

Attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 in the Eyes of Fans: Factors Affecting Fans' Evaluations

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Attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 in the Eyes of Fans: Factors Affecting Fans' Evaluations¹

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Abstract

Hinatazaka46 is one of the top idol groups in Japan. This study assumes that Hinatazaka46's fans differently evaluate the group's attractiveness depending on when they started having an interest in the group or whether they like other idol groups. By analyzing data collected from ninety fans of Hinatazaka46, this study shows that longtime fans evaluate the hardships the group faced in their early days more than new fans. However, contrary to the hypotheses proposed in this study, it is shown that, regardless of whether fans like other groups, some of the group's characteristics commonly attract fans. Moreover, we provide suggestions for future research.

Keywords: idol group, fans, Hinatazaka46, Keyakizaka46, Sakurazaka46, Nogizaka46

1. Introduction

When new members were initially recruited in Hiragana Keyaki in November 2015, almost none of the fans of Keyakizaka46 thought that a completely new idol group would be born. Rather than a new idol group, it would be built for Neru Nagahama, who did not formally finish auditioning for a member of Keyakizaka46 (current Sakurazaka46), and their fans believed that just an under-group (the second group) of Keyakizaka46 would be newly formed for her. Eleven members finally gained admission to this new group, and they started their careers as idols. However, their unique CD was not released, and their musical numbers were only included in the CDs of Keyakizaka46. As evidenced by Nogizaka46 and AKB48, this was a typical treatment for groups categorized under the main group comprising selected members. In fact, Keyakizaka46 was considered a group comprising “de facto” selected members, and Hiragana Keyaki was regarded as one of the non-selected members. Furthermore, their one and only hope, Neru Nagahama, opted out of Hiragana Keyaki to become an exclusive member of Keyakizaka46 in September 2017. They were in a quite difficult situation.

In a little more than three years after that time, members of Hiragana Keyaki changed

1 上田 泰：ファンの目から見た日向坂46の魅力：ファンの評価に影響する諸要因

its name to Hinatazaka46, and their solid position as one of the top idol groups has already been established and well recognized not only in Japan but also in neighboring countries. About 476,000 copies of their first single *Kyun* were sold in the first week after its on-sale date, March 27, 2019. *Kyun* set a new record for the number of female artists by exceeding those in Silent Majority of Keyakizaka46. They also appeared on the Red and White Singing Contest (*Kohaku Utagassen*), the most famous TV program in Japan, on December 31, 2019. Any singers who appear on this TV program tend to be regarded as top-ranked singers in Japan.

As a female idol group, it is natural that Hinatazaka46 is composed of very charming ladies and girls. Beyond this natural aspect, it is said that Hinatazaka46 possesses unique attractiveness compared to other groups. They experienced hardships as a “de facto” under-group of Keyakizaka46 but finally chose to take a different path as an idol group from Keyakizaka46 (Studio Green Henshubu, 2019ab).

Considering their long history of ups and downs, one of the most important research topics regarding Hinatazaka46 is exploring how their fans differently evaluate the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46. This paper investigates fans' evaluation of the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46, which might differ according to when fans started paying attention to Hinatazaka46. In addition, fans' preference for other idol groups is also considered to have an important effect on their fondness for Hinatazaka46. This study empirically examines which characteristics of Hinatazaka46 fans have an interest in and whether some factors have a significant effect on fans' evaluation of the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46.

2. Attractiveness of Hinatazaka46

As more people are gradually interested in Hinatazaka46, the media discuss the attractiveness of the group. The following citations are examples.

Ms. Kaoru Housen, when asked about the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46, answered that “their attractivity is coming from the fact that it seems members share an equally horizontal position because no individualistic member has well recognized generally” (Otona*answer, September 27, 2020). As a matter of fact, Hinatazaka46 does not have an overwhelmingly popular member, like Yurina Hirate of Keyakizaka46. All members seem to equally stand out. Although Nao Kosaka has held a center position four times, Kyoko Saito, Shiho Kato, and Mirei Sasaki also played the role of center singers of the group if including songs during the days of Hiragana Keyaki. Most of Hinatazaka46's fans do not recognize a steady top member in the group.

An unquestioning top member is a two-edged sword. Yurina Hirate was indeed a big asset that could quickly boost up the position of Keyakzaka46 as a top idol group. However,

there was a growing reputation that no member was important or known except for her. As a result, Keyakizaka46 was obliged to change their name to create a new image for itself after Yurina Hirate suddenly withdrew from the group. Furthermore, from fans' viewpoint, if the group has such an outstanding member, there seems to be a sort of conflict between this member (and supporting members around her) and other members even if there is actually no such conflict. Moreover, fans tend to be categorized into supporters and non-supporters of this outstanding member.

MANTAWEB (May 4, 2020) focuses on a variety of songs of Hinatazaka46 and their single-hearted attitude as points that appeal to Hinatazaka46's fans. The former is related to two kinds of songs: typical idol songs, such as *Kyun and Do Re Mi Sol La Si Do*, and cool songs since the early days of Hiragana Keyaki, such as *Soredemo Aruiteru* and *Kitai shite inai Jibun*. The latter reflects their old image when they were an under-group of Keyakizaka46.

Various songs can inhibit the group from having a stereotypical image. A stereotypical image is also a two-edged sword for the group. Although members of Keyakizaka46, who performed revolting songs that spoke for young people, could stir up enthusiasm in some people, they suffered from a situation that made them unable to shed this image.

In addition, the rockin'on.com (July 22, 2019) emphasizes that the "happy aura" characteristic of Hinatazaka46 not only makes people see the group happy, but also provides them with power to triumph over adversity. The website concludes by stating that, because of the hardships they faced in their early days, "their happy aura is positive and also persuasive because this term includes their unyielding spirits." KIS Henshubu (2020) also mentioned that "they have a large appetite that no other groups have because they won the current position in a painstaking way" (location: 233).

Although "happy aura" is not an exclusive feature of Hinatazaka46, it symbolizes the goal the group aims for. Aura is something unharnessed from a biological body to energize other people around it, and it means that Hinatazaka46 having an aura of happiness can give people a happy feeling. If the group had advanced their career successfully from the start, their encouragement would not have been persuasive to many people. Due to the difficulties they faced in their early days, their happy aura concept attracted and encouraged many fans. Studio Green Henshubu (2019b) also stated that "because of long hard days, they have valued their idea to appreciate their fans" (location: 917).

Finally, Real Sound (July 23, 2020) argues that the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 comes from "their performance with great happiness" because they perform with great enthusiasm as if they are a varsity team. Real Sound also demonstrates that the "attractivity of individual members, not the whole group, is extracted in their live stage performance."

This opinion accords with the fact that not only one member of Hinatazaka46, but also all its members are eye-catching.

In fact, Rina Ikoma of Nogizaka46 played her role as a central singer of the group five times in succession after their major debut, and Yurina Hirate of Keyakizaka46 continued holding the center position from the first to the end. Although it can be said that this is an effective strategy to promote a new group, it is a two-edged precarious sword, as described earlier.

Thus, arguments regarding the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 are summarized as follows: 1. their high-level performance full of happiness as typified by “happy aura”; 2. their efforts and single-hearted attitude to overcome adverse challenges; 3. a sense of togetherness fostered by all the attractive members.

3. Hypotheses

As shown in the previous section, fans have paid attention to various aspects of the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46. This diversity of fans' opinions is attributable to their complicated carrier. Hinatazaka46 was born as a little sister group of Keyakizaka46 and sang songs that spoke for young people who were aggrieved by and resisted pressure from adults and adult society, similar to Keyakizaka46.

Longtime fans of Hinatazaka46 witnessed the early challenges the group faced as an under-group of Keyakizaka46, and they backed them up. If fans paid attention to the group when it was comprised of only the first-generation members, such as Kyoko Saito, Shio Kato, and Mirei Sasaki, they would know that the group had been through many hard times and overcame them, and evaluate members' efforts and endurance more highly than other fans. In addition, fans might prefer to listen to a type of songs similar to those of Keyakizaka46 rather than typical idol songs. Conversely, people who became fans of the group after its name was changed to Hinatazaka46 were attracted to the pleasant atmosphere of the group symbolized by “happy aura” more than to its hard-earned performance during its early days as an under-group of Keyakizaka46. Thus, the following two hypotheses can be proposed:

H1: Longtime fans of Hinatazaka46 since the time when the group was affiliated to Keyakizaka46 will prefer its cool songs and the single-hearted attitude of its members more than recent fans.

H2: Recent fans of Hinatazaka46 after the second-generation members joined the group prefer typical idol songs and the pleasant atmosphere of the group more than old fans.

Considering their history, Hinatazaka46 has an intense relationship with Keyakizaka46. However, their current image might be closer to Nogizaka46 than to Keyakizaka46. It

is well known that Nogizaka46 exceedingly comprises beautiful ladies and girls. Thus, fans of Keyakizaka46 might regard Hinatazaka46 as a little sister and still evaluate Hinatazaka46's initial performance of resistance toward adults and adult society. However, fans of Nogizaka46 might emphasize the beauty of the members of Hinatazaka46 more than fans of Keyakizaka46.

Furthermore, AKB48 is comprised of various members. Although most fans of AKB48 love the beauty of its idols, they also like their remarkable ability to entertain cultivated through performing at their own theater. Thus, if Hinatazaka46's fans, who also like AKB48, are interested in the same group characteristics as fans of AKB48, they will emphasize the group's ability to entertain more than fans who do not like AKB48.

Thus, the following three hypotheses are also proposed.

H3: If Hinatazaka46's fans also like Nogizaka46, they will prefer typical idol songs and appreciate the pleasant atmosphere of the group more than fans who do not like Nogizaka46.

H4: If Hinatazaka46's fans also like Keyakizaka46, they will prefer cool songs and appreciate the single-hearted attitude of the group more than fans who do not like Keyakizaka46.

H5: If Hinatazaka46's fans also like AKB48, they will appreciate their ability to entertain more than fans who do not like AKB48.

4. Analysis Method

Data Collection Method

The author asked followers of his Twitter account to complete a questionnaire on the Questant website of Macromill Inc., which provides a web platform for questionnaire investigation. Data were collected from October 20, 2020 to October 23, 2020. Although most of the followers of the author's Twitter account are students and university graduates, the author is working for, respondents' demographic factors, except for gender and age, are not sure because the author also asked followers to retweet their tweets, and unknown persons, seeing a retweeted tweet, might have answered the questionnaire. Respondents were limited to those who were interested in Hinatazaka46 because many items in the questionnaire were not appropriately answered if the respondents did not know the group, for example, the item asking respondents to pick up the most favorite member. As a result, we collected data from 90 respondents (males: 51 [56.7%], females: 39 [43.3%]). Among the respondents, 48 (53.3%) were over the age of twenty, and 86 (95.6%) were under the age of twenty-five.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire on the website is divided into two parts: the first is comprised of items that ask about the degree to which various aspects of the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 are evaluated, and the second includes questions regarding the factors affecting the evaluation of attractiveness. The former includes items regarding attractiveness, as described in the previous section. The latter includes items regarding gender, age, the time fans liked Hinatazaka46, favorite members (up to three members), other idol groups fans like, and favorite members of the other idol groups.

The following twelve items are concrete question items that ask about the attractiveness of the group. These items are shown randomly to the respondents. All the question items were rated on a regular 5-point scale ranging from “agree (that this aspect represents attractiveness of Hinatazaka46)” to “disagree.”

They have an image full of happiness.

They are a healthy-looking and bright group.

They play friendly and catchy music.

They have many pretty and beautiful members.

They have many entertaining members.

There is one member or a few high-visibility (attention-getting) members leading the group.

They have a strong sense of togetherness and bond.

They have a cool image.

They play music that speaks for young people.

They struggled in their early days.

They have a great ability to overcome adversity.

Members perform with a strong single-hearted attitude.

Among these items, the first six items are related to the group's bright image attributable to its “happy aura,” and the remaining six items are associated with how the group handled early hard days.

5. Result*Basic Tendency*

First, the questionnaire proposed five different moments and asked the respondents to select the most proximate one when they became a Hinatazaka46 fan. According to Table 1, about 60% of the respondents selected the moment when the members were collected as Hiragana Keyaki (n = 24, 26.7%) or the moment when their name was changed to Hinatazaka46 (n = 30, 33.3%).

Table 1 The Time You Became a Fan of Hinatazaka46

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
When members formed the group Hiragana Keyaki	24	26.7	26.7
When the second-generation members gathered as a group	7	7.8	34.4
When the TV program “Hiraganaoshi” started	16	17.8	52.2
When they changed their name to Hinatazaka46	30	33.3	85.6
When new the third-generation members were added	13	14.4	100.0
Total	90	100.0	

Next, the respondents were asked to pick up the name of their most favorite member, and the other two favorite members, if any. The option, “no specific member,” was also included if the respondents had no favorite member (that is, *hako-oshi*). The members are listed in Table 2. The table shows that Kyoko Saito, Hina Kawata, and Nao Kosaka gained many votes. The strengths of these three members are not changed if not only the most favorite but also the all three favorite ones were considered (by adding votes

Table 2 The Most Favorite Member

	Top		Top Three	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Sarina Ushio	1	1.1%	2	0.7%
Yuka Kageyama	6	6.7%	9	3.3%
Shiho Kato	4	4.4%	11	4.1%
Kyoko Saito	10	11.1%	19	7.0%
Kumi Sasaki	0	0.0%	4	1.5%
Mirei Sasaki	2	2.2%	8	3.0%
Mana Takase	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Ayaka Takamoto	3	3.3%	10	3.7%
Mei Higashimura	6	6.7%	11	4.1%
Miku Kanemura	6	6.7%	15	5.6%
Hina Kawata	9	10.0%	19	7.0%
Nao Kosaka	8	8.9%	19	7.0%
Suzuka Tomita	1	1.1%	11	4.1%
Akari Nibu	5	5.6%	11	4.1%
Hiyori Hamagishi	4	4.4%	11	4.1%
Konoka Matsuda	5	5.6%	10	3.7%
Manamo Miyata	5	5.6%	10	3.7%
Miho Watanabe	5	5.6%	14	5.2%
Hinano Kamimura	1	1.1%	12	4.4%
Mikuni Takahashi	0	0.0%	3	1.1%
Mari Morimoto	1	1.1%	1	0.4%
Haruyo Yamaguchi	0	0.0%	3	1.1%
No specific member	8	8.9%	57	21.1%
Total	90	100.0%	240	100.0%

together). Although the popularity of Kyoko Saito and Nao Kosaka, who have experience in occupying a center position, is understandable, the popularity of Hina Kawata, who has not yet stood at a center position in their main songs yet, is rather surprising. According to Magazine Box (2019), she is the kind of person who is loved by not only fans but also other members. This feature might manifest in winning many votes.

As a more pronounced result, it can be pointed out that many members were dispersedly selected by their fans. Eighteen members out of a total of twenty-two were chosen as the most favorite members, and twenty-one members were selected as the top three members of the group. If the same question had been asked to the former Keyakizaka46's fans, a significant proportion would have voted Yurina Hirate, who had great charisma in Keyakizaka46. We can say that the fact that most members are equally popular among their fans is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Hinanazaka46.

Items regarding the attractiveness of Hinatazaka46 are listed in Table 3 in the order of the largest mean to the smallest one. According to this table, fans strongly agree that the image of Hinatazaka46 is represented by being “a healthy-looking and bright group,” having “a strong sense of togetherness and bond,” and having an attitude “full of happiness.” Conversely, fans do not strongly agree that the group is “cool”, “plays music that speaks for young people,” and has “one member or a few high-visibility members.” The low score of the last item corresponds with the fact that the fans like various members.

Previously, the author empirically revealed that the ability to entertain was not an advantage of Nogizaka46 (Ueda, 2016). Compared to this result, it is an interesting fact that “entertaining members” have a high mean value ($\mu = 4.511$), and this result might indicate Hinatazaka46 has a different image from Nogizaka46.

Table 3 Attractiveness of Hinatazaka46

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
They are a healthy-looking and bright group.	4.867	0.402
They have a strong sense of togetherness and bond.	4.678	0.633
Members perform with a strong single-hearted attitude.	4.656	0.690
They have a happy image.	4.600	0.747
They struggled in their early days.	4.578	0.734
The group has many pretty and beautiful members.	4.511	0.738
It has many entertaining members.	4.511	0.902
They make friendly and catchy music.	4.400	0.859
They have a great ability to overcome adversity.	4.111	1.096
There is one member or a few high-visibility members leading the group.	2.978	1.324
They play music that speaks for young people.	2.978	1.112
They have a cool image.	2.311	1.186

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they liked Nogizaka46, Keyakizaka46, and AKB48 and to tell favorite members of idol groups other than Hinatazaka46. Nogizaka46 had the highest mean ($\mu = 4.422$), Keyakizaka46 was in the middle position ($\mu = 3.878$), and AKB48 had the lowest mean ($\mu = 2.644$). However, this result is not specific to Hinatazaka46's fans, but it demonstrates the common tendency of young people. For example, Ueda's (2016) survey showed that AKB48 was much less popular among young people than Nogizaka46. Further, Erika Ikuta (a member of Nogizaka46) obtained the maximum votes as the favorite idol, and Hikaru Morita (a member of Keyakizaka46) occupied the second position. It can also be noted that the popularity of Hikaru Morita provides evidence supporting the validity of the judgment of Sakurazaka46's management regarding placing her at a center position for the group's first musical number.

Testing the Hypotheses

Our hypotheses considered attractive characteristics evaluated by Hinatazaka46's fans, which differ according to when they became fans of the group. Concretely, longtime fans knew that members took painstaking steps in their early days, and they would emphasize the items of attractiveness related to the group's hard times.

First, we divided respondents into longtime fans and new fans by focusing on whether or not they started having an interest in the group before the group changed their name to Hinatazaka46, and we conducted an independent two-sample t-test to assess the responses of the two groups of fans. The results, as shown in Table 4, indicate that longtime fans evaluate the four items more than new fans. All of these four items show that the members united to handle difficult times, which means Hypothesis 1 is supported by the result. Regarding the items symbolizing the group's "happy aura," although we assumed new fans would make more evaluations than longtime fans in Hypothesis 2, the two-sample t-test did not produce any significant results. This implies that the bright image of Hinatazaka46 commonly attracts fans regardless of when they started having an interest in the group.

Table 4 Two-sample t-test for longtime and new fans

Items	Mean		sig.
	Longtime (47)	New (43)	
They have a strong sense of togetherness and bond.	4.809	4.535	0.044
Members perform with a strong single-hearted attitude.	4.809	4.488	0.031
They struggled in their early days.	4.766	4.372	0.013
The group has many entertaining members.	4.745	4.526	0.012

sig. = a significant level

Next, we divided respondents into two groups depending on whether they liked Nogizaka46, Keyakizaka46, or AKB48 and conducted a two-sample t-test to evaluate the responses of the two groups. The significant items are listed in Table 5. The table shows that whether fans like Nogizaka46 or not has a significantly positive effect only on the “strong single-hearted attitude,” and interest in Keyakizaka46 has a significantly positive impact on the “healthy-looking and bright” image of the group, “struggle in their early days,” and “entertainment.” Hitanazaka46’s fans, who also like AKB48, significantly emphasize “friendly and catchy music” and “cool image” more than their counterparts. We hypothesized that fans seek the characteristics of Hinatazaka46 that are the same as those of the other group. However, although the results partially support Hypothesis 4 regarding Keyakizaka46, definitive empirical results supporting Hypotheses 3 and 5 are not obtained.

Table 5 Two-sample t-test for having a favorable attitude to other groups

Nogizaka46			
Items	Mean		sig.
	Like (49)	Dislike (41)	
Members perform with a strong single-hearted attitude.	4.796	4.488	0.043
Keyakizaka46 (Sakuarzaka46)			
Items	Mean		sig.
	Like (58)	Dislike (32)	
They are a healthy-looking and bright group.	4.875	4.449	0.001
They struggled in their early days.	4.813	4.449	0.007
The group has many entertaining members.	4.875	4.310	0.001
AKB48			
Items	Mean		sig.
	Like (48)	Dislike (42)	
They play friendly and catchy music.	4.604	4.167	0.021
They have a cool image.	2.542	2.048	0.045

sig. = a significant level

Finally, another two-sample t-test was conducted to determine any gender differences in participants' responses although it is unrelated to our hypotheses. As shown in Table 6, males evaluate items related to Hinatazaka46's past hard days more than females. As an interesting point, males appreciated “entertaining” members more than females. We

speculate that this is not a unique idea of Hinatazaka46's male fans, but male idol fans tend to appreciate the ability to entertain them more than female fans.

Table 6 Two-sample t-test for gender differences

Items	Mean		sig.
	Males (47)	Females (43)	
They have a strong sense of togetherness and bond.	4.810	4.513	0.044
Members perform with a strong single-hearted attitude.	4.784	4.488	0.049
They struggled in their early days.	4.726	4.385	0.037
The group has many entertaining members.	4.706	4.257	0.026

sig. = a significant level

6. Discussion

Our empirical analysis showed that longtime fans of Hinatazaka46 tended to emphasize the attractive characteristics of the group related to hardships in their early days more than new fans. The same tendency was partially observed in fans who also liked Keyakizaka46. These results are in accordance with Hypotheses 1 and 3. However, the degree to which Hinatazaka46's fans emphasize the attractive characteristics of the group in terms of the "happy aura" concept is not affected by when they became fans of the group or whether they like Nogizaka46. Therefore, Hypotheses 2 and 4 are not supported. The latter result means that Hinatazaka46's fans do not make a choice between their past hardship and their brightness. Rather, we can say that all fans like the bright image of the group, and longtime fans focus on the early days when the group overcame difficulties.

Furthermore, Hinatazaka46 performed songs speaking for young people just like Keyakizaka46. However, even Keyakizaka46's fans do not seem to consider this aspect as one of Hinatazaka46's appealing characteristics. In other words, our empirical results show that Keyakizaka46's fans consider Hinatazaka46 not as a little sister group of Keyakizaka46 but as a quite different group with different attractiveness. Even so, it is worth noting that many fans like both Hinatazaka46 and Keyakizaka46.

7. Conclusion: Hinatazaka46 in the Future

This study aimed to empirically reveal which aspects of Hinatazaka46 attract fans and the factors that influence fans' evaluation of various characteristics of the group. The study demonstrated that, regardless of when fans started having an interest in Hinatazaka46 or whether they liked other groups or not, fans always loved the completely happy and bright image of Hinatazaka46 symbolizing the "happy aura" concept. According to this result,

Hinatazaka46's "happy aura" is a good strategy to further increase the number of fans because attractiveness is considered acceptable to many people.

Only a few members have resigned from the group so far. However, these members will be replaced by new ones in the coming days because more than ten members are twenty years old or above. Any idol group could face some difficulties when representative members resign from the group. Although Hinatazaka46 does not have exceptionally prominent members, some members, such as Kyoko Saito and Shiho Kato, are still visible and popular. Managing the replacement of visible members will be a big challenge to the group and the operation staff. Further, their captain, Kumi Sasaki, is known to be a leader with strong leadership skills. Also, Shiho Kato plays a very important role as a "de facto" associative leader who supports Kumi Sasaki. Magazine Box (2019) describes their relationship as "100% synchronized" (p.177). Succeeding members should maintain this good relationship between the leader and the sub-leader.

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