Using *Katakana* Letter in Japanese Products for Customer Buying Intention

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Abstract

The Katakana letter is one of the Japanese letters, which are generally used to write foreign terms into Japanese and are also used on products to attract customers' intention in buying a product. The researcher wants to test whether the argument is true. This research used quantitative methods, quantitative correlation approaches, and descriptive data analysis techniques to prove this argument. In collecting data, the authors surveyed to see the trend in selecting products written in Japanese characters and the reasons. After analyzing it, the main factor that attracts the customer's attention in buying products is not the letters but rather the preference factors of the customer.

Keywords: Japanese Letter; Purchase intention; Japanese product; Katakana

INTRODUCTION

The name or description is an essential component in selling a product. Zinkhan (1987) stated that an attractive name will make a brand and product easy for consumers to remember and compete with competitors. A brand is not a label, and a brand can attribute a product's selling point. A brand is a complex logo representing a product with many ideas and attributes related to the product it represents. Regarding brand naming or writing product descriptions, Japan uses the three letters: *Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji*, and *Romaji* (writing Japanese terms with Latin characters). *Katakana* letters emphasize words or attract someone's attention, such as advertisements. Japanese companies believe that displaying foreign terms in their products creates the impression that their products are trustworthy, high-quality, and cool, so many Japanese companies use foreign loan words written in *Katakana*. Using foreign loanwords in an advertisement can expand the image of a product so that foreign loanwords are one of the Japanese companies' strategies to advertise their products. There are variations in Japanese characters in Japanese products, especially Katakana characters used in writing the original Japanese words. Through this research, the researchers wanted to know the relationship between *Katakana* letters on customer

buying intention and the reasons. Hence, manufacturers can use the results as a basic reference in product naming.

This study continues the previous research by Igarashi (2007), stating that "*Katakana* letters are used to emphasize words or attract someone's attention, such as in advertisements". The difference between this study and Igarashi's (2007) is that in this study, the researchers explored the influence of *Katakana* letters on customer buying intention. Also, the researchers wanted to test whether Katakana had a significant effect on product sales, as stated by Igarashi (2007).

LITERATURE STUDY
This research will discuss the usage of Japanese letter (Katakana) in advertisement, so this is part of sociolinguistic research. Trudgil in Saputra, et.all (2019) states that Sociolinguistics is that part of linguistic which is concerned with language as social and cultural phenomenon. The *Katakana* letter is one of the three Japanese characters: *Hiragana, Kanji,* and *Katakana*. Al Jahan (2017) stated *Katakana* letters were found in the 9th century at the beginning of the Heian period. Initially, *Katakana* was used almost exclusively by men for official texts and texts imported from China. Okugakiuchi (2010) stated *Kanji* characters can cause ambiguity in sentences because they have a broad meaning, while *Katakana* letters have a more definite meaning, making it easier for readers to understand what the researchers want to convey. There are four functions of Katakana letters. Some of the functions are taken from journals written by Renariah (2002). The four functions and examples are described in Table 1.

Besides the four functions of the *Katakana* letters, they can emphasize a word. Although the terms are from Japanese, they can also be written in *Katakana* to emphasize the effect, or the same function as Italics in English, which also emphasizes a word. Table 2 is an example and an explanation.

Hitomi (2018) stated that Katakana could create innovation and fashion in his journal. *Katakana* also increases the desire to buy and indicates that his company is different from other companies. The Japan Technical Communicators Association (JTCA) (2015), in their company manual, stated that one of the advantages of using *Katakana* in their products for manufacturers is to increase product demand. Kato (2002) stated that writing *Katakana* letters creates a stiff and dry impression. While writing using *Hiragana* letters creates a smoother and softer impression. Collins (1992) in Japan-think Ameri-think stated that Japanese companies believe that displaying foreign terms in their products creates the impression that their products are trustworthy, high-quality, and cool, so that many Japanese

companies use Katakana in their products. Goto (2000) states that using gairaigo/borrowed terms in an advertisement can broaden the image of a product. So the use of Katakana is one of the strategies of Japanese companies to advertise their products.

Table 1. The Function of *Katakana* Letter

Function	Original Term	Katakana Letter
Foreign Terms Writing	Starbucks	スタバック (*Sutabakkusu*)
	Guitar	ギター (*Gitaa*)
	Drum	ドラム (*Doramu*)
Animals and Plants Writing	Lion	ライオン (*Raion*)
	Coconut	ココナツ (*Kokonatsu*)
The names of foreign people & places writing	Jeremy	ジェレミー (*Jeremii*)
	Jakarta	ジャカルタ (*Jakaruta*)
Onomatopoeic writing	Heartbeat sound (Nervous)	ドキドキ (*Doki-Doki*)
	Shiny	キラキラ (*Kira-Kira*)

Table 2. *Katakana* Letter as Emphasis Function

Sentences	*Katakana* Letter	Original letters in *Hiragana* & *Kanji*
昨日の試験はカンタンでした **Read: *Kinou no shiken wa KANTAN deshita*** **Meaning: Yesterday's exam was EASY**	カンタン Read: Kantan Meaning: Easy	かんたん、簡単

METHOD

This research was conducted using quantitative methods, correlation approaches, and descriptive data analysis techniques. Wahidmurni (2017) mentioned that quantitative research is one of the methods used to solve research problems related to numerical or statistical data. A survey will be distributed containing 10 types of Japanese products. For each type of product, there are 3 product choices. The names/descriptions of the products are mostly written in *Hiragana, Katakana* and *Kanji* characters.

The questions in the questionnaire have 2 stages; where the first stage is to determine which product is the most preferable, but because the reasons for choosing are still biased, a second stage is needed to ask the reasons for choosing the product to match it with the theory in the literature study. This survey was distributed to Japanese people who lived in Kansai and Chubu regions. The survey was distributed via Google Form from March 20, 2021, to April 26, 2021. From that timeframe, a sample of 74 respondents was collected. In this survey, the respondents were asked to choose one of 3 products written in different fonts, as many as 10 types of products, along with the reasons for choosing them. The following is an example of a survey question

Figure 1. Example of Question in Survey

Based on Figure 1, there are 4 sample questions, which consist of 2 types of products. Question number 1 is for the type of seaweed product. From 3 examples of seaweed (*Konbu*) products in question number 1, there are 3 options that respondents can choose. Option A (left) is a product written in Katakana letters （コンブ）, option B (middle) is written in *Hiragana* letters

（こんぶ）, and option C (right) is written in *Kanji*（昆布). In question number 2, the respondent's reason for choosing one of the 3 products was asked. The same pattern was used in question number 3 regarding *Miso* products (Japanese fermented soybean paste) and question number 4 regarding the respondent's reason for choosing one of the 3 Miso products. This question pattern was repeated for up to 10 types of products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To interpret the survey results, the researchers divided them into 2 ways of interpretation. First, the results will be seen from how many respondents choose products based on letters, choice A for *Katakana* letters, choice B for Hiragana letters, and choice C for *Kanji* letters. This first interpretation method will answer the research question that whether writing a product in Katakana makes consumers more likely to buy the product. Then, in the second interpretation method, the researchers will look at the respondent's reasons for choosing the product. For this reason, it will be more visible to detail the opinion of each respondent. The results of the first interpretation are described in Table 3.

Table 3. The Results of Product Selection with Certain Letters

Product	Answer choices (left to right sorted by quantity of voters)		
	C (Kanji Letter)	B (Hiragana Letter)	A (Katakana Letter)
Konbu / Seaweed	41%	32%	27%
Miso Paste	65%	15%	20%
Apple Juice	22%	34%	45%
Tonkotsu Ramen	46%	36%	18%
Edamame Bean	36%	45%	19%
Grape Candy	76%	20%	4%
Mineral Water	88%	9%	3%
Milk	69%	18%	14%
Senbei Chips	20%	16%	64%
Natto Bean	54%	38%	8%
AVERAGE	**52%**	**26%**	**22%**

From Table 3, the products written in *Kanji* show that more respondents are chosen, 52% or 40 respondents. The least selected was the product written in Katakana, which was 22% or 6 respondents. From this result, most product selection factors are not from products written in *Katakana*, although the *Katakana* letter was emphasized in previous studies. However, this function does not make customers interested in buying a product written in Katakana. To clarify this first interpretation, the researchers will then carry out the second interpretation. The respondent's reasons will be analyzed to determine the respondent's reasons for choosing the product. The respondents' reasons were then regrouped into 10 major categories, as explained in Table 4.

Table 4. Categorization of Respondent's Reason

Category No.	Reason's Category	Represented Reason
1	Favoritism	delicious, looks good, likes the taste, matches with certain foods
2	Packaging	cute, interesting package, good color/design, looks classy, simple because of a certain shape of the package, safe, can see the food inside, environmentally friendly, unique
3	Usability / Purpose	easy to use, can be used directly, can be stored for a certain time, good for health
4	Previous experience	already know the taste, often buy, believe, often see the product
5	Signature Product	from a certain city, a certain brand, famous, signature
6	Product's Description	selection of letters, detailed explanations, easy to understand, good word selection
7	Curiosity	curious about the product
8	Portion	big, small
9	Price	expensive, cheap
10	Not clear	no reason was stated; not sure

The result of the respondent's reason will be explained in Table 5. From Table 5, the main factor in choosing a product is not from the type of letter but based on preferences/favoritism. This reason was chosen by 31% or 230 respondents. The selection of letters in the "product description" category was only chosen by 6% or 46 respondents. The researchers narrowed down the reasons from the reasons represented in the "product description" category. The products were written in certain letters (Katakana, Hiragana and Kanji). These reasons are listed in Table 6.

Of the 6% or 46 respondents who chose the "product description" category, only 10 people chose the product because they paid attention to the type of letter (Katakana, Hiragana, Kanji), and only 2 people chose the product because they were interested in the *Katakana* letter. These 2 people were interested in Miso Paste products written in *Katakana* because Miso Paste is very strong with Japanese images, contrary to the writing that use *Katakana* letters. One respondent chose apple juice products written in Katakana because the letter model looks classic and impressed by an old brand.

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Table 5. The Result of Respondent's Reason

Product	Reason category (from left to right based on the number of respondents)									
	Favouri tism	Pack aging	Previo us experie nce	Usabi lity / Purp ose	Signat ure Produ ct	Produc t's Descrip tion	Curi osity	Por tion	Not clear	Pri ce
Konbu / Seaweed	22%	35%	3%	31%	0%	5%	3%	0%	1%	0%
Miso Paste	19%	27%	22%	15%	8%	7%	1%	1%	0%	0%
Apple Juice	23%	45%	4%	4%	9%	8%	0%	3%	3%	1%
Tonkotsu Ramen	34%	11%	7%	0%	24%	19%	3%	3%	0%	0%
Edamame Bean	23%	24%	12%	14%	8%	4%	1%	8%	4%	1%
Grape Candy	62%	8%	12%	9%	3%	3%	1%	1%	0%	0%
Mineral Water	7%	8%	59%	11%	11%	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Milk	24%	9%	8%	20%	22%	9%	0%	1%	5%	0%
Senbei Chips	66%	15%	5%	3%	0%	4%	5%	0%	1%	0%
Natto Bean	31%	7%	24%	9%	23%	1%	3%	0%	0%	1%
AVERAGE	**31%**	**19%**	**16%**	**12%**	**11%**	**6%**	**2%**	**2%**	**2%**	**1%**

Table 6. Respondent's reason related to certain letters

Product	Answers	Reasons (in Japanese)	Translated Reasons
Konbu / Seaweed	C (Kanj)	漢字の「昆布」という表記から商品の伝統や格式を感じたため、一番美味しそうに感じたから	interested because it is written in *Konbu kanji*
Miso Paste	C (Kanji)	漢字の「味噌」という表記から商品の伝統や格式を感じたため、一番美味しそうに感じたから	interested because it is written in *Miso kanji*
	A (Katakana)	味噌のイメージに反するカタカナの仕様が逆に惹かれた	interested because it is written in *Katakana*, contrary to the *Miso* image
	B (Hiragana)	純正って言葉に惹かれた	interested because the selection of the original letters (*Hiragana*)

Product	Answers	Reasons (in Japanese)	Translated Reasons
Apple Juice	C (Kanji)	字のフォントが日本らしくていい。商品の中身が見えて安心。	interested because the selection of letters looks authentic Japanese (Kanji)
	A (Katakana)	古いフォントのパッケージが長いブランド感があり信頼出来る	the font model seems old-fashioned, impressed by an old brand
	B (Hiragana)	フォントがカッコいい	the letter looks cool
Tonkotsu Ramen	B (Hiragana)	フォントやイラストに癒されるから。	the letters and illustrations feel fresh
	C (Kanji)	フォントとパッケージの色合いから美味しそうに感じたから。	selection of letters & colors is suitable, looks good
Milk	B (Hiragana)	ひらがなでいいから	because written in Hiragana

CONCLUSION

From this research, letters, especially *Katakana*, had little effect on customer buying intention. The most influential factors were the consumers' preferences, such as favoritism, packaging, and previous experiences. For further research, product packaging can be explored, which is the second-highest factor in consumer interest in choosing products and can also relate to the concept of *Omotenashi* (service excellence) from Japan.

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