Use of Memes: A Comparison Between Japan and America

Heather O'Connell and Quenton Montgomery-Fletcher

California State University, Monterey Bay

Abstract

Today, the internet is an integral part of daily life. The internet provides access to the far reaches of the world at anytime from anywhere, as well as allows for creative forms of expression. Internet memes are a form of expression found on the internet. Through the use of memes, internet users can share their unique emotions and opinions. In our research, we asked the following questions: What are the differences in Japanese and American students' perceptions and opinions on memes? What cultural differences influence the variety of memes created in Japan versus America? From the survey we conducted with Japanese and American university students, we found that although both Japanese and American students are familiar with memes from their own cultures, American students are more familiar with memes in comparison to Japanese students. American students think of memes from a broader perspective with the ability to spread culturally, while it appears that Japanese students' perception of memes as merely amusing images is strong. However, we found that both Japanese and American university students tend to share amusing memes rather than memes that spread a message.

Introduction

In the modern era, social media has become an integral part of people's digital lives. Through social media people are able to express and convey their own personal ideas and opinions to others both to entertain others as well as inform. What sort of message people wish to convey to others seems to be highly dependant on their country of origin. But what influence does one culture actually have on preferred forms of entertainment and messaging? How much do these preferences actually change between country to country? Do people's motivations really change that much in different countries?

1. Significance of the Study

Quenton became interested in Japan's usage of social media and user created content. He wanted to know how Japan's pop culture influenced their usage. While studying abroad, he found that various types of social media became popular. Heather was interested in the development of memes, so she wanted to know more about memes created in Japan. While studying abroad she also found unique Japanese logo and poster designs. Because she is a

Communication Design major, she wants to know more about the design points of America and Japan, and their differences. Because we have an understanding the of popularity of memes, we wanted to learn more about their common features and differences.

2. Research Questions:

1) What are the differences in Japanese and American students' perceptions and opinions on memes?

2) What cultural differences influence the variety of memes created in Japan versus America?

3. Research Background
3.1. Definition of a Meme

The word Meme's root comes from the ancient Greek word "Mimema" meaning "something imitated" (Börzsei, 2013). Meme's pronunciation is /mi:m/. Meme's broad definition is the posting, sharing, and remixing of digital content to communicate jokes, emotions, and opinions (Rosa-Carrillo, 2015). In Börzsei's study, it is said that the materials memes are created from are "unique phrasings," "personal photos," "famous images," and "events in news" (2013).

Successful memes—called "meta-memes" or "memeplexes"—construct the overall belief system and fall within a currently acceptable set of norms, standards, beliefs, or practices for a given context (Waddock, 2015). Memes have a 35.47% chance of being successful, but a meme with a high number of competitors and a low peak has the highest chance of being successful (Coscia, 2013).

3.2. Meme Examples

There are two main types of memes. The first is "High-fidelity static memes" which are replicated with very little variation, and the second is "Remixed memes" which are replicated via evolution, adaptation, and transformation of the original (Knobel, 2005). The most widely used type of meme is the "image macro," which is a type of meme where an image with superimposed text contains a witty message or catchphrase (Börzsei, 2013; Rosa-Carillo, 2015).

The meme "Qi Attack" or "Hadokening" is an example of meme evolution. It's based on the invisible qi-force attack used by characters in the game *Street Fighter* and anime *Dragonball Z* (Know Your Meme, 2016). The original was posted on Twitter Japan, from which the western adaptation, then the Gamer, Star Wars, Music, and other variations emerged.

3.3. History of Memes

The history of internet memes begins in the 1980s. In 1982, Scott Fahlman created emoticons, which is said to be the first meme. Emoticons were both fun to use as well as able to express emotions and ideas (Börzsei, 2013). In 1986, Yasushi Wakabayashi and binbou created the first emoticons in Japan (Suzuki, 2007). In 1989, Richard Dawkins was the first to use the word "meme," defining a meme as "an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture."

Next comes the 1990s. At the start of the 1990s, Adobe Photoshop was first released, making layered images easier to create, which also affected the spread of internet memes. In 1997, Dino Ignacio created the "Bert is Evil" meme, which became the first modern remixed meme. In the following year, Photoshop made superimposing text on top of images much easier. Furthermore, Photoshop's "Save for web" function allowed users to change the image size and quality specifically for internet use (Börzsei, 2013).

Next comes the 2000s. Thanks to improved user interface in Photoshop, anyone could easily create memes. In addition, the increase in personal internet connectivity also made sharing content online more common. In 2006, the amount of pet-related pictures uploaded online sparked the creation of a variety of animal memes (Börzsei, 2013). In 2009, usage of the word "meme" to describe internet memes arose in regular language (Rosa-Carrillo, 2015).

Finally comes the 2010s, when memes addressing social issues began to be created, which allowed authors to share their personal opinions, call others to action, and convey ideas to fight against issues. In 2012, websites dedicated to cataloging memes began also arose, such as memes specific to a certain university community (Börzsei, 2013).

3.4. Memes & Social Media

Americans mainly use Facebook, while Japanese people simultaneously use LINE, and Twitter (Statista, 2016). The origins of where a specific memes are created are not clearly defined. Of all 15,425 recorded internet memes, those tagged as specifically "Japanese" or "American" are estimated at a low 11% with the reasoning being that memes are spread throughout the world (Know Your Meme, 2017).

4. The Study

4.1. Demographics

In this study, we surveyed 80 college students. In total there were 40 Japanese students (18 male, 22 female) and 40 American students (18 male, 20 female, and 2 other).

4.2. Research Method

The survey was conducted through online survey in both Japanese and English, with each survey consisting of 23 questions.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Question 1: What are the differences in Japanese and American students' perceptions and opinions on memes?

To answer this research question, a we asked numerous questions. Figure 1 shows responses for the first question, "What is the best definition of an 'internet meme'." American students primarily chose the broad definition, while 30% of Japanese students chose the false definition.

**Figure 1: What is the best definition of an "internet meme"?**
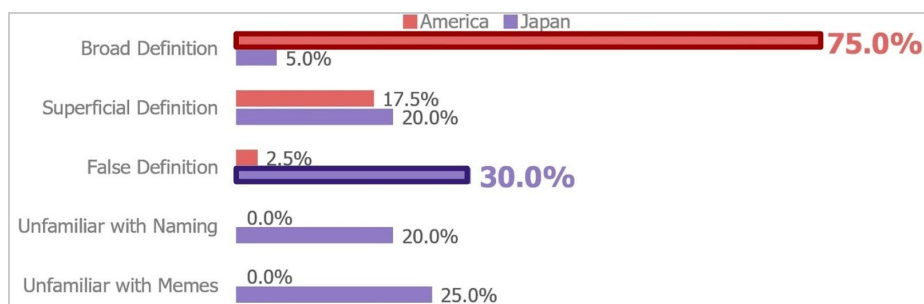
For the question, "Where did you get your definition of an internet meme?" 88% of American students answered that they developed it over a long period of time, while around 48% of Japanese students responded that they got their definition from the internet (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Where did you get your definition of a meme?
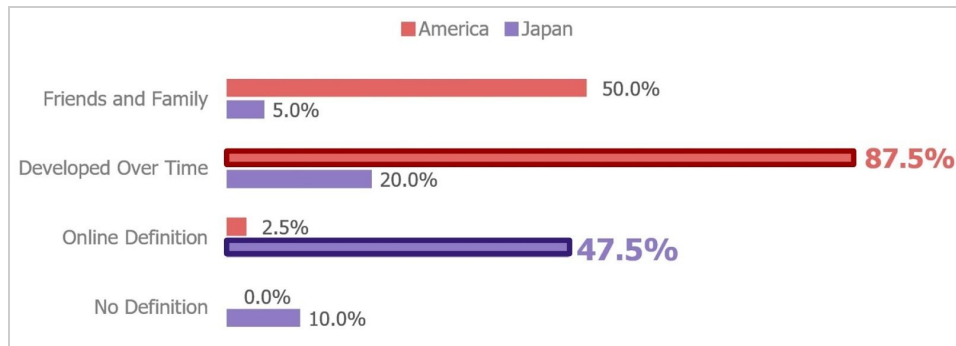
In the question "How familiar are you with memes?" 60% of American students answered they are very familiar with memes, while about half of Japanese students answered they were unfamiliar with memes (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: How familiar are you with memes?
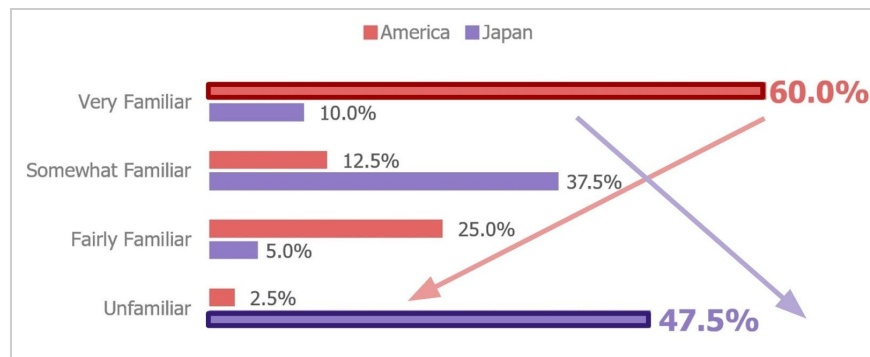
In "How many memes do you recognize?" students selected memes from a selection of both American and Japanese meme examples. Using Figure 4, it was apparent that Americans recognized many memes. It also demonstrated that Americans recognized American related

memes more than others. Japanese students answered that they had some familiarity with memes with Japanese related memes being the most recognizable to them.

**Figure 4: How many of these memes do you recognize?**
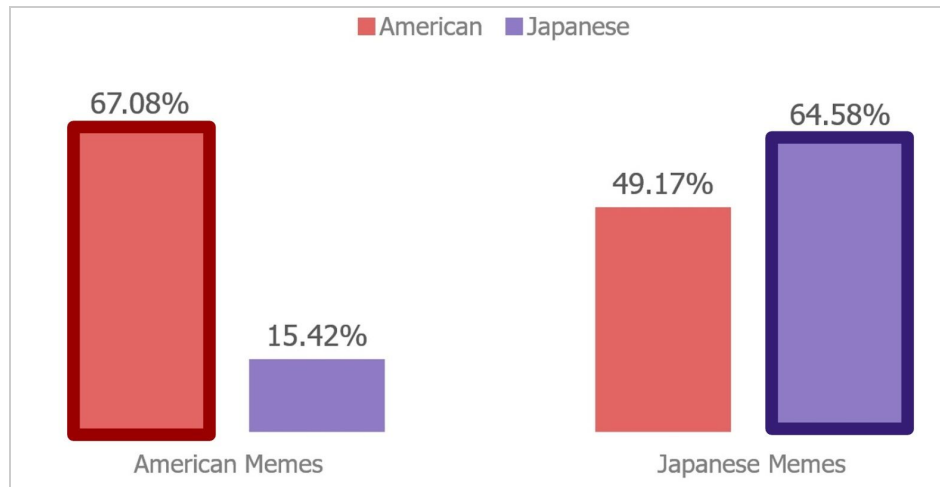
In "How many times have you shared internet memes?", 43% of American students answered that they have shared a meme more than 20 times. On the other hand 53% of Japanese students answered they have never shared a meme (See Figure 5),

**Figure 5: How many times have you shared internet memes?**
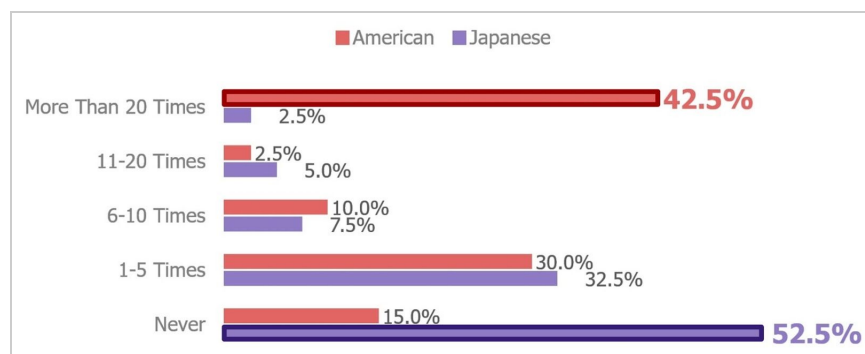
Concerning what type of memes, "makes you laugh" memes were most popular for both American and Japanese students. Americans as a whole were more interested in sharing memes (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: I would share a meme if it…
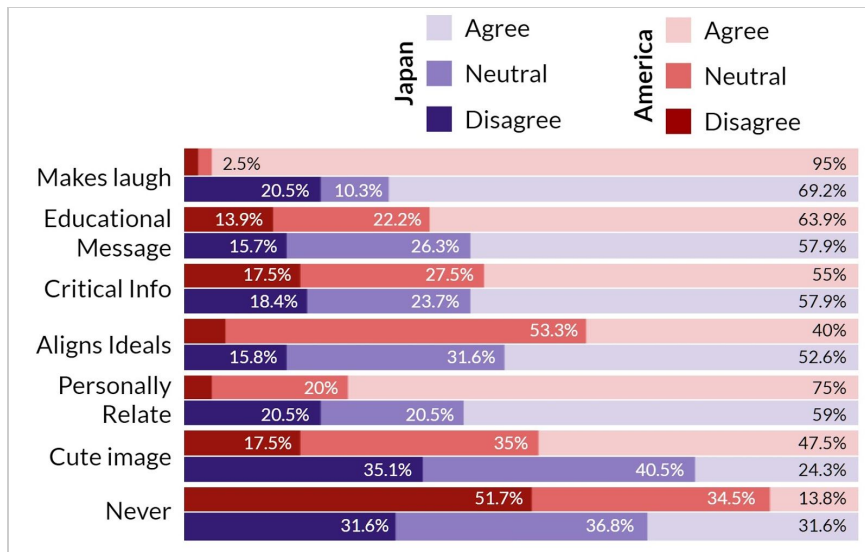
Japanese students answered that the foremost purpose of memes was "to make you laugh," while American students felt that memes have various purposes (See Figure 7).

**Figure 7: What do you think is the purpose of internet memes?**
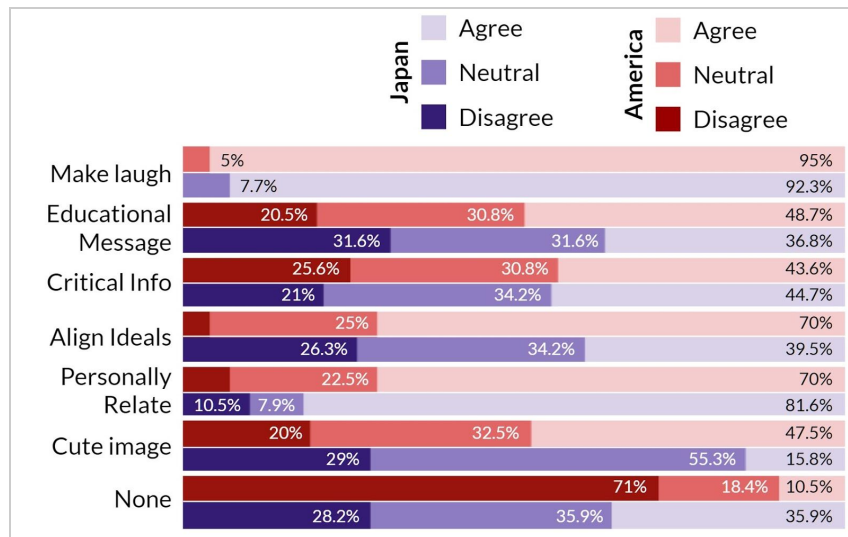
Using Figure 8 for the results of the question, "Do you think internet memes are just as popular in Japan/America?" both in Japan and American students answered that they thought memes are "probably popular" in their opposite countries.

Figure 8: Do you think internet memes are just as popular in Japan/America?
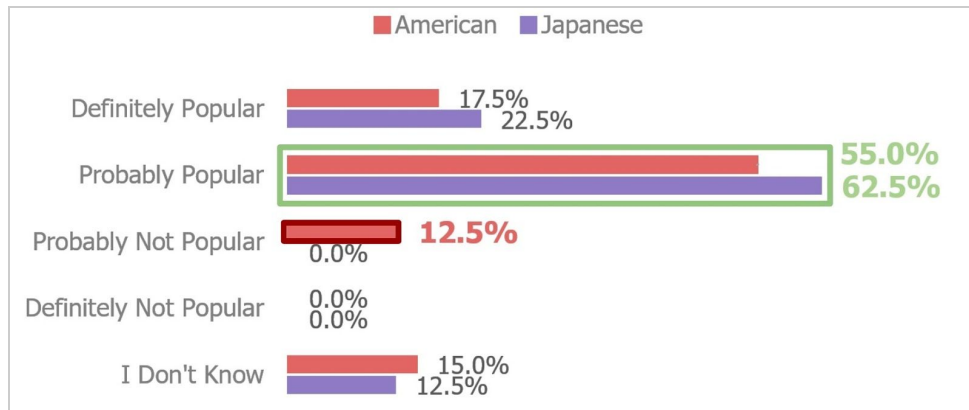
In "Why do you think memes are popular in Japan/America?" two separate answers were mainly given: "Memes spread infinitely online" and "Meme humor is universal" (See Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Why do you think memes are popular in Japan/America?**
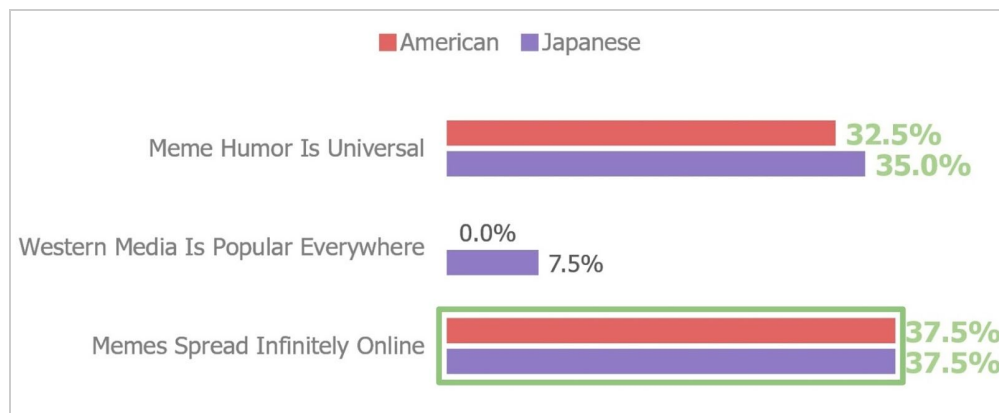
In the question "Why do you think memes aren't popular in Japan/America?" only 5 American students answered the question with 60% answering "meme content is country

specific" and 20% answering either "Japan uses different social media" or "meme's aren't relevant" (See Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Why do you think memes aren't popular in Japan/America?**
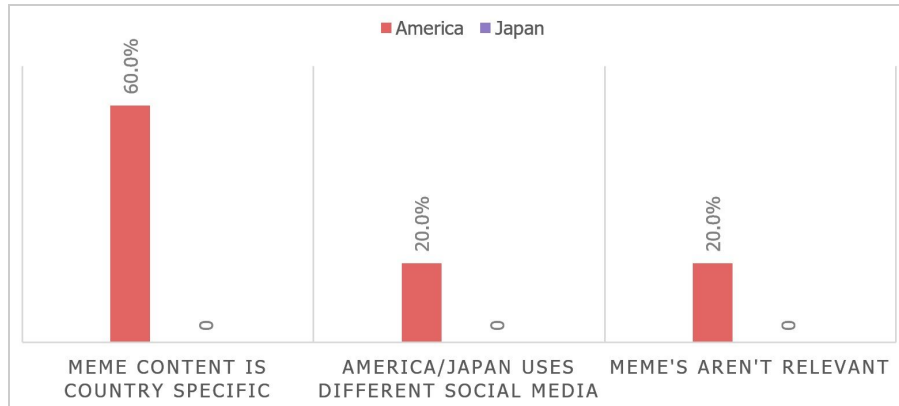
5.2. Research Question 1 Summary

Because memes are still a new concept, in America they have diffused more allowing for broader definitions and beliefs in purposes to occur. Memes also tend to reflect the culture of their country of origin, with knowledge of the country's culture needed to understand the meme's meaning.

5.3. Research Question 2: What cultural differences influence the variety of memes created in Japan versus America?

Concerning this research question, firstly, it is understood that Japanese and American students see memes mostly on Facebook and Twitter (See Figure 11).

Figure 11: Where do you see memes the most?
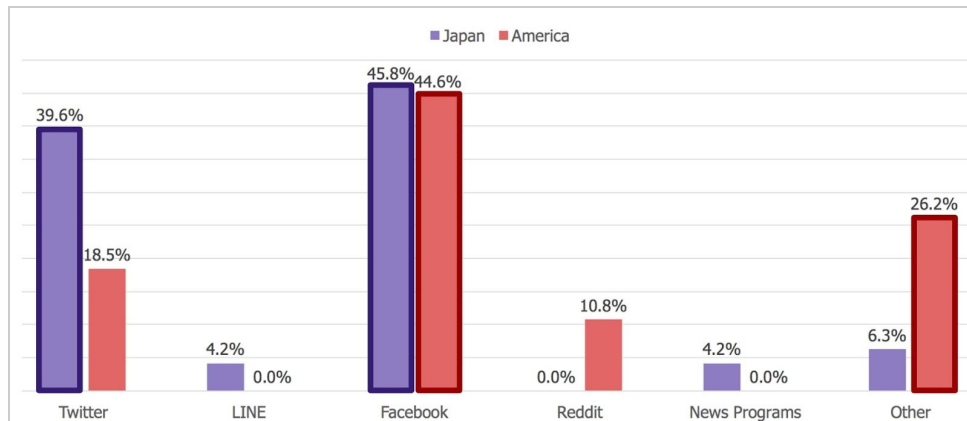
For the question, "How often do you see internet memes?" 60% of American students answered they see memes several times every day, which is four times the amount of what Japanese students answered they see (See Figure 12).

Figure 12: How often do you see internet memes?
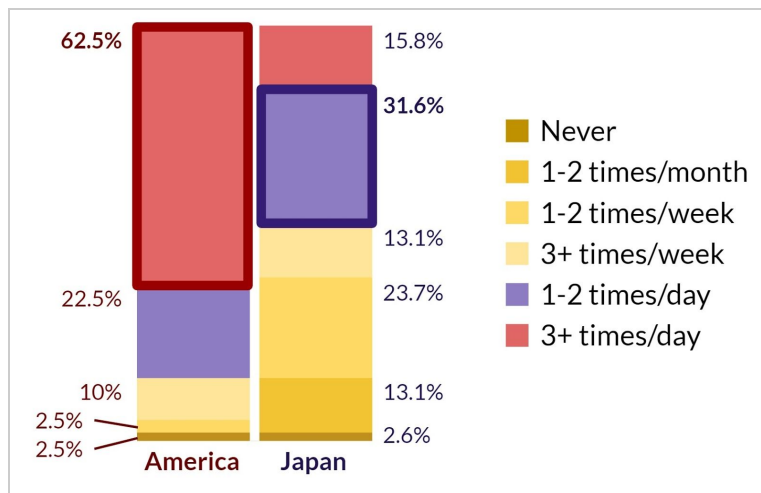
The following three questions concern five types of memes. In "What types of memes do you see most often?" the most seen memes were different for both Japanese and American students. American students responded with an even 20% spread in each category, while Japanese students answered with 50% seeing viral media types of memes the most (See Figure 13).

Figure 13: What types of memes do you see the most often?
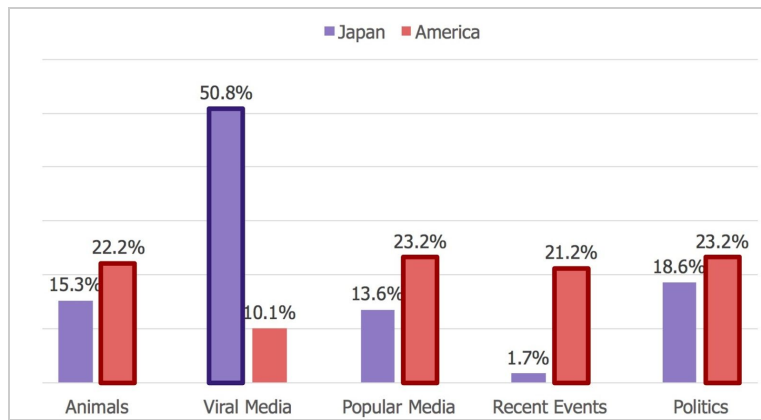
Using Table 1, both Americans and Japanese students stated that their number one favorite types of memes are those related to animals. While there very few Japanese students who stated they didn't like viral media memes, most American students answered that viral media memes were their most disliked type.

Table 1: What types of memes do you like?

Japan		America	
Like	**Dislike**	**Like**	**Dislike**
Animals	Politics	Animals	Viral Media
Viral Media	Popular Media	Popular Media	Recent Events
Popular Media	Animals	Recent Events	Politics
Politics	Recent Events	Politics	Animals
Recent Events	Viral Media	Viral Media	Popular Media

For why they liked those types of memes, both countries answered that their top three reasons were "make you laugh," "personally relate," and "has an educational message." Although Japan is known for its "cute culture", "has a cute image" was the least answered reasoning for Japanese students (See Table 2).

Table 2: Why do you like those types of memes?

Japan	America
Make laugh	Make laugh
Personally relate	Personally relate
Educational message	Educational message
Critical Info	Ideals Align
Ideals Align	Cute Image
Cute Image	Critical Info

The reasoning for disliking that type of memes was the same for both American and Japanese students, the reason being they "don't personally relate" to the meme (See Table 3).

Table 3: Why do you dislike those types of memes?

Japan	America
Don't personally relate	Don't personally relate
Don't align ideals	Don't make laugh
No critical info	Don't align ideals
Don't make laugh	No critical info
No educational message	No educational message
No cute image	No cute image

In, "What is the overall attraction of memes to you?" both countries showed the same trend (See Figure 14). In short, both in America and Japan felt a sense of community in memes.

Figure 14: What is the overall attraction of memes to you?
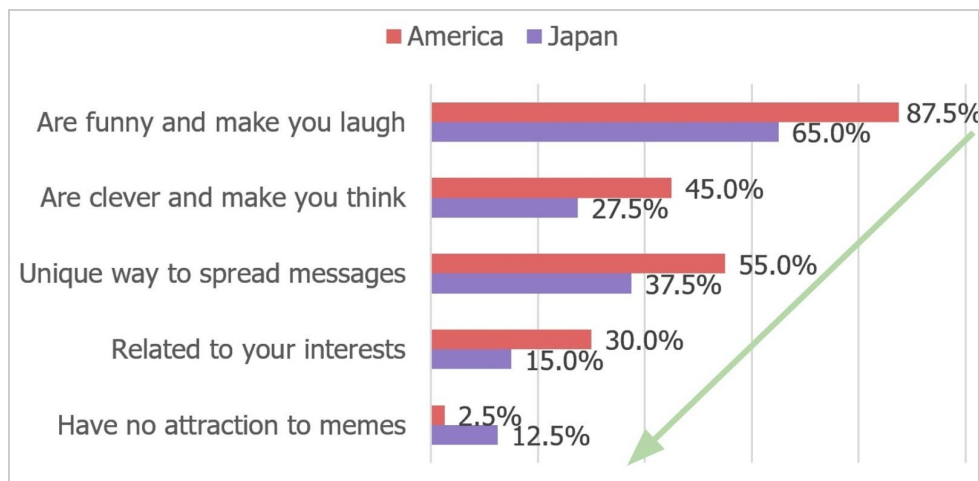
5.4. Research Question 2 Summary

In summary for research question 2, it can be seen that memes have diffused throughout the world, with Japan primarily being exposed to viral media type memes, and America being exposed to various types. However, in both countries, animal related memes were the most favourable. Still, in Japan politically centered type memes were the most disliked while in America viral media type memes were the most disliked, with the reasoning that reflected the culture of favoring personal freedom to choose. However in both countries, the reasoning for liking specific memes remains the same with "makes you laugh", "can relate personally" and "has an educational message" being the most important reasoning, illustrating that "personal relation" culture crossover between both countries.

6. Conclusion

In Japan, memes are just starting to spread while in America memes already have prior history of usage meaning that the types of memes created and liked are more clearly defined. In both countries a sense of community in liking "funny types" of memes can be seen with the types of memes liked being dependent on the country's culture. Japanese students disliked politically related memes, while American students looked for memes that freely expressed one's own feelings, which is most likely caused by the American culture of respecting one's own

feelings. This difference in culture also affects what types of memes are shared. Because internet memes are able to be shared instantly throughout the world, gradually the world will began to share a broad point of view while difference of point of view will still be able to be seen. Because of this, memes are a barometer of the global society.

7. Limitations of the Study and Future Study

For limitations of this study, the study was limited to college students only, so the data may not be generalizable. In Japan, there is limited existing research on memes so collecting data on Japanese usage is difficult as well as our unfamiliarity with Japanese internet culture. In the future we would like to know more about the origin of memes within Japan, research into the usage of stamps and similar image macros and discover what their correlation is with memes, as well as research what cultural values influence entertainment preferences.

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