

Young Students' Views of Idols' Romances:  
Differences between AKB48 and Sakamichi Group Fans

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## Young Students' Views of Idols' Romances: Differences between AKB48 and Sakamichi Group Fans<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study examines young students' views of idols' romances. Statistical analysis of data collected from 171 university students reveals that the Sakamichi group is more popular among students than the AKB48 group; students tend to require idols to have comprehensive features and accept idols' past romances. They also consider many idols to have a secret significant other and are not opposed to them concealing the secret. Regression analysis also finds that fans of the Sakamichi group, particularly those of Nogizaka46, show a tendency for romantic fixation on a particular member, and female students have a more realistic view of idols' romances.

**Keywords:** Nogizaka46, Keyakizaka46, Hinatazaka46, AKB48, idol

### 1. Introduction

The performances of contemporary female idol groups, particularly the AKB48 and Sakamichi groups (the latter comprising Nogizaka46 (乃木坂46), Keyakizaka46 (欅坂46), and Hinatazaka46 (日向坂46)) are outstanding. Sales of their CD-DVDs almost always pass the million mark. The number of views of Keyakizaka46's Kuroi Hitsuji (Black Sheep) on YouTube exceeded 13 million by the end of September 2019. Nogizaka46 received the Japan Record Award consecutively in 2017 and 2018, and AKB48 also received this award in 2011 and 2012.

Individual members of these female idol groups have also had impressive careers. Some of them are active not only as singers but also as movie stars. Yurina Hirate (平手友梨奈), a leading member of Keyakizaka46, played the lead character of the movie *Hibiki* in 2018, for which she received several awards including the Newcomer of the Year award at the 42nd Japan Academy Film Prize. Similarly, Miona Hori (堀未央奈) is one of the most popular members of Nogizaka46. She played a lead character in *Hot Gimmick: Girl Meets Boy* in 2019 and received the New Face Award at the 22nd Shanghai International Film Festival.

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1 上田 泰:「アイドルの恋愛に対する若者の考え方について:特にAKB48グループと坂道グループのファンの違い」

Thus, the effect of idol groups, particularly AKB48 and Sakamichi groups, on people and society is much greater than we usually imagine. However, despite such a great social impact of these female idol groups, they can become vastly unpopular if a secret romance is divulged. As part of what Tagawa (2009) calls “one’s own fictional world,” many male fans of an idol tend to have a “pseudo-romance” relationship with a female idol. If fans learn their idol has a romantic relationship in real life, many of them quickly lose interest in her and no longer spend much money for her, which could cause great economic losses for the company managing the idol. Thus, some companies include provisions in their contracts with idols stipulating that they not have romances while under their management.

Contrariwise, some weekly magazine companies try to get the scoop on idols’ secret romantic relationships to increase sales. With every press report on an idol’s romance, debate arises among her fans over whether she should resign. However, nobody knows whether in fact many fans do engage in pseudo-romances with their idols and would refuse to accept their real-life romantic relationships. It is also unknown whether young people who are not interested in idol groups view idols’ romances similarly to fans. Furthermore, it is unsure what factors influence their refusal to accept their idol having a romantic relationship, and whether there is any difference between AKB48 and Sakamichi group fans in this respect. In spite of the fact that these problems are urgent in light of the large sums of money these idols earn, no statistical analysis has yet been conducted of this issue. This study collected data from university students and conducted statistical analyses of their interest in various idol groups, views of idols’ romances, and factors affecting these views.

## 2. Survey Overview

In this study, data were collected from students who attended a private university in Tokyo, Japan, in September 2019. Students were given a paper questionnaire or a piece of paper with the QR code of the questionnaire site on the web during class and were asked to complete it after class. The questions were so simple that students could easily and quickly answer them in a few minutes.

The total sample in this study was 171 students (69 males, 92 females, and 10 of unspecified gender). Although the questionnaire did not include an item regarding their age, as they were undergraduates, their ages were from 18 to about 23 years old. The questionnaire asked about their recognition of and degree of interest in three Sakamichi groups and six domestic AKB48 groups, some desirable features of an idol (beauty, dancing, etc.), and views of idols’ romances.

The items regarding interest in idols were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging

from 1 = *no interest* to 5 = *much interest*, and the items on desirable features as an idol and views of idols' romances were also scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *disagree* to 5 = *agree*. The contents of the questionnaire are as follows.

### **Questionnaire Survey on Opinions about Female Idols' Romance**

1. Your gender

- (1) male                                      (2) female

2. Do you have an interest in the following female idol groups? Please select the most applicable answer from 1 = (*I know this group*), but have no interest in it, to 5 = *I have much interest in this group*, or 0 = *I do not know this group*. The term "have an interest" includes liking, curiosity, and concern.

[0 = *I do not know*, 1 = *no interest*, 2 = *a little interest*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *quite a lot of interest*, 5 = *much interest*.]

- |                |                  |                  |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| 2.1 Nogizaka46 | 2.2 Keyakizaka46 | 2.3 Hinatazaka46 |
| 2.4 AKB48      | 2.5 SKE48        | 2.6 NMB48        |
| 2.7 HKT48      | 2.8 NGT48        | 2.9 STU48        |

3. How much do you agree with the following opinions on female idol groups? Please select the most applicable number from (1) *disagree* to (5) *agree*.

[(1) *disagree* (2) *disagree a little* (3) *neither agree nor disagree* (4) *agree a little* (5) *agree*]

[Features]

- 3.1 Female idol groups should be beautiful. (beauty)  
3.2 Female idol groups should be cute. (cuteness)  
3.3 Female idol groups should be good at dancing. (dance)  
3.4 Female idol groups should sing well. (singing)

[Views of Idols' Romances]

- 3.5 I have interest in news about female idols' romances. (news)  
3.6 I have no concern about her romance before she become an idol. (past love)  
3.7 A female idol should have no beloved in her life. (endure)  
3.8 A female idol should resign her job as an idol if her romance gets out. (resign)  
3.9 There are many idols who hide a secret romance. (secret)  
3.10 I understand some fans feel true love for an idol as if she were a real lover. (true love)

3.11 Everything is okay if a female idol glosses over her romance. (okay)

3.12 A rule against idols' romances is necessary. (rule)

### 3. Recognition and Interest in Idol Groups

#### (1) *Recognition Rates*

Although it was not the main object of our research, we compared the recognition rates of the AKB48 groups and Sakamichi groups. The AKB48 group consists of not only AKB48 as a main “branch,” but also various “regional branches” based in a central local city. The recognition of these groups is expected to be quite high in each of these local cities and its surrounding area, and loyal and enthusiastic fans (often called “AKB otaku”) also know these groups well even if they live away from these cities. However, we did not have information about the extent to which ordinary young students know these regional idol groups.

Although asking respondents about how much interest they have in each of idol groups is predicated on their recognition of these groups, some respondents might not know the idol groups. Thus, the items asking respondents' interest in idol groups included the option “do not know (this idol group).”

Table 1 shows the percentages of students who know each of the idol groups and those who do not. According to this table, no student answered that he or she was unaware of Nogizaka46. This is not surprising because Nogizaka46 have shown an outstanding performance as the top idol group. The proportion of students who knew Keyakizaka46 and AKB48 were also almost 100%, and over 90% of the students knew SKE48, NMB48, and HKT48. These high numbers also make sense because Keyakizaka46 is well known for its popularity among young people, and the latter groups are comparatively historic ones that have (had) very famous members such as Sayaka Yamamoto (山本彩) (NMB48), Rino Sashihara (指原莉乃) (HKT48), and Sakura Miyawaki (宮脇咲良) (HKT48). Hinatazaka46 also had a high recognition rate. Under the original name Hiraganakeyaki46 (けやき坂46), they started as a younger sister group of Keyakizaka46 in a real sense in May 2016 (although Neru Nagahama (長濱ねる) joined it in November 2015, no other member participated in it at that time). They also have flagship variety TV shows like *Hinatazaka de Aimasyou* and *Hinabingo (1&2)*.

In contrast, NGT48 and STU48 have a low profile. Although NGT48 recently gained attention due to an instance of violence against one of its members, more than 20% of the students were unaware of NGT48, and a majority of the students were unaware of STU48. This result is surprising because STU48 has several members who are also active as “selected” members of AKB48, such as Yumiko Takino (瀧野由美子) and Chiho Ishida

(石田千穂), and some fans who are worried about the future of AKB48 call STU48 “the final fortress” of the group.

Table 1 Recognition Ratio of Idol Groups

Groups	know	do not know
Nogizaka46	171 (100.0%)	0 ( 0.0%)
Keyakizaka46	170 ( 99.4%)	1 ( 0.6%)
Hinatazaka46	151 ( 88.3%)	20 (11.7%)
AKB48	170 ( 99.4%)	1 ( 0.6%)
SKE48	164 ( 95.9%)	7 ( 4.1%)
NMB48	150 ( 87.7%)	21 (12.3%)
HKT48	157 ( 91.8%)	14 ( 8.2%)
NGT48	133 ( 77.8%)	38 (22.2%)
STU48	85 ( 49.7%)	86 (50.3%)

## (2) *Differences in Interest*

Table 2 presents the result for responses to the items asking respondents' interest in each of the idol groups. One of the most surprising facts is a high interest in the Sakamichi group and a low interest in the AKB48 group. Although this survey was conducted among university students, fans of the AKB48 group might be slightly older than these students, judging from pictures of fans celebrating the birthdays of AKB48 members or attending the AKB48 Theater. We conducted a *t*-test to examine gender differences in interest, but no significant differences in interest were found between male and female respondents, except that male students indicated a higher level of interest in Hinatazaka46 than female students at the 10% significance level. In other words, both Nogizaka46 and Keyakizaka46 are popular with both sexes, but the AKB48 group is less popular among both male and female respondents.

In the results of correlation analysis, all correlations between interests were significantly positive. We know that some core AKB48 fans are critical of the Sakamichi group, and vice versa. Indeed, there seem to be such core fans, as the correlations between any two Sakamichi groups or between any two AKB48 groups are generally higher than those between a Sakamichi group and an AKB48 group. However, except for such core fans of each group, students show a wide distribution in interest, ranging from those having no interest in idols to those with great interest in them.

Table 2 Basic Statistics and Correlations of Interest in Idols

Groups	N	Means	Std. Dev.	Means (Male)	Means (Female)
1 Nogizaka46	171	2.965	1.426	2.899	3.000
2 Keyakizaka46	170	2.700	1.332	2.632	2.717
3 Hinatazaka46	151	2.470	1.385	2.6935+	2.263
4 AKB48	170	1.882	1.002	1.783	1.912
5 SKE48	164	1.628	0.792	1.582	1.632
6 NMB48	150	1.727	0.976	1.650	1.732
7 HKT48	157	1.637	0.871	1.556	1.647
8 NGT48	133	1.617	0.877	1.556	1.620
9 STU48	85	1.718	0.840	1.658	1.683

+ Difference between male and female is significant at the 0.1 level (2-tailed)

Groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Nogizaka46								
2 Keyakizaka46	0.746**							
3 Hinatazaka46	0.676**	0.691**						
4 AKB48	0.373**	0.370**	0.327**					
5 SKE48	0.376**	0.364**	0.349**	0.730**				
6 NMB48	0.351**	0.267**	0.350**	0.616**	0.721**			
7 HKT48	0.350**	0.319**	0.342**	0.746**	0.811**	0.779**		
8 NGT48	0.315**	0.342**	0.358**	0.694**	0.868**	0.718**	0.816**	
9 STU48	0.336**	0.440**	0.392**	0.692**	0.786**	0.758**	0.921**	0.769**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4. Desirable Features and Favorite Groups

Idols have various features: Some idols are quite beautiful, others are good at dancing, and some idols sing very well. Thus, fans might show a variety of demands for different skills and features of idols. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the desirable traits of an idol and each of the idol groups.

First of all, all the average scores for desirable features were over 3.0. Cuteness had the highest value and singing the lowest. A *t*-test revealed that all the means were significantly different at least at the 5% significant level except for the beauty-dance and dance-singing relationships. In addition, female students tended to want skills in dancing and singing more than male students do, at a 1% significant level.

Second, all the correlations between two of the four desirable features varied from 0.365

to 0.656, and all values were significantly positive at the 1% significant level. This result shows that the requirements of idols are not like a multiple-choice test; having just one feature is not sufficient to become an idol. A comprehensive talent is desirable, and indeed is required to be popular as a contemporary top idol.

Third, only a few significant correlations between these desirable features and interest in each of the idol groups were found. Significant correlations at the 5% significant level are: Hinatazaka46-dance (-0.187), SKE48-cuteness (-0.187), and NGT48-cuteness (-0.215). The former might come as a surprise because Hinatazaka46 has some members who had ballet training, such as Konoka Matsuda (松田好花) and Hiyori Hamagishi (濱岸ひより). The finding that interest in SKE48 or NGT48 is weaker if cuteness is emphasized, or that fans with an interest in these group do not require cuteness from their idols is interesting. However, its reason remains unknown.

## 5. Views of Idols' Romances

Table 3 shows the basic statistics (means and standard deviations) and inter-correlations regarding the items concerning idols' romances. According to this table, we find that students generally tended to take a realistic view and overlooked an idol's romance before she became an idol. They also realistically consider many idols to actually have a secret significant other. An interesting point is that they consider it to be of no importance if an idol conceals a secret romance, and they also believe that an idol does not have to resign if this secret comes out. On the whole, students were accepting of idols' romances.

Table 3 Basic Statistics and Correlations of Views to Idol's Romance

	N	Means	Std. Dev.	Means (Male)	Means (Female)
1 news	168	2.702	1.236	2.448**	2.912
2 past love	167	4.240	0.920	4.224	4.233
3 endure	168	2.768	1.199	2.582	2.868
4 resign	168	2.220	1.006	2.149	2.286
5 secret	168	4.077	0.833	4.075*	4.132
6 true love	168	3.780	1.181	3.358	4.055
7 okay	167	3.778	0.934	3.806	3.844
8 rule	167	2.605	1.070	2.537	2.644

\*\* Difference between male and female is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\* Difference between male and female is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)



Groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 news							
2 past love	0.016						
3 endure	0.341**	-0.053					
4 resign	0.289**	-0.153*	0.544**				
5 secret	0.307**	0.221**	0.150	0.087			
6 true love	0.316**	0.017	0.332**	0.152*	0.097		
7 okay	-0.033	0.344**	-0.161*	-0.203**	0.292**	-0.050	
8 rule	0.224**	-0.050	0.635**	0.422**	0.093	0.296**	-0.197*

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As for gender differences, female students have more interest in news on idols' romances and show a tendency to sympathize with a person who has a romantic fixation on an idol. This is a rather surprising result, as women have by and large been considered to dislike and avoid males romantically fixated on an idol (*gachi-ota*).

Correlation analysis also yields some interesting points. The high positive correlations between any pairs of the "endure," "rule," and "resign" items are as expected. The respondents who agree with these items tended to have a severe attitude toward idols. It also stands to reason that the correlations of the "okay," "endure," and "resign" items are significantly negative.

Next, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to understand the structure of these associations of items. We found initial eigenvalues of two factors were over 1.0 (two factors explained 52.797% of total variance of variables). Table 4 depicts the pattern matrix from EFA (the extraction method was principal axis factoring and the rotation method was promax with Kaiser normalization). Rotation sums of squared loadings of two factors were respectively 2.048 and 1.028.

According to the values in Table 4, Factor 1 is related to loyal and enthusiastic fans' attitudes toward idols. A high value of this factor implies a severe attitude that refuses to accept idols' romances. We thus call this factor the "*gachi-koi mind*" factor, where *gachi-koi* means a romantic fixation on an idol as if to a real lover. Factor 2 is related to a fan's attitude not to mind a secret romance. A person with a high value of this factor considers many idols actually to have someone special but does not care if they conceal it. Fans with a high value of this factor are considered to expect idols to entertain them with a wonderful performance. We thus call this factor "*cover-up mind*." The correlation between two factors is  $-0.095$ . If an idol's romance is divulged, the impact of the news differs depending on the values of Factor 1 and Factor 2: The higher the value of Factor

1, the more harshly the idol is treated by her fans, and the higher the value of Factor 2, the higher the acceptance of a romantic relationship by her fans. It is then important to determine the factors influencing these two factors.

Table 4 Pattern Matrix

variables	Factor	
	1	2
endure	<b>0.853</b>	-0.029
rule	<b>0.678</b>	-0.091
resign	<b>0.600</b>	-0.13
news	<b>0.482</b>	0.210
true love	<b>0.409</b>	0.090
okay	-0.145	<b>0.620</b>
secret	0.272	<b>0.574</b>
past love	-0.034	<b>0.471</b>

Regression models with each of these two factors as a dependent variable were then examined. The first model had gender, interest in the AKB48 group, and interest in the Sakamichi group as independent variables. Interest in AKB48 group was calculated by adding the values of interest for all six AKB48 groups, and interest in Sakamichi group was the total interest in the three Sakamichi groups. The second model included four desirable features. Stepwise regression analysis was adopted because the correlations between independent variables were relatively high.

First, in the first regression model with interest in the two idol groups, only interest in Sakamichi group had a significant positive impact on Factor 1 ( $\beta = 0.235$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the higher the interest in Sakamichi group students have, the greater their tendency to truly love an idol (probably a Sakamichi group member). When the interests in all nine individual groups were separately entered in the model in place of interest in the AKB48 and Sakamichi groups, only interest in Nogizaka46 was significant. This means that many fans of Nogizaka46 have a “*gachi-koi*” attitude toward its members. As for Factor 2, only gender had a significant impact ( $\beta = -0.266$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), which means female students show more cover-up mind than male students. This result is understandable because it is rare, if ever, for women to have a “pseudo-romance” relationship with a female idol.

Second, regarding the effects of idols’ features, only beauty had a significant effect on Factor 1 ( $\beta = 0.187$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that students who consider that idols should be beautiful or who love beautiful idols have a higher possibility of forming romantic fixations on idols. This is also an understandable result. However, no feature had a significant impact on Factor 2.

## 6. Conclusion

This study reports several important findings that are summarized below.

1. Young students know all AKB48 and Sakamichi groups well except for NGT48 and STU48.
2. Young students tend to have a higher interest in the Sakamichi group than the AKB48 group. In particular, the degree of interest in Nogizaka46 and Keyakizaka46 is extremely high. Even so, all the correlations between interests in any two groups are significantly positive, which means that interest in one group does not imply opposition to the other group. Moreover, no gender effect was observed.
3. Cuteness is considered the most important feature as an idol, while singing well is not as emphasized. However, significant positive correlations between any two features mean that it is not being the master of only one feature but rather having a comprehensive mastery of several features that is required of modern idols.
4. Many students tend to accept idols' past romances and consider most idols to actually have a significant other. Female students have more interest in news on idols' romances and greater sympathy than male students for those who form romantic fixations on idols.
5. The results of regression analysis reveal that fans of the Sakamichi group tend to form a romantic fixation on an idol (probably a Sakamichi group member), and female students tend to accept idols' secret lovers more than male students do.

Following the huge success of female idol groups such as AKB48, Nogizaka46, and Keyakizaka46, academic articles focusing on the fans of idols have gradually accumulated (Maruta, 1998; Ogawa, 2006; Tagawa, 2009). However, research investigating data collected from young people who are currently fans or potential customers of these idol groups is rare. This study, despite a limited sample, is the first statistical analysis examining young people's views of idols and idols' romances.

One limitation of this study is that it dealt with the idol group as a unit of analysis and did not focus on individual members of these groups. However, except for the "*hako-oshi*" who loves a whole group rather than an individual member, most fans have more interest in a particular member of an idol group. Even if they like a particular idol group, their views of idols and idols' romances might differ depending on who their favorite idol is. It is thus important to examine whether there is any difference between fans of two idols in the same group. For example, among fans of Nogizaka46, do fans of Mai Shiraishi (白石麻衣) have a greater tendency to accept an idol's romance than those of Asuka Saito (齋藤飛鳥)? What about fans of Ayame Tsutsui (筒井あやめ), the youngest member of Nogizaka46?

Research focusing on differences among the fans of these individual members will be important and can be expected to be published in the near future.

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