

Cultural Projections of Career and Success: A Comparative Study between the US and Japan

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Abstract

This comparative study examines the cultural projections of career and success in the US and Japan, by looking what college students considered to be success through their post-college plans. A survey allowed me to collect data from 72 people: 37 American and 35 Japanese. Analyzing the responses, I looked at how the two cultures perceive success from an assumption that the US has been labeled as individualistic and Japan as collectivistic. I came to find that social expectations had a stronger influence in shaping perspectives of individualism in the United States, while in Japan, family and friends had a stronger influence toward collectivist ideas of success. Interestingly, of my college student participants, both American and Japanese students had said that 75% did not measure their success based on material possessions. In terms of describing successful people, results among American respondents showed that the words 'self-motivated' and 'driven' prevailed, while surveys of Japanese students reported 'aggressive' and 'creative' as most widespread.

Introductions

My initial interest in this topic of 'success' came from the last five years of being a college student. Whenever the topic or thought came to mind 'what am I going to do after college', all I would say or think is that I 'wanted to succeed'. Even then, it left me with a certain amount of vague meaning. It was during my time abroad when I got to meet people of different backgrounds and different nationalities. Not only were we concerned about post-college career plans, but we all seemed to have different ideas of what 'success' meant to one another and how each of us measures it.

1. Significance of the Study

As I'm about to graduate, what is it that other college students view as success in their future endeavors? I'm curious as to what both cultures look in their future careers. In terms of success, I want to find out what is most important between American and Japanese cultures, and through my case study I want to find out about cross cultural perceptions of success and successful people.

2. Research Questions

1. What drives people to pick their career based on the factors around them? Is there a difference between the US and Japan? How different are the choices?
2. Does success differ from a culture that has been labeled as individualistic versus one that is labeled as collectivist and how is it measured? How have surrounding factors influenced these concepts?
3. What characteristics and aspects are most relevant to a successful person?

3. Background Research

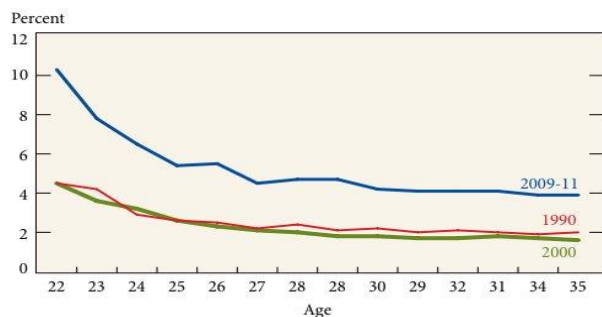
First, I will look at the definitions of success. Then I shall proceed onto the topic of career and unemployment in both American and Japan. That will be followed by ‘America and Individualism’ and ‘Japan and Individualism’.

3.1. Definition of ‘Success’

Kojien defines success as “achieve a goal”, “get work done: do your job” and “from nothing, gain position and wealth”. Meriam-Webster defines it as “favorable or desired outcome” and “the gaining of wealth or fame”. While having different initial definitions, both share a common definition for gaining wealth (Iwanami Shoten 1991, Merriam-Webster 2006).

3.2. Career and Unemployment Data for the US and Japan

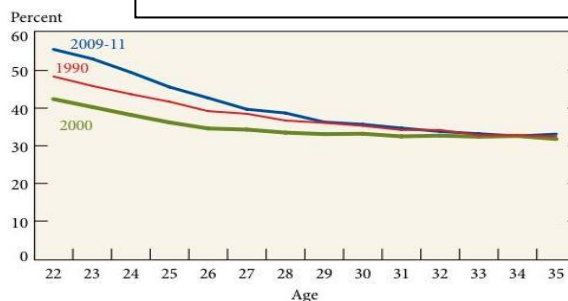
Figure 1: Career: Employment and Unemployment Data



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey.

Figure 2

Career: College Students’ Degree and Employment Relation



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census and American Community Survey, U.S. Department of Labor, O*NET.

Looking at Figure 1, the percent of unemployed recent college graduates in 2009 - 2011 was higher than it's been over the past two decades: it has doubled compared to the data

line '1990'. Looking at figure 2, the data shows the correlation between the recent college grads who do have jobs, but are working in fields that don't require their degree. The data shows that the percent, has increased about 20% since the year 2000.

Figure 3

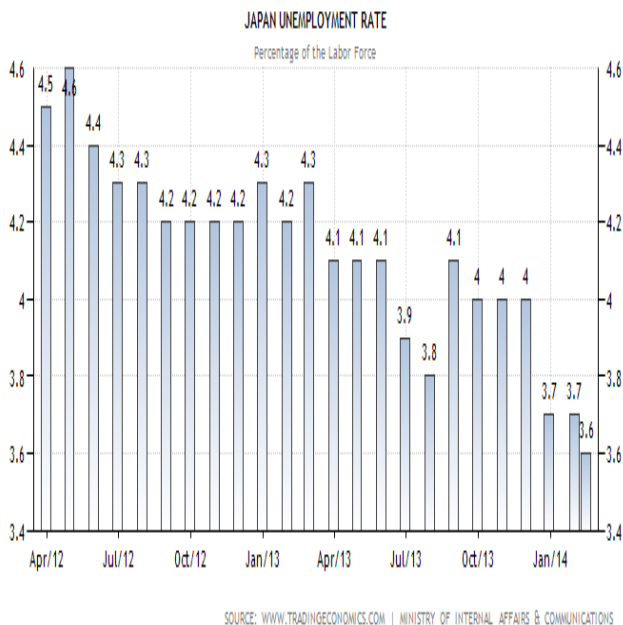


Figure 4

Table 4. Employed recent college graduates by degree, occupation, industry, and class of worker, October 2011
[Levels in thousands]

Characteristic	Total, recent college graduates	Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree
Total employed, ages 20 to 29	995	793	202
Percent distribution	100.0	100.0	100.0
Occupation¹			
Management, business, and financial operations	14.0	11.6	23.2
Professional and related	47.9	42.7	68.3
Service	12.7	15.3	2.3
Sales and office	19.1	23.1	3.7
All other	6.3	7.3	2.4
Industry²			
Goods-producing	6.4	7.8	1.1
Wholesale and retail trade	10.3	10.0	11.7
Financial activities	6.1	6.7	3.7
Professional and business services	16.0	14.1	23.7
Educational and health services	41.8	38.5	54.9
Educational services	22.2	20.2	30.4
Health care and social assistance	19.6	18.3	24.6
Leisure and hospitality	9.0	11.2	.3
Public administration	3.4	3.2	4.0
All other industries	6.9	8.5	.6
Class of worker³			
Government wage and salary workers	17.5	15.4	25.7
Federal	2.5	2.1	4.3
State	8.6	8.3	9.7
Local	6.4	5.0	11.8
Private wage and salary workers	81.7	84.0	72.9
All other	.8	.6	1.4

On the other hand, if you look at Figure 3, Unemployment Rate in Japan has decreased to 3.60 percent in February of 2014. The rate is still 3 points below its peak in 2008, and around 24,000 graduates are believed to remain jobless. Yet, when compared to the provided data to the US, the situation in Japan is better.

Moving onto occupation, 47.9% of recent graduates in the US in 2011 found employment in Professional and related based jobs. By industry, about 2 in 5 recent graduates in the 2011 cohort found work in educational and health services.

Figure 5

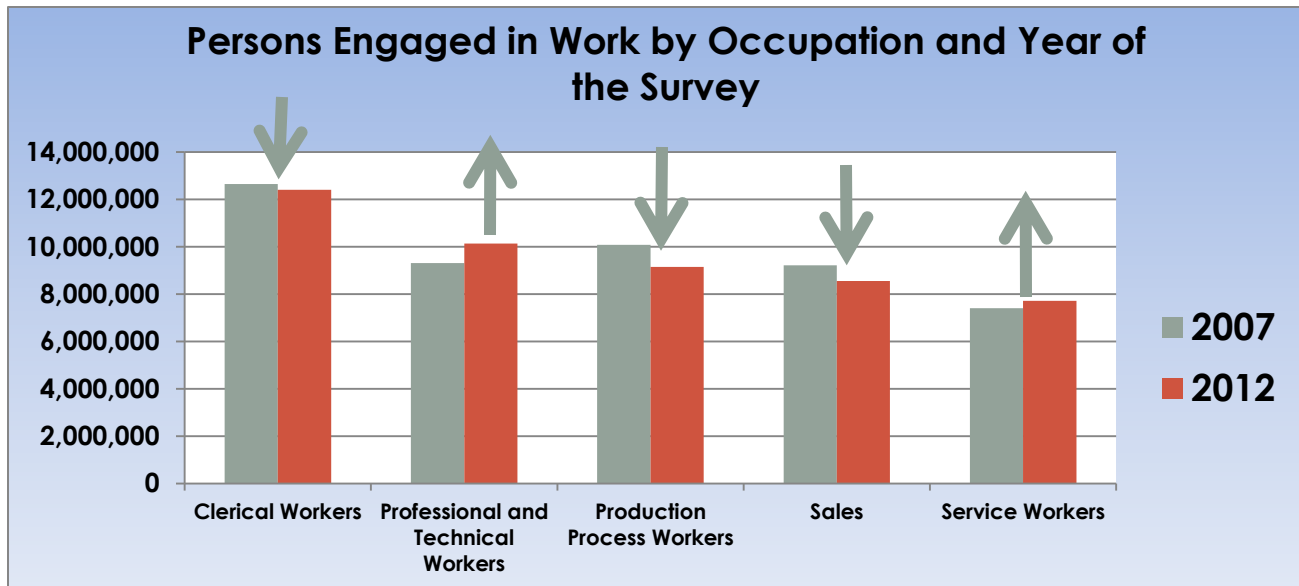


Figure 5 shows the recent trends in occupation in Japan between 2007 and 2012. Of the 64 million surveyed, The most filled occupation is Clerical Workers at around 12 million people. Between this time, ‘Professional and Technical Workings’ and ‘Service Workers’ have increased while ‘Production Process Workers’ and ‘Sales’ have decreased.

3.3. Analysis of The American Dream and Modern Success

From here, we will start talking about the concept of the American Dream and success. *The American Dream* by Cullen claims that the American Dream’s basic roots started with the Declaration of Independence. “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”. Then, as America turned into the 19th century, (Cullen, 2003) supports that “modest beginnings became an indispensable bedrock for distinction.” In the book, Cullen marks two examples from two historical figures: President Jackson and Preside Lincoln. President Lincoln, born from the backwoods in Illinois, was able to become the 16th President of the United States.

The American Dream has had four primary concepts that define the periods between the 17th Century and 21st Century. Upward Mobility: one could realize the fruits of one’s own aspirations through applied intelligence and effort. Equality: over-coming

racial and economic differences. Home Ownership: working hard to save enough money to obtain ownership of the house and the land it's on. The Coast: Rather than working hard, enjoy the quantity over quality of resulted effort (ex investing). This concept is more 20th and 21st century-based (Cullen, 2003).

The actual term 'American Dream' was first coined in the year 1931. The word is less than 100 years old, but the goal has been there since the start. It was the quote "every man can become a millionaire" that started the trend toward people's increased benchmark for monetary-based success (Samuel, 2012). By the 1960s, (Hartford Courant, 1963) claimed that "The American dream used to be a chicken in every pot and car in every garage, then It was a swimming pool in every backyard, but now, apparently, it's a golf course viewed through the picture window"



Recently, there was an article by TIME Magazine in August 2013 that talked about how "overall happiness didn't include having kids, but rather financial stability". Money is still of high importance, but 21st century thinking seems to be less concerned about having kids.

3.4. Japan's Success: Modern Concepts

Japan's Bubble Economy during the 1980s and 1990s was a period of high economic growth and prosperity. Many middle-class young people became millionaires during the IT bubble age in late 1990s and fit the term Nari Agari (成り上がり). Nari Aagari were people who had suddenly earned higher economic status, but not gained social acceptance of others in that class, mainly concerning age and experience. It was then this group of people started to call themselves "winners" in society (kachigumi). The concept of Kachigumi started during 1970s and started to spread among the country from the late 1990s to early 2000s. Young people could not become rich and successful in Japanese age-based social structure. Certain business fields ignored socially stratified business structure in Japan.

Kachigumi translates into "winning-group". You are considered in "Kachigumi" when you obtain something that's of high social value, such as money, or a really

attractive partner. When imagining someone who represents “Kachigumi”, it’s common to image someone whose white collar. The concept isn’t limited to just those who would be seen as business people, but for example, someone who worked hard to get onto the professional soccer team would be seen as Kachigumi. Alongside Kachigumi, the word “Makegumi” exists, which means “losing group. One is considered Makegumi when there is an unfulfillment of goals or social norms compared to people in your circle. Makegumi is a form of person benchmarking it isn’t a social label that the Japanese give one another. Rather, you put yourself into Makegumi if you feel dissatisfied with your accomplishments compared to those who you are comparing yourself to. (Yamada, 2007). Such examples include career and marriage. For example, if 3 of your friends are married, and you yourself haven’t, then one would consider themselves Makegumi.

3.5. America and Individualism

According to (Bellah 1991) "the good society is one in which individuals are left free to pursue their private satisfactions independently of others." The American Dream Emphasizes individual achievement and self-fulfillment. (Bellah, 1991) (George, 2007) claims that "...so much of our early success in life depends upon individual efforts. "We spend our early years trying to be the best. To get into West Point or General Electric, you have to be the best. That is defined by what you can do on your own."

4. Research

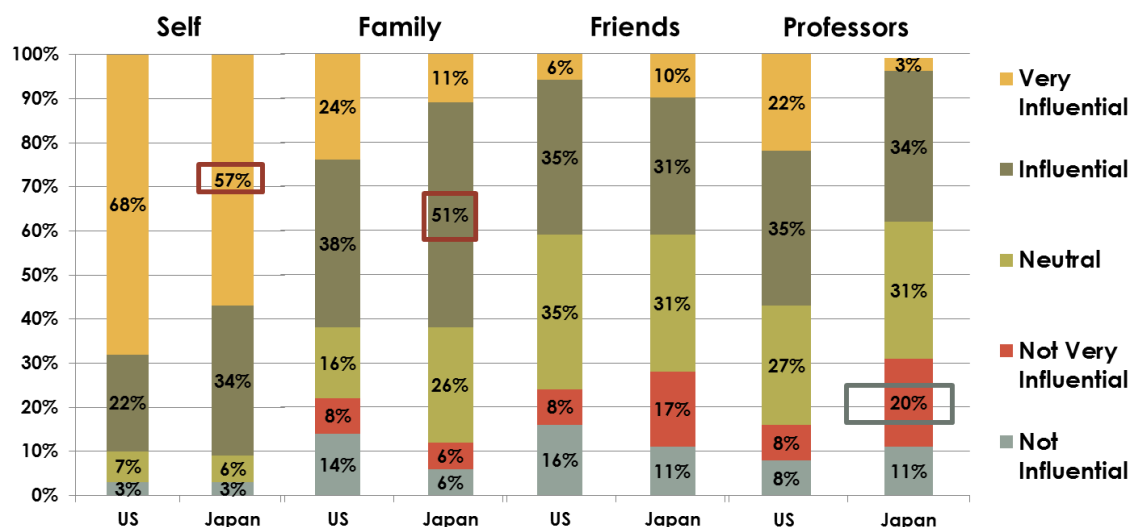
4.1. Participants

There were a total of 72 participants, 35 Japanese and 37 American. I conducted the survey through the use of Google Docs and was able to distribute the survey through social media resources.

5. Survey Analysis and Results

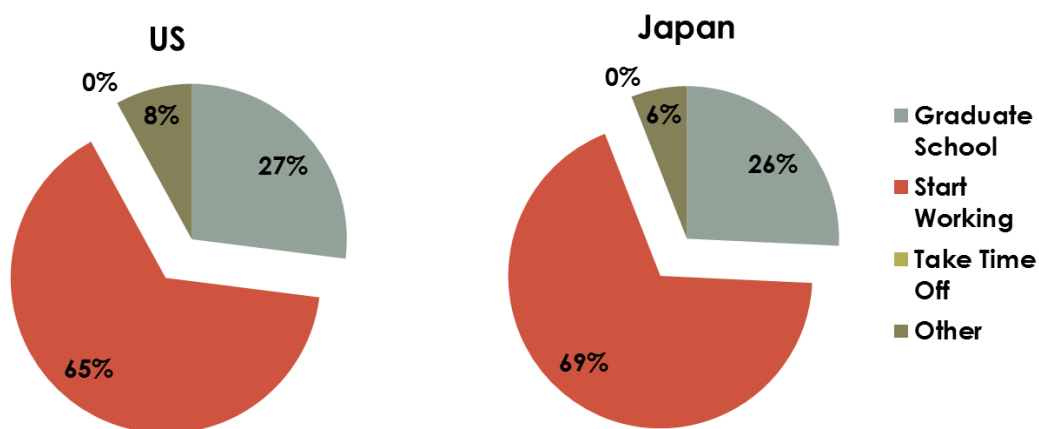
5.1. Research Question 1: What drives people to pick their career based on the factors around them? Is there a difference between the US and Japan? How different are the choices?

Figure 7: Influences on Future Career Plans



From figure 7, when asked “what degree do the following influence your career plans?”, both American and Japanese students equally answered “myself”. Japanese students’ results answered “family” more while American students’ answer was more toward “professors”

Figure 8: Post-college Plans



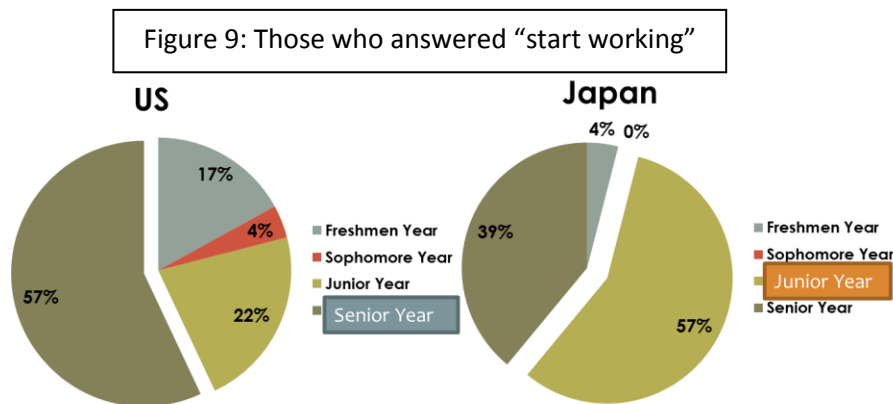
When asked what both college student’s plans were post-college, both answered a majority of “start working”.

The ‘other’ answers from the American students’ results included:

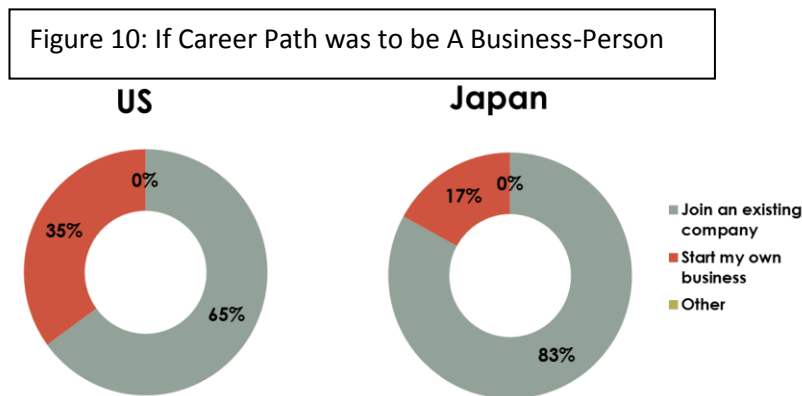
- Military
- Paramedic School
- Teaching Credentials

The Japanese students’ other result was:

- Undecided



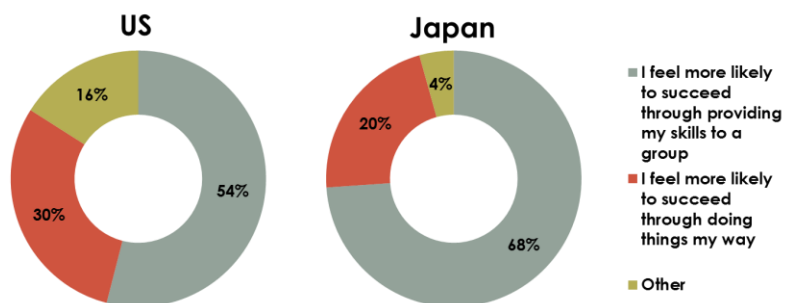
Based on the previous data on Figure 8, for the 70% who answered “start working”, According to Figure 9, American students started looking for employment during their fourth year of college while a majority of Japanese students start looking during their third year.



In the survey, there was a question to base the concept of individualism and collectivism based on career path. When asked hypothetically if they were to become a business-

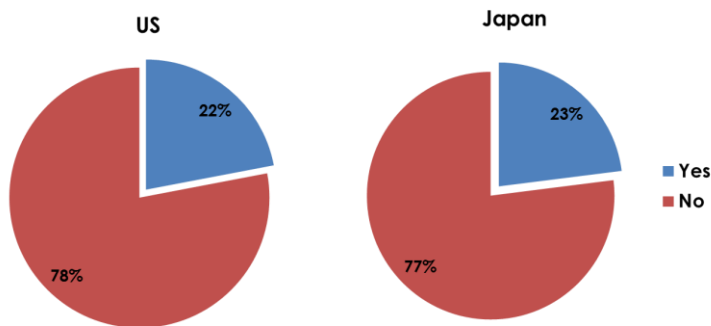
person, I asked “would you rather join an existing company or create your own company from scratch”, according to Figure 10, both were in favor of joining an existing company. However, it is apparent that American students did show a bit more favor toward starting their own company, showing more tendencies toward individual-based beginnings.

Figure 11: Supporting Reason for Figure 10



The follow up question to the previous data about joining a company or starting your own asked for the reason to their thinking. Both students found more confidence in being able to achieve success through attributing their skills and abilities to an organization, rather than doing things through their own applied effort. This seems to be supporting a form of opposition toward the information I gathered on American Individualism, but compared to the Japanese students’ response, it’s still higher.

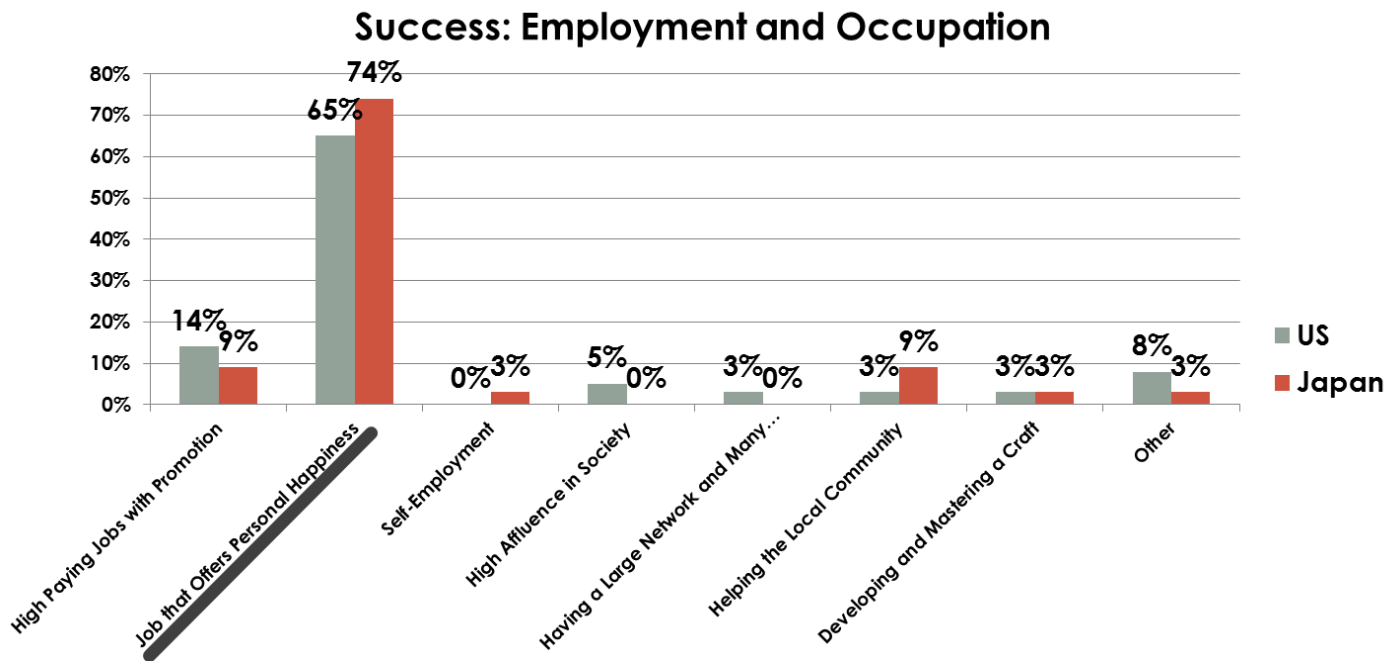
Figure 12: Material Possession and Success



Next, when asked if students measure their success through material possession, both students show interesting results of “no”. It seems that based on these results, there is proof that modern

students don't find success through material possession, unlike the data found in my background research about the American Dream in the 1960s.

Figure 13:



When asked to pick one of the following that will represent 'success' through employment and career, looking at Figure 13 shows that both Japanese and American students chose the "job that offers personal happiness". While this does provide rather interesting insight into what students look for, the depth of reasoning is lacking. Rather, it may be necessary to look at what both cultures value in terms of 'quality of life' or 'quality of job' in order to ascertain a more concrete answer

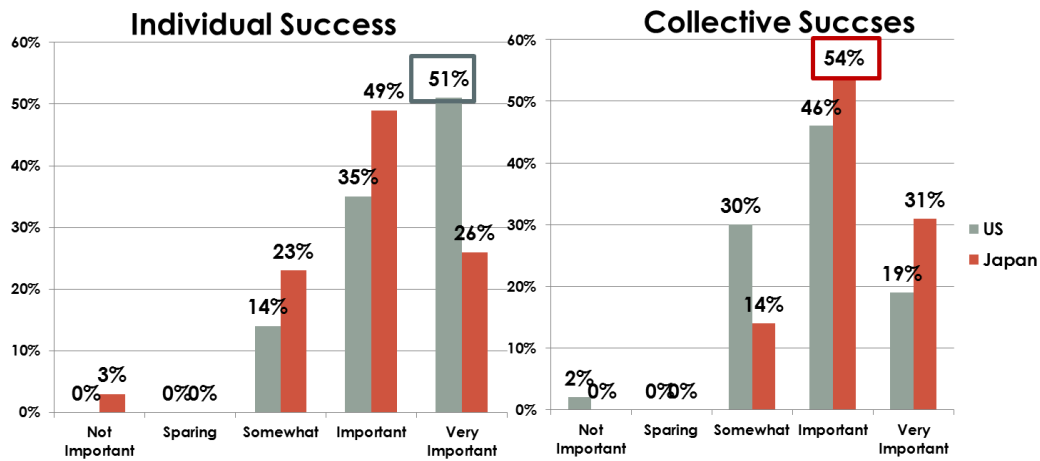
5.2. Research Question 1 Summary

Both students are planning to start working after college, but Japanese students start looking sooner than American students. Even though the unemployment rate is decreasing in Japan, the competition is still strong and Japanese students start early, even though data in my research shows that the unemployment rate is higher in US for college students. Both Japanese and American students, if given the situation of becoming a business-person, would choose to join an existing company would be able to feel success

through providing their skills rather than doing it on their own. In terms of success and career, both students show high favor of a career that will provide personal happiness while also not showing much emphasis on representing their success through material possessions.

5.3. Research Question 2: Does success differ from a culture that has been labeled as individualistic versus one that's labeled as collectivist and how is it measured?

Figure 14: Important of Individual and Collective Success



In

the survey, both students were provided a brief definition of individual success and collective success. When asked after reading the definitions how important they were, Figure 14 shows that American students value individual success while Japanese value collective success.

Figure 15 Influence on Individualism

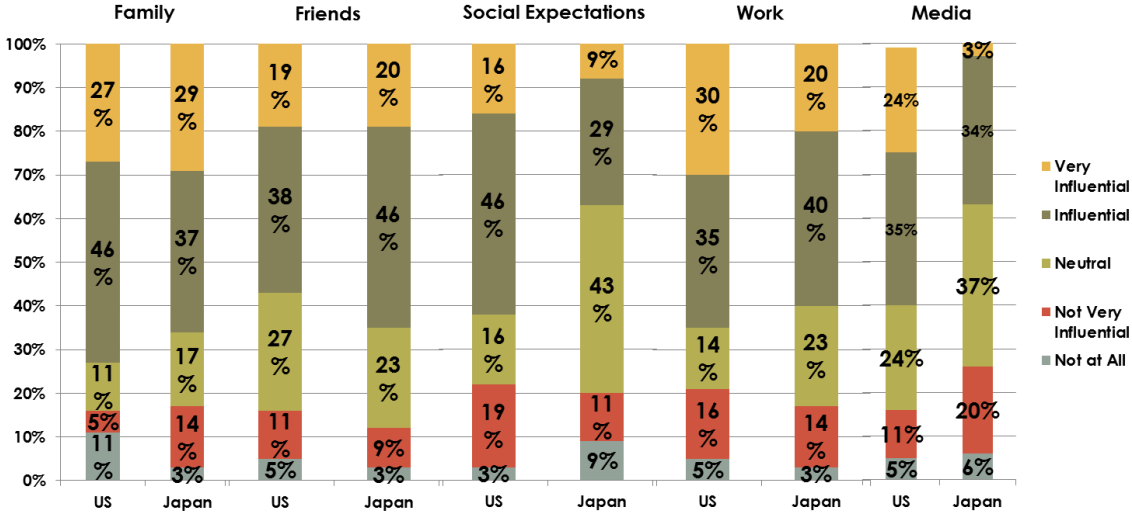
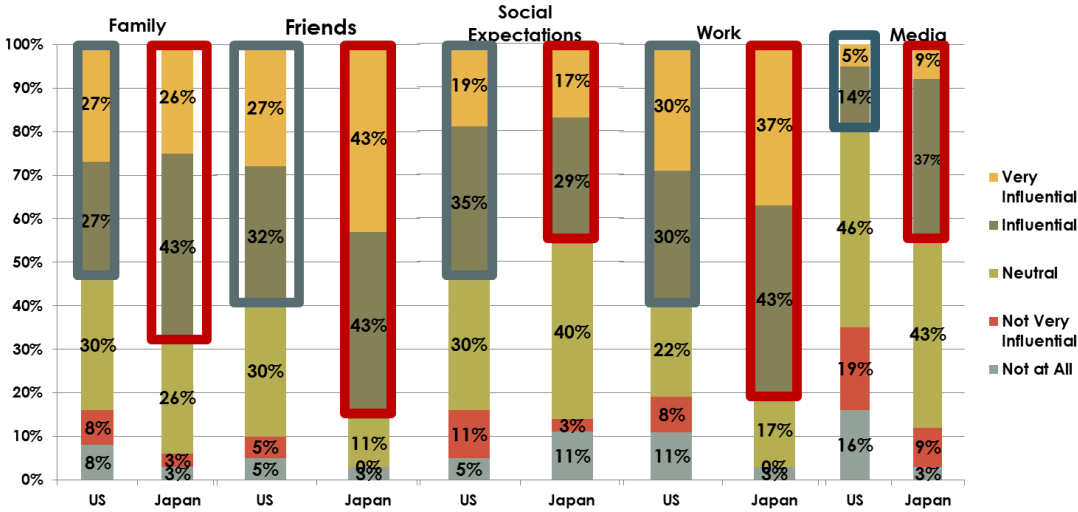


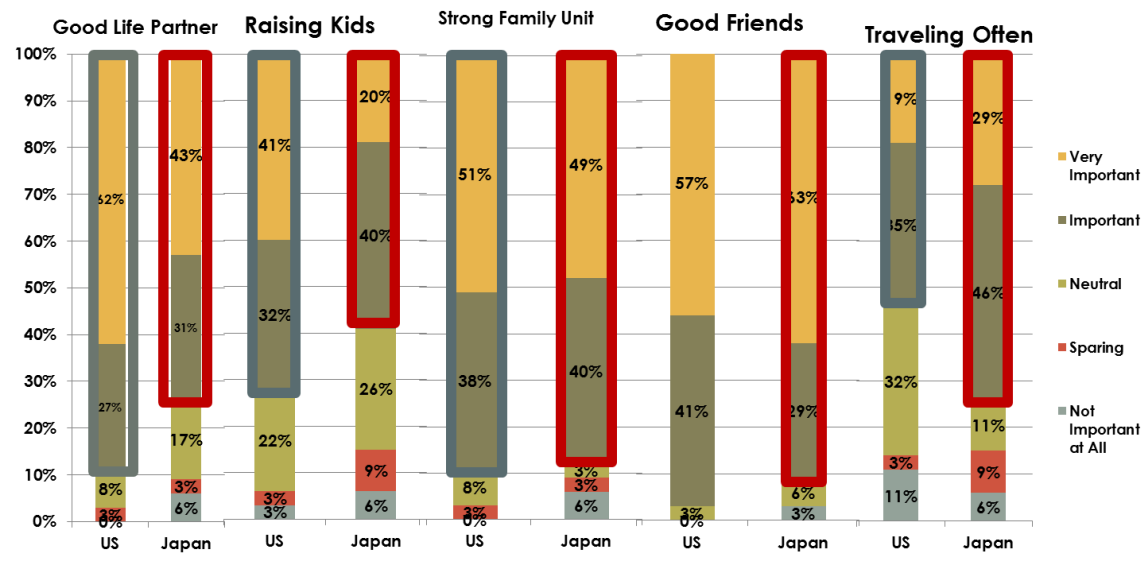
Figure 15 shows where influence on individualism has come from for both students. Results show that American students are more influenced from “family and social expectations”, while Japanese students are more influenced from “friends and work”.

Figure 16: Influence on Collectivism



In terms of influence on collectivism, Figure 16 shows that American students showed that their influence mainly comes from “career” while Japanese students show that their influences comes mostly from “friends, family, and career”.

Figure 17: Personal Goals and Success



When asked about the level of importance on personal goals, according to Figure 17, both students equally value having a good family unit. American students found “good life partner and having kids” to be of high importance while Japanese students found “having good friends and traveling” was more important.

Figure 18: Personal Goals and Success

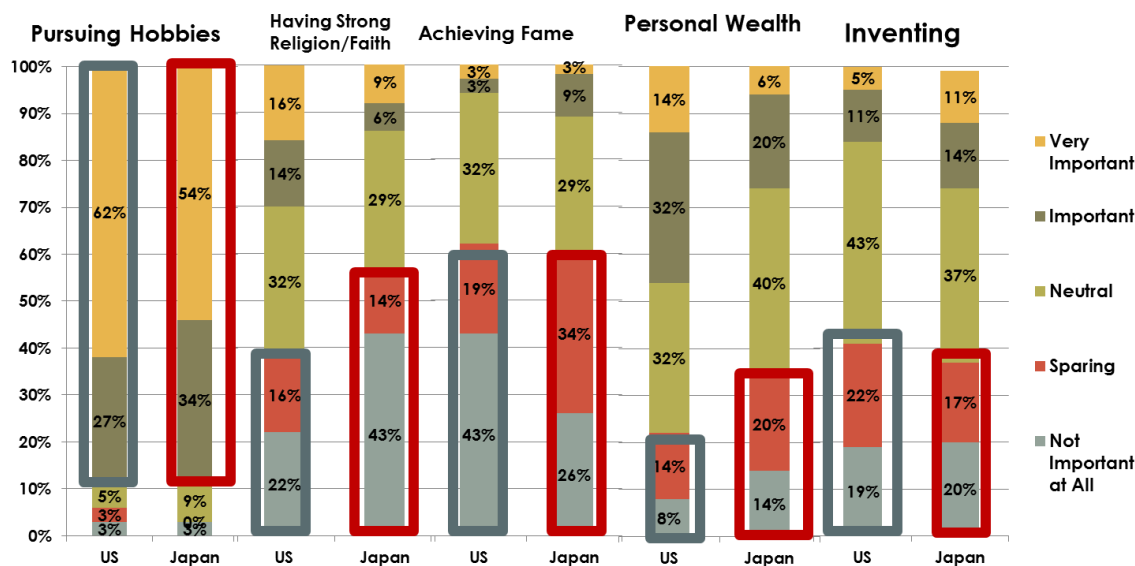


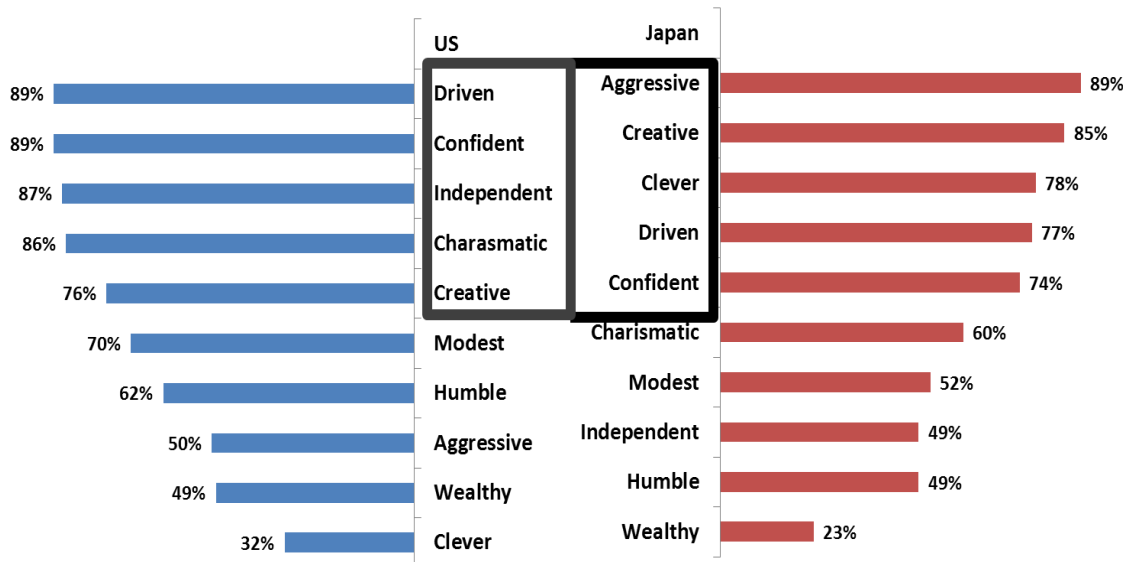
Figure 18 continues the results for the same question concerning personal goals. Both students have a very high regard for “hobbies and passions”. The last four, “strong faith, becoming famous, becoming rich, and inventing” were all regarded as low and not of high importance.

5.4. Research Question 2 Summary

While Americans value individual success, the influence mainly from family and social expectations. In terms of personal goals, Americans showed value on “good life partner, having kids, and hobbies and passions”. Japanese students show favor in success through collective success and receive influence from “friends and career. When valuing personal goals, Japanese students showed favor toward “good friends, traveling, and hobbies and passions.” Both equally didn’t find “strong faith, becoming famous, becoming rich, and inventing”

5.5. Research Question 3 : What characteristics and aspects are most relevant to a successful person?

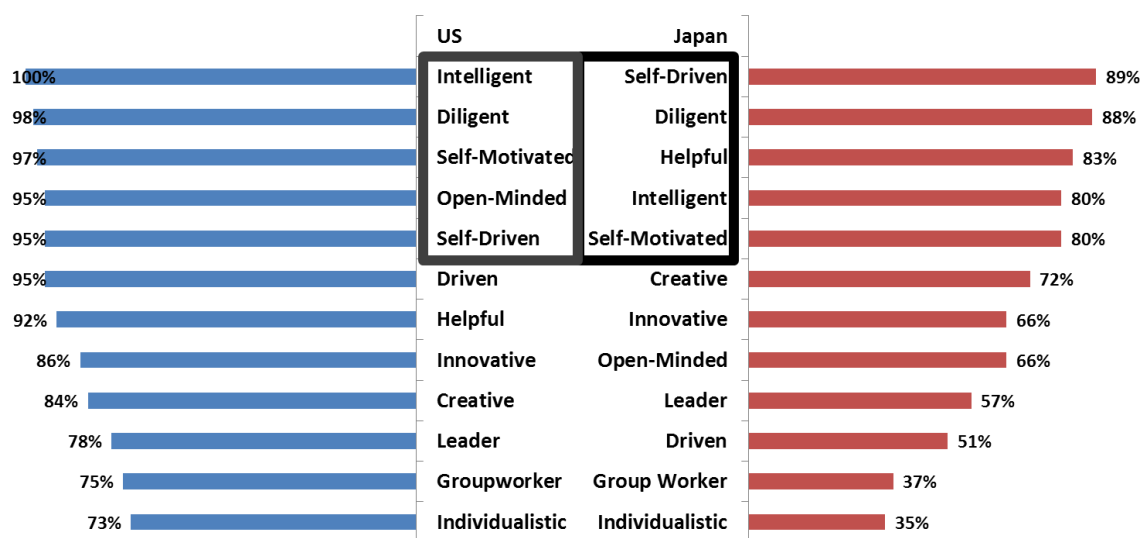
Figure 19: Adjectives of a Successful



In the survey, students were provided a list of 10 adjectives pertaining to a successful person. Each one was rated on a scale of 1 through 5, 1 being ‘not fitting’ and 5 ‘fits best’. When

analyzing the data, I took the percent of responses from 5 ‘fits best’ and 4 ‘fits’, and added them up, then put them on a scale and looked at what were the top 5. As you can see in Figure 19, the top 5 for Americans were “Driven, Confident, Independent, Charismatic, and Creative”. The top five for Japanese students were “Aggressive, Creative, Clever, Driven, and Confident”. Both Japanese and American students’ top five were “Driven, Confident, and Creative”. Even though the results show that three of the top five are similar, the Japanese answer of “Aggressive” being the best is very interesting. American students’ top two focus on being “driven and confident” while Japanese students’ response shows “aggressive and creative”.

Figure 20: Characteristics of a Successful Person



Similar to Figure 19, Figure 20 provided a list of 12 different traits of a successful person, each also graded on a scale of 1 through 5. Just like Figure 19, Figure 20’s results show that the top five traits relevant to a successful person. Both American and Japanese students shared “Intelligent, Diligent, Self-Motivated, and Self-Driven” in their top five most relevant traits. What’s most interesting, regardless of the similarities, is that American response showed that “Intelligent” was voted to be 100% relevant to being a trait of a successful person.

5.6. Research Question 3 Summary

Both Japanese and American students’ found that when describing a successful person, “Driven, Confident, and Creative” were shared by both in their top five. Both American and

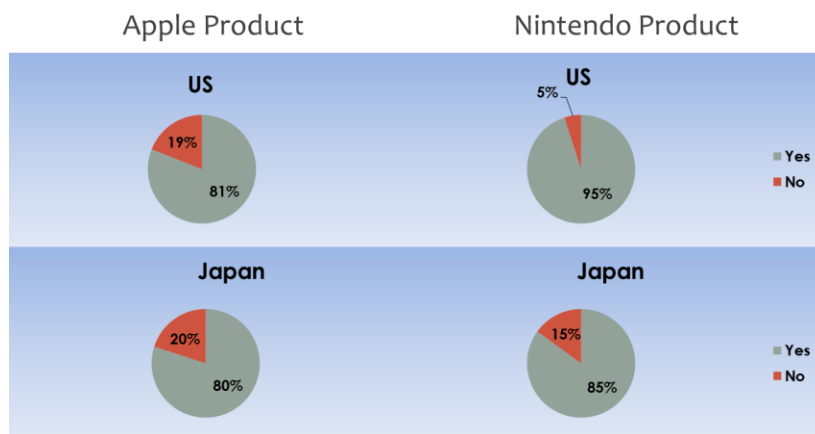
Japanese students shared “Intelligent, Diligent, Self-Motivated, and Self-Driven” in their top five most relevant traits. However, regardless of the similarities, what stood out from the adjectives was how Japanese found “Aggressive” to be the highest voted, while in terms of characteristics, Americans found that “Intelligent” was factor seen as 100% relevant.

6 Case Study: Perceptions of Those Who Have Succeeded

Steve Jobs was an American entrepreneur, marketer, and inventor, who was the co-founder (along with Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne), chairman, and CEO of Apple Inc. Through Apple, he is widely recognized for his contribution to the personal computer revolution and for his career in the computer and consumer electronics fields, transforming one industry after another, from computers and smartphones to music and movies.

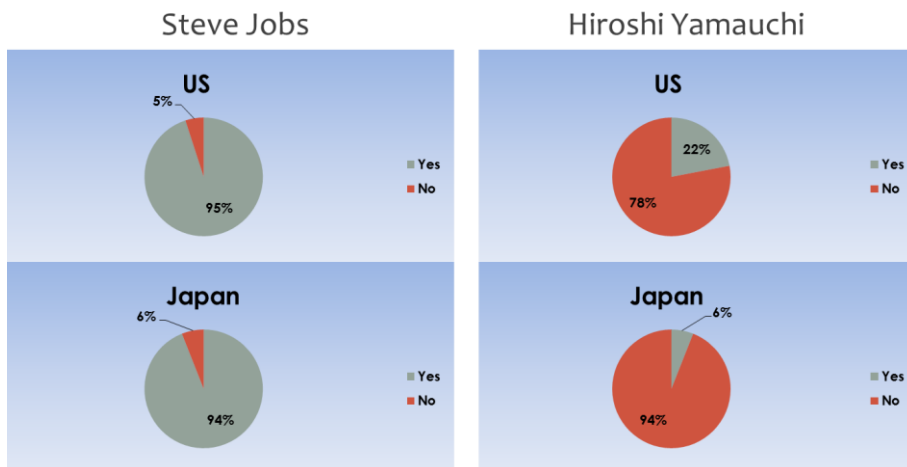
Hiroshi Yamauchi was the third president of Nintendo. Yamauchi is credited with transforming Nintendo from a small hanafuda card-making company to a multi-billion dollar video game company. Nintendo’s products have held a lead in the Japanese market for a number of years and created the Famicom Age in and outside of Japan. The company’s success reflects Yamauchi’s managerial philosophy, which has brought strong success even today. As of April 2013, Forbes estimated Yamauchi’s net worth at ¥2100 billion. He was the 13th richest person in Japan and 491st richest in the world.

Figure 21: Ownership of Apple and Nintendo Products



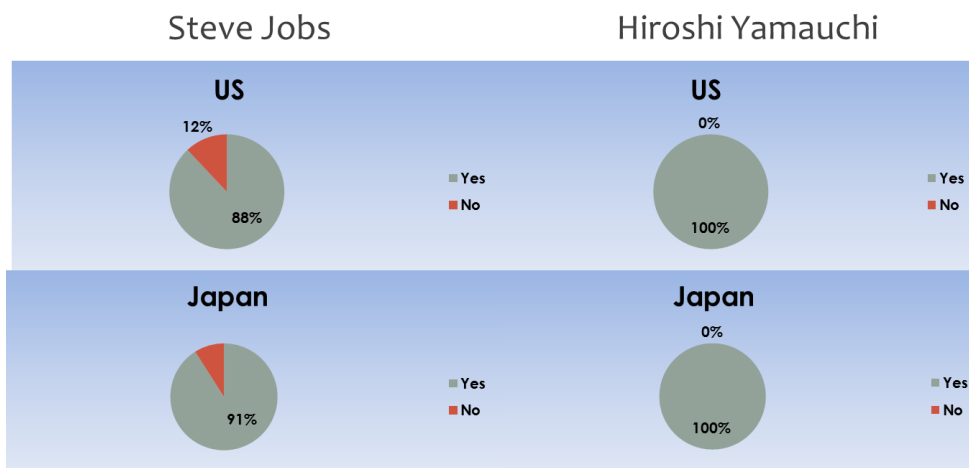
In the survey, before prompting the above information about Steve Jobs and Hiroshi Yamauchi, I asked students if they've owned an Apple or Nintendo product. Both students equally answered that a majority had owned these products. (Figure 21)

Figure 22: Name Recognition



Still, before showing the prompt about Steve Jobs and Hiroshi Yamauchi, I asked if students knew who these two men were. While Steve Jobs was widely known in both countries, surprisingly, Yamauchi wasn't known at all, especially in his home country of Japan. (Figure 22)

Figure 23: Perspective of Degree of Successfulness



However, for those who answered “no” to knowing Hiroshi Yamauchi, both American and Japanese students were given the prompt that has been written above. Once both students had read the information, when asked “do you consider these men to be successful?”, both American and Japanese students found Hiroshi Yamauchi to be 100% successful, out weighting Steve Jobs. (Figure 23)

Graph 1: Prevalent Reason Why Steve Jobs was Considered ‘Successful’

アメリカ	日本
“He invented something that revolutionized technology.”	“He revolutionized the way music is sold.”
“Left his mark on the world while making a lot of money.”	“He had a career doing what he wanted.”
“Made a business from nothing to something.”	“Not only did he create an innovative product and service, but created the framework for a company that has made huge profits.”
“He melded technology with human interests.”	“Created a product that’s used by most people.”
“He was an inspirational leader.”	“His product has made people’s lives more convenient.”
“Charismatic and Intelligent.”	

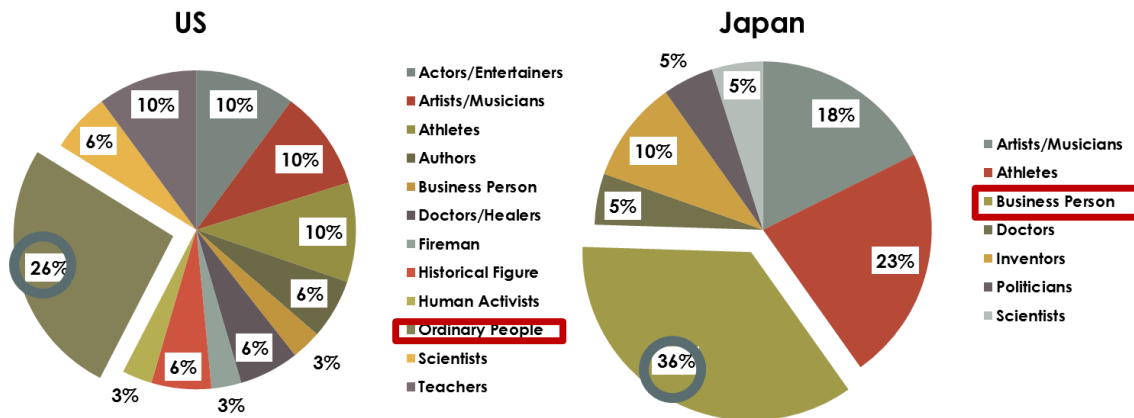
After asking if Steve Jobs was successful, students were prompted to give a free-response answer to why they find Steve Jobs to be a person of success. Graph 1 shows the quotes that stood out and were more prominent.

Graph 2 Prevalent Reason Why Hiroshi Yamauchi was Considered ‘Successful’

アメリカ	日本
“Like Steve Jobs, he made a flourishing company.”	“Like Steve Jobs, he created something he wanted to make with confidence.”
“Took a small company into a large corporation.”	“Went from a small card company into a major business.”
“Nintendo Products are original, creative, and fun.”	“He’s successful because he made a world-class company.”
“I became a gamer because of Nintendo products.”	“He’s successful because he was able to expand Nintendo into the family computer marketplace.”
“The ability to transform an industry into a household name is almost impossible.”	Due to his ranking as 13th richest man in Japan.

After asking if Hiroshi Yamauchi was successful, students were prompted to give a free-response answer to why they find Hiroshi Yamauchi to be a person of success. Graph 2 shows the quotes that stood out and were more prominent.

Figure 24 Who Represents Success to You



Finally, the last question I promoted to my survey takers was on who they found to be a person of success to them. It was a free response question where I took the names and professions provided and categorized them based on the relevant occupation. American responses had a lot more variety of people who represented success, but the majority of Americans gave more names towards “normal people”. Of that group, it consisted of family members, those who had financial responsibility, and overall live a life meeting personal happiness. Japanese response shows that of the names presented, the majority of them were “Business People”. From Japanese responses, one of the names that popped up was Softbank’s CEO and Seven-Eleven’s CEO.

6.1. Case Study Summary

From these Case Study results, we were able to see the difference in how Steve Jobs and Hiroshi Yamauchi were seen through individualistic and collectivistic perspectives. Regardless of how much these two have contributed to the technological world, Japan’s Hiroshi Yamauchi had only recognition when prompted with information

regarding the company he was related to. The lack of name recognition reflects on Japanese culture's attitude toward individual success. In regards to who represents success to one another, the results from the American perspective show favor toward the concept of the American Dream.

7. Discussion

Through this research, it has shown me that there are more similarities between our cultures in terms of success and career than I had anticipated. Both a majority of American and Japanese students plan to look for jobs after graduating from college while also looking for a career that can provide personal happiness. If both students were to follow the path of a business person, they would find more success in contributing to the group. In terms of additionally representing their success, I found it very interesting that both students don't measure their success through material possession. Even though we live in a highly capitalized and consumer-based world, I wonder what role material objects are playing in our lives outside of the realm of success.

The aspect of what each culture values in terms of personal goals was also interesting, first by the fact that American students showed high level of importance on having kids. This information provides an interesting thought at how the result contradicts the background information provided by TIME Magazine and how they claimed that kids aren't necessary. The same results from personal goals and success showed interesting results from how the Japanese find traveling important. In that, I wonder what places Japanese find to be most favorable to travel to and how often.

Additionally, the traits and adjectives pertaining to a successful person was also assumed by me to be different. These results furthered the overall result that Japanese and American perspectives on Success and Career are similar rather than different. The Case Study conducted did however show differences in how each culture has perceived how Steve Jobs and Hiroshi Yamauchi as people of success in the technological industry. Not only that, but the results brought up the difference between the individualistic and collectivist mentalities. The Japanese culture puts the group first before the individual, so Hiroshi Yamauchi was an unknown entity based on cultural collectivism.

8. Future Study

Based on this research, how will success of this current generation change? As the participants of my research were college students, how will measure and value of success change? From the answer “a career that provides personal happiness”, what is it that’s personal happiness? What factors are most relevant culturally and personally to meeting that “personal happiness”? Lastly, opposed to success, what is failure? What is that’s considered the “low point” for both Japanese and American cultures?

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