



Digital Marketing Trends Among Young Consumers in Kansai region, Japan

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Bachelor of Business Administration

Bachelor's Thesis

2025

Abstract

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Degree Bachelor of Business Administration
Thesis Title Digital Marketing Trends Among Young Consumers in Kansai region, Japan
Number of pages and appendix pages 47 + 4
<p>Detta lärdomsprov undersökte digitala marknadsföringstrender bland unga konsumenter i Kansai-regionen i Japan, med särskilt focus på små och medelstora företag (SME) som vill etablera sig på den japanska marknaden. Japans ekonomiska betydelse och dess unika konsumentbeteende skapar både möjligheter och utmaningar för utländska företag, särskilt med tanke på den ökade tillgången till marknaden via EU:s och Japans avtal om ekonomiskt partnerskap (EPA). Studien syftade till att identifiera de mest effektiva marknadsföringsstrategierna för att nå och engagera unga japanska konsumenter, samt att analysera de kulturella och beteendemässiga faktorerna som påverkar deras interaktion med digital marknadsföring.</p> <p>För att besvara forskningsfrågorna användes en kvalitativ metod med en digital enkät riktad till unga vuxna (18-35 år) bosatta i Kansai-regionen, huvudsakligen studenter vid Kansai Gaidai universitet. Undersökningen genomfördes under våren 2025 och samlade in data från 51 respondenter. Metodiken fokuserade på att undersöka plattformsanvändning, preferenser för digitalt innehåll, faktorer som påverkar varumärkestillit och köpbeslut samt betydelsen av lokalisering i marknadsföringen. Analysen baserades på beskrivande statistik och tematisk analys av öppna svar.</p> <p>Resultaten visade att unga japanska konsumenter i Kansai främst interagerar med varumärken via Instagram och LINE, och att visuellt tilltalande innehåll samt rekommendationer från vänner och influencers är avgörande för varumärkeengagemang och köpbeslut. Transparens, tydlig produktinformation och användarrecensioner värderades högre än omfattande kulturell anpassning. Slutsatsen är att utländska SME bör prioritera visuellt stark och transparent marknadsföring, samt bygga förtroende genom socialt bevis och lokala influencers, medan fullständig lokalisering är mindre avgörande för denna målgrupp.</p>
Key words Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Customer Engagement, Cross-Cultural Marketing

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1 Introduction

This is a research-based thesis for Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences' bachelor's degree in International Business, with a specialization in Marketing and Sales.

1.1 Background of the Research

Expanding into the Japanese market presents a unique challenge for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Japan, known for its distinct consumer behavior and sophisticated market dynamics, requires a well-crafted marketing strategy for foreign companies to establish a strong presence. (Villán, Chaparro and Ojeda 2021)

As globalization facilitates cross-border business, companies seek for attractive export markets. Japan remains one of the largest economies in the world (Buchholz 2024), offering significant opportunities for foreign businesses. The country's economic attractiveness is further underscored by its recent partnership with the European Union through the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which came into effect on February 1, 2019 (EU-Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation, n.d.). This agreement aims to remove tariffs and reduce other trade barriers, thereby facilitating easier and more cost-effective exchange of goods and services between the EU and Japan. At its inception, tariffs were eliminated on more than 90% of Japanese imports from the EU, with plans to increase this to 99% over a 15-year period. This liberalization is particularly beneficial for sectors such as agriculture, food products, industrial goods and services, including telecommunications, financial services and transport. The agreement also enhances the protection of intellectual property rights and geographical indications, ensuring premium positioning for high-quality European products in the Japanese market.

Therefore, European companies may now look more actively into opportunities that the Japanese market presents, encouraged by reduced barriers and enhanced market access. However, navigating the trends, cultural expectations and practicalities of the Japanese market can be complex, especially for SMEs that often lack the extensive resources of larger corporations. For this reason, this thesis is written to serve as a practical guide for SMEs, aiming to bridge the knowledge gap and provide actionable insights for those seeking to establish or expand their presence in Japan.

1.2 Objectives

This thesis aims to analyze and identify the most effective marketing strategies for SMEs targeting young consumers in Japan, particularly in urban areas of Kansai region. By investigating digital

marketing trends, consumer engagement, and cultural influences, this study provides actionable recommendations for SMEs looking to enhance their market presence in Japan.

The main research question of this thesis: **How can foreign SMEs effectively leverage digital marketing communication trends to engage young consumers in the Kansai region of Japan, considering cultural and behavioral factors?**

The specific investigative questions (IQ) guiding this research are:

IQ1. Which platforms are the most effective for digital marketing endeavors in Kansai region?

IQ2: Which cultural, psychological and visual preferences influence the perception and success of digital marketing among young Japanese consumers?

IQ3: What factors make consumers to engage with the content?

How do young Japanese consumers interact with different types of digital marketing content and channels (e.g. social media, influencers)?

Table 1: Overlay Matrix

Investigative question	Theoretical Framework	Questionnaire Questions	Results
IQ1. Which platforms are the most effective for digital marketing endeavors in Kansai region?	2.1,2.2, 4.1,4.2	2,3,8	6.2
IQ2. Which cultural, psychological and visual preferences influence the perception and success of digital marketing among young Japanese consumers?	2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2,3.3, 4.3	5,6,9	6.3
IQ3. What factors make consumers to engage with the content?	2.3,3.1,3.2,3.3,4.1,4.2,4.3	4,7,10	6.4

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to both academic knowledge and business practices by providing insights into effective marketing strategies for SMEs in Japan. It is particularly relevant for foreign SMEs seeking to enter the Japanese market, as well as policymakers, marketing professionals, and business consultants who support SME internationalization. Additionally, this study helps bridge the gap between theoretical marketing concepts and their practical applications in the Japanese business environments.

In addition to contributing to SME competitiveness, this thesis also supports the broader agenda of sustainable business practices. Specifically, the recommendations promote efficient digital strategies that reduce resource waste associated with traditional marketing, aligning with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). By enabling enterprises to compete effectively in foreign markets, the study also advances SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), thus offering value beyond immediate commercial benefit.

1.4 Scope of the Research

This thesis focuses specifically on SME rather than large multinational corporations, as smaller businesses often face different challenges, such as limited resources and brand recognition when entering the Japanese market. This study is centered on marketing strategies targeting young consumers (18-35 years old), as they represent a key demographic driving digital engagement and modern consumer trends.

The research is limited to digital and social media marketing, influencer marketing, and branding strategies. It does not cover extensive supply chain logistics, legal regulations, or operational management strategies beyond their marketing implications.

Given the constantly evolving nature of consumer behavior and digital platforms the findings of this study are based on current market trends as of 2025. While they provide a strong foundation for SMEs looking to enter Japan, businesses must continuously adapt their strategies to keep pace with future changes in the Japanese consumer landscape.

1.5 Risks and Risk Management

Expanding into the Japanese market presents several risks for SMEs, including cultural misunderstandings, regulatory challenges, and consumer skepticism towards foreign brands. Additionally, the competitive landscape in Japan is highly demanding, requiring companies to

differentiate themselves effectively. Economic fluctuations and changes in digital platform policies can also impact marketing efforts.

To mitigate these risks, SMEs must engage in thorough market research, invest in localization strategies, and collaborate with local partners who understand Japanese business culture. Establishing a strong digital presence through trusted marketing channels and influencers can help build credibility. Additionally, businesses should monitor consumer trends and adjust their strategies accordingly to remain competitive in the evolving Japanese market.

1.6 Key Concepts

To ensure clarity, the following key concepts are defined in the context of this research:

- **SMEs (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises):** Businesses with limited resources and a smaller market share compared to large corporations, often characterized by their flexibility and innovation-driven strategies.
- **Digital Marketing:** The use of online platforms, including social media, search engines, and e-commerce, to promote products and engage with consumers.
- **Consumer Behavior:** The study of how individuals make purchasing decisions, including the psychological, social and cultural influences affecting their choices.
- **Localization.** The process of adapting marketing strategies, branding, and messaging to align with the cultural and linguistic preferences of a specific market
- **Influencer Marketing:** A strategy that involves leveraging individuals with significant online followings to promote products and services in an authentic and engaging manner.
- **Customer Engagement:** The interactions and experiences a brand creates to foster long-term relationships with consumers, leading to brand loyalty and advocacy.

2 Digital Marketing

This chapter explores the role of digital marketing strategies in fostering online customer engagement in an increasingly digital world. It examines how businesses build customer engagement and loyalty by leveraging social media and content marketing while highlighting the necessity of selecting appropriate digital channels and interactions.

Digital marketing, also known as online marketing, is the strategic promotion of brands, products, and services to connect with potential customers using the internet and various forms of digital communication. This encompasses wide range of tactics beyond traditional advertising, utilizing digital technologies such as computers, mobile phone, websites, social media, search engines, email, and mobile applications to reach consumers. The core objective of digital marketing is to engage with audiences throughout the customer journey, from initial awareness to becoming loyal customers (Iljomah 2024). Unlike traditional marketing, which relies on offline such as television, radio, print and billboards to broadcast messages to a broad, often less targeted audience, digital marketing enables business to pinpoint specific demographics, deliver personalized content and interact directly with customers. While traditional marketing typically operates as a one-way communication channel – where businesses push message to consumers without immediate feedback – digital marketing fosters a dynamic, two-way dialogue (Urziceanu 2020). This interactivity allows for real-time engagement, customer feedback and the opportunity to adapt strategies quickly based on analytics and performance data.

The importance of digital marketing has grown significantly with the increasing use of the internet and digital devices. It offers businesses the ability to reach a global audience, target specific demographics, and measure the effectiveness of their campaigns in real-time. Unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing facilitates two-way communicating between businesses and their customers, allowing for more personalized and interactive experiences (Zhu 2021).

For current consumers, digital marketing means more than just exposure to advertisements – it represents a shift toward empowered, informed decision-making. People now seek brands that engage with them authentically, respond to their needs and provide value through relevant, timely content (Dašić 2023). Digital marketing strategies enable businesses to meet these expectations, building trust and loyalty by delivering tailored experiences and fostering meaningful, ongoing relationships with their audience.

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM) is a vital component of digital marketing. It refers to the strategic use of social networking platforms to connect with target audiences, foster brand awareness and stimulate engagement through a combination of organic content and paid advertising (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch 2016). At its core, this approach leverages the interactive and community-driven nature of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, TikTok and others to communicate directly with consumers, share valuable information and build relationships. While digital marketing covers all online promotional activities – such as email, search engines, websites and mobile apps – social media marketing focuses specifically on platform-based engagement and community building. The two are closely linked: social media provides a powerful channel for digital marketing efforts and digital marketing strategies help businesses maximize the impact of their social media presence (Ünvan & Badlo 2021).

Even though, the primary objectives of social media marketing include increasing brand visibility and prompting audience responses (e.g. likes, comments, shares), the discipline has evolved to encompass a much broader range of strategic considerations and tactical execution (Waad & Gomez 2011). In today's digital landscape, SMM goes beyond merely broadcasting messages; it involves listening to audience feedback, analyzing data to refine strategies and adapting content to align with consumer preferences and behaviors. Modern SMM also integrates influencer collaborations, user-generated content campaigns and real-time customer service, all of which help businesses establish authenticity and trust with their audiences (Shaltoni 2016). Furthermore, the availability of advanced analytics tools allows marketers to track performance in real time, measure return on investment (ROI) and optimize campaigns for better results. Paid advertising initiatives (e.g. targeted ads and sponsored posts) complement organic efforts by extending reach to specific demographics and maximizing impact (Silva, Duarte & Almeida 2020).

As discussed earlier, significant facet of modern social media marketing is influencer marketing. This involves collaborating with individuals who have a substantial and engaged following on social media to promote products or services (Yesiloglu, Costello, Yesiloglu & Costello 2021). Influencers, due to their perceived authenticity and connection with their audience, can be highly effective in reaching specific demographics and building trust in a brand. The influencer marketing industry constitutes \$32.55 billion in value in 2025 (Statista Research Department, 2025), while in 2015 being just \$1.7 billion indicating its significant growth and importance. However, it is worth noting that successful influencer marketing requires careful selection of influencers whose values align with the brand, and regulatory bodies are increasingly emphasizing transparent disclosure of sponsored content. (Yesiloglu, Costello, Yesiloglu & Costello 2021)

Ethical considerations are paramount in social media marketing. With increasing scrutiny on data privacy, transparency, and authenticity, brands must adhere to ethical guidelines in their social media practices. This includes being transparent about sponsored content, respecting user privacy (with regulations like GDPR impacting data handling), avoiding the spread of misinformation (which can damage brand reputation and trust), and engaging in respectful and inclusive communication. (Granstedt 2024)

Table 2. Top Priorities for Businesses Using Social Media Marketing (adopted from Tuten 2023)

Social Media Marketing Priorities	% Companies Using
Brand awareness and brand building	84,2
Customer retention	54,3
New customer acquisition	51,1
Brand promotions (e.g., sales promotions, contests)	48,4
New product introduction	45,1
Customer service	39,1
Employee engagement	38,0
Market research	22,3
Targeting new markets	17,4
Identifying new product opportunities	15,2

Table 2 outlines the primary objectives businesses aim to achieve through social media marketing, alongside the percentage of companies pursuing each goal.

The most prominent priority for businesses using social media is "brand awareness and brand building," with 84.2% of companies indicating this as a key objective. This underscores the vital role social platforms play in enhancing visibility and establishing brand identity. Following this, "customer retention" (54.3%) and "new customer acquisition" (51.1%) are also significant goals, reflecting businesses' focus on both maintaining existing relationships and expanding their customer base.

Approximately 48.4% of companies use social media for "brand promotions," such as sales or contests, while 45.1% utilize these platforms for "new product introduction." This indicates a strategic use of social media for both promotional activities and product marketing. Additionally,

"customer service" (39.1%) and "employee engagement" (38.0%) are moderately prioritized, suggesting an emphasis on internal culture and customer interaction through social channels.

Less frequently cited objectives include "market research" (22.3%), "targeting new markets" (17.4%), and "identifying new product opportunities" (15.2%). These lower percentages suggest that while social media is acknowledged for its potential in strategic planning and innovation, it is more commonly leveraged for immediate marketing and engagement tasks.

2.2 Content Marketing

Content marketing (CM) is another core element of digital marketing, focused on the creating and strategic distribution of valuable, relevant and consistent content designed to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – ultimately driving profitable customer actions. CM supplied the substance that powers digital marketing channels, which serves not just as promotion, but also provide information, solve problems and build trust with audiences, which helps to establish brands as authoritative and reliable sources (Mailchimp n.d.). A key distinction between content marketing and other digital marketing tactics (e.g. SMM discussed in the previous subchapter) is that content marketing is primarily about the creation and dissemination of high-quality audience-focused material. While SMM leverages social platforms to distribute content and foster direct engagement, content marketing is broader in scope, often involving long-form content, downloadable resources and educational materials that can be shared across multiple digital touchpoints (New York Times Licensing n.d.).

Analysis of investment trends reveals a significant expansion within the realm of CM. Specifically, in the German-speaking European territories, the financial commitment to CM initiatives has demonstrated a substantial increase, escalating from €4.4 billion in the year 2010 to €9.4 billion by 2019. This growth reflects the increasing recognition among businesses of the value delivered by content in engaging audiences and driving profitable customer actions (Koob 2021).

Turning to Japan, although investment figures specifically for content marketing as a distinct category are less commonly reported, robust data on digital content and internet advertising reveal strong trends that parallel international developments. In 2024, according to Dentsu, internet advertising expenditures in Japan reached a record high of 3,651.1 billion yen (approximately €21.6 billion), with internet advertising media expenditures (excluding production and merchandise-related costs) at 2,961.1 billion yen (about €17.5 billion), marking a 10.2% year-on-year increase. Notably, video advertising grew by 23% year-on-year to 843.9 billion, and social advertising surpassed 1,100 billion yen for the first time the broader media content marketing in Japan was

valued at 12.4 trillion yen in 2022, with online media content accounting for about 46% of the marketing, highlighting the substantial investment in digital content creation and distribution. Given that data, it is clear that more B2C marketers recognize content marketing as a key tool for delivering personalized experiences that cater to diverse audience needs. With the increasing emphasis on customer-centric marketing, discussions on effective content marketing strategies have intensified.

Employing CM into marketing endeavors poses multiple benefits. One of the most significant advantages of content marketing is its capacity for storytelling, which refers to use of narrative techniques (plot, character, conflict and resolution) to communicate a brands' message and engage its audience emotionally (Olivier 2017). Rather than simply presenting facts or promotional messages, storytelling aims to create a compelling, authentic narrative that resonates with consumers and fosters a deeper connection with the brand. (Pulizzi 2012). Storytelling allows brands to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace making their messages memorable and impactful. An example of a Japanese company that actively follows a storytelling strategy is MUJI – a renowned for its minimalist design and philosophy, rooted in the concept of “kanso” (simplicity). The brand’s storytelling focuses on the beauty of everyday life and the value of simplicity, using clean visuals and subtle messaging across its digital content (Japanify 2025). MUJI’s campaigns often highlight how their products support a calm, uncluttered lifestyle, resonating deeply with audiences seeking authenticity and mindfulness. Their approach is less about flashy advertising and more about creating an emotional connection through the narrative of living simply and thoughtfully.

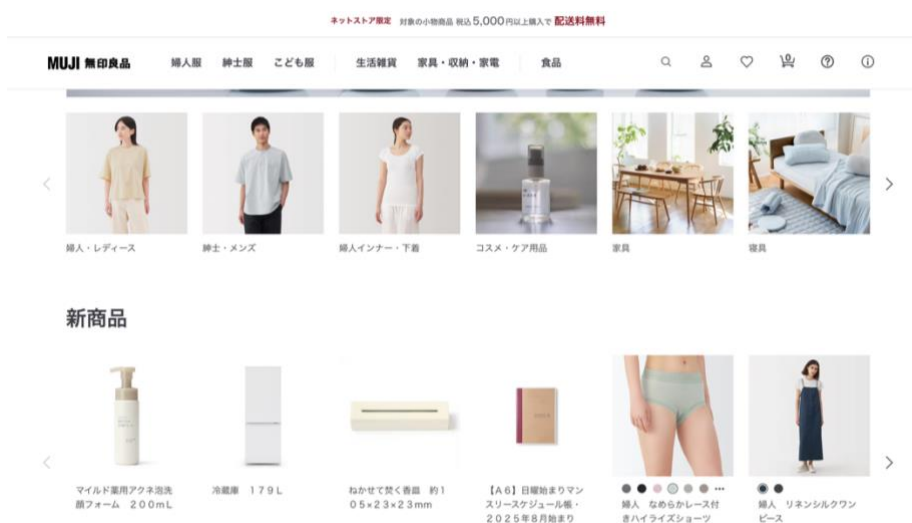


Figure 1. MUJI landing page (MUJI 2025)

Beyond storytelling, content marketing offers several other important benefits. It supports search engine optimization (SEO) by providing valuable, relevant content that improves a brands' visibility online (Asif 2025). When customers search for information or solutions, brands that consistently deliver high-quality content are more likely to appear at the top of search results, driving organic traffic to their websites. Content marketing enables brands to establish thought leadership and authority within their industries. By sharing expert insights, research findings and practical advice companies can position themselves as trusted advisors, which enables credibility and encourages customer loyalty (New York Licensing n.d.). CM is also highly measurable. Advanced analytics tools allow marketers to track engagement, conversions and return on investment (ROI), enabling continuous improvement and optimization of strategies. This data-driven approach ensures that content remains relevant and effective in meeting audience needs (Rancati & Gordini 2014).

2.3 The RACE Model

The RACE framework is a strategic digital marketing model that provides businesses with a structured approach to acquiring, converting, and retaining customers. Developed to guide organizations in setting clear objectives and optimizing customer interactions, the RACE model consists of four key stages: Reach, Act, Convert, and Engage (Chaffey 2022, 9-12). Below there is a breakdown of each stage of the framework.

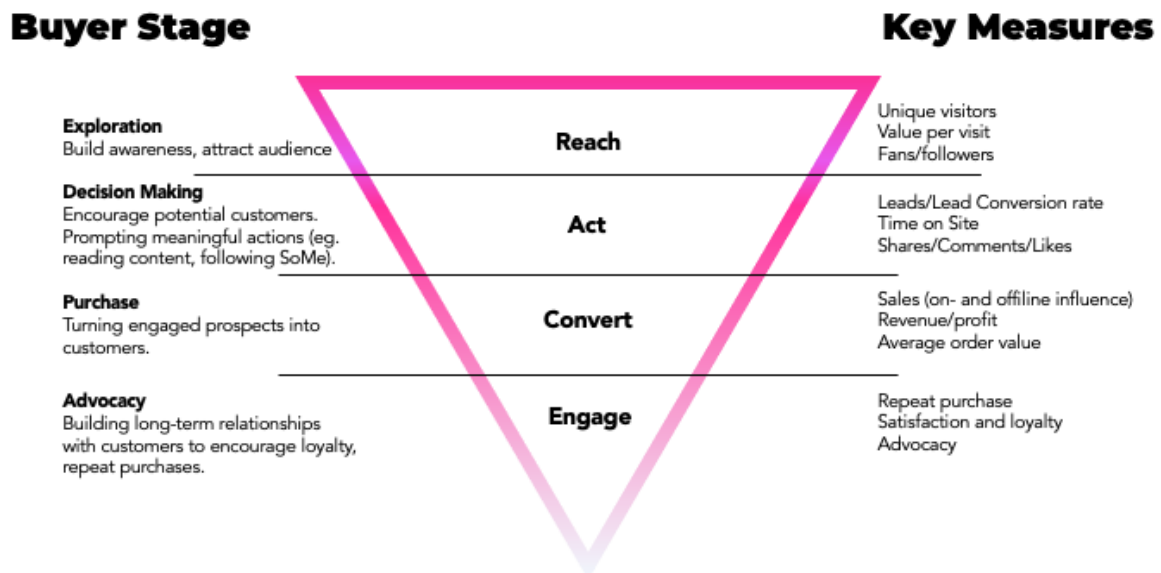


Figure 2. RACE Model (Adapted from Chaffey 2022, 9)

1. **Reach** – The first state of the framework focuses on increasing brand awareness and attracting potential customers. Businesses leverage various digital channels, including search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, paid advertising, and content marketing, to drive traffic to their websites and digital platforms. The goal is to create a strong online presence and engage users who are interested in the brands' offerings.
2. **Act** – Once potential customers have been reached; businesses must encourage interaction and engagement. The Act stage involves optimizing landing pages, using lead magnets such as free content or trial offers, and providing seamless user experiences to encourage visitors to take the next step. Whether it is filling out a contact form, signing up for a newsletter, or engaging with content, businesses need to ensure that customers move deeper into the funnel.
3. **Convert** – The Convert stage is where leads are turned into paying customers. This involves streamlining the purchasing process, providing personalized offers, and ensuring a smooth transition from interest to transaction. Businesses use retargeting, email marketing, and automated workflows to nurture leads and guide them toward making a purchase decision. A well-executed conversion strategy enhances the customer experience and increases revenue.
4. **Engage** – Retaining customers and fostering brand loyalty is crucial for long-term success. The Engage stage focuses on customer relationship management, personalized communication, loyalty programs, and customer support. Businesses utilize email marketing, social media engagement, and customer feedback to maintain strong relationships with existing customers. Engaged customers are more likely to become brand advocates, leading to word-of-mouth marketing and repeat purchases.

While the RACE model offers a helpful structure for guiding digital engagement, its linear nature may oversimplify the iterative, socially influenced pathways that characterize Japanese consumer behavior. In high-context cultures like Japan (more will be discussed in Chapter 5.3), the Act and Engage stages often blur, as peer validation via platforms plays a decisive role even before formal consideration. Thus, SMEs may need to invest disproportionately in localized Engage tactics, such as influencer collaborations or user-generated content to drive trust and credibility before conversion.

2.4 Metrics in Digital Marketing

Key metrics in digital marketing are quantifiable measures used to track the performance and effectiveness of marketing campaigns and overall digital strategies. These metrics help marketers

understand areas for improvement, and measure progress towards their goals. Tracking the right metrics in data-driven decisions and optimizing marketing efforts for better results.

Some of the key metrics in digital marketing include:

- **Return on Investment (ROI):** Measures the profitability of marketing investments by comparing the revenue generated to the total cost of the campaign.
- **Total Website Traffic:** The total number of visitors to a website over a specific period, indicating the site's visibility and popularity.
- **Traffic from Channels:** Breaks down website traffic by its source, such as organic search, paid search, social media, email, and referrals, helping to identify the most effective channels.
- **Conversion Rate (CR):** The percentage of website visitors who complete a desired action, such as making a purchase, signing up for a newsletter, or filling out a form.
- **Click-Through Rate (CTR):** The percentage of users who click on a link (e.g., in an ad or email) compared to the number of times the link was viewed.
- **Cost Per Acquisition (CPA):** The total cost incurred to acquire a new customer through a marketing campaign.
- **Customer Lifetime Value (CLV):** The total revenue a business can expect to generate from a single customer over the entire duration of their relationship.
- **Bounce Rate:** The percentage of visitors who leave a website after viewing only one page, indicating the relevance and engagement of the content.
- **Engagement Rate:** Measures how users interact with content, such as likes, comments, shares, and saves on social media.
- **Impressions:** The number of times an ad or piece of content is displayed to users.
- **Reach:** The number of unique users who have seen a piece of content.
- **Cost Per Click (CPC):** The amount paid for each click in a pay-per-click advertising campaign.
- **Cost Per Lead (CPL):** The cost associated with acquiring a new lead through marketing efforts.
- **Domain Authority (DA):** A score that predicts a website's ability to rank on search engines.

Measuring engagement in B2C digital marketing is essential for understanding how customers interact with a brand and for refining strategies to maximize business success. Effective measurement allows companies to assess the impact of their marketing efforts and allocate

resources to the most efficient digital channels. Engagement metrics provide valuable insights into the connection between a brand and its audience, ultimately influencing conversion rates and fostering customer loyalty (Chaffey 2022, 29-35). The ability to measure digital marketing engagement enables businesses to identify what resonates with consumers, improve customer experiences, and enhance brand performance in a competitive digital landscape.

One of the primary indicators of digital marketing engagement is social media interaction. Engagement on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), and LinkedIn, including likes, shares, comments, and mentions, serves as a vital measure of brand awareness and customer interest. Although social media engagement does not directly translate to immediate sales, it contributes significantly to brand visibility and community building. Businesses can use social media analytics to monitor audience preferences and adjust their content strategies accordingly to enhance engagement levels (Chaffey 2022, 29-35). Understanding these insights allows companies to create more compelling and interactive content that resonates with their audience.

Website traffic and user behavior are also critical components of engagement measurement. Tracking the number of visitors, page views, and time spent on different sections of a website provides valuable insights into how users interact with online content. A high bounce rate may indicate a lack of relevant information or an unsatisfactory user experience, whereas longer session durations and repeated visits suggest higher levels of engagement (Zantal-Wiener 2022). Additionally, businesses can track returning users to assess brand loyalty and measure the effectiveness of ongoing marketing campaigns in maintaining consumer interest.

Conversion rates play a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts. The percentage of visitors who take a desired action—such as completing a purchase, subscribing to a newsletter, or downloading an app—indicates how well marketing strategies drive customer actions. Optimizing conversion rates often involves implementing A/B testing, where different versions of digital content, advertisements, or landing pages are compared to determine the most effective approach (Coursera 2025). Businesses that effectively analyze conversion data can refine their digital marketing strategies to increase customer acquisition and retention.

3 Consumer Behavior

This chapter aims to construct a rigorous theoretical framework that examines consumer behavior through the lens of cultural dimensions, cognitive psychology and generational traits. The objective is to provide a nuanced, evidence-based basis for understanding how young Japanese consumers engage with digital marketing content, thereby offering critical context for answering the research questions of this thesis. In particular, this chapter centers on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, contemporary psychological models of digital decision-making and empirical data on Generation Z in Japan.

Brooks (2022) defines consumer behavior as "a specific code of conduct in which consumers engage in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs." The decision-making process is influenced by various social factors, including family, reference groups, culture, and social class. With the rise of digital marketing, consumer behavior has evolved, as modern consumers now have access to a wider range of online platforms to make purchasing decisions that align with their preferences and needs.

3.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory in Japanese context

The Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede introduced the Cultural Dimensions Theory in the 1980s as a systematic framework to understand cultural differences and their impact on workplace behavior, national institutions and consumer behavior. His original study, based on data collected from IBM employees in over 70 countries, identifies six dimensions of culture: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Long-Term Orientation versus Short-Term Normative Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR). Each of these dimensions represents a core societal value system that influences behavior, decision-making and communication styles. Hofstede's model has since become one of the most widely cited frameworks in international marketing research and cross-cultural psychology. (Hofstede 2001)

In the context of Japan, Hofstede's metrics indicate several cultural tendencies that are crucial for understanding consumer behavior. Japan scores extremely high in uncertainty avoidance (UAI =92), suggesting that consumers are risk-averse, prefer structured information, and are less likely to engage with unfamiliar brands without strong assurances of quality or reliability. This cultural trait makes Japanese consumers particularly sensitive to digital content that lacks clear informational structure or transparency. Moreover, Japan has a relatively high power distance (PDI =54) and long-term orientation (LTO =88), suggesting that hierarchical credibility and future-

oriented messaging resonate well. The country also scores high in masculinity (MAS = 95), reflecting a societal emphasis on achievement, competition and performance, which could influence how marketing messages are framed in terms of success and aspiration (Hofstede Insights 2023)

It is important to mention that Hofstede's framework is not without its limitations. It has been critiqued for treating national cultures as homogeneous, thereby overlooking regional, generational and subcultural variations (McSweeney 2002). These critiques are especially relevant in the context of digital-native youth who may deviate significantly from national averages in their behavior and values. As Ampadu (2015) argues, identity in the digital age is increasingly constructed through subcultural affiliations, online communities and transnational media, rather than through rigid national paradigms. Therefore, while Hofstede's model offers a valuable starting point, it must be applied critically and supplemented with other data.

3.2 Purchasing behavior of Generation Z

Generation Z, the target research group of this study, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represents a cohort with unique psychological, technological and economic characteristics (Merriam-Webster 2020). Raised in a world of smartphones, high-speed internet and algorithm-driven content, this generation is particularly adept at navigating digital environments (Katz 2022). Their formative years have been shaped by instant access to information, which together influence how they perceive brands, assess value and make purchasing decisions.

Unlike older generations who may value brand heritage and loyalty built over time, Gen Z consumers prioritize immediacy, visual appeal and peer validation in their consumption decisions (Zhulal, Marits & Herman 2024). They respond to real-time engagement, influencer credibility and social trends rather than traditional notions of brand authority. Moreover, their high expectations for seamless digital experiences, quick customer service and personalized recommendations make them a demanding yet lucrative market segment. Gen Z seamlessly integrates online platforms into their shopping routines (McKinsey & Company 2020). Social media channels serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as primary avenues for product discovery and purchase. Features such as shoppable posts and in-app checkouts facilitate immediate transactions, encouraging spontaneous micro-purchases (Lauris 2025). This digital fluency enables Gen Z to engage in shopping behaviors that are instantaneous and fragmented, aligning with their preference for quick and convenient experiences. Gen Z places a premium on authenticity and ethical considerations in their consumption choices (Sudirjo 2023). They are more likely to support brands that demonstrate transparency, social responsibility and alignment with their personal values. Economic pragmatism also plays a role. Having come of age during a period of economic

stagnation and demographic decline, Gen Z consumers exhibit strong price sensitivity and value-consciousness. They frequently seek out discount codes, cashback offers and budget friendly alternative (World Economic Forum 2018).

3.3 Cognitive Psychology and Digital Decision-Making

Cognitive psychology offers further insight into how Generation Z processes digital content. In particular, several cognitive biases and psychological tendencies are amplified in digital contexts.

Confirmation bias is a significant factor; individuals tend to seek out information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs or social norms (Jin 2023). In a collectivist society such as Japan, where group consensus and in-group validation are paramount, this bias reinforces the influence of social proof. As Jin notes, consumers are more likely to trust brands that are endorsed by their social circle or respected influencers. As for Japan, this aligns with its Hofstede's individualism score (IDV =46), which reflects a society that is moderately collectivist.

Another key bias is anchoring, whereby the first piece of information encountered about a brand disproportionately affects perception (Xindan 2023). In the context of digital marketing, anchoring manifests in the weight consumers give to initial impressions such as website design, product imagery and influencer endorsement. According to Chen (2023), these initial cues can establish a lasting framework that shapes future interpretations of the brand, often outweighing objective comparisons like price or performance. This is particularly significant in digital ecosystems where rapid scrolling and limited attention spans heighten reliance on heuristic cues.

Complementing the anchoring effect is loss aversion, a concept from prospect theory which posits that people experience losses more intensely than gains of equal value (Gu, Zhang, & Zhang 2022). For Japanese consumers, whose cultural profile includes high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2001), the psychological weight of potential regrets is magnified. This makes unfamiliar foreign brands especially vulnerable to negative bias unless they deploy substantial trust-building measures. Shi (2020) demonstrates that such brands must provide safety nets – like clear return policies, domestic customer service, and local influencer endorsements – to neutralize perceived risks.

4 Digital Marketing in Japan – Platforms, Trends and Cultural Context

This chapter tackles the unique characteristics of Japan's digital marketing landscape. The specific roles and user behavior associated with various digital platforms are discovered, following by examining of phenomenon in trends, visual preferences and other prevailing trends.

4.1 Platform Overview: Dominant Platforms and Their Specific Roles

As of the third quarter of 2023, Japan's social media landscape is dominated by platforms distinct from those prevalent in Western countries. The five most used platforms in Japan by active monthly users are LINE (96 million), YouTube (78,6 million) X (formerly Twitter) (73,4 million), Instagram (52.6% 55,45 million), TikTok (22.9% 26,05 million), Facebook (15,75 million), Threads (10,7 million), Pinterest (10,5 million), LinkedIn (4,6 million) (Statista Research Department, 2024).

LINE stands as Japan's undisputed primary social network and a quintessential "super app". Its pervasive integration into daily life extends beyond messaging to encompass news, payments (LINE Pay, though services are transitioning to PayPay by April 2025), and diverse brand interaction features (DMFA 2024). LINE is particularly crucial for customer relationship management (CRM) and fostering loyalty, effectively driving foot traffic to physical retail locations through features like targeted coupons and messages delivered via Official Accounts (Ojigital 2024).

Instagram, despite a slower initial growth compared to other global markets, has achieved substantial traction in Japan, particularly among younger demographics drawn to its visual-centric content. It serves as a highly effective platform for brand storytelling and visual marketing, with Japanese users demonstrating a strong preference for high-quality visuals and creative content. Instagram is also a leading platform for social commerce (Ishino 2024).

TikTok has emerged as a global phenomenon, with a significant user base in Japan. TikTok is actively expanding its e-commerce integrations in Japan, including live shopping and in-app store functionalities (Reuters 2025). While highly effective for upper-funnel engagement and achieving viral reach, TikTok still faces challenges in gaining the full trust of Japanese advertisers for direct response campaigns, especially when compared to Meta platforms. The platform's high engagement and active expansion into e-commerce, coupled with its potential to become a significant player in search advertising through features like TikTok Search Ads, indicate a substantial future shift (Influencer MarketingHub 2025). This suggests that brands should view TikTok not merely as a tool for brand awareness but as an experimental channel for full-funnel marketing, particularly for visually driven products and for capturing high-intent users through its

evolving search capabilities. Early experimentation and optimization on TikTok Shop could yield considerable returns as the platform matures within the Japanese market.

Twitter/X holds a prominent position in Japan, which boasts a large user base globally. It functions as a key platform for public discourse, real-time engagement, accessing honest product reviews, and even deriving business insights. Its versatility makes it suitable for both business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) marketing, particularly for building overall brand awareness. (Humble Bunny 2022)

YouTube is a leading video platform in Japan. It enjoys widespread popularity across all age groups, with a notable increase in usage among younger demographics, who consume diverse content ranging from vlogs and tutorials to live streams and product reviews. Japanese viewers value high-quality, respectful, visually appealing, and culturally relevant content, often utilizing the platform for product research prior to purchase (Info Cubic n.d.).

4.2 The phenomenon of VTubers

The **rise of VTubers and virtual influencers** represents a significant and growing phenomenon in Japan's digital landscape. Originating from Japanese online culture, VTubers (Virtual YouTubers) and virtual influencers utilize anime-inspired avatars or 3D personalities to engage with audiences across platforms like YouTube and other social media (The Economist 2025). These virtual personas are highly popular among younger audiences, often cultivating a more passionate fanbase than traditional YouTubers or Instagrammers, which positively impacts marketing efforts. Their aspirational appeal is notable, with surveys indicating that more Japanese children aspire to be VTubers than traditional YouTubers.



Figure 3. Vtuber Gawr Gura (TheGamer n.d.)

Companies and local governments increasingly collaborate with Vtubers for public relations, product promotions, and to effectively reach younger demographics that traditional advertising channels might miss. The Vtuber ecosystem is broadly divided into **independent Vtubers** (self-managed personas like Kizuna AI) and **corporate Vtubers** (talent under agencies such as Hololive, Nijisanji and Vshojo) (Hololive TODAY 2025). Corporate Vtubers, backed by large agencies, dominate the market due to their professional production quality and cross-platform reach, while independent VTubers thrive on niche communities and creative autonomy. The economic impact of VTubers is substantial. Japan's VTuber market reached ~¥65.8 billion (~€ 404 million) 2023 in FY 2022 (Stattista Research Department 2024).

Brands can leverage VTubers to craft controlled yet engaging narratives that resonate with digitally native audiences. The key lies in developing personas that align with brand values and foster genuine interaction, rather than treating virtual avatars as gimmicks. Japanese agencies expanding overseas, this hybrid model of entertainment and marketing offers a novel avenue to mitigate risks associated with human influencers while achieving high engagement (Davey 2019)

4.3 Aesthetics in Japanese media

Japanese marketing aesthetics distinguish themselves through several popular design themes that effectively capture audience attention and build brand connections. One prominent approach is the extensive use of illustrations and manga, which transcends product categories and demographics (Aziz and Ong 2023). This includes employing existing anime and manga characters into marketing campaigns and using stylistics and canon to create new stylized scenarios. The Japanese brewery Sapporo Beer exemplifies this strategy, in 2025 they launched a product line featuring anime Levi and Erwin, characters from a viral anime-franchise "Attack on Titan" (Essential Japan 2025).



Figure 4. Attack on Titan and Sapporo beer collaboration (Essential Japan 2025)

Japanese advertising frequently employs the bizarre and nonsensical to create high-impact visuals that capture attention, prioritizing visual excitement over immediate comprehension, often leading to a "soft sell" approach (Humble Bunny, 2023). An example that illustrates that well might be Akagi, known for their absurd commercials. For instance, their "Sof" commercial campaign features old man's head attached to a pair of legs.



Figure 5. New Akagi Sof commercial (Akagi 2025)

Another distinct feature is the cute and charming aesthetic (jp. *かわいい*), which is utilized by both domestic and global brands to achieve significant marketing impact. Kumamon, the bear mascot of

Kumamoto Prefecture, exemplifies the potent force of this concept in Japanese marketing and its significant economic implications. According to a Bank of Japan study (CUHK Business School 2016), Kumamon has contributed 123 billion yen to Kumamoto Prefecture's economy through tourism and product sales, and generated more than 9 billion yen in publicity.



Figure 6. Kumamon (CUHK Business School 2016)

It is notable that a large portion of Japanese digital marketing—especially in e-commerce, retail, and entertainment—embraces maximalism. Websites, online banners, and advertisements frequently feature dense text, bright "acid" colors, overlapping images, and a cluttered layout. This approach stems from Japan's information-rich communication culture, where conveying as much detail as possible within a single visual space is seen as transparent and efficient (Missbichler, 2023). Bright, animated visuals and 2D illustrations, influenced by anime and manga, add an element of fun and familiarity, making digital content engaging for consumers.



Figure 7. Japanese retailer's Don Quijote's landing page (donki.com 2025)

5 Research methodology

This chapter outlines the research approach, data collection methods and analytical techniques used to investigate marketing strategies for SMEs in Japan. A study consists of an online survey conducted in Hirakata, Kansai region.

5.1 Research approach

A quantitative research approach has been employed in this study, utilizing an online survey to investigate marketing communication trends and strategies among young people in the Kansai region. Quantitative research characterized by the collection and analysis of numerical data, enables the identification of patterns and relationships within the target population (Scribble 2023). The decision to use a survey was guided by the need to gather structured, measurable and generalizable data from a sample of respondents aged 18-35 (Ponto 2015). Quantitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring patterns in consumer behavior, such as platform usage, content preferences and attitudes toward foreign brands as it enables the researcher to capture numeric data that can be statistically analyzed (Bryman 2016)

An online survey was selected due to its cost-effectiveness, speed and accessibility, especially given the digital literacy of the target demographic (Wright 2017). Young Japanese consumers are highly active on digital platforms and are accustomed to interacting with brands online, making them ideal participants for this format (Nippon 2019). The structured nature of the survey ensures consistency in responses, allowing for reliable comparisons across variables such as age, platform use and cultural preferences.

However, the intended sample size is limited to 51 respondents, primarily due to logistical and time constraints. As a result, there is an inherent risk of overgeneralization, and findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of the broader youth population in Japan (Peter, Krauss & Braganza 2022). Despite this limitation, the survey offers valuable preliminary insights that can inform the development of marketing strategies tailored to youth audiences and serve as a foundation for future, larger-scale studies.

Moreover, the survey supports the thesis objectives by generating empirical data that can be quantitatively linked to the theoretical framework, particularly in areas such as consumer psychology, cultural dimensions by Hofstede and digital engagement models. While qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups could offer deeper insights, they would limit the ability to generalize findings relevant to SMEs. Therefore, the quantitative survey provides an appropriate and pragmatic methodological foundations for this research.

Alternative methods, such as qualitative interviews or focus groups were considered for their depth of insight. However, a quantitative survey was selected to allow for pattern identification across a broader sample, improving generalizability within the youth segment. According to Bryman (2016), quantitative surveys are effective when investigating attitudinal trends across defined populations. To mitigate sampling bias, purposive sampling at Kansai Gaidai ensured the including of respondents within the defined age and regional criteria.

5.2 Target audience

This study focuses on identifying the factors that small and medium-sized enterprises in the Kansai region as well as international companies planning to penetrate this market should consider from the perspectives of consumer behavior, customer engagement, customer loyalty and effective digital marketing communication among young consumers. Accordingly, the target population for this research comprises young individuals residing in the Kansai region of Japan. For the purposes of this study, “young people” are defined as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, reflecting the demographic most actively engaged with contemporary digital marketing channels and trends.

In determining the target audience, it was essential to ensure that only respondents who meet the criteria of age and regional residence were included in the survey. To achieve this, the initial section of the online questionnaire includes screening questions regarding the respondent’s age. Respondents who do not fall within the specified age range are politely thanked for their interest and asked to submit the survey without proceeding to the main section.

To ensure the relevance and accuracy of the data collected, the sampling method employed in this research is purposive sampling. The sample chosen for this research is domestic students at Kansai Gaidai University in Hirakata City, this was chosen to make sure geographic and age criteria of the study. Data collection will be conducted in person on the Kansai Gaidai University campus. The researcher will approach people directly and invite them to complete the online questionnaire using their own digital services.

5.3 Data Collection

The survey was administered using online survey tool Webropol. The author personally recruited participants in Hirakata City by approaching individuals at Kansai Gaidai University, explaining the survey’s purpose and obtaining oral consent before providing a QR code to access the questionnaire. To ensure the relevance of responses, only permanently living in the Kansai region were invited to participate. All respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

To accommodate participants with varying levels of English proficiency and to ensure inclusivity, all survey questions were available in both Japanese and English. This approach allowed all participants, regardless of their language skills to comfortably understand and respond to each question.

The survey was intentionally designed to avoid overly basic questions, instead focusing on nuanced aspects of digital engagement and consumer behavior. By making most questions compulsory and excluding “No option” options, the survey reflected thoughtful and genuine consumer preferences and behaviors.

5.4 Data Analysis Methodology

The analysis methodology for this thesis was structured to directly address the main research question and the four investigative questions guiding the study. The main research question explores how foreign SMEs can effectively leverage digital marketing communication trends to engage young consumers in the Kansai region of Japan while considering cultural and behavioral factors. The three investigative questions focus on identifying key marketing trends understanding how young Japanese consumers interact with digital marketing content and channels, examining the challenges and opportunities for foreign SMEs adapting their strategies and investigating the cultural, psychological and visual preferences influencing digital marketing among Japanese youth.

The analysis began with thorough data preparation. Survey responses were carefully checked for completeness and consistency. Quantitative data, including Likert-scale ratings, rankings, and multiple-choice selections were coded for statistical analysis. The optional free-response question, which asked participants if they had recently seen an advertisement they thought was well-made was analyzed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and notable examples.

Descriptive statistics were then used to summarize the data and identify key trends (Dong 2023). Frequency distributions, means and percentages were calculated to illustrate how young consumers in the Kansai region engage with various digital marketing content and channels. Key findings were visualized using charts and graphs to clearly present the patterns.

Inferential and thematic analysis were employed to explore deeper insights (Anders 2022). The analysis examined relationships between consumer preferences and cultural factors, such as the importance of localized content and its perceived effectiveness. It also investigated how psychological and visual preferences influence the reception of digital marketing. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses provided additional context on the challenges and opportunities faced by foreign SMEs in adapting their digital marketing strategies and opportunities faced by foreign SMEs in adapting their digital marketing strategies to the Japanese market. This included

understanding perceptions of cultural adaptation, language use and the impact of visual elements in marketing.

The results were interpreted in the context of each investigative question, providing evidence-based answers and actionable insights for foreign SMEs. The analysis considered how cultural norms, psychological trigger and visual preferences shape the reception and success of digital marketing efforts in the Kansai region. Based on these findings, practical recommendations were formulated to help foreign SMEs optimize their digital marketing strategies for young Japanese consumers.

6 Results

6.1 Demographics

The survey sample consisted of 51 respondents, with an overwhelming majority – 98% - falling within the 18-24 age group.

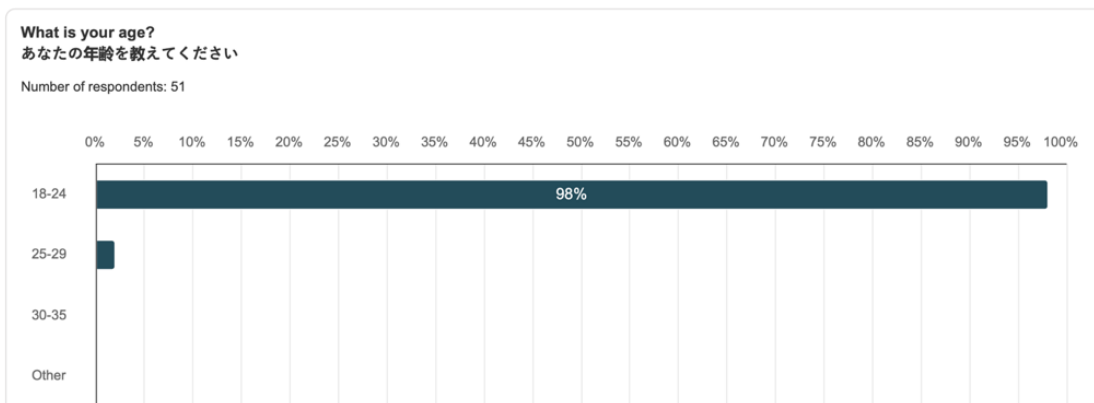


Figure 8. Results of age distribution

6.2 IQ 1 Which platforms are the most effective for digital marketing endeavors in Kansai region?

When examining platform usage, Instagram and LINE emerged as the primary channels for brand interaction, signaling that these platforms are central to reaching this demographic. In contrast, X saw less engagement, indicating that not all social media channels are equally effective for brand communication among Kansai’s youth.

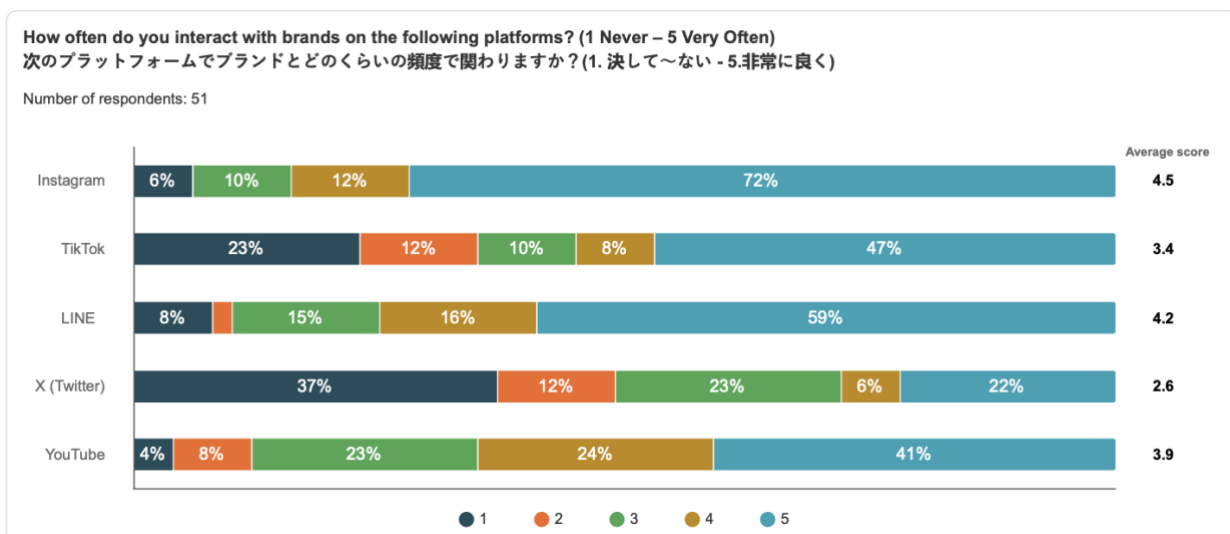


Figure 9. Results of digital platform usage distribution

As for search engine, Google proved to be the most relevant with most respondent stating that it is their primary search tool, which gives an insight on SEO strategies. There was one, responded, however, that misunderstood the question and claimed that they use Safari as a search engine, while it being a browser.

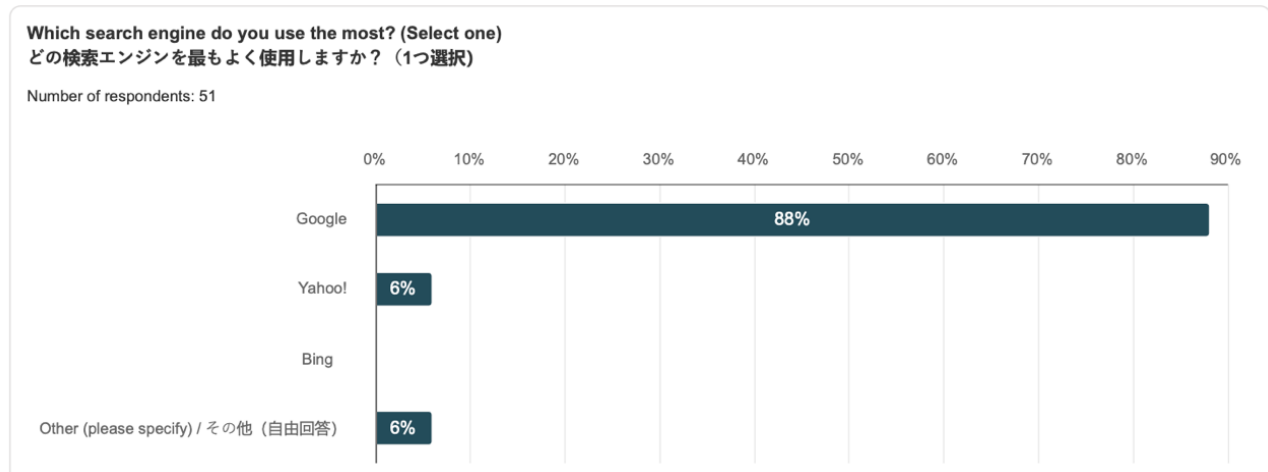


Figure 10. Results of search engine preferences

It has been revealed that Amazon and Rakuten (platforms traditionally associated with e-commerce) product pages are by far the most dominant platforms for online purchases or shopping link clicks among young consumers, with 62,7% of respondents having used these sites in the past three months. This underscores the continued strength and trust associated with established e-commerce giants in the Japanese market, likely due to their comprehensive product selection, reliable delivery and user-friendly interfaces.

Social media platforms, however, are also playing a significant role in shaping purchasing behavior. Instagram stands out as the leading social commerce platform, with 23,5% of respondents reporting purchases or clicks through shopping links, followed by TikTok at 19,6% and YouTube at 9,8%. This suggests that visually driven platforms are increasingly effective channels for product discovery and impulse buying among young consumers, aligning with broader trends of mobile-first and visually oriented shopping experiences in Japan.

LINE, Japan's most popular messaging app, accounted for only 7,8% of purchase activity, indicating that while it is widely used for communication, its integration as a shopping platform may not be as robust or appealing to this demographic. The "Other" category, at 11,8% includes niche or specialized platforms such as Shein and SNKRDUNK which were mentioned multiple times. This points to a growing interest in alternative e-commerce sites, particularly for fashion and sneaker culture.

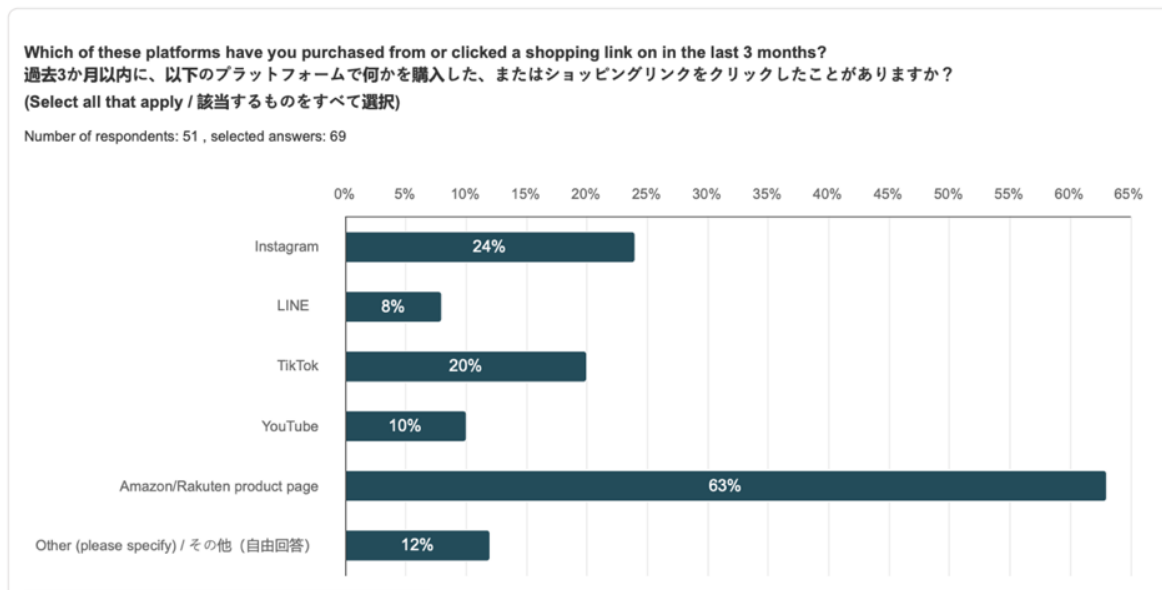


Figure 11. Results of platform that yield most shopping interaction

6.3 IQ2. Which cultural, psychological and visual preferences influence the perception and success of digital marketing among young Japanese consumers?

The survey also explored how young consumers discover new brands and products. Recommendations from friends were the most influential factor, cited by 62,7% of respondents, followed by influencer promotions and attractive design or branding. Online reviews and ads on social media were less influential, highlighting the continued importance of word-of-mouth and peer influence in consumer decision-making.

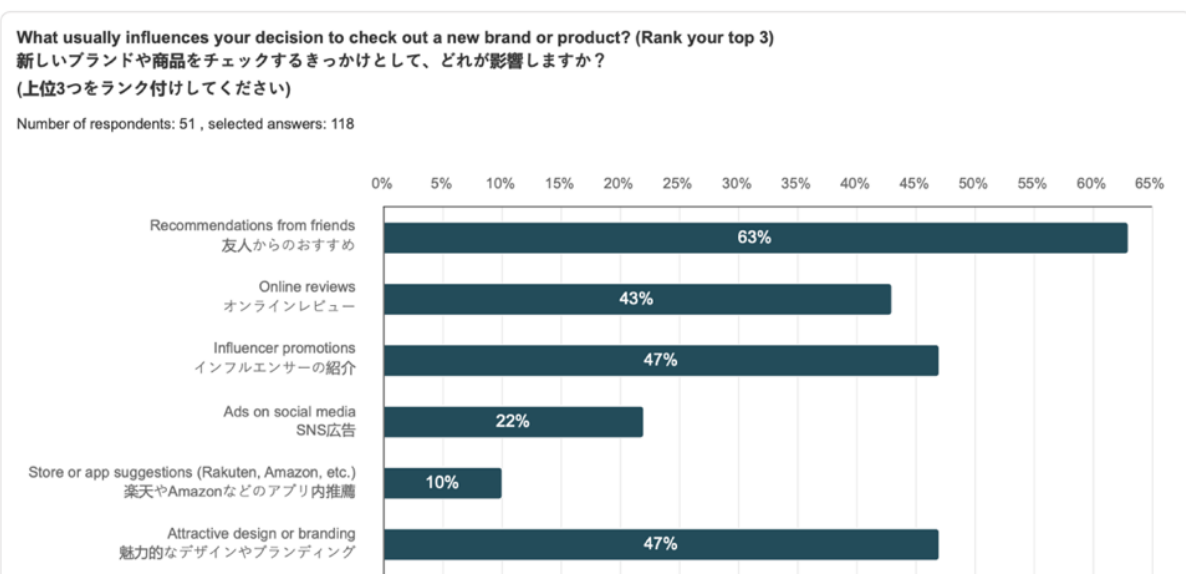


Figure 12. Results of factors influencing consumers to test a new brand/product

The significant portion of young Japanese consumers do not consider full localization – such as translation into Japanese or the use of local cultural elements – to be essential for foreign brands. For example, 60,8% of respondents rated localization as “somewhat important” while only 9,8% saw it as “very important”. In addition, nearly 30% stated that localization was “not important” at all. At first glance, this suggests that many young consumers are open to global branding and may not require extensive adaptation to Japanese language or culture.

However, it is important to contextualize these findings with the reality of English proficiency in Japan. Despite some generational shifts and increased exposure to global media, English proficiency among Japanese people remains relatively low compared to other developed countries. Many individuals, even among younger demographics, are not comfortable navigating content in English and may prefer information in their native language for clarity and confidence.

This suggests that while young, tech-savvy consumers may be more tolerant of minimal localization for simple visually driven purchases – such as fashion or beauty products – they still value clear, accessible information. For more complex products or services, Japanese language support becomes much more important.

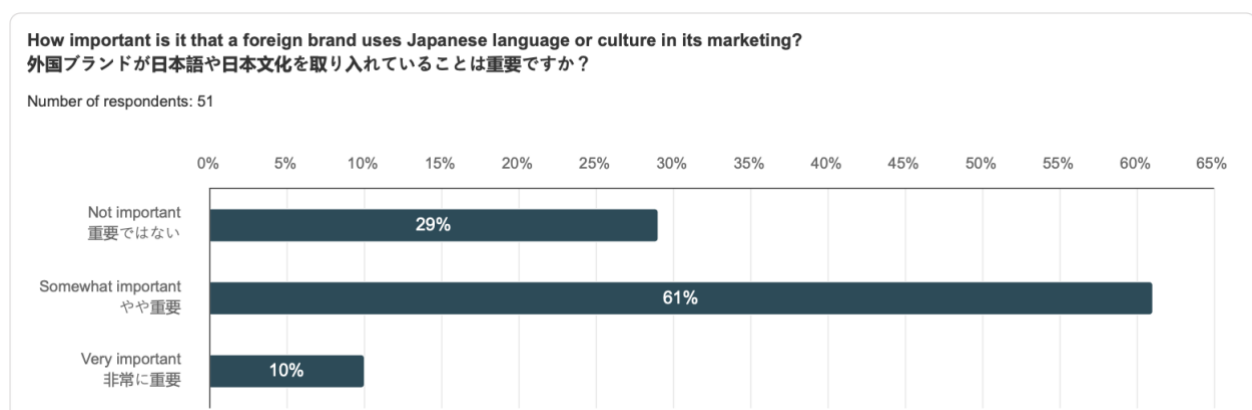


Figure 13. Results of localization importance

When asked to give a deep evaluation on the factors that form brand trust, the survey revealed that when deciding to trust a new brand, young consumers in Japan place the greatest importance to appealing design and branding, with an average score of 4,2 out of 5, and a significant 43,1% rating it as “very important”. Clear and detailed product information and reviews from other users are also highly valued, each with an average score of 4,1 and over 70% of respondents rating these factors as “important” or “very important”. This underscores a consumer preference for transparency and peer validation in the decision-making process (which proves the non-individualistic nature of Japanese society discussed earlier). In contrast, Japanese localization received a lower average score of 3,4, with only 16% considering it “very important”, indicating that

while cultural adaptation is relevant, it is less critical than product clarity and visual appeal for this demographic. Social media presence was deemed moderately important (average 3,5) suggesting that while visibility on digital platforms contributes to trust, it is secondary to product substance and user feedback. Overall, these findings highlight that for young Japanese consumers, trust in new brands is primarily built on strong visual identity, comprehensive product information and credible user reviews, while localization and social media activity play supporting roles.

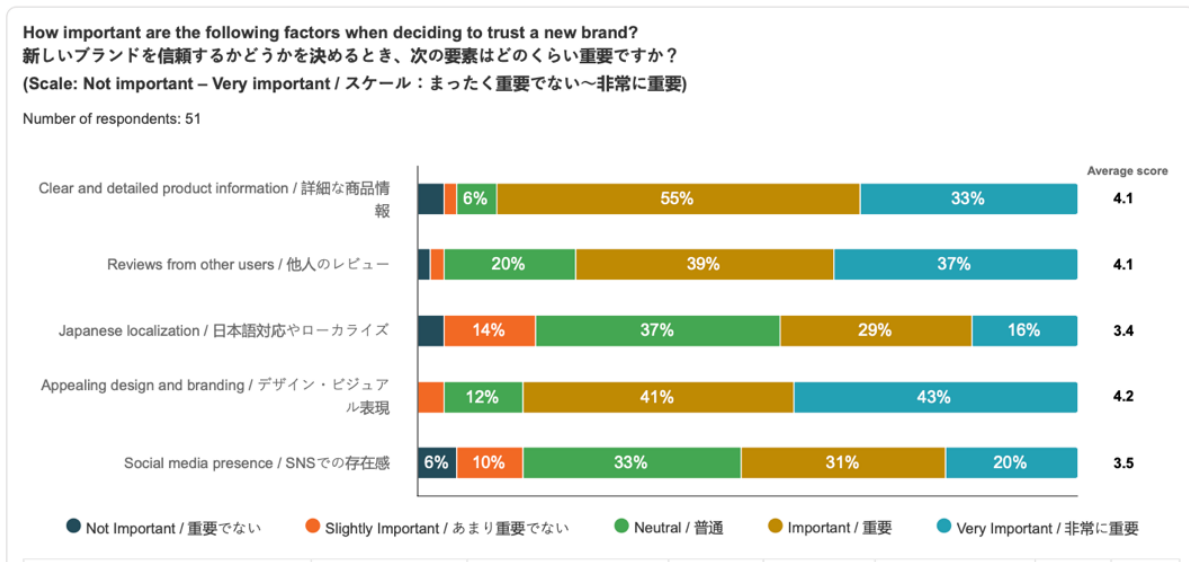


Figure 14. Results of importance degree of factors influencing whether to trust a new brand

6.4 IQ3. Which factors make Japanese consumers to engage with the content?

Content preferences reveal a strong inclination toward video content and visually appealing images, which together capture attention of a significant portion of respondents. User-generated content and interactive elements, while present, were less prioritized, suggesting that young consumers in Kansai value high-quality, brand-driven visuals over community-driven or participatory formats. This preference is further reflected in the factors influencing trust in new brands. Clear and detailed product information, user reviews and appealing design and branding were rated as highly important, with average scores ranging from 4,1 to 4,2 on a 5-point scale. Social media presence and Japanese localization were also considered important but to a lesser degree, indication that while cultural adaptation is valued, it is not as critical as transparency and visual appeal.

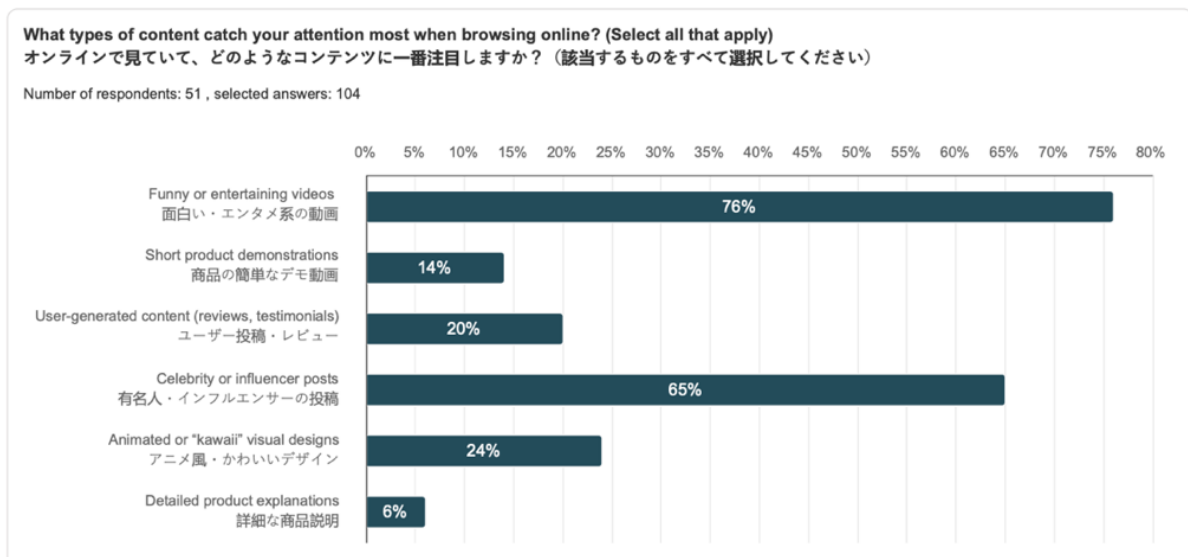


Figure 15. Results of content preferences

The results on brand collaboration preferences reveal nuanced consumer attributes toward endorsement strategies among young Japanese consumers. Most notably, the responses are nearly evenly distributed across three primary categories: Japanese influencers (27,4%), indifference to collaborations (27,5%), and well-known international celebrities (25,5%), indicating a fragmented preference landscape rather than a clear consensus.

The marginally higher preference for Japanese influencers (27,4%) aligns with Japan's cultural tendency toward in-group identification the growing influence of domestic content creators who understand local cultural nuances and communication styles. This finding supports the theoretical framework of cultural proximity in marketing, where consumers respond more favorably to endorsers who share similar cultural backgrounds and values. However, the slim margin between Japanese and international celebrity collaborations (25,5%) suggests that globalization has created a more cosmopolitan consumer base among younger demographics, who are increasingly exposed to and accepting of international cultural influences.

Perhaps most significant is that over a quarter of respondents (27,5%) expressed indifference toward collaborations entirely, indicating that collaborative marketing may have limited impact on purchase decisions for this demographic. This skepticism toward celebrity endorsements reflects broader trends in digital marketing where consumers, particularly younger generations, have developed advertising literacy may prioritize product quality, value and authentic reviews over celebrity assassinations. This relatively lower appeal of anime and manga character collaborations (19,6%) is somewhat surprising given Japan's strong anime culture described marketing in Japan chapter.

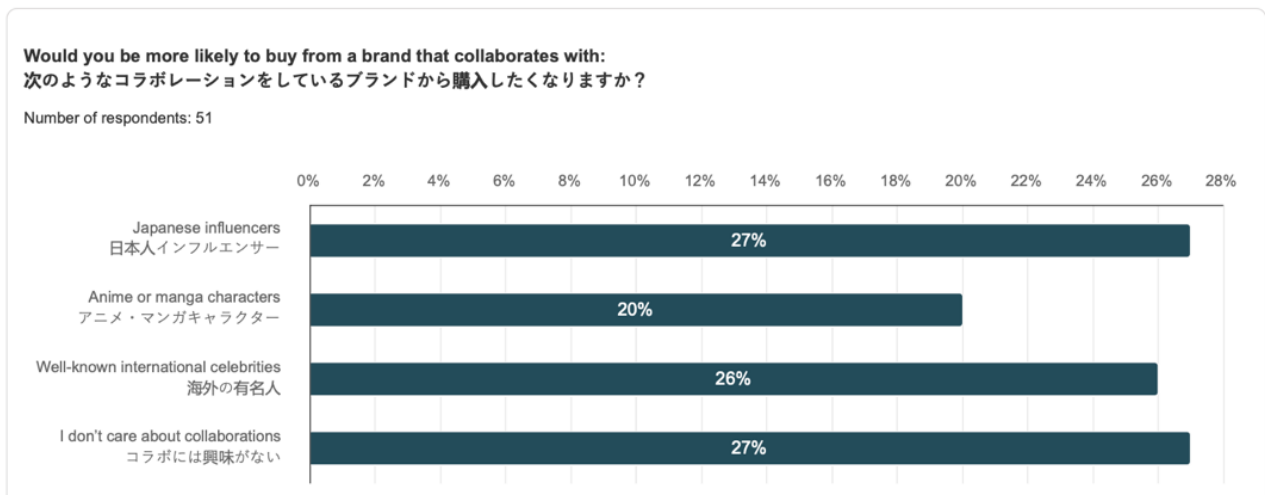


Figure 16. Results of collaboration preferences

The most influential factor when it comes to motivation to share advertisements is whether an advertisement is funny or entertaining, with 27,5% of respondents indicating this as their primary reason for sharing. This suggests that humor and entertainment are powerful drivers for organic ad dissemination.

The second most common motivator is visual appeal, with 25,5% of respondents sharing ads they find “cute or cool”. This underscores the significance of strong, attractive design in capturing attention and encouraging social sharing, which aligns with broader trends in Japanese consumer culture that value aesthetics and creativity.

Practical value and cultural relevance are somewhat less influential but still notable: 13,7% of respondents are motivated to share ads that feel culturally relevant to Japan and an equal percentage share ads they find useful or informative. A substantial portion – 19,6% - report that they rarely or never share ads. This highlights a degree of advertising fatigue or selectivity within the group, suggesting that only content that stands out as particularly entertaining, visually appealing or relevant is likely to be shared.

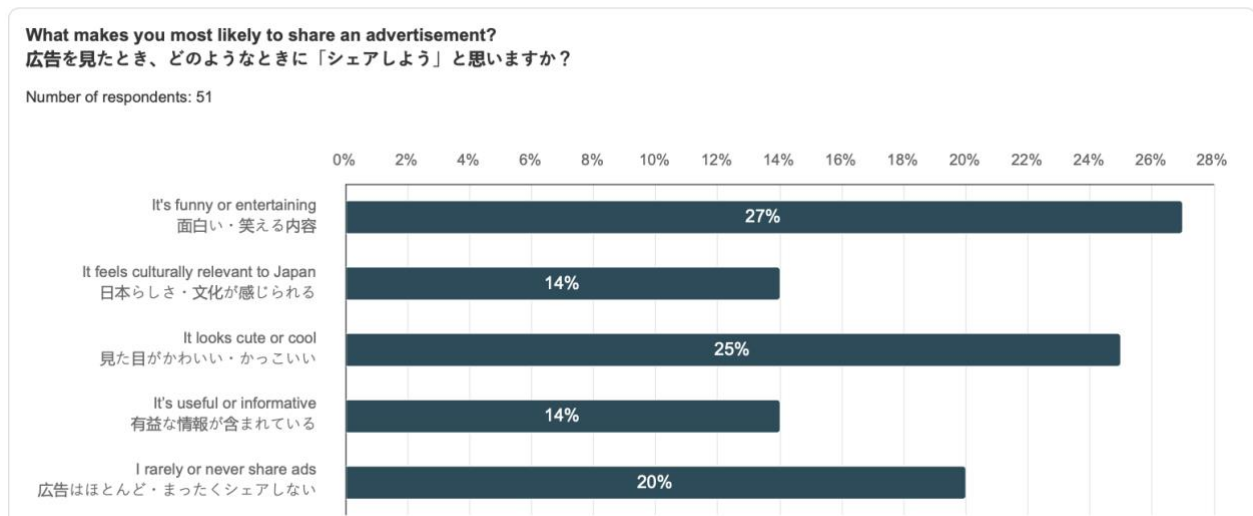


Figure 17. Results of factors influencing content share

6.5 Recent marketing campaign that resonated with young demographic

The responses to the non-compulsory question about recalling recent marketing campaigns are highly varied and, in many cases, lack depth or relevance for detailed analysis. Several respondents simply mention brand or product names (e.g., “Sponge Bob”, “Nike”, “New Balance”, “Nintendo Switch”), without providing any context or explanation as why these campaigns stood out to them. Other reference general advertising formats or platforms, such as “YouTube commercial because I often see it”, or “3D Animation Advertises” which do not offer specific insights into the effectiveness or appeal of the campaigns.

A few answers provide more useful detail. For instance, one respondent highlights the attractiveness of Instagram advertisements due to their structure, and another notes the appeal of advertisements that are “funny” or feature engaging trial games. There are also mentions of visual impact (“the photo conveyed the feeling of moisture really well”), effectiveness for specific needs (“an advertisement that is effective for rough skin”), and the influence of celebrity endorsements and honest reviews, particularly in cosmetics. However, these more insightful responses are in the minority.

Overall, the majority of answers are either too vague or simply list familiar brands without elaboration. This suggest that respondents either do not actively recall memorable marketing campaigns or do not engage deeply enough with advertising to articulate what makes a campaign effective. The lack of detailed or relevant responses may also indicate advertising fatigue or a general indifference toward marketing among this demographic, making it challenging to draw robust conclusions from this particular question. For future research, more structured or guided

questions may be necessary to elicit actionable insights about what constitutes a memorable or effective marketing campaign.

Number of respondents: 18

Responses
スポンジبوب
広告で出てくれるお試しゲームがやってみると面白くてインストールしちゃう！
ツヤファンデーションの広告で、水分っぽさなどの見た目がみずみずしさが写真からすごく伝わった！！
堅苦しくなく、ネットを触る人たちが好きむような、バズる投稿
i think insta advertisement is good since it is sturcture that is attractive
youtube commercial because i often see it
An advertisement that is effective for rough skin. I was just worried, so I thought it was wow.
The onlive performance was partly for free, and the later half needed fee. I purchased it lol
McDonald's ad in X
3D Animation Advertises
ニケ
Nintendo Switchの広告
ニューバランス
私は主に化粧品を買うのですが、有名人などが使っているのを見て正直レビューしているのを見たらとても買いたくなります！！また、有名なキャラクターとコラボしてるのもかなり興味が湧きます！ I mainly buy cosmetics, but when I see celebrities using them and reviewing them honestly, it makes me really want to buy them!! Also, I'm really interested in collaborations with famous characters!
Nothing
特にないです
下げて上げる商法
ない

Figure 18. Free form question results

6.6 Statistical analysis

A statistical analysis was performed to assess how well the survey results from a sample of 51 young adults (98% aged 18-24) in Japan's Kansai region reflect the broader population of 18-35-year-olds in the area. Confidence intervals (Cis) were calculated to quantify the uncertainty associated with generalizing sample findings to the entire population.

For each proportional result (e.g. 62,7% use Amazon/Rakuten), the 95% (meaning that there is 95% confidence that the true population value lied within this range) CI was calculated using:

$$CI = p \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

Where:

p : Sample proportion (e.g. 0,627 for 62,7%)

n ; sample size (51)

1,96: Z-score for 95% confidence level

Table 3. Confidence Intervals for the Survey Results

Question	Sample %	95% Confidence Interval	Population Estimate (Kansai 18–35)
Search Engine Preferences			
Google usage	88.2%	79.3% – 97.1%	~2.8–3.4 million
Yahoo! usage	5.9%	0% – 12.4%	~0–0.4 million
Content Preferences			
Funny/entertaining videos	76.5%	64.9% – 88.1%	~2.3–3.1 million
Celebrity/influencer posts	64.7%	51.6% – 77.8%	~1.8–2.7 million
Trust Factors			
Recommendations from friends	62.7%	49.4% – 76.0%	~1.7–2.7 million
Appealing design/branding	47.1%	33.4% – 60.8%	~1.2–2.1 million
Platform Usage			
Amazon/Rakuten purchases	62.7%	49.4% – 76.0%	~1.7–2.7 million
Instagram engagement	23.5%	11.9% – 35.1%	~0.4–1.2 million
Localization Attitudes			
Somewhat important localization	60.8%	47.4% – 74.2%	~1.7–2.6 million
Not important localization	29.4%	16.9% – 41.9%	~0.6–1.5 million
Ad Sharing Motivations			
Funny/entertaining ads	27.5%	15.2% – 39.8%	~0.5–1.4 million
Rarely/never share ads	19.6%	8.7% – 30.5%	~0.3–1.1 million

Table 3 shows the statistical reliability and generalizability of the survey findings. It quantifies the uncertainty in extrapolating results from the sample to a broader population of 18-35-year-olds in Japan's Kansai region.

Key observations are as follows:

Google usage has a high sample percentage of 88,2%. The 95% CI is 79,3%-91,1%, which is relatively tight for such a high percentage and indicates strong confidence that a large majority of population uses Google as their primary search engine. In contrast, Yahoo! Usage is very low at 5,9% in the sample, with a wide CI of 0%-12,4%. This wide interval, especially reaching down to 0%, suggests that while some in the sample use it, there is considerable uncertainty about its prevalence in the broader population.

Funny/entertaining videos (76,5% sample, 64,9%-88,1% CI) and Celebrity/Influencer posts (64,7% sample, 51,6%-77,8% CI) show substantial engagement. While the CIs are still relatively broad

(due to the sample size), they consistently indicate that a majority of the Kansai youth population values these content types.

Recommendations from friends (62,7% sample, 49,4-76,0% CI) also demonstrate a strong influence. The CI suggests that at least half of the population (minimum 49,4%) is likely influenced by friend recommendations, aligning with findings on social proof.

Appealing design/branding (47,1% sample, 33,4%-60,8% CI) also plays a significant role. This CI indicates that visual aesthetics are important for a substantial portion of the population, but with a greater degree of uncertainty than friend recommendation.

7 Discussion

This chapter provides a critical synthesis of the research findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature, drawing conclusions that directly address the investigative questions of the study. It also outlines limitations, proposes directions for future research, and delivers actionable implications for marketers, particularly foreign SMEs aiming to reach Gen Z consumers in the Kansai region.

7.1 Linking Results to Literature and Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study reinforce and expand upon the existing body of knowledge regarding Gen Z consumer behavior, cultural preferences, and digital platform usage. For instance, the dominant role of Instagram and LINE as marketing channels aligns with the literature on Japanese digital ecosystems, where visual-first content and personalized, conversational messaging are key to engagement (Dentsu, 2023; Chaffey, 2022). The prominence of social validation mechanisms—such as peer recommendations and influencer endorsements—confirms previous studies that highlight collectivist influences in Japanese consumer behavior (Jin, 2023; Hofstede, 2001). From a psychological standpoint, the respondents' preference for aesthetically appealing and informative content supports theories of cognitive load reduction and anchoring effects in high-context cultures (Chen, 2023; Takemura & Yamamoto, 2022). Additionally, the observed risk aversion toward poorly localized or non-transparent marketing content corroborates Hofstede's dimension of high uncertainty avoidance in Japan (UAI = 92). Interestingly, while localization was not rated as essential by most participants, this finding should be interpreted within the context of high visual literacy and implied meaning decoding typical in Japanese communication (Guo, 2023).

The preference for visually rich, short-form content like TikTok and Instagram videos further affirms the shift away from static or text-heavy content among Gen Z, consistent with Zhulal et al. (2024) and Aziz & Ong (2023). Meanwhile, the modest role of LINE in e-commerce conversion—despite its widespread use—suggests a nuanced media ecology, where platform choice depends on the type of brand interaction: trust-building and customer support vs. direct sales

7.2 Limitations of the study

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size (n=51) limits the statistical generalizability of the findings. Although purposive sampling at Kansai Gaidai University ensured regional and age consistency, it may not fully represent the diversity of Gen Z across the Kansai region. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data collection captures only a snapshot in time.

As digital marketing trends evolve rapidly, the preferences and behaviors observed in early 2025 may shift within months. Third, while the questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, the qualitative component was relatively underdeveloped, limiting the depth of insight into complex cultural or psychological drivers.

Moreover, self-reporting bias and the bilingual format of the survey (Japanese and English) may have affected interpretation. Respondents might have chosen socially desirable answers or misunderstood subtle language nuances. Lastly, the exclusion of platform-side analytics (such as Instagram engagement metrics or TikTok click-through rates) limited the triangulation of self-reported behaviors with actual usage data.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should expand the sample size and diversity by including respondents from multiple cities across Kansai and incorporating both domestic and international Gen Z consumers in Japan. Longitudinal studies would provide insight into shifting digital behaviors over time, especially as platforms evolve their monetization models and content formats.

Furthermore, a mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys with in-depth interviews or ethnographic observations would yield richer cultural and psychological insights. Incorporating platform analytics and eye-tracking studies could also offer a more objective measure of content engagement and visual preference.

Research could also explore the impact of emerging formats like augmented reality (AR) and virtual influencers (VTubers) in brand engagement strategies, particularly given their cultural popularity in Japan. Finally, comparative studies between urban and rural areas within Japan—or between Japan and other East Asian markets—could contextualize the cultural specificity of the findings.

7.4 Practical Implications for Marketers

For foreign SMEs aiming to enter the Kansai market, several strategic recommendations emerge:

Visual and Informational Content: Focus on producing visually compelling, professionally designed content that is supported by clear, concise product information and peer reviews. Design matters more than full localization, but clarity and aesthetic harmony are essential.

Platform Optimization: Prioritize Instagram for visual storytelling and TikTok for virality and upper-funnel reach. LINE should be used for customer retention, service, and promotional messaging, but not relied upon as a direct sales channel.

Influencer and Peer Trust: Collaborate with local micro-influencers who resonate culturally and linguistically with Kansai youth. Peer recommendations carry more weight than celebrity endorsements or corporate branding.

Content Style: Use culturally resonant formats such as manga-style illustrations, kawaii elements, or absurdist humor where appropriate. These design strategies reflect local aesthetic codes and enhance relatability.

Risk Reduction Measures: Emphasize return policies, secure payment methods, and local partnerships to reduce perceived risk. In high-uncertainty environments, these trust signals are critical to conversion.

Localized Campaigns: While full translation may not be essential, minimal localization (such as including Japanese UI, date formatting, or culturally familiar references) adds authenticity and improves cognitive fluency.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey questions

Digital Marketing Trends among young population in Kansai region, Japan

 Mandatory questions are marked with an asterisk (*)

1. What is your age?

あなたの年齢を教えてください *

- 18-24
- 25-29
- 30-35
- Other

Next

2. How often do you interact with brands on the following platforms? (1 Never – 5 Very Often)

次のプラットフォームでブランドとどのくらいの頻度に関わりますか？(1. 決して～ない - 5.非常に良く) *

	1	2	3	4	5
Instagram	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TikTok	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
LINE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
X (Twitter)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
YouTube	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. Which search engine do you use the most? (Select one)

どの検索エンジンを最もよく使用しますか？ (1つ選択) *

- Google
- Yahoo!
- Bing
- Other (please specify) / その他 (自由回答)

4. What types of content catch your attention most when browsing online? (Select all that apply)

オンラインで見ている、どのようなコンテンツに一番注目しますか？（該当するものをすべて選択してください） *

- Funny or entertaining videos
面白い・エンタメ系の動画
- Short product demonstrations
商品の簡単なデモ動画
- User-generated content (reviews, testimonials)
ユーザー投稿・レビュー
- Celebrity or influencer posts
有名人・インフルエンサーの投稿
- Animated or "kawaii" visual designs
アニメ風・かわいいデザイン
- Detailed product explanations
詳細な商品説明

5. What usually influences your decision to check out a new brand or product? (Rank your top 3)

新しいブランドや商品をチェックするきっかけとして、どれが影響しますか？（上位3つをランク付けしてください） *

- Recommendations from friends
友人からのおすすめ
- Online reviews
オンラインレビュー
- Influencer promotions
インフルエンサーの紹介
- Ads on social media
SNS広告
- Store or app suggestions (Rakuten, Amazon, etc.)
楽天やAmazonなどのアプリ内推薦
- Attractive design or branding
魅力的なデザインやブランディング

Please select maximum 3 options

Selected options: 0

6. How important are the following factors when deciding to trust a new brand?

新しいブランドを信頼するかどうかを決めるとき、次の要素はどのくらい重要ですか？

(Scale: Not important – Very important / スケール：まったく重要でない～非常に重要) *

	Not Important / 重要でない	Slightly Important / あまり重要でない	Neutral / 普通	Important / 重要	Very Important / 非常に重要
Clear and detailed product information / 詳細な商品情報	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reviews from other users / 他人のレビュー	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Japanese localization / 日本語対応やローカライズ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Appealing design and branding / デザイン・ビジュアル表現	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media presence / SNSでの存在感	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7.

Would you be more likely to buy from a brand that collaborates with:

次のようなコラボレーションをしているブランドから購入したくなりますか？

*

- Japanese influencers
日本人インフルエンサー
- Anime or manga characters
アニメ・マンガキャラクター
- Well-known international celebrities
海外の有名人
- I don't care about collaborations
コラボには興味がない

8.

Which of these platforms have you purchased from or clicked a shopping link on in the last 3 months?

過去3か月以内に、以下のプラットフォームで何かを購入した、またはショッピングリンクをクリックしたことがありますか？

(Select all that apply / 該当するものをすべて選択) *

- Instagram
- LINE
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Amazon/Rakuten product page
- Other (please specify) / その他 (自由回答)

9. How important is it that a foreign brand uses Japanese language or culture in its marketing?

外国ブランドが日本語や日本文化を取り入れていることは重要ですか？ *

- Not important
重要ではない
- Somewhat important
やや重要
- Very important
非常に重要

10. What makes you most likely to share an advertisement?

広告を見たとき、どのようなときに「シェアしよう」と思いますか？ *

- It's funny or entertaining
面白い・笑える内容
- It feels culturally relevant to Japan
日本らしさ・文化が感じられる
- It looks cute or cool
見た目がかわいい・かっこいい
- It's useful or informative
有益な情報が含まれている
- I rarely or never share ads
広告はほとんど・まったくシェアしない

11. Have you recently seen an advertisement that you thought was well-made?

