

# Image Strategy of Nogizaka46: How Do Young People Perceive It?

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### Abstract

Nogizaka46, one of the top idol groups in Japan, was established as an official rival of AKB48 in 2012. Although its image was initially intended to be different from that of AKB48, ordinary people have some difficulty differentiating the group's image as unique. This study examines how Nogizaka46 is perceived by young people, utilizing data collected from university students in Tokyo, Japan. Data analysis shows that Nogizaka46 has a distinctly different image from AKB48. Further, the effect of recognition of members on preferences for Nogizaka46 is partially mediated by its image as a beautiful group. In this article, future implications for strategic development of an idol group's image are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Nogizaka46, AKB48, semantic differential method, Japanese idol group

### 1. Introduction

There is probably no one living in Japan who is unfamiliar with AKB48 and related groups. AKB48 is a top idol group in Japan; whenever one of its new CD-DVD sets is released, more than one million volumes are sold. Because of its significant social impact, some academic researchers have paid attention to AKB48 (Minowa, 2013; Morita, 2012; Nishio, 2013). AKB48 is well known not only throughout Japan, but also in many Asian countries. Other more regional groups that have emerged with the popularity of AKB48 are SKE48 in Nagoya, HKT48 in Hakata, NMB48 in Osaka, and NGT48 in Niigata. These groups are collectively called “the AKB48 group” or AKB48G.

Although AKB48 initially released projects under DefSTAR Records Inc., a subsidiary of Sony Music Entertainment (SME) Inc., the group became popular after it was traded to King Record Co., Ltd. in 2008. Subsequently, SME deeply regretted giving up AKB48; therefore, the company sought another idol group to compete with AKB48. As a result, Nogizaka46 (乃木坂46) was established by SME as an official rival of AKB48 in 2012. Needless to say, the position as “an official rival group to AKB48” is a form of propaganda.

Nogizaka46 is produced by Yasushi Akimoto (秋元康), one of the most famous producers in Japan. However, he is also recognized as the producer of AKB48G. Nogizaka46 is a small group with less than 40 members, contrasting with AKB48G and its membership of more than 200 young girls. Many people did not believe that Nogizaka46 deserved to be called an official rival group, and its members were the targets of some forms of bashing when they began performing.

It is true, however, that the popularity of Nogizaka46 has grown gradually in Japan. As of August 2015, the group had released 12 single CDs, and recently, more than 500,000 volumes of each of their CD-DVD sets have been sold. Although sales fall short of those of AKB48, they exceed sales of SKE48 and HKT48. Thus, Nogizaka46's position as an official rival of AKB48 has gradually gained recognition (Shinomoto, 2015).

It is very important to create an image when marketing a new artist, as Kaplan & Haenlein (2011) emphasized, using Britney Spears as an example. In 2011, responsible officials proposed that Nogizaka46 would have a distinctly different image from that of AKB48. AKB48's image is that of female students at a public high school in Japan, and it is full of local color. On the contrary, Nogizaka46 was intended to portray students in a private all-girls high school in a suburban area of France. Ordinary Japanese people still tend to expect something elegant and refined from the sound of "France." This perception of advantage tends to impart a different image for Nogizaka46 (Kohli, Leuthesser, & Suri, 2007). Further, members of Nogizaka46 are forced to behave in accordance with this assumed image. For example, they are not permitted to appear in swimsuits because of sexual connotations, wear miniskirts, or have manicured nails.

Although enthusiastic fans retain different images of Nogizaka46 and AKB48, ordinary people often have the wrong impression that Nogizaka46 is a group within the collective AKB48G. There are at least two reasons for this incorrect perception. One, as alluded to previously, is that both groups are creations of Yasushi Akimoto. The other reason is that there is an informal system among both groups for exchanging members. Originally, the exchange of members was limited to AKB48G, but in 2014, Rina Ikoma (生駒里奈), a leading member of Nogizaka46, was directed to belong to AKB48 as well, and Rena Matsui, a famous member of AKB48/SKE48, was asked to also perform as a member of Nogizaka46. The impact of the exchanges was so big that many fans of Nogizaka46 considered that their favorite group had fallen to the status of a group within AKB46G.

Although it may be difficult to judge whether or not Nogizaka46's image is connected to AKB48G, it is quite important to clarify how Nogizaka46 is different from the AKB48G, especially from the standpoint of ordinary people. In this study, we examined whether or not these two groups were differentiated, based on an analysis of data collected from

university students. Data analysis revealed that recognition of Nogizaka46's members reinforces its image as a beautiful group, which in turn has an impact on preferences for it. There are no studies focusing on Nogizaka46, according to CiNii (scholarly and academic information navigator) and other databases for academic papers. Therefore, this study is the important first step academically for focusing on this influential idol group.

## 2. Image of Nogizaka46 and Hypotheses

Although regular studies should refer to relevant past studies in an effort to develop original hypotheses, we found no academic studies dealing with Nogizaka46. However, it can be said that the effect of an image of an idol group on people is similar to the effect of a brand image on consumer behaviors. Customers' subjective perceptions and behaviors are influenced strongly by a brand image (Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008; Lien, Wen, Huang, & Wu, 2015).

A brand image is often created by a firm and intentionally marketed to potential customers. The officials of idol groups also try to create images for their groups to push them toward the market effectively. Subsequently, it is important for officials to position their groups appropriately in something like "an idol map" and to differentiate them from other idol groups.

Thus far, however, there have been no idol maps for strategic positioning of idols. Therefore, in this paper, we propose a two-feature model to map idols and idol groups. The first feature is related to a graceful or beautiful figure of an idol. Though the criteria for beauty may differ from person to person, a general guide is that female idols should be more graceful or beautiful than ordinary people. This feature used to be a sufficient condition for becoming an idol. In other words, this singular characteristic was the only one needed by a female idol. Not surprisingly, there were some idols who were beautiful but very poor at singing or engaging in small talk. However, today's female idols need an additional feature beyond a beautiful figure: the entertainment feature. This feature is related to special abilities to beguile people with interesting talk, splendid vocals, amazing dancing, or something more than graceful figures or beauty.

Currently, for any female idol, both beautifulness and entertainment features are necessary to some degree, meaning that some idols have a different image from others in terms of the degrees of these two dimensions. To understand this concept, the idol grid—developed based on the classical "managerial grid" by Blake and Mouton (1964)—is proposed in Figure 1. Along with this figure, female idols are positioned on a scale somewhere from 1.1 to 9.9. Typical positions are depicted as 1.1, 1.9, 9.1, 5.5, and 9.9. First, *no-notable idol* (1.1), which is low on both features, cannot survive for long, although

there may be a short-lived popularity. In contrast, an idol achieving the score of an *ideal idol* (9.9) exhibits both beauty and entertainment features simultaneously. However, it is uncertain whether there can be such an all-round idol. Further, if an idol tries to entertain people, she sometimes has to play a role of crown, which may reduce perceptions of her beautifulness. Thus, it is uncertain whether an idol can play such a contradictory role appropriately.

Therefore, it is realistic that most idols are positioned somewhere on a diagonal line between *entertaining idol* (1.9) and *beautiful idol* (9.1). As a recent trend, rather than idols with extreme positions such as 1.9 or 9.1, idols who balance both features—who have both features to some degree—are more desirable and tend to be more popular.

This idol grid is applicable to not only a single female idol but also a female idol group. In the latter case, characteristics of a group as an entity are dependent on characteristics of its members. When a group consists of especially beautiful members, the group is branded as a beautiful group, and the group is considered an entertaining group if it has members that are particularly entertaining. It goes without saying that idols need good looks, but many fans and articles have pointed out that Nogizaka46 has more beautiful members than AKB48G and other similar idol groups. Further, as discussed above, they have an elegant and beautiful image since they are associated with a French private school.

In contrast, AKB48 has an entertainment feature that excels that of Nogizaka46. Some members of AKB48, such as Haruka Shimazaki (島崎遥香), are adorable but not good at talking. There are plenty of members, however, who delight people with their humor, including Rino Sashihara (指原莉乃) and Minami Minegishi (峯岸みなみ). Although Nogizaka46 has some entertaining members such as Manatsu Akimoto (秋元真夏) and Kazumi Takayama (高山一美), its entertaining skills are still weak as a whole.

Therefore, we propose the first hypothesis to confirm whether sufficient differences exist for the two groups:

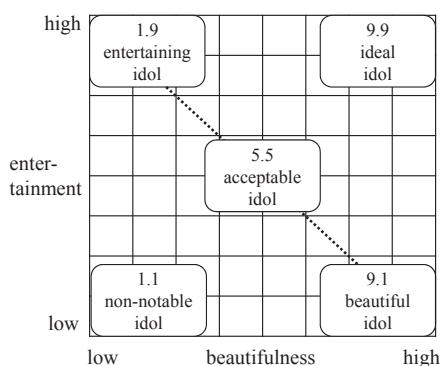


Figure 1 Idol Grid

*H1*: Nogizaka46 will have a different image from that of AKB48. In particular, its image will be positioned as more beautiful and less entertaining than AKB48.

Though a firm attempts to create a brand image of its goods and markets it to customers, customers may create a new brand image based on their experiences in utilizing or relating to the products (Verhoef et al. 2009). As discussed above, the officials of Nogizaka46 intended to create an elegant image for Nogizaka46. This branding strategy is applicable to the entire group, not to each individual member. Indeed, idol groups are usually perceived as an entity, or a gestalt. Yet, as people develop their interests in idol groups, they begin to discern the characteristics of each member. As they identify individual members, they perceive each member's features, and these features may change the projected image of the group.

In particular, social media enables ordinary people to create new brand images (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015; Shih, Lin, & Luarn, 2014). Although an example of an idol not belonging to Nogizaka46, the widely known "one miraculous picture" of Kanna Hashimoto (橋本環奈) illustrates this effect of ordinary people. Numerous pictures of members of Nogizaka46 are provided through regular and social media. Thus, people gradually recognize the beautiful looks of individual members, thereby fostering Nogizaka46's image as a beautiful group. However, they generally do not regard Nogizaka46 for its entertainment feature. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H2*: Recognition of members of Nogizaka46 will increase its image as a beautiful group.

*H3*: Recognition of members of Nogizaka46 will not increase its image as an entertaining group.

Third, it is well-known that brand images of goods strongly influence consumers' attitudes toward them. If people recognize the beautiful feature of Nogizaka46, they will demonstrate a preference for it because beautifulness is an important sales point. In contrast, Nogizaka46 does not sell entertainment. Thus, whether or not Nogizaka46 is considered as an entertaining group is irrelevant to people's evaluations of it. Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses:

*H4*: An image of Nogizaka46 as beautiful will have a positive impact on preferences for the group.

*H5*: An image of Nogizaka46 as entertaining will not have any impact on preferences for Nogizaka46.

*H2* and *H4* lead to the hypothesis of a mediating effect of Nogizaka46's image as a beautiful group on the relationship between recognition of its members and preferences for it. However, this mediating effect will not be full but partial. Even if people recognize members of Nogizaka46 and do not perceive it as a beautiful group, they may exhibit a preference for

it. This is understandable considering the complexity of the “strange” feelings of fans. Some fans like a member with whom they are personally acquainted, even before anyone else knew her. In this case, a member may have fans who do not necessarily consider her pretty or beautiful. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H6*: An image of Nogizaka46 as a beautiful group will have a partial mediating effect on the relationship between recognition of members and a preference for the group.

*H7*: An image of Nogizaka46 as an entertaining group will have no mediating effect on the relationship between recognition of its members and a preference for the group.

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3-1. Sample and Data Collection**

Data were collected from university students at one of the private universities in Tokyo, Japan. Students were asked to complete an original questionnaire as they attended one of the university’s classes. They were considered a representative sample of ordinary young people and not fans of AKB48G or Nogizaka46. Each student was presented with one of Nogizaka46’s new CDs (valued at 1,050 Japanese yen) as compensation for participating. The total sample began with 229 students, but some were excluded because of inappropriate answers. Therefore, the final sample size was 222 (122 male students and 97 female students; three students did not complete the gender identification item). Although we did not ask respondents to provide their ages, it was considered that most students were in the age range of 19 to 23 years.

#### **3-2. Variables**

The following variables were collected:

Gender: male (1), female (2)

Preference for idol groups: Respondents were asked to assess their degree of interest in Nogizaka46 and related idol groups, such as AKB48, Momoiro Clover Z (ももいろクローバーZ), Morning Musume (モーニング娘。), and E-girls. A 7-point scale ranging from *no interest* (1) to *very much interest* (7) was used. We used this variable as a preference variable for each idol group.

Recognized members of Nogizaka46: Respondents were shown 18 members selected by officials for their 11<sup>th</sup> CD and asked to identify all members whom they recognized.

Recognized singles of Nogizaka46: The group’s past 11 singles were displayed for respondents, who were asked to identify all songs that they recognized.

Semantic differential scales: The semantic differential (SD) method, developed by Osgood (1952) and Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957), is well-known as one of the standard

methods for measuring people's impressions about something. It is a psychological method that uses contrasting adjectives, such as *big* and *small*, and *bright* and *dark*; respondents are asked to provide their impressions about certain objects (in this study, idol groups) in accordance with a 7-point scale. Inoue and Kobayashi (1985) proposed adjectives often utilized in Japanese studies, and we selected 21 adjectives that they classified as related to personality and art.

All questions were written in Japanese.

## 4. Basic Statistics for Recognition of Nogizaka46

### 4-1. Recognition Rates of Members

Before testing our hypotheses, we wished to introduce some basic findings regarding recognition of Nogizaka46's members and single CDs and correlations between preferences for idol groups. Although Nogizaka46 currently consists of 38 members, not all are responsible for each single. Their official has associated certain members with each CD with its respective release. They are referred to as *Senbatsu* (selected) members who are responsible for recording and singing a single in musical performances. Table 1 shows the recognition rates of members selected for their 11<sup>th</sup> single, "Life Is Beautiful" (命は美しい). In this table, "number of students" refers to the number of students who indicated that they recognized a focal member. From Table 1, several features are observable.

First, more than 70% of students participating in this study recognized Rena Matsui (松井玲奈). As already mentioned, Rena was originally a member of SKE48/AKB48, popular among young people for a long time. She belonged to Nogizaka46 temporarily, and it is believed that students recognized her as a member of SKE48/AKB48, not Nogizaka46. In contrast, as one of original Nogizaka46's members, Mai Shiraishi (白石麻衣) was also recognized by more than 70% of respondents. Mai is very famous for her beautiful figure, and she has been active as a magazine model. Both of these members have received a massive amount of media exposure so far; thus, their high rates of recognition are as expected. Rina Ikoma had the third highest rate of recognition. She had a role as a central singer for the group's first five singles. As already mentioned, Rina was exchanged for Rena, and she temporarily belonged to AKB48. Thus, she became known not as a member of Nogizaka46 but of AKB48.

Compared to these three well-known members, it might have been unexpected that less than half of the students knew of Erika Ikuta, and about only a third of the students recognized Nanase Nishino (西野七瀬). In particular, Nanase had been a center singer three times, and her first photo book, *Casual Wear* (普段着), took first place in weekly record sales in the photo book section in May 2015. Particularly among fans, she is also



Table 1 Recognition Rates of Members of Nogizaka46 (N = 222)

Name	Number of Students	Recognition Rate
Rena Matsui (松井玲奈)	160	72.10%
Mai Shiraishi (白石麻衣)	158	71.20%
Rina Ikoma (生駒里奈)	156	70.30%
Erika Ikuta (生田絵梨花)	99	44.60%
Nanase Nishino(西野七瀬)	76	34.20%
Nanami Hashimoto (橋本奈々未)	70	31.50%
Sayuri Matsumura (松村沙友理)	54	24.30%
Reika Sakurai (桜井玲香)	31	14.00%
Manatsu Akimoto (秋元真夏)	29	13.10%
Asuka Saito (齋藤飛鳥)	28	12.60%
Kazumi Takayama (高山一美)	27	12.20%
Mai Fukagawa (深川麻衣)	25	11.30%
Minami Hoshino (星野みなみ)	23	10.40%
Miona Hori (堀未央奈)	23	10.40%
Misa Eto (衛藤美彩)	21	9.50%
Marika Ito (伊藤万理華)	20	9.00%
Yumi Wakatsuki (若月佑美)	18	8.10%
Iori Sagara (相楽伊織)	13	5.90%

known as the most popular member of Nogizaka46 for handshake opportunities. When considering only fans enjoy a handshake opportunity of Nogizaka46, it can be observed a rather contrast recognition of Nanase between fans of Nogizaka46 and ordinary people.

Further, it was quite unexpected that only seven members of 18 selected members were recognized by more than 20% of students. It was also surprising that very low recognition rates were recorded for Asuka Saito (齋藤飛鳥), who also performs as a magazine model; Misa Eto (衛藤美彩), who often appears in TV shows; and Marika Ito (伊藤万理華), who has played the central character in a movie.

#### 4-2. Recognition Rates for Single CDs

We also asked respondents to identify singles they recognized. This question could have seemed a bit ambiguous because we did not specify the meaning of “recognize.” Some students might have responded that they recognized a single because they knew the name of it, but other students might have considered recognition to mean that they could sing the song. However, we left the judgement regarding the content of the term to respondents’ discretion because actual specifications of “recognize” would be too difficult to explain.

Results regarding recognition rates are shown in Table 2. In this table, sales volumes of these singles until the summer of 2015 are also displayed. On the whole, recognition

rates of these singles took a very interesting shape. Although Nogizaka46's first and second singles were recognized widely, recognition rates for singles after these two were remarkably lower. Further, their 10<sup>th</sup> single—"How Many Blue Skies Have There Been?" (何度目の青空か?)—earned a top recognition rate.

"Mannequin in Uniform" (制服のマネキン) earned a relatively high recognition rate compared to other early singles. This single is famous for its unique dance; in fact, many high school students try to imitate the dance on platforms at school festivals. In contrast, "Summer Free & Easy" (夏のFree & Easy) and "Your Name is Hope" (君の名は希望) have the lowest and the second lowest recognition rates, respectively. This result is somewhat interesting because "Your Name is Hope" is known as one of the most popular single songs—*Kami-kyoku* (a reverend song)—among fans. On the other hand, "Summer Free & Easy" is a rather controversial song even among fans because some phrases in its lyrics can give a false impression, contrasting the pure image of Nogizaka46. As already stated, data show that "How Many Blue Skies Have There Been?" is best known by young students. This song has many attractive phrases, and it is also popular among young people as a karaoke song. It is known as a *Kami-kyoku* among fans as well.

Of interest is that this kind of recognition rate is not necessarily related to total sales volumes of the singles. Although individual sales volumes of single songs has been growing, as Table 2 shows, a correlation between recognition rates and total sales is not significant ( $r = -0.176$ , n.s.). This finding could mean that CDs of Nogizaka46 are not purchased by ordinary people who simply like their songs but only by enthusiastic fans. Additionally, these fans often have bought a number of the same CDs to receive some specific benefit, and this tendency has become more noticeable over time.

Table 2 Sales and Recognition Rates for Singles of Nogizaka46

Single Titles	Sales	Number of Students	Recognition Rates
"Coil the Curtain" (ぐるぐるカーテン)	214,373	94	42.3%
"Come on Shampoo" (おいでシャンプー)	225,383	122	55.0%
"Run! Bicycle" (走れ! Bicycle)	245,069	45	20.3%
"Mannequin in Uniform" (制服のマネキン)	312,677	68	30.6%
"Your Name is Hope" (君の名は希望)	318,162	33	14.9%
"Girls Rule" (ガールズルール)	459,310	36	16.2%
"Barrette" (バレッタ)	516,469	36	16.2%
"If You Notice a Crush" (気づいたら片思い)	546,832	45	20.3%
"Summer Free & Easy" (夏のFree & Easy)	526,564	29	13.1%
"How Many Blue Skies Have There Been?" (何度目の青空か?)	618,733	129	58.1%
"Life is Beautiful" (命は美しい)	616,719	56	25.2%

### 4-3. Positive Attitude toward Idol Groups

Nogizaka46 is not the only idol group in Japan. To assess how much ordinary young people like various idol groups, we adopted a question to evaluate preferences for Nogizaka46 and other competing idol groups, such as AKB48, Morning Musume, Momoiro Clover Z (Momokuro), and E-girls. All of these have appeared in the Red and White Singing Contest of NHK, which is regarded as proof of singers of the highest caliber in Japan.

Tables 3–5 show simple correlations between preferences for these idol groups. Interestingly, most of the correlations are significantly positive, which means the groups do not necessarily compete with each other from the perspectives of ordinary young people. In particular, a very high correlation between Nogizaka46 and AKB48 for females means that women are less likely to perceive a competitive relationship between them. They tend to like any idol group if these groups suit their interests. This relationship is similar to preferences for cakes. One may prefer shortcake to cream puffs, or another may like pudding the most. However, nobody does not consider they hate pudding because they like shortcake.

Further, a simple t-test of mean differences between genders reveals that female students have a greater preference than their male counterparts for four groups (for AKB48,  $2.46 < 3.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; for Momokuro,  $2.66 < 3.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; for Morning Musume,  $2.02 < 2.58$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; and for E-girls,  $2.83 < 3.05$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Only for Nogizaka46 are preferences between genders not significantly different. Therefore, we can conclude that Nogizaka46 is equally loved regardless of gender and that Nogizaka46 may occupy an unusual position as an idol group.

Table 3 Inter-correlations regarding Positive Attitudes toward Idol Groups

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Nogizaka46	3.18	1.82				
2. AKB48	2.77	1.57	.572**			
3. Morning Musume (モーニング娘。)	2.29	1.58	.294**	.311**		
4. Momokuro (ももいろクローバーZ)	2.96	1.68	.323**	.395**	.397**	
5. E-girls	3.05	1.81	.319**	.399**	.231**	.249**

N = 221-222, \*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table 4 Inter-correlations regarding Positive Attitudes toward Idol Groups (Male Sample)

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Nogizaka46	3.04	1.96				
2. AKB48	2.46	1.51	.468**			
3. Morning Musume (モーニング娘。)	2.02	1.50	.254**	.373**		
4. Momokuro (ももいろクローバーZ)	2.66	1.70	.299**	.429**	.467**	
5. E-girls	2.83	1.84	.269**	.476**	.304**	.211*

N = 121-122, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

Table 5 Inter-correlations regarding Positive Attitudes toward Idol Groups (Female Sample)

Groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
1. Nogizaka46	3.37	1.65				
2. AKB48	3.15	1.59	.737**			
3. Morning Musume (モーニング娘。)	2.58	1.58	.317**	.217*		
4. Momokuro (ももいろクローバーZ)	3.31	1.56	.345**	.292**	.257*	
5. E-girls	3.37	1.75	.378**	.271**	.129	.290**

N = 97, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

#### 4-4. Semantic Differences between Nogizaka46 and AKB48

Respondents were presented with 21 contrapositive adjectives, and they were asked to rate their images of two idol groups, Nogizaka46 and AKB48, according to scales provided. Table 6 and Figure 2 show the resulting differences between the two groups. Although, as discussed above, results of the correlation analysis showed that many students have similar preferences for Nogizaka46 and AKB48, Figure 2 reveals that the two groups were perceived quite differently from each other. Among 21 items, only two, *warm-cold* and *lively-unlively*, were not significantly different, and the differences in means of the remaining 19 items were significant at the level of 1% or 5%. For example, results show that students perceived Nogizaka46 to be soberer, darker, and heavier, but simultaneously, they were considered to be finer and more beautiful than AKB48. In particular, a sober, dark, and heavy image of Nogizaka46 is considered to be associated with its less entertaining character, and a sophisticated and graceful image is related to its beautiful feature. Therefore, *H1* (regarding the different images of these two idol groups) is supported. Nogizaka46 is regarded as a more beautiful and less entertaining group than AKB48.

Table 6 Differences in Means between Nogizaka46 and AKB48

Variables	Mean		t-value	Sig
	Nogizaka46	AKB48		
1. pretentious–sober	4.21	2.43	17.879	<.001
14. active–mild	4.94	3.27	15.221	<.001
2. bright–dark	3.32	2.28	10.907	<.001
11. strong–weak	4.27	3.25	9.922	<.001
4. light–heavy	3.9	2.89	8.886	<.001
12. fragmented–integrated	4.59	3.72	7.886	<.001
6. individualistic–ordinary	4.21	3.46	6.263	<.001
5. unhealthy–healthy	4.97	4.26	6.226	<.001
3. entertaining–bland	4.03	3.35	6.300	<.001
9. jolly–glum	3.36	2.77	5.548	<.001
8. childish–mature	3.92	3.42	3.962	<.001
18. fine–tired	2.98	2.71	2.484	0.014
21. lively–unlively	3.02	2.89	1.235	0.218
7. warm–cold	3.49	3.44	0.543	0.587
20. friendly–unfriendly	3.05	3.28	–2.273	0.024
19. affable–unpleasant	2.65	3.48	–8.976	<.001
13. new–old	3.4	4.29	–7.636	<.001
16. adorable–hateful	2.39	3.52	–11.141	<.001
10. beautiful–ugly	2.54	3.75	–12.381	<.001
17. cleanly–uncleanly	2.26	3.79	–14.045	<.001
15. calm–antsy	3.18	4.77	–12.603	<.001

N = 221-222

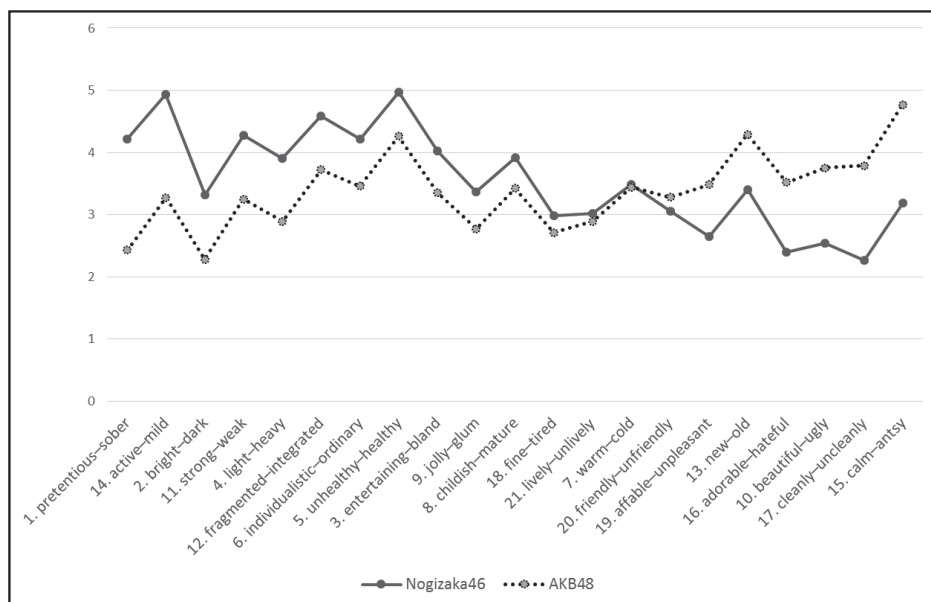


Figure 2 Differences in Means between Nogizaka46 and AKB48

## 5. Hypothesized Relationships and Result

For checking latent factor structures, we initially conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EPA) for all 21 items for Nogizaka46, and we found that six items had lower commonality scores. We removed these items and conducted an EPA again for the remaining 15 items. As Table 7 shows, satisfactorily acquired two latent factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (maximum likelihood/promax rotation).

In the previous section, we considered that current female idols should be evaluated according to the beautifulness and entertainment features. The pattern matrix in Table 7 reflects characteristics of each feature. The first factor accounted for 33.86% of the variance, and it is particularly related to items associated with beautifulness, such as *affable-unpleasant*, *adorable-hateful*, and *beautiful-ugly*.

The second factor accounted for 13.49% of the variance; it is related to entertainment (e.g., *pretentious-somber*, *lively-unlively*, and *entertaining-bland*). The smaller the values of the two factor scores, the more Nogizaka46 is evaluated as a beautiful and entertaining group.

Table 7 Pattern Matrix

Items	Factor	
	1 (beautifulness)	2 (entertainment)
19. affable-unpleasant	0.849	0.068
17. cleanly-uncleanly	0.847	-0.069
16. adorable-hateful	0.823	0.004
20. friendly-unfriendly	0.651	0.103
15. calm-antsy	0.632	-0.343
10. beautiful-ugly	0.584	0.067
7. warm-cold	0.424	0.313
2. bright-dark	-0.074	0.775
1. pretentious-somber	-0.314	0.738
9. jolly-glum	-0.005	0.643
21. lively-unlively	0.368	0.528
18. fine-tired	0.388	0.495
6. individualistic-ordinary	0.135	0.466
14. active-mild	-0.434	0.45
3. entertaining-bland	0.203	0.447

Table 8 Inter-correlations for Number of Members, Two Factor Scores, and Positive Attitudes

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3
1. Number of members	4.671	4.638			
2. Beautifulness	0.000	0.958	-.407**		
3. Entertainment	0.000	0.923	-.249**	.451**	
4. Positive attitude	3.180	1.824	.668**	-.408**	-.227**

N = 221-222, \*\*p < 0.01

A mediating role of images regarding Nogizaka46 was analyzed using a regression analysis and these factor scores. Table 8 shows all inter-correlations of numbers of recognized members, factor scores for beauty and entertainment, and preferences for Nogizaka46 prior to the regression analysis. As discussed above, the two factor scores were smaller when Nogizaka46 was considered beautiful or entertaining; thus, negative correlations between these two factors and other variables mean that when more members are recognized, Nogizaka46 is considered beautiful and entertaining, and it is preferred over AKB48.

To test  $H2-H6$ , we considered the following mediating relationships in Figure 3. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), we adopted typical steps of simple regression analyses in Tables 9 and 10. According to Figure 3, a mediating effect of a variable is assessed by estimating the following three equations:

$$\hat{Y} = i_1 + cX$$

$$\hat{M} = i_2 + aX$$

$$\hat{Y} = i_3 + c'X + bM$$

In these equations,  $i$  is an intercept coefficient. When the effect of  $X$  on  $Y$  decreases to zero statistically by including  $M$ , it is said that  $M$  has a full mediating effect on the  $Y-X$  relationship. When the effect of  $X$  on  $Y$  decreases statistically but not to zero,  $M$  has a partial mediating effect on the  $Y-X$  relationship. Further, Baron and Kenny (1986) described the following Aroian test static, which is an Aroian version of the Sobel test; it is compared with the critical value from the standard normal distribution appropriate for a given significant level:

$$z = \frac{a \times b}{\sqrt{b^2 s_a^2 + a^2 s_b^2 + s_a^2 s_b^2}}$$

A preference for Nogizaka46 as a dependent variable is explained in the equations that include the number of members (Model 1), images of Nogizaka46 (Model 2), and both

(Model 3) as independent variables. In Model 4, the image of Nogizaka46 is explained by the number of recognized members.

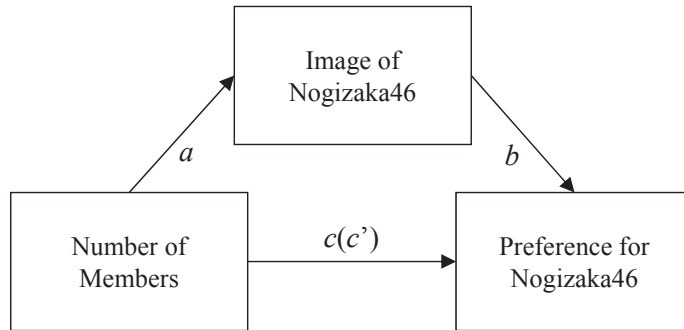


Figure 3 Mediating Model

First, Table 9 shows that all coefficients of explanatory variables are significant, which means *H2* and *H3* are supported. Further, the Aroian test static is 5.915, with a significant level of 0.01. This result means that the image of Nogizaka46 as a beautiful group has a partial mediating role between numbers of recognized members and a preference for the group. This result supports *H5*. Second, although a significant effect of an entertainment image on preference is shown in a simple regression (Model 2), entertainment does not have a significant effect if the number of members in Nogizaka46 is also entered as an independent variable, as in Model 3. The Aroian test static is not significant, either. Furthermore, we found no mediating effect of entertainment image between the number of Nogizaka46 and preferences for it. This result is in accordance with *H4* and *H6*.

Table 9 Regression Analyses to Reveal Mediating Effect (Beautifulness Factor)

Models	Dependent variables	Independent variables		adj r <sup>2</sup>	F
		Number of N46	Beautifulness		
1		0.263*** (0.020)		0.443	177.055
2	preference		-0.778*** (0.118)	0.162	43.269
3		0.241*** (0.103)	-0.309*** (0.022)	0.465	95.792
4	beautifulness	-0.085*** (0.013)		0.162	43.137



Table 10 Regression Analyses to Reveal Mediating Effect (Entertainment Factor)

Models	Dependent variables	Independent variables		adj r <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>
		Number of N46	Beautifulness		
1		0.263*** (0.020)		0.443	177.055
2	preference		-0.450*** (0.130)	0.047	11.805
3		0.260*** (0.021)	-0.128 (0.103)	0.447	89.113
4	entertainment	-0.050*** (0.013)		0.057	14.294

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper focuses on young people's perceptions of Nogizaka46 and its members, and it examines how images are influenced, or have been influenced by other factors. This study derived the following findings, as shown in the previous sections:

- (1) Recognition rates regarding members of Nogizaka46 were generally still low. Even Nanase Nishino, who has been a center singer three times thus far, was known by only a third of the university students who participated in the study.
- (2) The recognition rates for the group's main singles (title songs) were also low. However, it can be said newer songs have received more recognition, and greater recognition is expected in the near future.
- (3) Most inter-correlations of preferences for idol groups were significantly positive, which means ordinary young people do not evaluate these groups in a contrapositive manner. In other words, even though officials of Nogizaka46 try to position it as an official rival of AKB48, ordinary people—not fans—do not take sides with either group.
- (4) Nogizaka46 is generally perceived differently from AKB48. Nogizaka46 is perceived as a less entertaining and more beautiful idol group than AKB48. The features of Nogizaka46 are reflective of the image that their officials initially tried to establish; therefore, it can be said that their efforts resulted in success to some degree.
- (5) The number of recognized members has a positive effect on preference for the group, and this effect is partially mediated by an image of Nogizaka46 as a beautiful group. More specifically, as more members of Nogizaka46 are recognized, their beautiful feature receives greater appreciation; in turn, this image may enhance their popularity rating. In contrast, although Nogizaka46 is considered a less entertaining group than AKB48, that image did not have a mediating effect between the number of recognized

members and preferences for the group. Therefore, this feature is not a weakness of Nogizaka46.

As shown in Table 1, name recognition of members of Nogizaka46 is still low, and the group's official still has to sell Nogizaka46 according to various means, such as live performances, CM, and appearances on TV shows. Further, beyond enhancing name recognition of Nogizaka46, marketing considerations also include which aspect of the group resonates the most with people. As revealed in this paper, it may be unimportant or unnecessary to sell an entertaining aspect of Nogizaka46 by highlighting the more engaging members. Rather, a focus on members who keep a low profile but who look beautiful (e.g., Asuka Saito, Misa Eto, Hinako Kitano (北野日奈子), Himeka Nakamoto (中元日芽香), and Ranze Terada (寺田蘭世)), may be more strategic.

This study represents the first step for concentrating academically on Nogizaka46 and analyzing relevant data. Unfortunately, it seems researchers have been hesitant to focus on idol groups. However, the social impact of AKB48, Nogizaka46, and other idol groups is tremendous (as noted by sales volumes of CDs), and it is obligatory that researchers address such influential entities. Therefore, more studies dealing with these idol groups are expected.

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