



The rise of “cynicism”

Photo by NEXGki, Unsplash

Evidence from a 10-year longitudinal study, 2008-2018

2018.9.16 Source: RISKYBRAND MINDVOICE® 2008-2018

Over the past ten years, RISKYBRAND (headquarter: Shibuya, Tokyo, representative: Kazuteru Tasaki) has been taking the pulse of the Japanese consumer through a survey conducted annually on 4000 consumers, MINDVOICE®.

Based on these data, this report exposes the temporal dynamics in social values in Japan since 2008 and the implications for brands.

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Summary

1. Within ten years, the Japanese social value climate has shifted towards cynicism.
2. Growth in seven attitudes confirms this tendency:
indifference to others (1), dilution of relationships (2), dilution of emotions (3),
risk aversion (4), momentary pleasure (5), routinisation of luxury (6),
blasé mindset (7).
3. We identified four main implications for brands:
communication efforts must focus on uniqueness rather than empathy (1);
stronger reasoning and stories (2) and solid corporate ethics (3) will be key; a new,
more subjective form of luxury is arising (4).

Context analysis

Shift in social values come in response to socio-political and economic changes. Over the past decades, a number of dramatic events synchronized with major demographic and economic dynamics have profoundly impacted the Japanese social values climate:

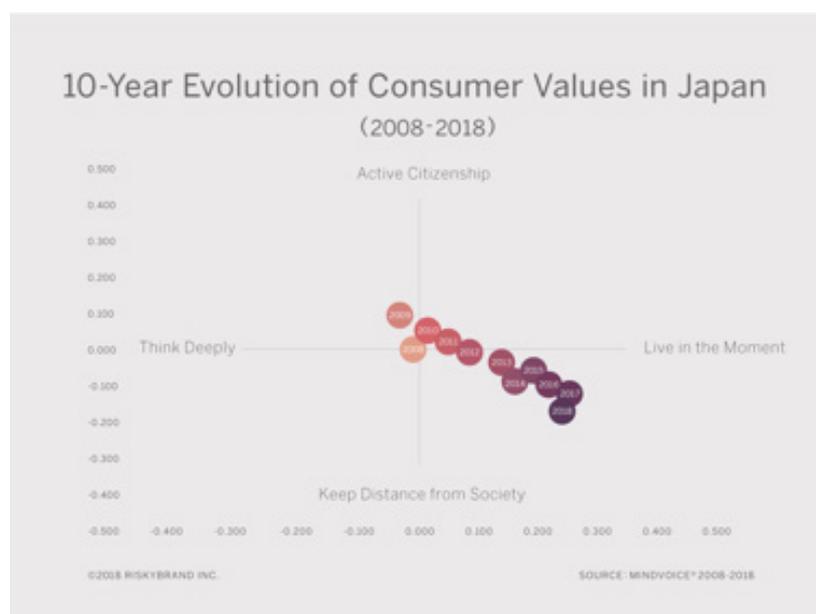
- In 2008, while the world plunged into a deep economic crisis, Japan reached its demographic peak and officially entered a new era of population decline (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2012).
- Since then, the internet revolution, rapid spread of SNS and e-commerce reshaped consuming behaviors and allowed unprecedented access to information and new cultures.
- Against the backdrop of these deep-seated socio-economic trends, random but affecting events such as the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 and the Kumamoto disaster in 2016, left a distinctive mark in the public's mentality.

How did these changes impact the Japanese consumer mindset?

Our study aims to answer this question by examining psychographic data collected from a total sample of 46,369 individuals, from 2008 to 2018.

1. Rise of Cynicism in Japan

The chart below presents the evolution of the 'center of gravity' of social values in Japan from 2008 to 2018. This center of gravity refers to the beliefs and norms that predominate in the Japanese society at a given time, calculated according to two criteria: respondent's type of interaction with society and their thinking patterns.



We can see that the center shifts up and to the left once in 2009 then moves to the right after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. Thereafter, there has been continuous movement to lower right from the years after.

According to Kojien dictionary (7th Edition,) cynicism is “1. A school of ancient Greek philosophers, the cynics. 2. Derisive attitude toward any phenomenon, ignoring public opinions and custom or moral.”

Two major trends suggest that cynicism as a mindset – understood as a disposition of distrust and detachment towards professed morals, governmental and economic organizations – is growing in Japan.

A. Tendency to keep a certain distance from the society.

On the vertical axis on the chart, transition from “active citizenship” towards “keep distance from society” suggests a growing desire to withdraw from political and economic interests. We can identify two factors driving this evolution:

- Trust in central institutions is crumbling. Even though the economy recovered from the Lehman incident, the authorities’ inability to solve serious social issues such as population ageing and devastating natural disasters, has resulted in growing disenchantment with politics and loss of confidence in the future. Revelations of dishonest practice among top corporations such as Toshiba’s accounting fraud in 2015, combined to strong signs of Japan Inc.’s declining competitiveness - remember the contentious acquisition of tech giant Sharp by Foxconn in 2016 – also contributed to undermine the public’s faith in Japanese corporations.
- The idea of the common good is eroding. Private interests and public interests used to overlap in the post-war booming economy. Hard work was rewarded not only at a personal level, but with the sense of pride of contributing to the company and the nation’s progress. When the economic pie is not growing, not only return of one’s effort become less certain, but only a happy few can prosper while the majority must share the remaining slices.

B. The growing desire to simply live in the moment.

Perhaps more dramatic is the shift from “think deeply” to “live in the moment” mentality that can be seen on the horizontal axis.

The most obvious driver of this growing focus on the instant is the incredible advancement in convenience and access to leisure of the past ten years. Many things that used to require patience and thoughtfulness are now accessible in one click: we no longer need to read

several books to get information, we can find a summary instantly by just scrolling our smartphone; we can have new friends just by clicking a button, enjoy our favorite videos and movies without leaving our home and at low cost. The luxury brands that used to be unaffordable are now available on the flea-market applications at incredibly low prices. According to “E-commerce Market Survey” by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, these flea-market applications have grown into a 500-billion-yen market in 2017 since their first appearance in 2012.

It seems fair to say that the comfort of Japanese modern life and the instant gratification culture that seems to come with it have reduced the urge to plan for the future and diminished the appreciation for hard work.

APPENDIX

Living in an affluent but stagnant economy: the seedbed for cynical values to flourish?

In this appendix we examine the hypothesis of a demographic factor in the rise of cynical values in Japan.

Generations born after the post-war boom – in a rich, but stagnant economy – account today for the largest segment of the Japanese population, representing more than half of it. The eldest of this segment are the children of the baby boomers, born between 1971 and 1974, and the firstborns of the so-called ‘lost generation’. While they grew up in an affluence and abundance that could not have been imagined a few decades before, coming of age they were severely hit by the economic turmoil that followed the Japanese asset price bubble's collapse. Our data suggest that cynical values in Japan were born with this generation of post-Bubble consumers. They show that unprecedented attitudes such as disinterest in material possession, stay-at-home and insularity, are prevalent in this cohort (MINDVOICE® 2018). The mentality of the post-bubble generation, materially well-off but with nothing better to look forward for in a rich but fading economy, seems to contain the perfect ingredients for the development of cynicism.

Can we conclude that the root of modern cynicism in Japan is grounded in the state of its economy? Answering this question require global comparisons and goes beyond the scope of this study. All that can be said is that behind the spread of the `cynical mindset' in Japan over the past decade, it seems that there is a demographic dynamic at work.

2. Seven Manifestations of Cynicism

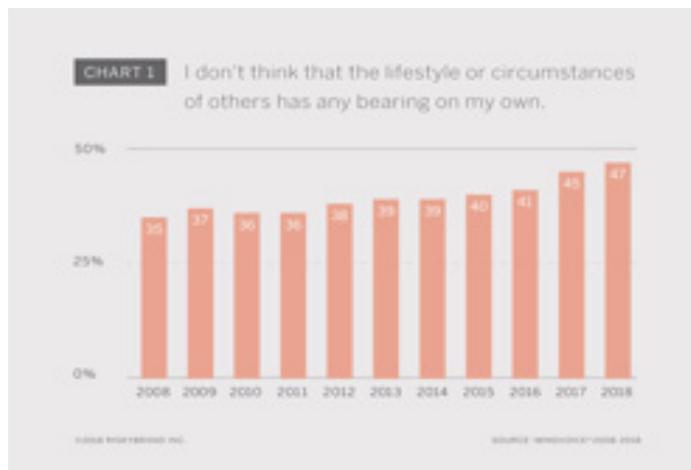
A more in-depth analysis of the data brings out seven major attitudinal shifts that could confirm the growth of a cynical mindset in Japan:

- ① Indifference to others
- ② Dilution of relationships
- ③ Dilution of emotions
- ④ Risk aversion
- ⑤ Momentary pleasure
- ⑥ Routinisation of luxury
- ⑦ Blasé mindset

① Indifference to others.

The number of positive answers to the statement “I don't think that the lifestyle or circumstances of others has any bearing on my own” in the survey increased by more than 30% (12 points) in the past 10 years.

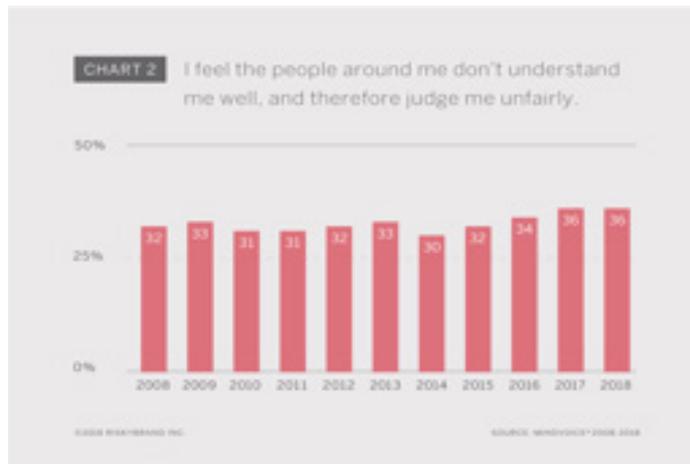
Protecting privacy is one of the important issues in modern societies. The obsession for self-protection can lead individuals to have less interests in others and set them apart.



② Dilution of Relationships

Respondents who agreed that “the people around them don't understand them well, and therefore judge them unfairly” increased by 13% (4 points).

Although the digital revolution allowed extended and constant connections, the quality of people's interactions seems to be deteriorating. The resulting disappointment and sense of isolation logically lead to the disinterest in others recorded above.



③ Dilution of Emotions

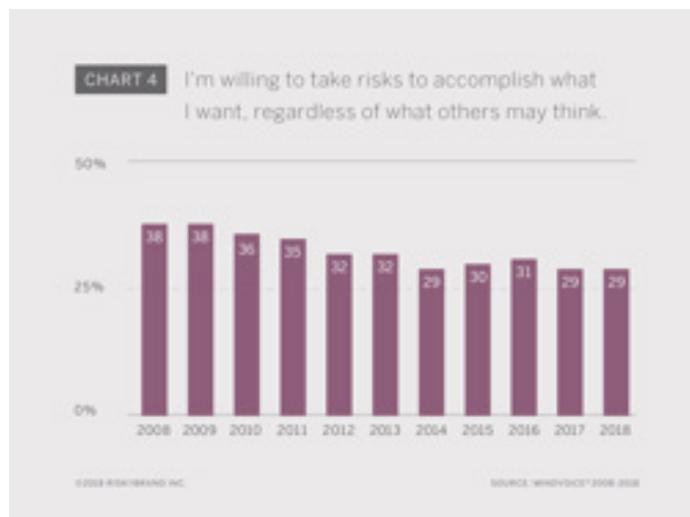
This attitude could result from a growing desire to close one's emotional pores to ease disappointment and avoid being hurt.



④ Risk Aversion

We observed a 24% (9 points) decrease in respondents who “are willing to take risks to accomplish what they want, regardless of what others may think”.

When the future is unpredictable and distrusted, the chances of reward from taking risk are the same. As a result, the tendency to avoid embarking on any ambitious project to avoid failure rises.



⑤ Momentary Pleasure

People who “do not worry about tomorrow as long as they are enjoying themselves now” have increased more than 40% (8 points) in this past 10 years.

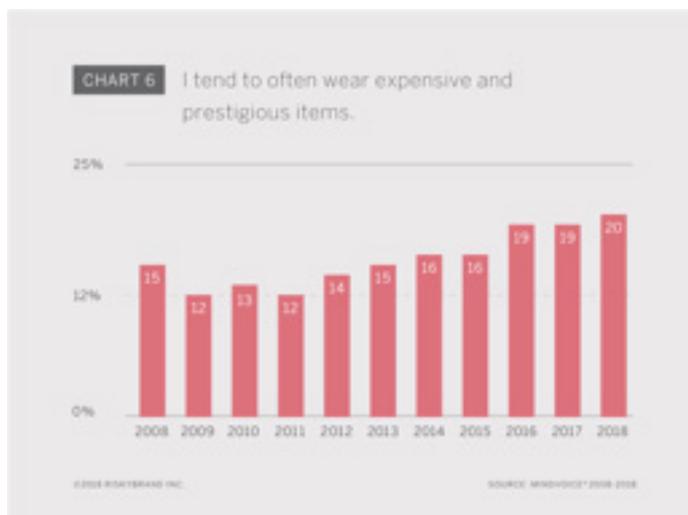
While high standards of living establish instant gratification as the new normal, detachment from society narrows down people’s scope of interest to oneself and an intimate circle of family and friends, fueling the quest of personal pleasure. This ‘live like there is no tomorrow’ - kind of behavior can be also seen as a reaction to a gloomy future.



⑥ Routinisation of Luxury

People who “often wear expensive and prestigious items” have increased by 30% (5 points) in the past 10 years.

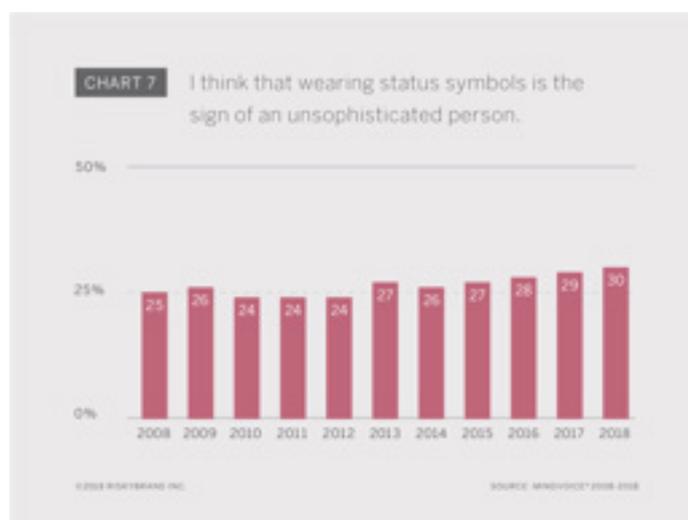
This idea of ordinary luxury is yet radically different from the pomposity seen in the time of bubble economy in Japan. While luxury goods consumption used to be a lot about outward ostentation, for the disillusioned consumer, it rather is driven by a more inward desire to enjoy the present by indulging in the finest things in life.



⑦ Blasé Mindset

People who think that “wearing status symbols is the sign of an unsophisticated person” have increased by 20% (5 points.)

Sarcasm is a cynical attitude par excellence. Growing disdain for conspicuous consumption suggests detachment from traditional social values such as prestige.



3. Implications for Brands

Cynicism can have a negative connotation. However, reducing this mindset to alienation or melancholy is not only simplistic, but this would be to forget Japan's History. What we see as a progression towards cynical values could be simply the aftereffect of the country's rapid transition from a consensus-oriented society where personal choices were limited, towards a Western model designed for an individualistic society and all that go with it. We could also argue that the high-speed industrialization and urbanization of the last century caused traditional ties to be replaced with a rather intense form of individualism. Of course, not all Japanese citizens have cynical viewpoints and they still have various values and interests. However, there is no doubt that the society will be under the certain influence of cynical values.

This presents tremendous challenges and opportunities for marketers.

In the next part, we propose four kinds of moves that brands should make to seize the opportunities created by this new paradigm.

From empathetic promotion to uniqueness appeal

"Empathy" has long been a central element of brand communication. However, in a context where people are not easily moved, companies can no longer hope to entice them with polished creative executions, cute or sexy visuals, and generic symbolic wording such as "happiness," "future," or "challenging".

The public is increasingly adopting a 'seen-it-all' attitude towards brands, thinking, "What makes you really different?" Jaded consumers are looking for brands with strong individual universes. In this context, identifying and communicating clearly what makes you unique becomes paramount.

Stronger reasoning and stories

Increased skepticism is another challenge to brand managers. Cynical-minded consumers are weary of traditional sales pitch, and question the claims and statistics presented to them. In a state of disbelief in the sincerity of brands, they closely scrutinize them to distinguish honest corporate message from superficial smoke and mirrors. In this context, catchy promotional lines - such as “the lightest ever” or “the absolute performance” - will be taken coldly.

To be credible, marketers must back their claims with evidences such as solid statistics, and most importantly, a storyline that the consumer can relate to.

Solid corporate ethics

Ethics will play an increasing role in consumers' decision. On one hand, people disenchanted with politics are increasingly relying on corporations to address pressing social issues. On the other side, the growing number of green-washing cases, not to mention fraudulent practices have led to consumers distrusting the goodwill of business organizations.

Implications for marketers are tremendous: not only the public will prioritize brands that are committed to a social cause, but they will continuously check the depth and authenticity of this commitment. Making a biodegradability claim or being involved in a few charity programs is no longer enough. Corporations that do not include Sustainable Development Goals or Environmental, Social and Governance considerations in their company mission, or those who are taking steps but are unable to communicate it, will be left behind by offerings viewed as more genuine and serving a clearly defined social purpose.

Because consumers will increasingly look at what companies stand for, rather than what they sell, branding will be key in this process of building authenticity. The most successful brands will be the one able to answer people' s call for meaning by establishing themselves as moral authorities.

Towards a new luxury

While growing economic disparities are fostering the emergence of a new class of wealthy, consumer behaviors towards luxury are transforming. Our data suggested that mentality of luxurious consumption as a badge of economic success has been continuously weakening. The outward purpose that luxurious purchases used to serve loses relevancy when the desire to fit in decreases.

Brands need to fundamentally rethink their approach by shifting their narrative from social status assertion to a more subjective definition of luxury. Storytelling that focuses on the face behind the creation, artists or origin will help stimulate engagement and demonstrate authenticity.

Methodology for MINDVOICE® survey (2008–2018)

Social value climate analysis

The chart presented in the first part of this report exposes the evolution of the “center of gravity” of values in Japan, from 2008 to 2018. It is based on 41 attitudinal archetypes compressed into 2 sections, using principal component analysis.

Vertical Axis

This section examines the interactions between individuals and society, with the items “Active citizenship” and “Keep distance from society” at the two ends of the axis.

Attitudes (statements) measured for “Active citizenship” :

- “I try to do things that benefit society and mankind, regardless of how they will affect me”
- “Other people regard me as someone with a good sense of art and design”
- “I take any opportunity to meet people with different values and opinions from my own”

Attitudes (statements) measured for “Keep distance from society” :

- “To the extent possible, I'd rather not have to deal with others”
- “I seek something to heal my heart”
- “I don't think that the lifestyle or circumstances of others has any bearing on my own”

Horizontal Axis

This section monitors prevalent thinking patterns, with the items “think deeply” and “Living in the moment” at the two ends of the axis.

Attitudes (statements) measured for “Think deeply” :

- “I'm good at things involving logical thinking and analysis”
- “I often wonder about the background and reasons for even the most simple and everyday things”
- “I think intelligence is the essence of my personal style”

Attitudes (statements) measured for “Live in the moment” :

- “I tend to wear expensive and prestigious items”
- “I tend to be more knowledgeable than others about the latest shops, restaurants, movies, and music”
- “I do not worry about tomorrow as long as I am enjoying myself now”

Demographics : 15-64 y.o, men / women (household yearly income >3 million yens)

Sample size :

- 2008 年 N= 4,155
- 2009 年 N= 4,056
- 2010 年 N= 4,048
- 2011 年 N= 4,028
- 2012 年 N= 4,181
- 2013 年 N= 4,267
- 2014 年 N= 4,239
- 2015 年 N= 4,272
- 2016 年 N= 4,367
- 2017 年 N= 4,361
- 2018 年 N= 4,395

(Online survey conducted in collaboration with MyVoice Com. Inc.)

About MINDVOICE®

MINDVOICE®* is an extensively studied and tested questionnaire completed annually by 4000 Japanese individuals since 2008, tracking the key psychographic attributes - such as beliefs, values, and attitudes - that drive consumer behavior.

- Sample demographics: 15-64 y.o (15-74 y.o, in 2018), men / women, Japan (household yearly income >3 million yens)
- Sample size: approx. 4000 respondents annually (4,873 in 2018)
- Method: online survey

* registered trade mark.

About RISKYBRAND INC.

RISKYBRAND INC. is a Japan-based multi-lingual brand strategy consultancy that has helped major domestic and international brands break through to the next level over the past two decades.

Web: www.riskybrand.com LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/riskybrand

About MyVoice Com. Inc.

MyVoice Com. Inc. is a full-service online research, survey designing, hosting & panel provider. The company has been leveraging its permanent panel composed of 1 million individuals to conduct and publish proprietary research projects in 2700 different fields.

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