

# More Insight Into Young Japanese Female Consumer Behavior

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## Abstract

In the second of a two-part research project, a study of young female consumer behavior was disseminated in three central Japan prefectures that included Aichi, Gifu, and Mie. A sample of 329 women across four age groups – further divided into sub-groups of 15–20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35 years of age responded to the survey and their results were analyzed. In this section of the survey, female consumer behavior study using a ranking format scale analyzed 9 questions that focused on factors that determine brand purchases, travel destination preferences, and disposable income. Based on these findings, this study debunks the myth that most Japanese women actively seek brand name goods and follow collective purchasing habits. Instead, this information suggests that it is quite possible that the spending habits of an elite minority, with multiple brand-name purchases, are the likely cause for the discrepancy in purchasing power among young women in Japan.

2部からなる研究プロジェクトの第2部、若い女性の消費者行動に関する類型学研究は、日本の中心部に位置する愛知、岐阜、および三重で広められた。

4つの年齢層にわたる329人の女性のサンプルは、調査に応じて、15歳から20歳、21歳から25歳、26歳から30歳、31歳から35歳のサブグループにさらに分割され、それらの結果は分析された。研究のこのセクションで、ランキング形式尺度を使用する女性の消費者行動研究は、ブランド購入品、旅行先の好みや可処分所得を決定する要因に焦点化した9つの質問を分析した。これらの研究結果に基づいて、この研究は、大部分の日本人女性が積極的にブランド商品を探し求め、集団的な購買習慣に続くという社会的通念が偽りであることを示す。その代わりに、この情報は、多数の有名ブランド品を持つ少数エリートの浪費習慣が、日本の若い女性の間の購買力における矛盾の理由だといえる。

**Keywords:** ☐ young women ☐ consumers ☐ brand goods ☐ Time, Place, Occasion  
☐ 若い女性 ☐ 消費者 ☐ ブランド品 ☐ TPO

## Introduction

Japanese female consumers seem to have quite a penchant for designer goods. Walk down any city street in Japan and it is easy to spot a young woman carrying an expensive handbag. Whereas North American and European women usually enter middle age before expensive handbags become socially acceptable or a financially justifiable item, young Japanese women have sped up the process by a few decades. On overseas trips, I have fielded questions from puzzled yet delighted merchants whom often ask, “how on earth do they get the money to shop like this?” For this reason, I began this two-part research endeavor to find some answers. Further insight into young women’s purchasing preferences, habits, and mindset were the main objectives for this project.

Besides being avid shoppers, young single Japanese women also represent a significant portion of the overseas travel market. According to H.I.S. travel (Vinson, personal communication, 2006), this trend does not appear to be abating. And since going abroad often equates to shopping, traveling often fulfills a dual role for these female consumers. So, with more and more women in the workforce, and most putting off the idea of matrimony, overseas travel is becoming rather commonplace (Asahi Shimbun, 2005).

Prior research on the typology of young women suggested that the affinity for brand name goods is a possible extension of cultural assimilation within a collective society (Quasha, 2006). For a growing group of young women, it may be a form of retail therapy for a demographic group that is still not sure how they will intellectually fit into society (Synodinos, 2001; Underhill, 1999). Not all Japanese young women, however, adhere to the so-called brand-name feeding frenzy. In fact, the fallacy of multiplication may be confounding the situation. Overzealous consumerism by people on holiday does not represent the yearly shopping habits of an entire generation. Nevertheless, many Japanese female consumers, due to their ability to reside at home and avoid paying living expenses, possess the necessary disposable income to purchase large name ticket items.

In this quantitative research survey, the author sought to better understand what specific brands and items young Japanese female consumers find appealing. In addition, more information about where it is they like to travel and how they view popular destinations was a project goal. These results should prove cogent for a variety of readers. Marketing professionals, retailers, and sociologists can use the data to better pinpoint the purchasing preferences for these groups with their high disposable incomes. Since this research is divided among 4 distinct age groups, it also has the potential to delineate the purchasing habits concerning brands for certain age categories. Again, this aspect should help retailers better target their prospective audience. Lastly, the study gives us better

insight into what young women will do with their money. This last category is complex, yet in a simple sense it permits us to view whether young women are no longer like their mother's generation that saved a significant portion of the family income. It indicates what it is they value. What do they anticipate spending money on; Shopping, travel, savings, or perhaps to buy a new car?

## Ranking Format Study

This aspect of the research project was undertaken to determine which specific luxury bags have permeated the mindset and influenced the purse strings of young female shoppers. In addition, the research attempts to gather personal preference for travel destinations, perception of various foreign countries, and gauge exactly how much savings young women have at their disposal. The survey itself consisted of 14 questions that categorized respondents' age, marital status, education, occupation, and propensity to consume given certain hypothetical conditions. An English translation of the survey is listed below.

1. What is your age?      1) 15 ~ 20                      2) 21 ~ 25  
                                    3) 26 ~ 30                      4) 31 ~ 35
2. Marital Status            1) Single                      2) Married  
                                    3) Separated or Divorced
3. Living Conditions        1) Living with family      2) Living alone  
                                    3) Living with a friend    4) Living with parent(s)  
                                    5) Other
4. Occupation &            1) Junior High School      2) High School Student  
Educational Level        3) University Student      i) Public/Private  
   ii) Co-ed/ Women's  
   iii) Junior College, Technical School  
                                    4) Employed (member of the workforce)  
   i) High school graduate  
   ii) University graduate
5. Current Employment    1) freelance                      2) part-timer  
                                    3) Employed on a contractual basis  
                                    4) Job-hopper                      5) Unemployed  
                                    6) Student part-timer
6. If you were to buy an expensive handbag, which country's product would you most likely purchase?      1) Japan                      2) China  
                                    3) Italy                          4) U.S.A.

- 5) France  
7) England  
9) Other
- 6) Germany  
8) India
7. Regarding luxury goods such as handbags, shoes, and coats, what factor most likely influences your purchasing decision?
- 1) Price  
3) Design  
5) Material  
7) The store
- 2) Brand name  
4) Size  
6) Product Warranty  
8) Other
8. If you were to purchase a luxury item for someone other than yourself, whom would that person most likely be?
- 1) Parent(s)  
3) Husband  
5) A female friend  
7) Brother  
9) Other
- 2) Boyfriend  
4) Family Member  
6) A male friend  
8) Sister
9. Please write in your personal favorite brand name for the following items.
- 1) Handbag ( )      2) Shoes ( )  
3) Accessories ( )      4) Scarf ( )  
5) Other: Name ( )      Brand Name: ( )
10. From the following travel destinations, which place would you most like to visit?
- 1) Hawaii  
3) Canada  
5) France  
7) Germany  
9) India  
11) Other country ( )
- 2) Continental U.S.A.  
4) Australia  
6) England  
8) Egypt  
10) China
11. Which foreign country have you traveled to most often? How many times have you visited there?
- 1) Most often visited \_\_\_\_\_  
2) How many times? \_\_\_\_\_
12. From the following list of countries, which words do you most associate with each particular country?
- a) Traditional      b) Revolutionary      c) Folksy  
d) Safe      e) Dangerous      f) Wealthy  
g) Poor      h) Friendly      i) Powerful  
j) Young
- 1) U.S.A.      2) China      3) France      4) England

- 5) Canada                      6) Australia              7) Guam              8) Saipan  
10) New Zealand
13. How much money do you approximately have in savings?
- 1) below ¥ 100,000                      2) between ¥ 100,001 ~ ¥ 300,000  
3) between ¥ 300,001 ~ ¥ 500,000              4) between ¥ 500,001 ~ ¥ 1,000,000  
5) between ¥ 1,000,001 ~ ¥ 1,500,000  
6) between ¥ 1,500,001 ~ ¥ 2,000,000  
7) between ¥ 2,000,001 ~ ¥ 2,500,000  
8) between ¥ 2,500,001 ~ ¥ 3,000,000  
9) more than ¥ 3,000,001
14. If you had ¥ 100,000, how would you use the money? Please make 2 choices from below.
- 1) Go shopping                      2) Travel                      3) Save the money  
4) Give some to my family              5) Invest in stocks, etc.  
5) Down payment for a home              6) Hobby  
7) Accessories                      8) Buy a car  
10) Other

## Sociology at work

### *The notion of TPO*

Before embarking on this quantitative journey to pinpoint the purchasing whims of Japan's fashion-conscious young female consumers, it would appropriate to mention the notion of TPO. For today's young females, life does indeed present itself with various opportunities to wear or accessorize outfits. So, in a nation that prides itself on adhering to social protocol, the time, place, and occasion of the acronym TPO is quite fitting. My own students brought this concept to my attention while completing this survey. Without batting an eye, many of them proclaimed that owning 3 designer handbags is rather ordinary for many university students. Perhaps this should come as no surprise since it is believed that more than half of Japanese women in their 20's own a Louis Vuitton bag, while an astonishing one in ten claim to own at least one Vuitton item (Fortune, 2003). Being the case, we may be able to extrapolate that the Vuitton brand has become a de facto uniform for young Japanese women.

## Survey Results

### *Age distribution*

For the purpose of this study, response data for the 3 age groups was collected with the following results.

- Age group 1 (15–20 years old)–66 respondents
- Age group 2 (21–25 years old)–94 respondents
- Age group 3 (26–30 years old)–100 respondents
- Age group 4 (31–35 years old)–69 respondents

Hence, this survey has a more weighted response ratio for young women within the all-important 21–30 age groups as younger (age group 1) and slightly older (age group 4) respondents also have near equal representation with 66 and 69 respectively. The data for groups 2 and 3 are key figures since the majority of these women fall under the oft-maligned term of parasite singles. These women are fully content to live in their parents' home, do not pay rent and have a one of the highest quality of lives in the industrialized world. In this study, the group 2 respondents - young women aged between 21–25 years old – reported that a scant 3 respondents out of 94 are married.

For age group 3, out of 100 respondents, 22 answered they are married which equates to approximately 23% for this particular age group. Combining the data for groups 2 and 3 yielded information that supports the current social trend for Japanese women to marry at or beyond the age of thirty. For the young women in this research study ranging from 21–30 years of age, only a miniscule 25 out of 194 are married. This number indicates that 13 percent of the study is married or inversely 87 percent is single. No matter how one looks at the numbers, it is a figure that is disconcerting for Japanese policymakers whom are desperately trying to convince young women to marry earlier as a countermeasure to the nation's alarmingly declining birthrate (Head, 2004).

### *Individualism within*

Japan is known to be a collective culture, therefore determining personal preferences are often difficult to ascertain. One interesting result derived from this survey came from question number 9. In this query, respondents gave an answer for their personal favorite brand of handbags, shoes, fashion accessories, and scarves. Regarding the high-ticket item of handbags, 47% of the respondents for question 9–1 said they do not have any special preference. Should this come as a shock? Further inquiry with the data also shows that the parasite single groups (2 & 3) represent 89 of these responses. Thus, 27% of the supposed high disposable income groups do not have a particular handbag brand that tickles their fancy. My students TPO acronym seems appropriate here since it is quite

possible the young women that do own designer bags often have more than one. Simkin (2001) reported that for the up-market retailers, this truly represents the best of times. Sales and profits are soaring - so much so that, despite the fall back into recession 5 years ago, at that time one-third of the world's designer goods were sold in Japan.

As for actual brand name preferences, the respondents of this study tended to vary. Yet, it should come as no surprise that French designer Louis Vuitton was the top choice with 62 answers. Lagging well behind in second place was Hermes with 39 answers. Below is a simple chart that displays the survey results.

### Handbag Preferences

#### *Age Groups*

16-20   21-25   26-30   31-35

Louis Vuitton	9	27	14	12
Hermes	0	14	13	12
Coach	2	7	4	2
Gucci	0	2	6	2

These responses somewhat shatter the myth that Japan is as much of a collectivistic consumer culture that we are led to believe. Instead, it shows that most young women do not have a preference for a particular handbag. To further bolster this argument, question 6 examined handbag purchase preference and the results yielded an extremely wide selection of bag choices with Italian goods leading the way over French bags. However, many women wrote in multiple selections and other countries bags such as Spain to better reflect their desires. The same result occurred with the next question. This trend seems to support Tanaka's (1998) prognostication for an emerging diverse consumer culture. In number 7, women refused to be typecast into the brand-name bonanza and instead opted for design, size, and material as more logical choices for purchasing expensive goods. This action depicts more apparent consumer individuality and supports the notion that while many women may follow the most recent trends, a great many others want alternatives. It also suggests that women consumers are becoming more polarized, reminiscent of Japanese society, combining cheap chic with expensive designer goods.

#### *So many shoes, never enough days*

Regarding shoe preferences in question 9-2, a wider disparity of answers appeared. Yet, for most women in this research, a large majority of 222 or 67% of the respondents expressed no particular preference. Thereafter, the 44 various brands that completed their answers again lend credence to a diverse and well-educated consumer culture.

Accessories also proved to be a myriad bunch with a great number of respondents declaring that they had no particular preference and many writing in personal favorites. The final category 9-4 for scarves yielded very little useful data as most women did not indicate a special preference for this item. Part of this could be attributed to the notion that scarves may be perceived as more of an older women's item of clothing. Hence, the apparent lack of interest.

#### *Frequent flyer, anyone?*

Question number 10 asked which country respondents would most like to visit. Again, the results brought about a smattering of data. England and Australia rank ahead of the United States although many people still seem to want to visit Hawaii. Egypt and India is also appealing for young women. The older women in the survey (groups 3 and 4) wrote in many additional destinations for this question. Bali, Italy, and Spain were a few reoccurring places and domestic travel within Japan was also an option. The next question revealed that the United States is the place most respondents have most visited. Part of this could stem from economics since traveling from Japan to the U.S. is still one of the more affordable overseas trips available. Following closely behind is Korea because of its proximity to Japan and Australia. The latter may have been a working holiday spot for some of the respondents. It is inconclusive whether young women are spending more time in one particular continent. It is safer to assume that women in Japan today are seeking a variety of travel options and will continue to prop up the travel industry with their desire to go abroad for adventure, excitement, relaxation, and shopping.

#### *Cash on hand*

Results from question #13 brought about some expected outcomes. Group 2 (21-25 year olds) have a large number of consumers with cash reserves under ¥100,000 with a total of 19 respondents. This should not come a major surprise since they are still young and most do still live at home. Ironically, Group 3, on the other hand, has far more people with less than ¥100,000 (29 total) and also has 44 people in the next category between ¥100,001~¥300,000. This data seems to reveal that the parasite single group is not saving money at the same pace as previous generations. Without sounding too condescending, young women are more hedonistic and are living for the moment. They are well aware that the level of responsibility that comes with settling down to a married life will eliminate so much of their current freedom. So, they are spending money now. Of course, the problem is if many of these women decide against marriage, their limited savings will hinder purchasing property and financial assets for retirement. However, that is another chapter in life they will need to confront when the time comes.

## Conclusion

The preference-based segment of this research supports many of the recent trends in modern Japan. Women have more freedom to go shopping using their own cars at sprawling, suburban malls. The main attribute for these young women is they have a sufficient disposable income because so many live at home and can consequently maintain a rather lavish lifestyle compared to Japanese women just a few decades ago (Clammer, 1997).

As the data from this survey revealed, it is a bit alarming that the parasite single set is not saving enough money. Perhaps they are relying on a perceived cash infusion from a marriage down the road, or plan on some family inheritance. This intriguing subtopic information is incomplete, but it is rather sad for this researcher to witness Japan following the American consumer model of buy today, pay tomorrow.

Nevertheless, for retailers and travel agents, this burgeoning consumer group represents a key market. Based on the findings of this study, we can determine that Japanese women have a variety of preferences and although some are interested in brand goods- and will make repeat purchases — most others have discerning tastes. Today's women in Japan want to experience new places and will continue to travel overseas if tour countries can offer trips that pique their curiosity. Expect to see more specialized tour packages that highlight cultural and culinary aspects of foreign countries.

The Vuitton marketing machine is running on all gears in Japan since it personifies a marquee name. Many consumers associate it as a status symbol while some young people view it as their passage into adulthood. Regardless, this survey does depict a trend that more women are indecisive concerning brand name goods. It may not mean as much to them as we think. Whether this a harbinger for future generations remain to be seen, it goes to prove that Japan is evolving into a more demographically splintered consumer culture.

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