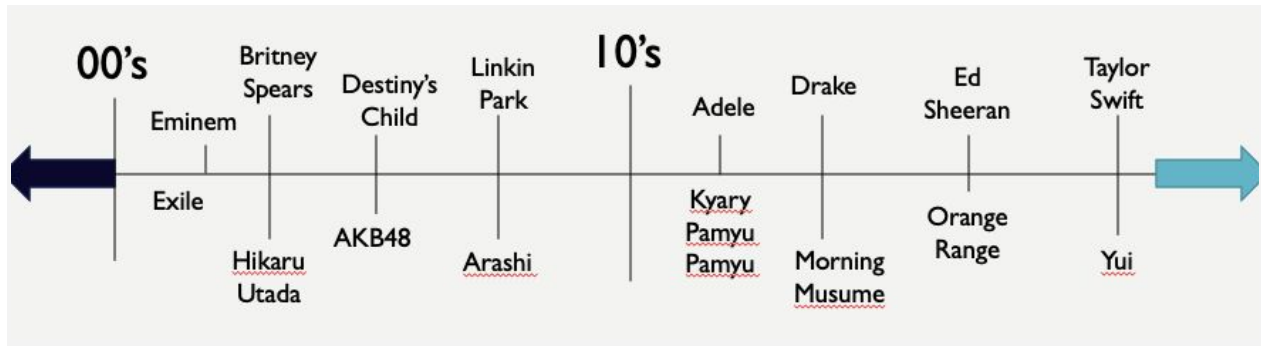
Idols especially are expected to keep a clean image and avoid any form of scandal. They are assisted heavily by the labels, managers, and scheduled promotions. Even their social media and fan interaction is carefully constructed to increase their popularity and image. Fan interaction is a massive market in and of itself, with signing and meeting events, promotional campaigns, etc (JICS Media, n.d.).

### **Examples of Idols by Era**

As you are able to see from the timelines below, these are the most notable pop idols

from the eras starting with the first occurrence of popular music being recognized in the 1960's. In America, there are recognizable differences from what genre was perceived as being most popular from the era. For example, Madonna is listed amongst the most popular musicians from the nineteen eighties. Since she is renowned as the "Queen of Pop," having Madonna on the same list as Linkin Park, a renowned rock group, would appear to be incorrect, but both were most popular in America during their respective peaks. The Japanese music industry has remained constant with the most popular musicians being from the modern understanding of the pop genre (with a few exceptions such as XJAPAN). There is somewhat no change in the popular idols' genre in Japan due to the strict definition of popular music.





1

### Examples of Female Idols

The below female idols were most recognized, from the most popular lists, as outstanding in their field of work. The statistics we found for the artists in the following figures were based on an all-time standard amongst American musicians. The first female artist, Madonna, is the best-selling soloist in America. For these statistics, we had to decide which group was the best-selling American female group and chose Destiny's Child, due to longevity and sales, which were only slightly higher than other artists in the categories. It was difficult to have a definite answer for which American female group was the best-selling; TLC was first if Destiny's Child was not and vice versa. Taylor Swift has received the most awards amongst all of American female artists. This could be due to the sudden emergence of television award shows, other than the Grammy Awards.

With the Japanese idols, we used the same standards and researched which idols were most popular, highest selling, and the best-selling solo. Surprisingly, the highest selling and most popular girl groups in Japan were not the same. The most popular girl group was Momoiro Clover Z. There were no issues with finding these results like there was with the American

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1: Most notable Pop Idols through the ages in America and Japan

best-selling female group, possibly due to the singular main charting (Oricon) used throughout Japan for music. The highest selling girl group was AKB48, a girl group we use for a number of examples in our survey. The best-selling female soloist, Utada Hikaru, also showed up in our survey as a write-in response from the participants as one of their top three favorite popular artists.



**Madonna**  
Best Selling Female  
Soloist



**Destiny's Child**  
Best Selling American Female Group



**Taylor Swift**  
Most Awarded Female  
Artist



**Momoio Clover Z**  
Ranked Most Popular Girl  
Group in Japan



**AKB48**  
Highest Selling Girl Group in  
Japan



**Utada Hikaru**  
Best Selling Solo Female  
in Japan

### **Examples of Male Idols**

For the purpose of our study, the male idols below were pulled from the same data as the female idols. Similarly, they stood out as outstanding amongst their peers. The data for the American male idols are from different categories than the female idols because we decided the study would benefit from an array of artists that stand out in their field. Our research found the Backstreet Boys to be the best-selling male group. This was undisputed and we did not have any conflicting data or findings. Justin Bieber was the most awarded and nominated male for the social artist award. He also holds the record of most consecutive wins and nominations at six. Drake has the highest number of hits on the Billboard 100 charts out of all other male artists.

With the Japanese idols, it was surprising that the highest-ranking males belonged to idol groups and were not just soloists. The first group was Arashi, which ranked as the most popular male group in Japan. Recently they have focused more on their careers as television personalities and not as idols. The next group, SMAP, ranks as the highest selling boy band in all of Asia. One of the members appeared in the survey, the results from which will be discussed later. The last group was B'z, who ranked as the highest selling male group in Japan and is still popular in some parts of the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Figure 2: Examples of Female Idols in America and Japan

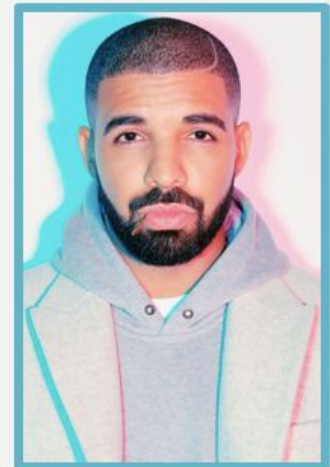




**Backstreet Boys**  
Best Selling Pop Male  
Group



**Justin Bieber**  
Social Artist Award  
2011-16



**Drake**  
Highest Number of  
Hits by Male Solo



**Arashi**  
Ranked Most Popular  
Male Group in Japan



**SMAP**  
Highest Selling Boy  
Band in Asia



**B'z**  
Highest Selling Male  
Group in Japan

3

### Current Role of Pop Idols in Social Media and Society

Within our research we came across a study that was conducted in Japan about people's reactions towards members of the idol group AKB48. The research's purpose was to discover the opinions of college students towards the pop idol group and which members are most likely to

<sup>3</sup> Figure 3: Examples of Male Idols in America and Japan

win the annual promotional competition to become the center of the new album's promotions. The participants in this case were shown an image of one of the members for four seconds, while in an fMRI machine, wherein their attitudes towards the idol were recorded. The functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI for short, is a machine that measures brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. In other words, in contrast to a normal MRI, which takes a still image of the brain, a functional MRI tracks various parts of the brain that activate due to stimuli given during the testing. This research was to see what the fans thought of the members and which members were most likely to win the annual promotional competition. This research's results came with no shock; where there were preconceived opinions towards the idols, which was reported beforehand, there was a correlation in evidence from the fMRI scans (Izuma et al., 2017).

Another study focussed on "Fan tourism" which is a phrase that means, "the practice of traveling to locations of significance to a movie, group, or event." There is a difference between fan tourism and other types of tourism. Since fan tourism deals with a specific fandom, these fans travel to the respective sites and support the local economy. Fan tourism is not always a negative form of tourism. Most of the time there are positive aspects of the tourists' visit. These tourists can bring in economic influence and boost the locations' reputation. Fan tourism has become a form of media and economic influence which is on par with major sporting events and teams. The tourist site has influence that increases traffic as well as helps to popularize the location as if there were a major sporting event occurring (Dai, 2018). This shows the greater role of pop artists in the modern world.

### **Current Controversies and Endeavors of the Pop Industry**

Within the pop industry, artists eventually end up in controversies for some of their endeavors. In this section, we look further into a select few modern controversies of pop artists. First, Taylor Swift recently announced her political views through her Instagram in the form of support for a candidate running for senate in her home state of Tennessee. She seemingly avoided stating whether she was in support of the current political administration; this had been a continued issue since the 2016 elections where she wouldn't publicly support any candidate. Fans were shocked by her backing Democratic candidates for the midterms and are still reveling in that fact. Later during her acceptance speech at the American Music Awards (AMAs), she encouraged people who are able to vote to go to their local polling place and cast their vote. Otherwise their political concerns would fall silent and all of the criticism they wrote about her being silent on politics would show what kind of people they really are. Swift's decision to share her political beliefs on social media was deemed the most controversial thing the singer has done to date (McDermott, 2018).

Cardi B is a musician who has never shied away from sharing her opinions through her social media. Although she has received positive and negative feedback, she has yet to back down. Since she is so well-educated in politics, there has come a social media debate among Democratic senators whether or not it is appropriate to retweet Cardi B's political dialogue videos. They feel that since she is a semi-college educated individual who appears to know what she is talking about, she should be an accepted source to be retweeted (Gontcharova, 2019). They note that the way she handles political dialogue is favorable to the common person in America who might not fully understand politics. Since the information comes across in this relatable manner, there is an overwhelming feeling throughout her followers that she should be allowed to

continue using social media for her political dialogues (Gontcharova, 2019).

Although most of the research we read was written about specific musicians, a music festival worked its way into our scope. This music festival was the Fyre Festival, which was heavily promoted through social media and by social media moguls. The Fyre Festival is one of the most controversial of these examples, one that appears to engender only negative connotations. The festival started out as being the summer's "new hot" music festival where all of the promotion for the event took place through social media. The initial promotions were exclusively in the form of mystery, an orange photo that would only have the caption of #FyreFestival, before the promotion video came out and more social media moguls began to promote. The festival made great promises on the attendance of musical acts and celebrity appearances, as well as top name models. Since this festival was being billed as nothing seen before and even more spectacular than Coachella, the tickets to the event were sold in tiers with additional add-ons you could purchase, starting at five-hundred dollars. Unfortunately for the festival goers, the advertised luxuries were false, and attendees were stranded on an island during the busiest time of the year for the island. Many of the festival goers are still waiting on compensation from the class action lawsuit against one of the co-creators (Smith, 2019).

Many of the controversies for idols in Japan tend to revolve around professionalism or lack thereof, whether that be with dating or saying the wrong thing. There is an extremely small margin of idols that are allowed to publicly discuss their opinions on controversial topics. The idols and social media influencers are held to a very high a standard of being professional and keeping their personal opinions out of their work. It would be considered extremely controversial to come out and publicly show your support for a political group of people, but SMAP member

Masahiro Nakai did just that in 2015. On a Japanese television show called Wide Show, Nakai expressed his support for a group of five thousand young people, Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs), who were protesting legislation that had been passed which concerned the categorization of various military weapons (Mizui, 2015). SEALDs, which disbanded in 2016, stated they were “ a platform of emergency actions by students to protect a free and democratic Japan. [They were] a group of youths from late teens to early 20s. [SEALDs] aim[ed] to rethink and enact democracy.” They were also a group where “participants were men and women, young and old who saw the information [the group] circulated through social media and came out of their own accord” (Oguma, 2016). Due to the pushback he would receive for giving his political views on the legislation, Nakai was only allowed to show his support of the next generation’s interest in political participation. Even then his support of a group like SEALDs caused an uproar, especially because he was a celebrity in a public setting.

The Japanese pop idol group, AKB48, is unique in the fact that the members have every aspect of their lives manufactured by their recording label for promotional purposes. The recording label of the idol group closely scrutinizes idols in order to maintain their image and work schedules. The members of the group are under strict contracting to keep their lives as the label advertises them to be and if there are cases where a member has broken contract the consequences can be as severe as them losing everything they had prior to the scandal. Often times the manufactured aspect has to deal with the idols’ hobbies and personal information. These aspects are created for the purpose of sharing with the fans to make the idols appear more relatable. This method of promotion has yet to fail for the idols and their recording company (Kiuchi, 2017).

Although this controversy occurred in 2013, it is relevant still today for the members of AKB48. Minami Minegishi was given a punishment from the recording label due to her breach of contract. Within the contents of her apology video, she delivers a tearful apology for breaking her contract by dating which was not in her idol bio. This punishment was for her to shave her head in addition to posting an apology video directed towards her fans. Since she was supposed to be single this was a grievance that her recording label could not forgive as easily as her fans were willing to (BBC News, 2013).

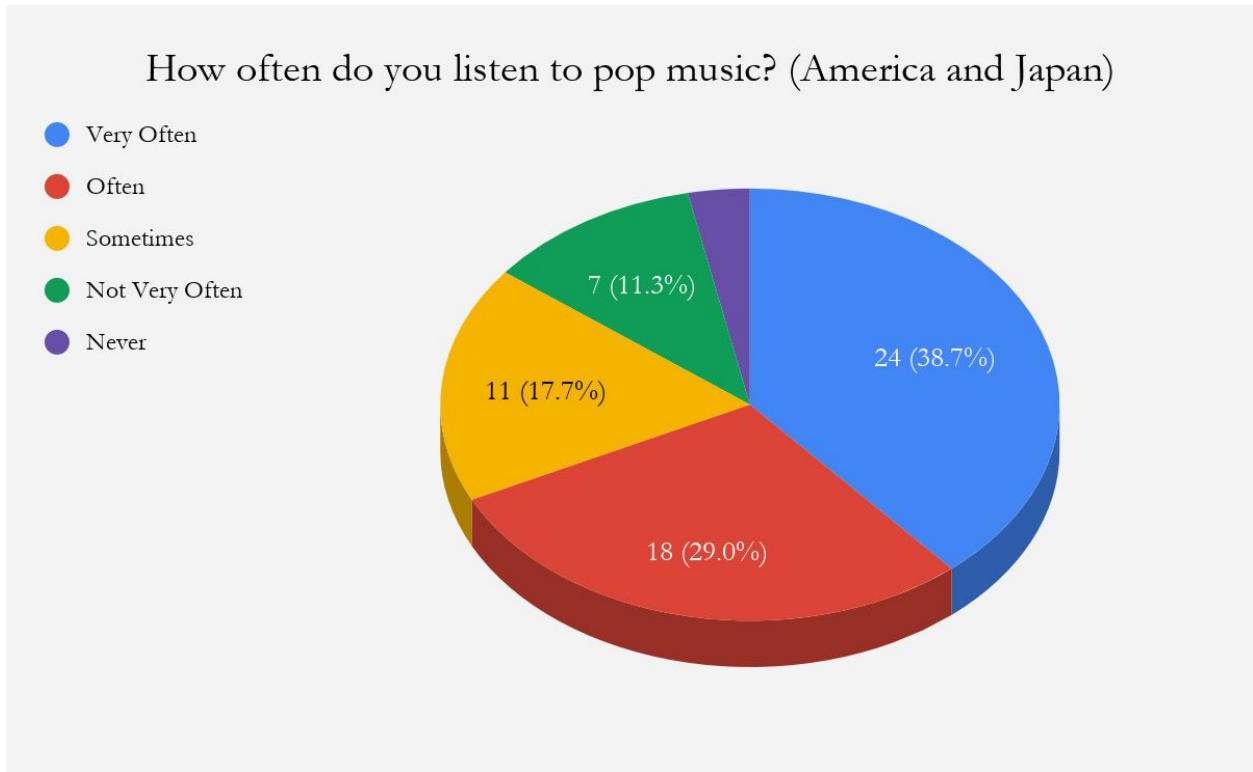
Male idol group, MeseMoa, released a music video on April 13, 2017 that featured the nine members engaging in acts of affection such as kissing. Since the music video had the members displaying themselves in poses commonly found in Japanese boy love comics, the music video became popular amongst the fans and found its way into the discussion about LGBTQ+ rights in both America and Japan. A multitude of blogs, tweets, and other mentions on social media discussed the implications of the video. Some argued that it was simply a ploy, while others hailed it as very progressive. The common consensus though seemed to be that even if it was a marketing attempt, it was a good sign that it could be done at all. When the group was asked in an interview if any of the members were gay, they responded by saying they did not know (Pride site, 2017).

## **The Study**

### **1. Participant Demographics**

Our study had 62 participants in total, 31 of whom were Japanese University students while the remaining 31 were American University students. 79% were between the ages of 18

and 21. Similarly, 29% of our respondents answered that they listen to pop music often.



4

## 2. Survey Method

We created, and tested, an online survey through Google Forms in both Japanese and English for data our collection.

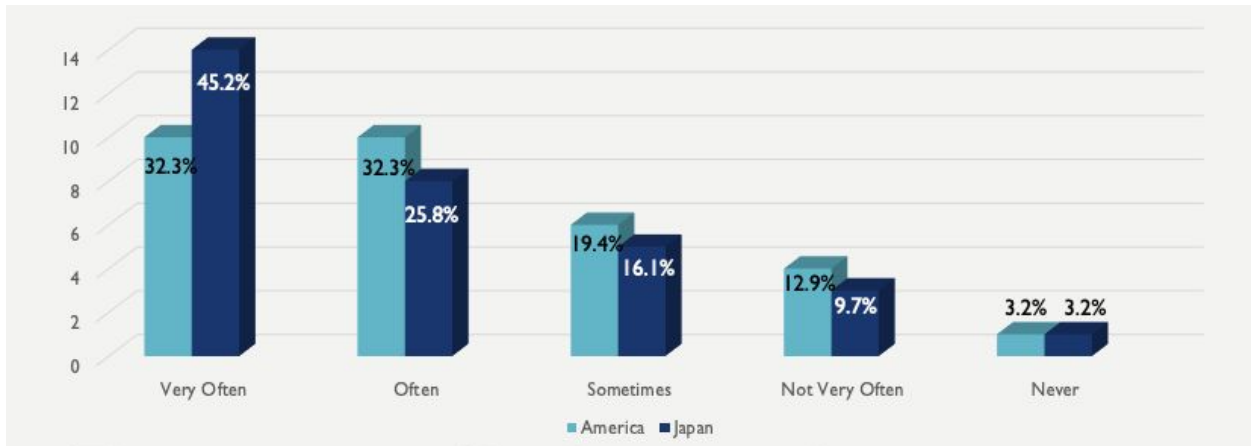
## Results

1. Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of pop idols within social media and their usage thereof?

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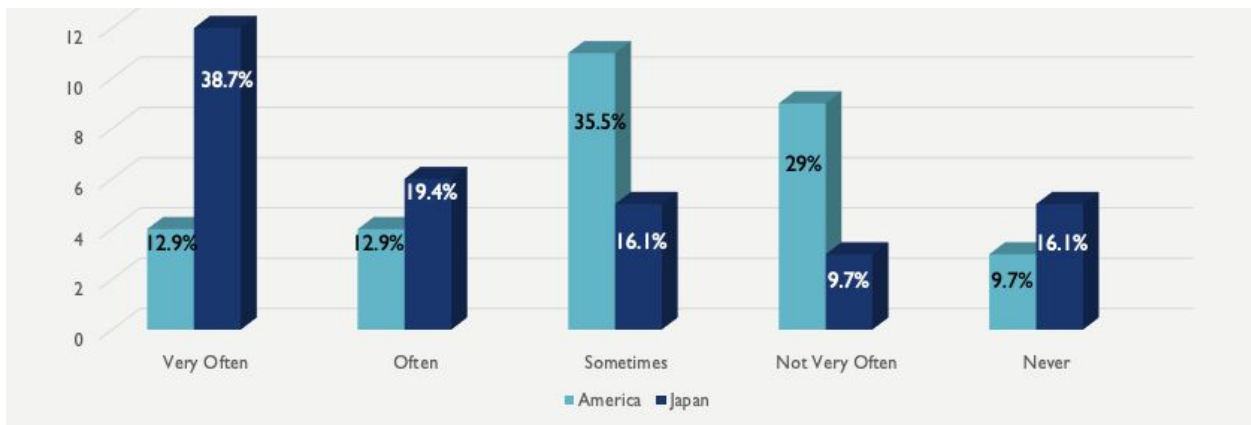
<sup>4</sup> Figure 4: Data from American and Japanese Surveys

The majority of both groups listen to pop music. (See figure 5)



5

Within the American respondents, 25.8% said they often pay attention, whereas within the Japanese respondents 58.1% said they often pay attention. (See figure 6)



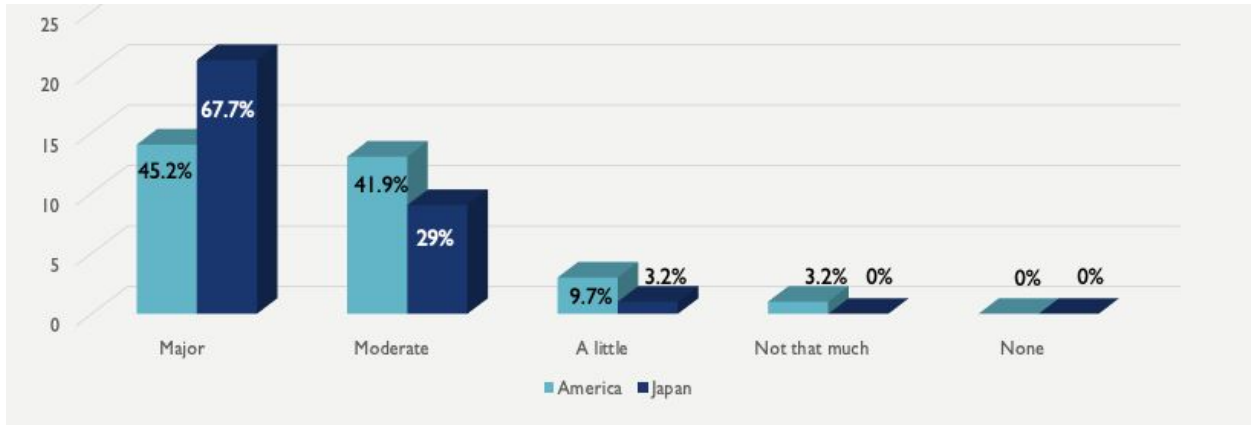
6

The majority of both groups felt that artists have major influence through social media. (See figure 7)

<sup>5</sup> How often do you listen to pop music?

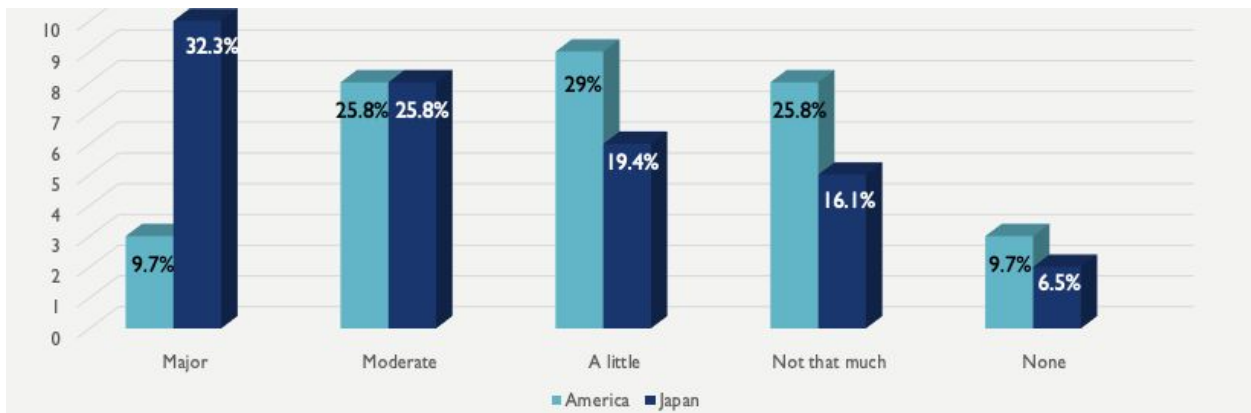
<sup>6</sup> How often do you view/pay attention to social media posts by popular musicians?





7

Among the American respondents 9.7% said there was a major impact on their own opinions, whereas in the Japanese respondents 32.3% said there was a major impact. (See figure 8)

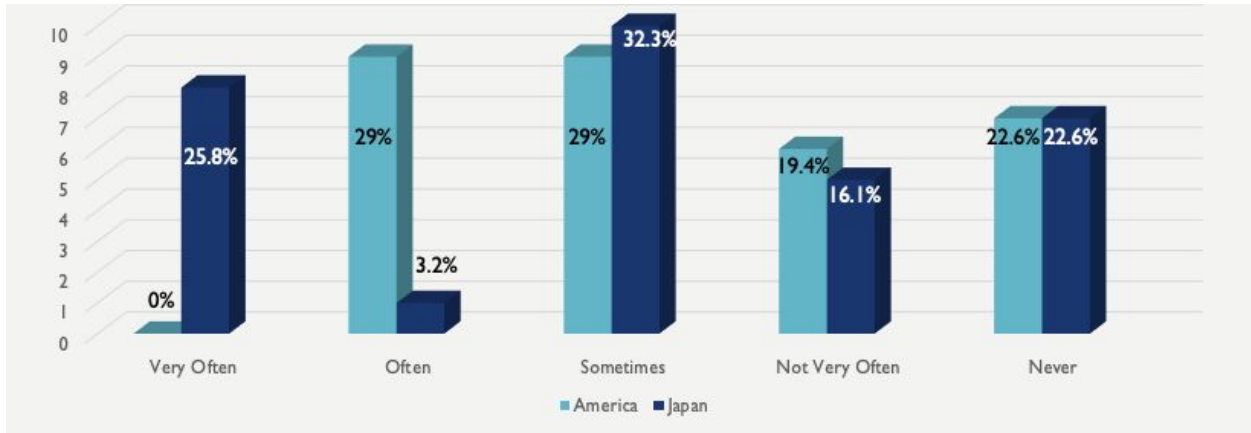


8

Though the majority of both groups said sometimes to never, within the American respondents 29% said often whereas in the Japanese respondents 25.8% said very often. (See figure 9)

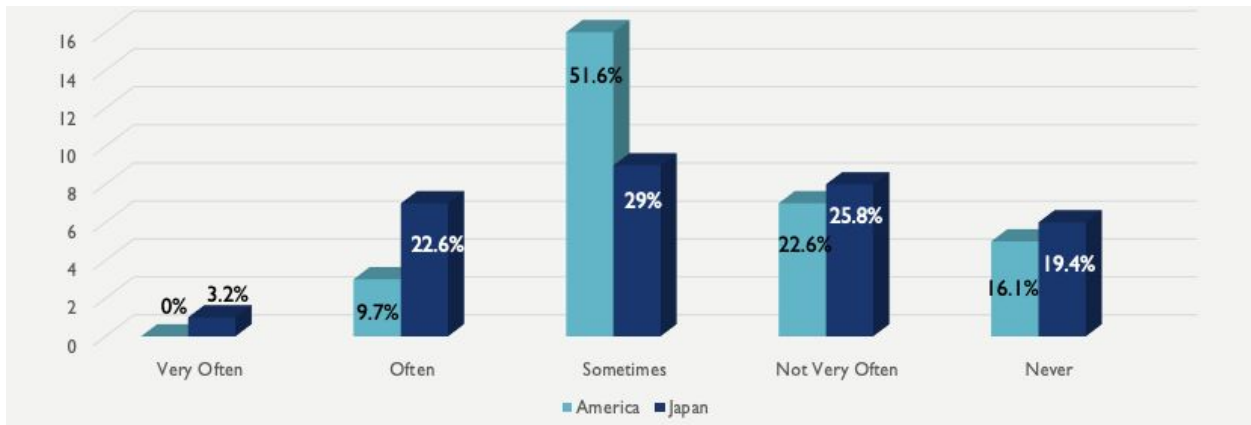
<sup>7</sup> How much influence do you feel popular musicians have through social media?

<sup>8</sup> How much of an impact do the opinions of your favorite musicians, concerning an issue shared on social media, have on your own opinions?



9

Within the American students only 9.7% often take the side of their favorite artists, whereas in the Japanese students 22.6% often take their side over others, and 3.2% said they very often take their side. (See figure 10)

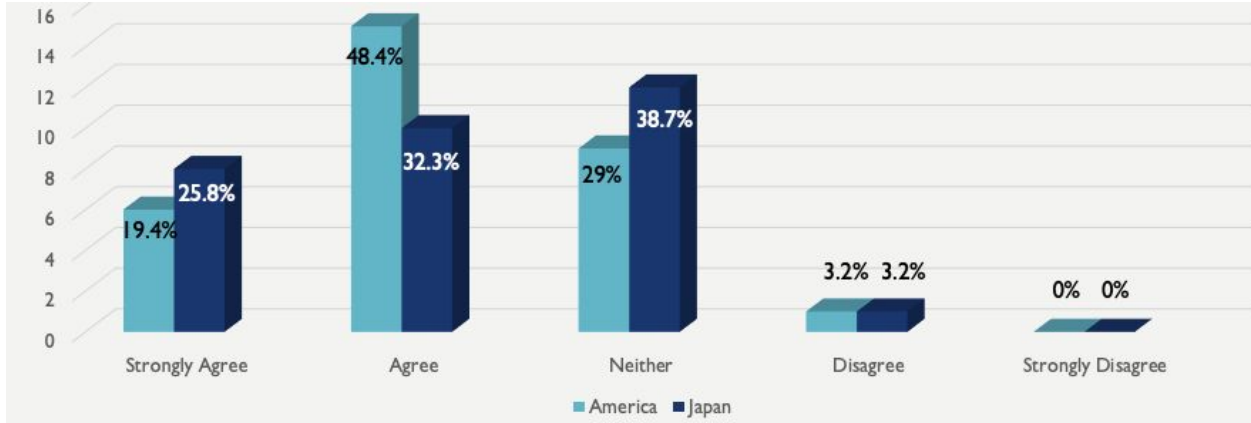


10

While both generally were in support, within the Japanese respondents they were much more ambivalent, with 38.7% more responding neither disagree nor agree. (See figure 11)

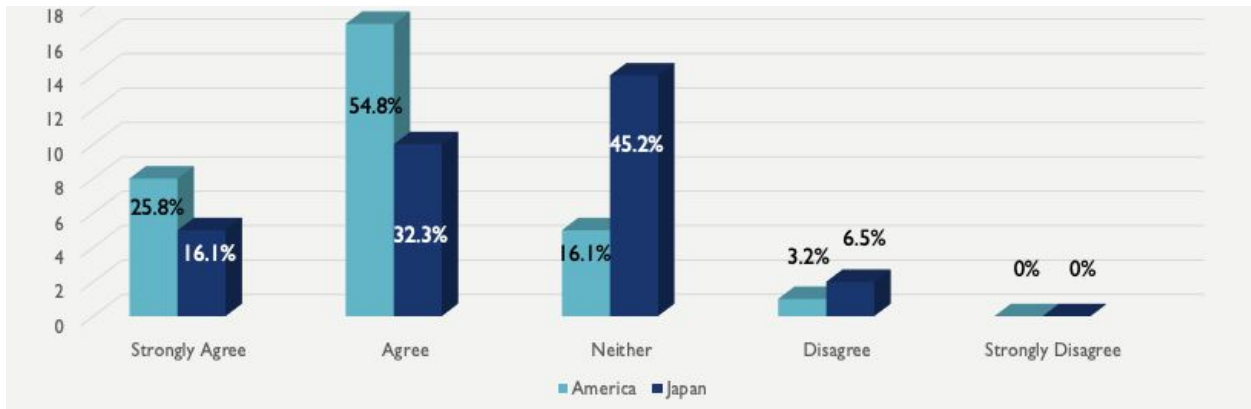
<sup>9</sup> How often do you follow a musician's social media, based on existing opinions or shared opinions with your own?

<sup>10</sup> How often do you take the side of your favorite musician over someone else (politicians, other artists, etc.), if at all?



11

Within the American respondents 80.6% either agreed or strongly agreed, with only 16.1% being ambivalent. However in the Japanese respondents only 48.4% were positive, with 45.2% being ambivalent. (See figure 12)

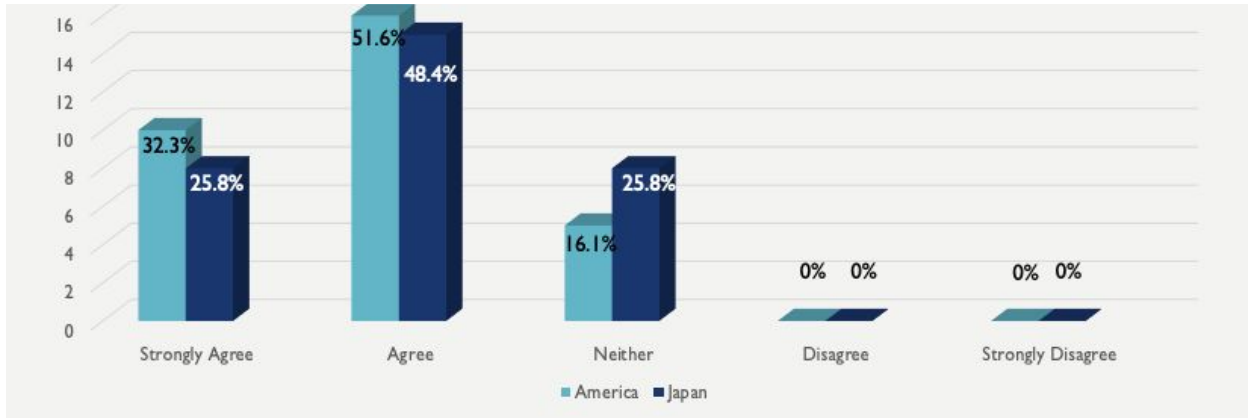


12

Both groups of respondents were relatively similar, with the majority being in agreement. (See figure 13)

<sup>11</sup> Taylor Swift, an idol who has long remained quiet on her political standings, recently came forward on Instagram to support a particular candidate and voice her views. She also encouraged people to go vote during her AMA (American Music Awards) acceptance speech. Do you agree with the way she chose to express her political views?

<sup>12</sup> Cardi B, an American rapper, has recently been commended for her political prowess. Democratic senators publicly debated whether or not to retweet Cardi’s recent political commentary. Some people feel that her way of communicating through social media presents the issue in a more relatable manner. Do you agree with her expressing her political views through social media?



13

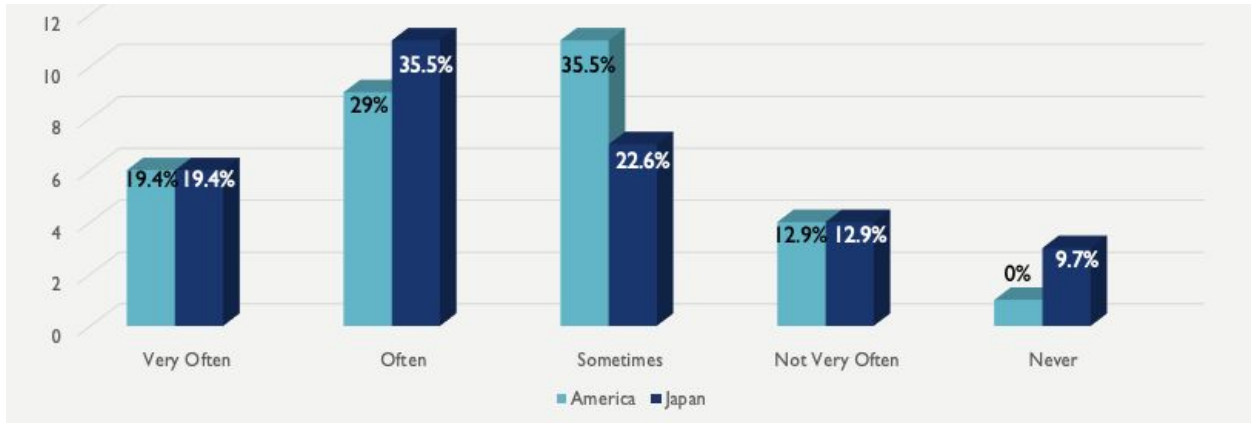
## 2. Summary of Research Question 1 Results

Both groups feel that artists have a high amount of impact using social media, but the Japanese were more easily influenced by it. The Americans held stronger opinions in terms of political comments, but the Japanese proved more ambivalent. However, the Japanese respondents were much more vocal about following artists on social media often. Both groups felt artists using social media was a generally positive thing.

## 3. Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of the pop idol industry and its methods of promotions through social media?

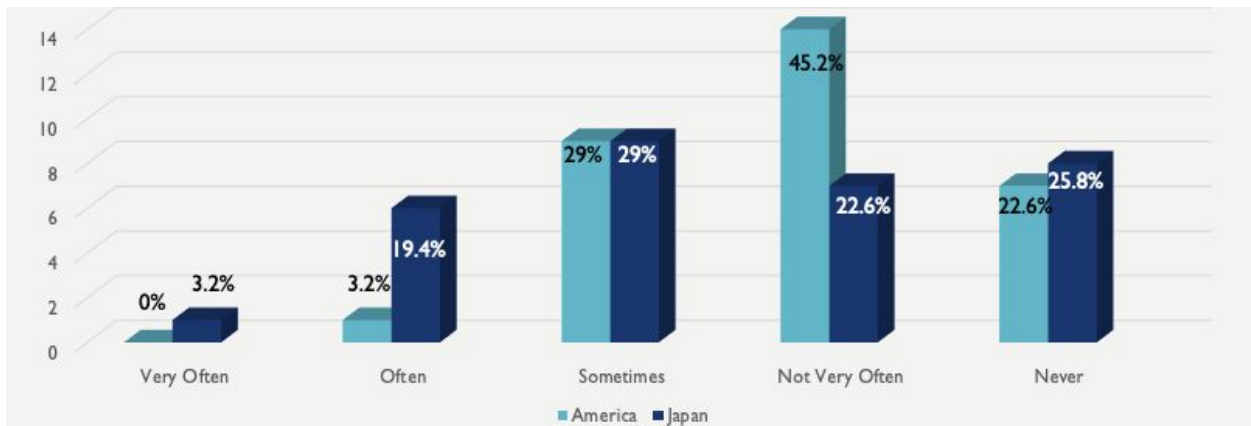
While the majority of respondents in both groups often see advertisements starring artists on social media, there was a somewhat higher percentage of Japanese respondents who said they never see such advertisements. (See figure 14)

<sup>13</sup> Masahiro Nakai, member of the extremely popular Japanese boy band SMAP, recently expressed his support on a national television show (Wide Show) of the protest held by 5,000 highschool students in regard to recent legislation which concerned the categorization of various military weapons. He especially focused on the fact that high schoolers were showing civic involvement and expressing opinions. He received some pushback, but stuck to his opinion. Do you agree with the way he chose to express his views publicly?



14

Within the Japanese respondents 22.6% said they often or always decided to buy or not buy a product based on artist endorsement, whereas in the American respondents only 3.2% said they were often affected. (See figure 15)

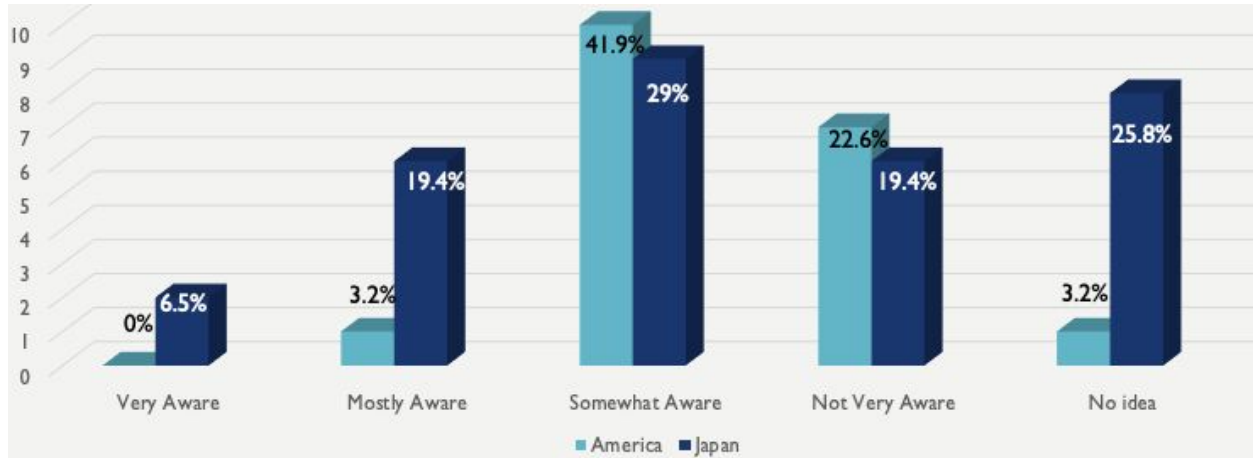


15

The Japanese respondents were overall more aware of the labels their favorite artists work for, in contrast to the American respondents who mostly had no idea, with only 3.2% saying they were mostly aware. (See figure 16)

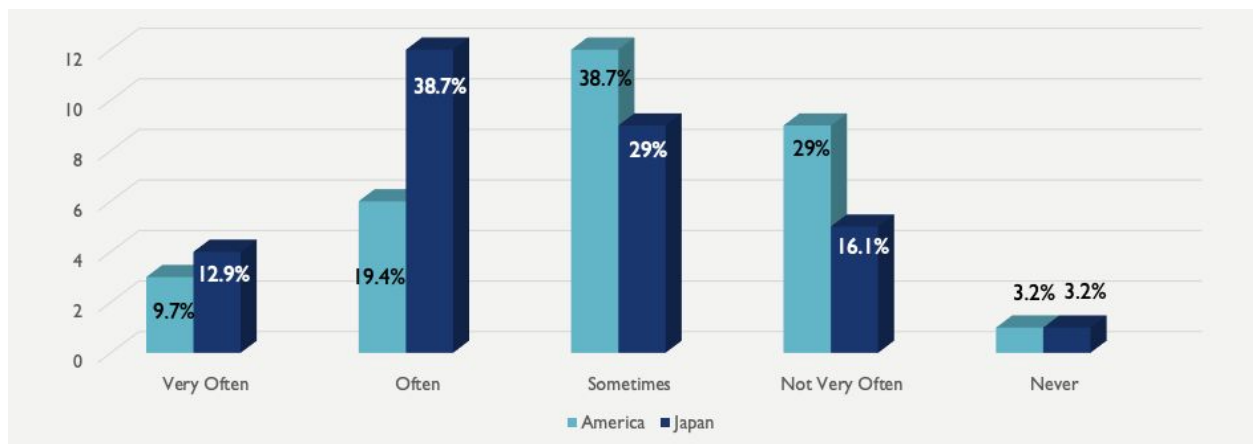
<sup>14</sup> How often do you see advertisements on social media starring musicians?

<sup>15</sup> How often has the endorsement of a musician affected your decision to purchase or not purchase a product?



16

Within the American respondents 29.1% said they feel artists discuss their industry often to very often, whereas in Japan 51.6% felt the same. (See figure 17)

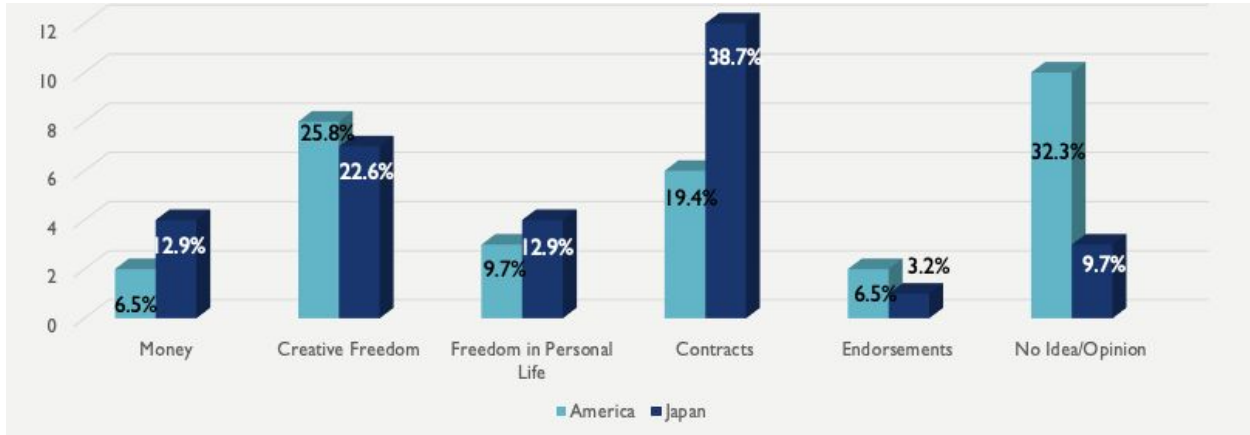


17

Both groups chose creative freedom and contracts as the largest topics, though the American respondents had 32.3% claim no idea. (See figure 18)

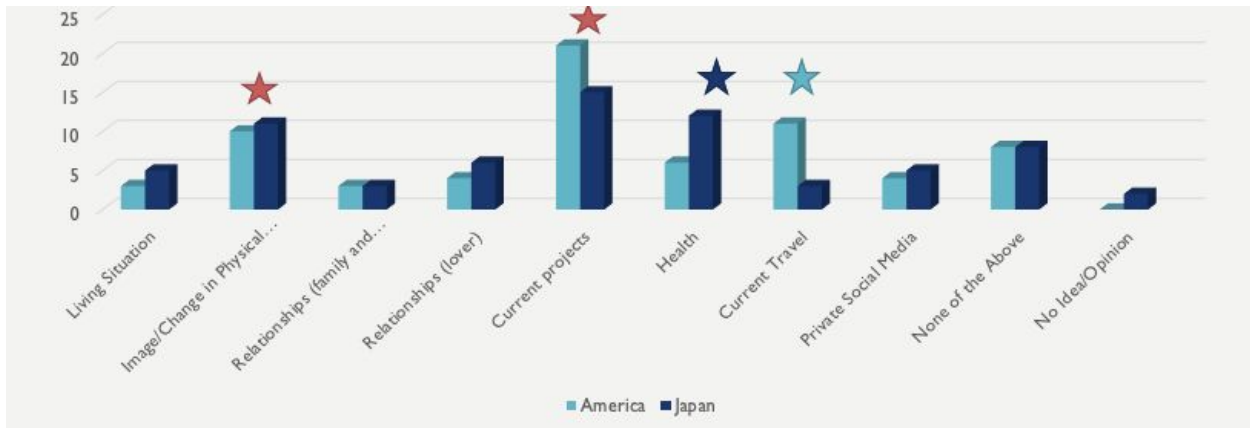
<sup>16</sup> How aware are you of the label or company your favorite musician works for?

<sup>17</sup> We see musicians battling with their recording labels in the media. How frequently do you feel musicians discuss the industry they work in?



18

The first and second-highest picked by both groups were current projects and physical appearance, but in the Japanese respondents third was current health, and in the Americans third was current travels. (See figure 19)



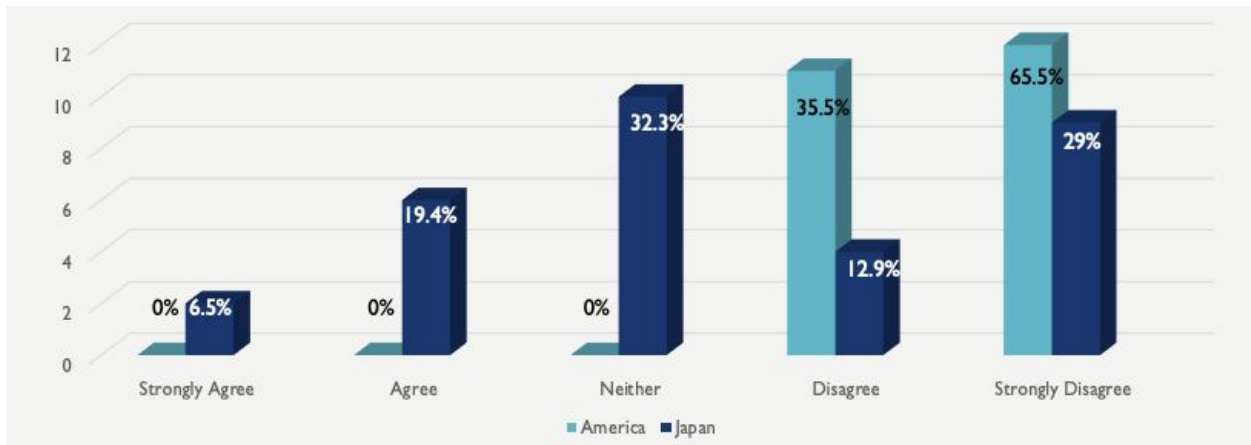
19

The American respondents overwhelmingly were against the punishment, whereas the Japanese were much more mixed, with the largest portion remaining neutral. However they did

<sup>18</sup> What topic do you most often see argued between artists and their label/production company?

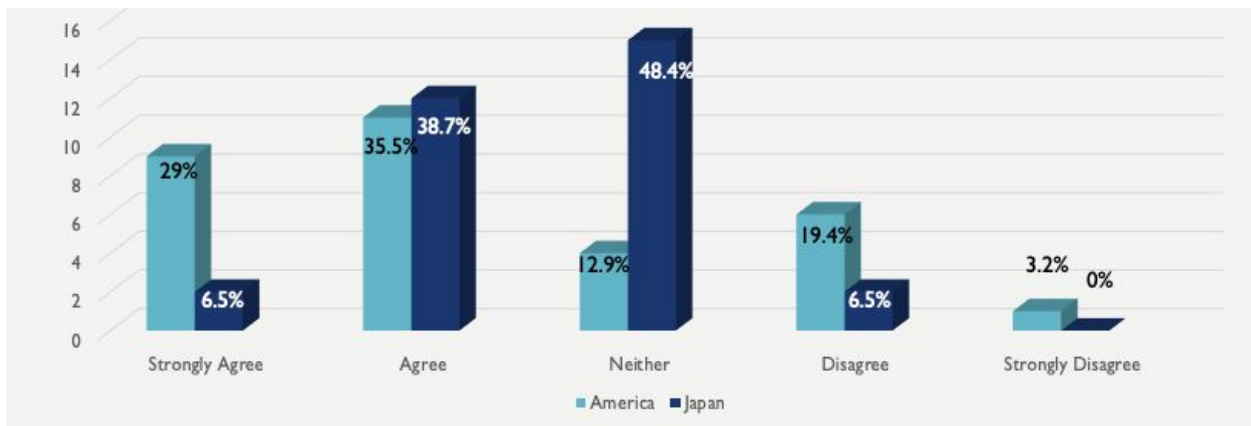
<sup>19</sup> The members of pop group AKB-48 have private lives tailored by the recording label. The recording label does this to maintain the idols’ image and their schedules. Often times hobbies and personal information are created for the purpose of sharing with fans and making the idol seem more relatable. What parts of a pop icons’ life do you think should be allowed to be used for promotional purposes?

have some positive responses. (See figure 20)



20

The majority of American respondents agreed, however the majority of Japanese respondents were neutral to the subject. (See figure 21)



21

<sup>20</sup> This same group, AKB-48, had a member who shaved her head and offered a public apology video on social media in 2013 for breaking contract and being in a relationship. She was then demoted to a trainee team. Do you agree with the punishment she was given?

<sup>21</sup> In 2017, The Fyre Festival was billed to be the hottest music festival of that summer; tickets started at \$500. The tickets sold out due to endorsement by popular artists. However, this fell through and the festival goers were left, in the Bahamas, without accommodations and did not receive a refund. Much of the promotion for the festival occurred on social media. Social media has become a major, free, form of advertisement in the music industry. Do you feel that improving regulations for advertising in social media would be beneficial?



#### 4. Summary of Research Question 2 Results

Both groups were more aware of the artists than the label, however in Japan they do feel it is more talked about than in America. Respondents felt that the label had the right to use not only current projects for promotion, but also things such as health, travel, and relationships. The Japanese respondents felt that under contract the company had at least some control over an artist's life. The American respondents were heavily against it. Both groups feel that there should be more restrictions on advertising in social media.

#### **Conclusion and Consideration**

Japanese and American college students are influenced differently through social media by pop artists. Japanese students tend to pay more attention to artists' social media, while American students are more apt to paying attention to political statements made by artists. In comparison to American students, Japanese students try to remain neutral when dealing with political statements. The Japanese students tend to view the artists as belonging to the public and labels, whereas in America the respondents felt the artists should have more freedom to create their own image. However, more Japanese students agree there should be restrictions on advertising through social media, possibly due to the fact that they are self aware of how easily influenced by celebrities they can be.

#### **Limitations of the Study and Future Studies**

We had difficulties receiving responses from Japanese college students at first, which could have been due to a many number of factors. Also, we would have liked to have found more opinionated Japanese survey takers since our data from Japanese respondents showed the majority choosing neutral options. Lastly, our study was based on the perceptions of college

students, so we eliminated the data from three American respondents and two Japanese respondents due to them stating they were not in college. In future studies we hope to rectify this with a greater push of Japanese participants from the start.

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