**Japan and America Sweet Tooth: A comparison of university students’ opinions on sweet shop**

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**Abstract**

Sweet retail sales are the largest in America compared to the world and the largest in Japan within Asia. 78% American students and 97% Japanese students know of good sweet shops to buy sweets from and to recommend to their friends. Sweets have always been consumed on a large scale worldwide. People have different reasons to eat these sweets and where they go to purchase them which can change depending on a country’s society and culture.

For my capstone, I have examined the differences between American and Japanese university students with a conducted survey for their perspectives of sweet shops and what influences these sweet shops’ success. Through this examination, I have been able to tell whether certain components help make a sweet shop business successful and what is appealing to university students. For example, American students go to sweet shops due to the convenient location of the shop and think of quality of the sweets. On the other hand, Japanese students like more of what they see, such as a pretty shop, colorful items and the shop decorations.

**Introduction**

When I traveled abroad to Japan, I noticed how sweet shops were different compared to America. These stores ranged from cake shops to coffee shops to candy stores and anything selling some form of sweet with them. I looked around at the items and wondered how these markets attract its current customer base and how different is the strategy compared to its American counterparts. After researching several literature review pieces, I hypothesized that Americans buy products based on their prices and from many distinct shops to buy sweets. I also hypothesized that Japanese would buy sweets due to the nature of their culture. This would be due to reward themselves after a hard day of school or work and love how cute the products look.

1. **Significance of the Study**

For the past five years, I have run a small business with my sister selling customized orders of cupcakes. I have kept in mind the possibility of going international with my business. I have also studied Japanese culture for a long time, noticing how Japanese are very keen to small details and that Americans focus on bigger projects. I have researched and surveyed how university students view these type of businesses and what makes sweet shops successful.

1. **Research Questions**
2. How do both cultures perceive sweet shops?
3. What influences these sweet shops’ success?
4. **Research Background**

3.1Sugar and Sweet History

Japan and America were introduced to sugar in different times. Japan was introduced to sugar in the 8th century, whereas America was introduced to sugar in the 15th century (Aesang, 2005). Being introduced to it centuries before America was, Japan was able to set its own rules on what sugar should be used for. During the 14th-17th century, sugar was mainly used as medicine. Sugar was also used by rich people for proper tea ceremonies (Nagai, 2003). During the 17th century, America utilized its land to cultivate sugar cane before Japan did in the 18th century. America was also able to open a sugar refinery in 1689. Japan opened its first sugar refinery in 1880, but had to shut down and reopen ten years later. This was due to the land being used not being as fertile to cultivate sugar properly (Nagai, 2003).

3.2Sugar Consumption

According to the most recent census, America’s population is 320 million compared to Japan’s 127 million ("United States Census Bureau", 2015). America consumes 10.2 billion kg (22.2 billion lbs) of sugar while Japan consumes 2.3 billion kg (5.07 billion lbs) of sugar. Using these numbers, it is calculated that for every American consuming 31.9 kg (70.3 lbs) of sugar, a Japanese is consuming half of that, at around 18.5 kg (40 lbs). Recent studies have shown that Japan’s culture has a tendency to cut down on its intake of sugar to not make things “too sweet” (Nagai, 2003).

3.3　Sweet Market Success

Both the United States and Japan have sweet retail sales as important factors of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2008, the GDP for America was $14.58 billion and Japan was $4.849 billion (US Real GDP by Year, n.d., "Japan - Gross domestic product (GDP) 2014 | Statistic", n.d.). In the same year, America made $28 billion in sweet retail sales, making them the largest market in the world ("United States Confectionery Market January 2009", 2014). Japan also did well as the largest market in Asia, making $9.1 billion in sales in 2008 (Japanese Confectionery Market Overview”, 2010). However, both of these countries do the same in sweet retail sales both being around 19% in respect to their GDP’s.

3.4　Cultural Views

America demonstrates selling sweets very well as it is the largest market on Earth. It is also known as the “sweetest” country globally. However, cultural views show a difference of how people feel about buying these sweets. A majority of Americans are used to hearing the phrases “sucrose” and “high-fructose corn syrup” are bad for one’s health (Drewnowski, A., & Levine, A. S., 2003). Americans do find that particular items that can only be found in a sweet shop are more expensive than they expect.

Japan goes on the opposite scale of sweetness by having a restrained sweetness flavor on their sweets. Japan is culturally known to express its seasons in many different ways, one of those being sweets. This equals to having sweets represent each of these season, giving more of a variety and appealing to Japanese who like sweets for their appearance rather than their flavor. (“和菓子を育てた日本独自の砂糖「和三盆」を訪ねて”, Nippon.com, 2015). Japanese tend to buy sweets as a reward as well, being seen as a sign of luxury ( 村上, 陽子, 2009).

3.5　Sweet Buying Influences

There are many different buying influences for both cultures. Americans tend to buy products that are really colorful and stand out to them (Anonymous, Snacking popularity expands confectionery opportunities, 2001). As mentioned before, Japanese like sweets for their appearance, although more delicate and simple from American’s taste (村上, 陽子, 2009). A big buying influence for both cultures is convenience. Americans prefer to have on the go access of sweets while Japanese tend to just focus on the closest location to buy sweets, which is usually a convenience store (Murakami, Sasaki, Takahashi, & Uenishi, 2009).

Both cultures have shown an interest in trying sweets other than just their own respective countries. According to recent studies, Japanese pop culture influence is interfusing with the U.S., translating to stores selling more Japanese related sweets and flavors (Kelts, R, 2006). The same goes for the Japanese, although the term “The West” was coined for anything considered “new and advanced” (Tamari, T, 2006). This includes buying products they feel has a western view to it. Common examples are American stores that are visited by Japanese on a daily basis, such as the Garrett Popcorn Shop in Harajuku and Krispy Kreme Donut shops all over Japan (Tamari, T, 2006).

1. **Research Method**

In order to understand how students felt about sweet shops by both countries, I created and sent out an online survey. Using google forms, I was able to ask a set of English questions to American University students and the same set translated to Japanese for Japanese University students. I was able to survey 37 Japanese and 37 Americans, a total of 74 students. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-26 years old for both cultures. The genders divided for Japanese to 19 males and 18 females, and for Americans to 13 males and 24 females. Out of all the participants, I needed to know how much they liked sweets in order to see who pays attention to what they buy. Out of the 74 respondents, 89% of Japanese and 92% of Americans see sweets positively.

1. **Survey Findings**

5.1  Research Question 1: How do both cultures perceive sweet shops?

First off, I asked where do university students go the most to buy sweets. I found that Americans and Japanese students go to other places more often than sweet shops. The number one place students go is supermarkets, followed by convenience stores. However, all students can identify with at least one sweet shop to answer the rest of the questions.

In my survey I asked if certain items in a sweet shop grabbed the student’s attention. I found that Americans are more into the colorful products themselves, whereas Japanese focus more on the overall store environment. However, both countries love store decorations.

In addition, both feel that familiarity is helpful, especially familiar taste. Americans found that recognizing a familiar brand is helpful versus Japanese finding new taste to be helpful. More sweet shop factors were presented to the students to what is helpful for influencing the decision to go to a certain sweet shop. For Americans, quality is number one, whereas advertisements is not helpful at all. For Japanese students, the location is helpful, whereas recommendations from others is least helpful.

I found out that the number one reason that students from either culture do not go to sweet shops is because they do not know many. There are more reasons that differ for either country. Americans feel guilty eating unhealthy food. Also, they have sweets bought for them, eliminating need to go to sweet shops. Japanese feel that sweet shops are seen as womanly, by both Japanese males and females. The image they see is often a negative one.

To summarize my research question 1 survey findings, I found that students know the allure of sweet shops, seeing them very inviting with how they are decorated and what colorful items they have. However, few sweet shops are known by both cultures. Many students can buy sweets at other places, such as supermarket and convenience stores.

5.2  Research Question 2:  What influences these sweet shops’ success?

When I asked students who they visited sweet shops with, I found that for both cultures, it was the same amount of influence from friends, family, and even going independently.

I then asked what students thought was noticeable about sweet shops. I found a strong 95% of Americans find quality to be most noticeable. Japanese found quality and service to be equally important. Both countries pay attention to service being important as service makes a long impression for a customer to return to any store.

I then asked the students what they liked and what they disliked about sweet shops in general. Both countries responded strongly of products being what attracts them most to a sweet shop. However, both countries also agreed that the price was something they disliked.

This makes sense as students do not spend much money on sweets. The average spending on sweets is $5(500 yen) a week for both countries.

I was able to test my hypothesis by asking students certain statements I provided and seeing which ones they can relate to more. Between buying sweets is affordable, a luxury, or whether it is bought as a reward, Americans strongly agreed with the statement “Buying sweets is affordable. Japanese, however, strongly agreed with both “Buying sweets is affordable” an “I buy sweets as a reward”. Both countries selected what I hypothesized they would pick.

I moved on to questions wondering how would both cultures feel about trying new sweets in the past and how they would feel trying items in the future. I asked how Americans felt about *Anko* and how Japanese feel about Oreo. These two sweets are not commonly known by both cultures. Both countries are very interested in trying new flavors, either past or future tasting. The reason behind trying new flavors is because both cultures are very curious of trying new flavors. However, 69% Japanese have a bit more curiosity, versus 51% of Americans.

For my studies, I also asked if a new sweet shop opened catering to both their own counties sweets and another’s countries sweets, if they would be interested in it. Overwhelmingly, both cultures responded that they would be very interested in trying and visiting this new sweet shop.

To summarize my research question 2 summary findings, I found that both have equal influences to go to sweet shops due to family and friends. Sweet shops more successful due to quality of products for both Americans and Japanese. However, service is also important for Japanese. I found that the products themselves are what people like, but not their prices. Americans focus more on prices whereas Japanese see sweets more as a reward and pricing.

1. **Conclusion**

In conclusion, both American and Japanese students seem to appreciate sweets in general, and how bright and colorful sweet shops are. Sweet shops are stereotyped to have good quality products at a high price. Because student buying budgets are low, they do not attract university students well. However, students are curious to try other flavors, both past experiences and new ones offered to them. This study has been very useful for me for when I go back to Japan.

1. **Limitation of the Study and Future Study**

I had a certain limitation of this study. I only collected data from where my friends lived, instead of comparing urban versus rural. This affects the availability of sweet shops around certain areas. However, I am continuing this study in the future as I am going back to Japan as I got accepted through JET. If I open a sweet shop to cater both cultures, it would be popular due to the curiosity to try new sweets but also have familiarity of their own sweets as well.