

# Kabuki- American and Japanese Universities Perspectives of Kabuki

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## Abstract

Kabuki is a Japanese traditional performing art. Traditional Kabuki features elements such as gorgeous stage settings, elaborate costumes, and makeup. In Japanese society only men can perform in Kabuki, while women cannot perform on stage. Recently, Super Kabuki is a new style of Kabuki that has steadily become popular. This capstone focuses on American and Japanese university students' perceptions of Kabuki. Additionally, this study will be looking at if students grasp the true essence of Kabuki. The research was conducted by surveying 30 American and 30 Japanese students. The results of this survey are interesting and show that American University students are more interested in Kabuki than Japanese students. In today's society, Japanese students do not agree that women should perform in Kabuki while American students believe that women should be able to. American students have a firmer grasp of the representation of anger, sadness, and jealousy compared to Japanese students.

## Introduction

Kabuki is made of different elements performing art that is only performed on stage by men. The music is composed of the shamisen and wooden flutes which reflect the simple stage setting. This study will look on how university students, both in American and Japanese students, view Kabuki. It also a reflection if students can still grasp the true essence of the performing art.

### 1. Significance of the Study

I had the privilege of seeing Traditional Kabuki while my year of studying abroad at Toyo University, which made me curious on how the youth in America and Japan perceive Kabuki. This study will see if in today's society students can still grasp the true essence of the art.

### 2. Research Questions

1. How do American and Japanese students perceive Kabuki?
2. Can university students still grasp the true essence of Kabuki?

### 3. Research Background

#### 3.1 Traditional Kabuki

Kabuki is performed only by men who blend voice, color, appearance, precise movements, and gestures. Kumadori is the style of make-up that is used during a Kabuki performance. The stage is composed of an orchestra which features traditional Japanese instruments such as the shamisen and wooden flutes, and simple stage settings.

#### 3.2 Super Kabuki and Current Popularity

Super Kabuki is a new style of Kabuki that borrows many concepts from Broadway Theater such as prerecorded music and elaborate costumes. In today's society the style is becoming popular due to the fact that is continuously evolving to bring in the youth. Famous Japanese drama actors also act in both Traditional and Super Kabuki which generates a greater audience during these performances.

#### 3.3 Differences between Kabuki and Super Kabuki

There are a number of differences between Traditional Kabuki and Super Kabuki. Traditional Kabuki uses Traditional Japanese dialogue that is difficult to understand while Super Kabuki uses modern Japanese dialogue which is easier to understand. The costumes and stage setting in Super Kabuki are more elaborate than in Traditional Kabuki.

#### 3.4 Kabuki's actor and Kumadori (make-up)

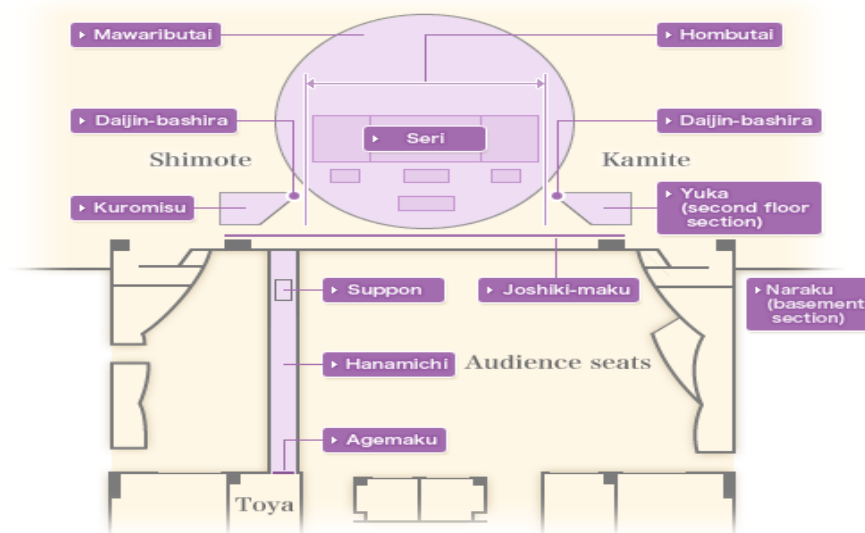
Kabuki consists of three main roles which are, the Aragoto, Wagoto, and Onnagata. The Aragoto role has a powerful demeanor while the Wagoto role demeanor is gentler, elegant, and realistic. Men who perform as young women are known as the Onnagata. In Kabuki the color depicted in the Kumadori (make-up), represents different emotions. For example, bright red line represents power (Image 1), while the blue lines depict sadness (Image2), yellow lines represent selfishness (Image 3), and dark red lines represent anger (Image 4). Each role has the own certain style of costume. The *Kugeyaku* or the Imperial role has the most lavish costumes, while the *Wagoto* is depicted with simple costumes that reflect the kimonos worn by the common population during the Edo Era. The *Aragoto* role wears kimonos similar to the ones samurai wore during the Edo Era.



### 3.5. Kabuki's Stage setting

The Kabuki stage consists of various parts but these are the most important parts: the *Agemaku*, the *Hanamichi*, and the *Suppon*. The *Agemaku* is the curtain hung at the end of the *Hanamichi* (passageway to/from stage) and is visible from the stage. *Hanamichi* is the passage that extends at right angle to the *Hombutai* from its *Shimote* side, passing through the audience seating area to the *Agemaku*; it is used mainly for actors' entrances and exits. *Suppon* is a small *Seri* located near the section where the *Hanamichi* joins the stage.

Image 5: Kabuki's Stage Setting



### 3.6 Kabuki's History

Kabuki was founded in *Izumo no Okuni* in 1603. By 1628 women were banned from performing in Kabuki and the *Onnagata* role played the female roles starting in 1629. In 1688 and 1689 the *Aragoto* and *Wagoto* role respectively, were established. In 1789 the all *Onnagata* dance routine was established. In 1878 Kabuki's first theater, the *Shintomiza*, opened in the middle of downtown Tokyo. The most famous of the Kabuki theaters, the *Kabukiza*, opened its doors in Ginza in 1889. In 1989 borrowing concepts from Broadway Theater, Super Kabuki's play, *Yamoto Takeru*, sold at the *Kabukiza* for six months straight.

## 4. Research

### 4.1 Research Subject

For my research I surveyed 60 university students from America and Japan. 30 American students and 30 Japanese students.

### 4.2 Research Method

I used Google forms to create a survey.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Research question 1: What are American and Japanese student's perception of Kabuki?

Figure 1: Familiarity of Kabuki

[Which Kabuki Style are you more familiar with?] American students were more familiar with Traditional Kabuki than their Japanese counterparts.

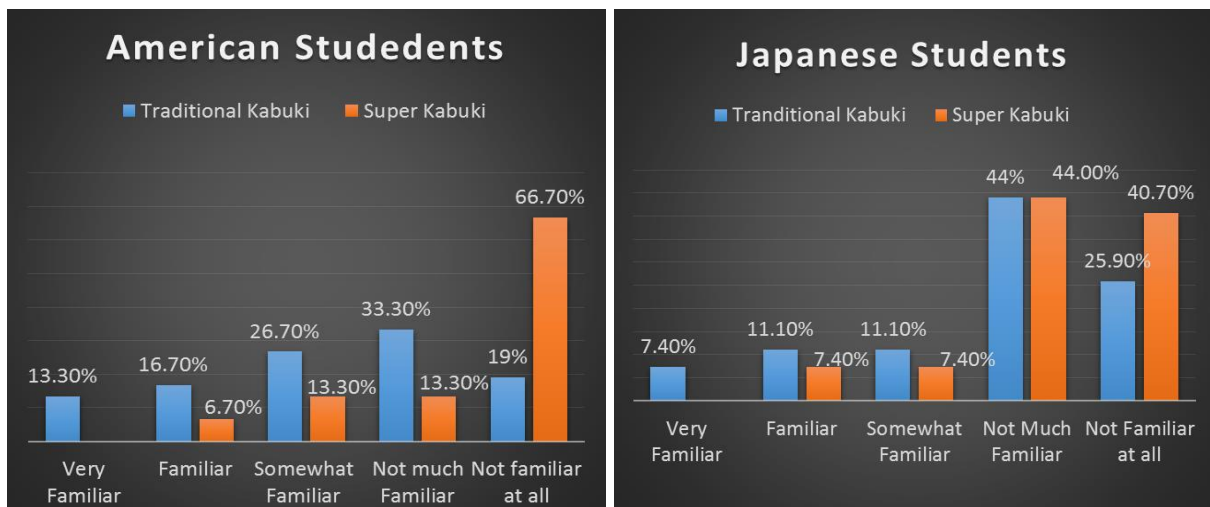


Figure 2: Interest of Kabuki

Form figure 2 both American and Japanese students should more interest towards Traditional Kabuki than Super Kabuki. Super Kabuki is directed for the modern age but it seems students are interested in the traditional aspects of the art

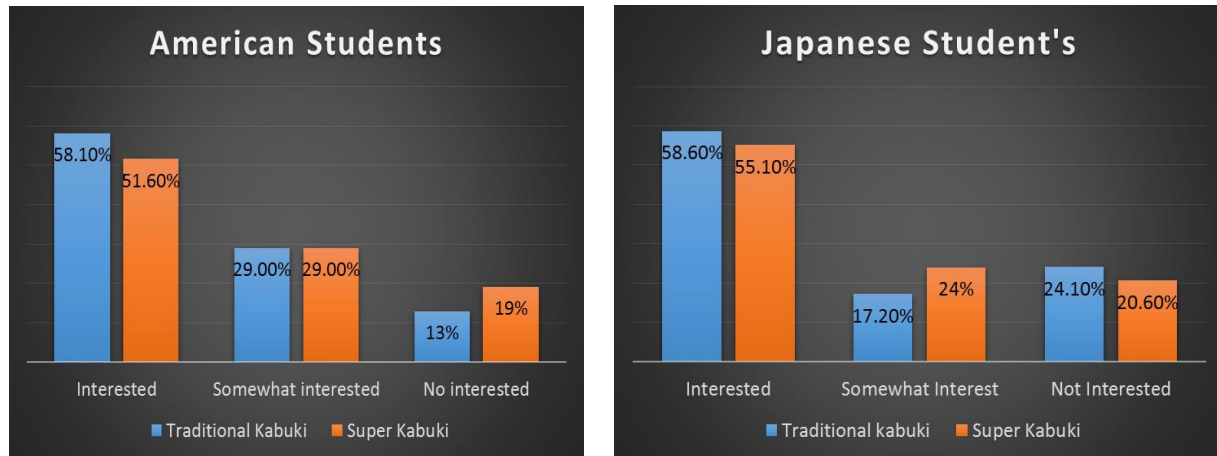


Figure 3: Viewership at the theater:

[How many times have university students you Traditional Kabuki at the theater?] Both American and Japanese students have seen Tradition Kabuki at the theater. A small number of Japanese students have seen Super Kabuki at the theater.

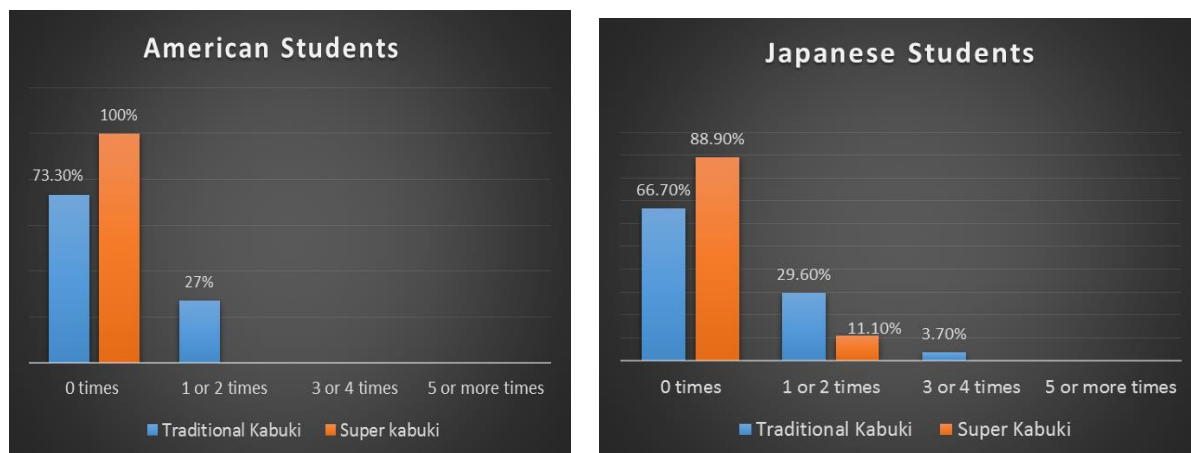


Figure 4: Enjoyment at theater

Next which element of Kabuki do students enjoy, American students enjoyed all elements of Kabuki, while Japanese only enjoyed the acting and the costume (Figure 4).

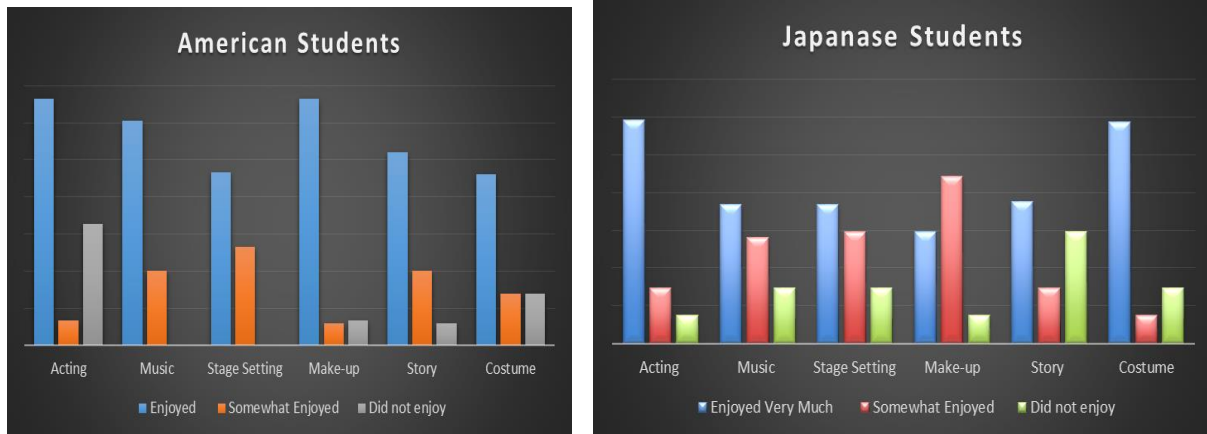


Figure 5: Genre of Kabuki

From figure 5, both American and Japanese students are more inclined to watch a comedic Kabuki performance at the theater.

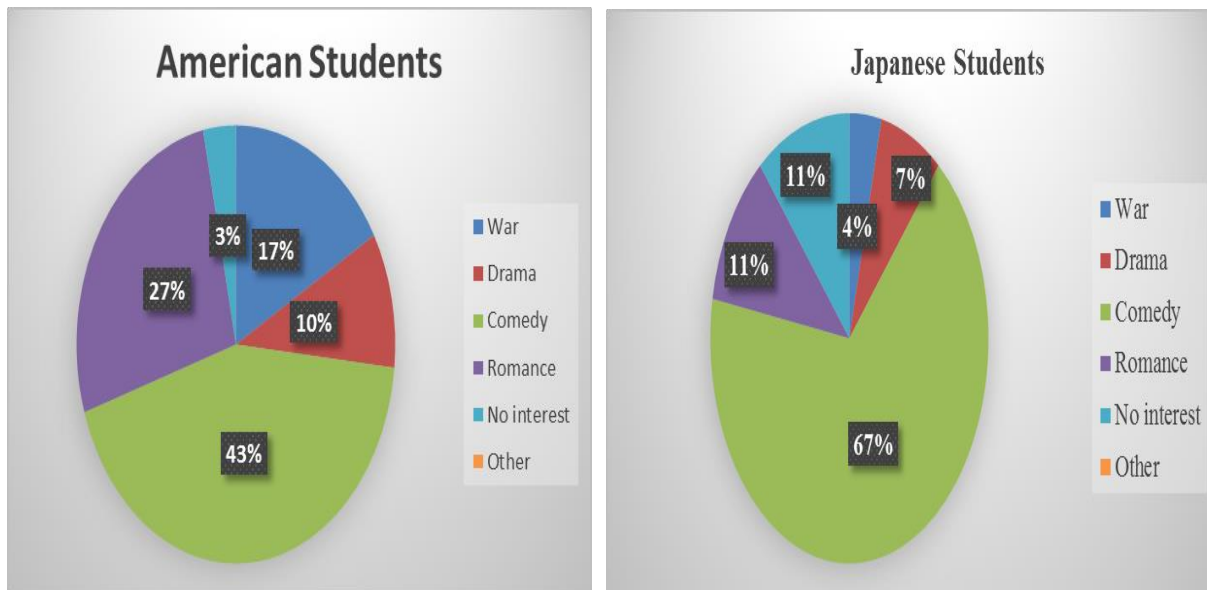


Figure 6: Which style of Kabuki do you prefer?

American University are more inclined to watch [both styles] which came in at 50%, followed by Super Kabuki. For Japanese students there was a tie between [Both] and [Traditional Kabuki] at 31%, followed by Super Kabuki at 28% (Figure 6).

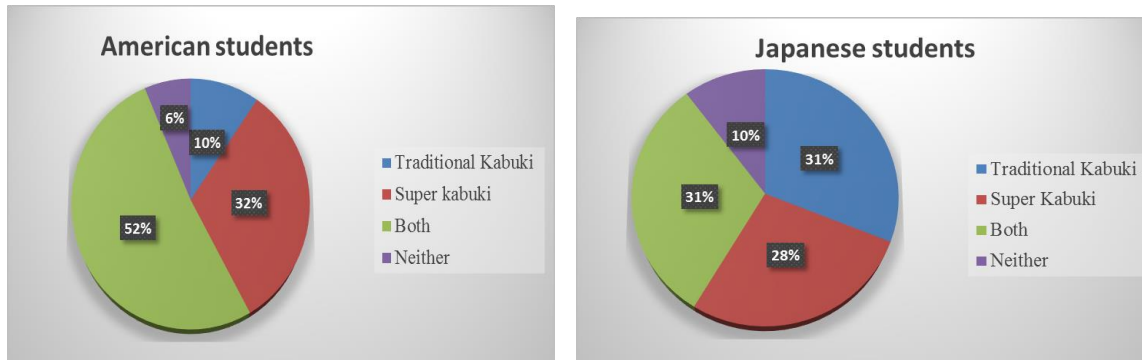
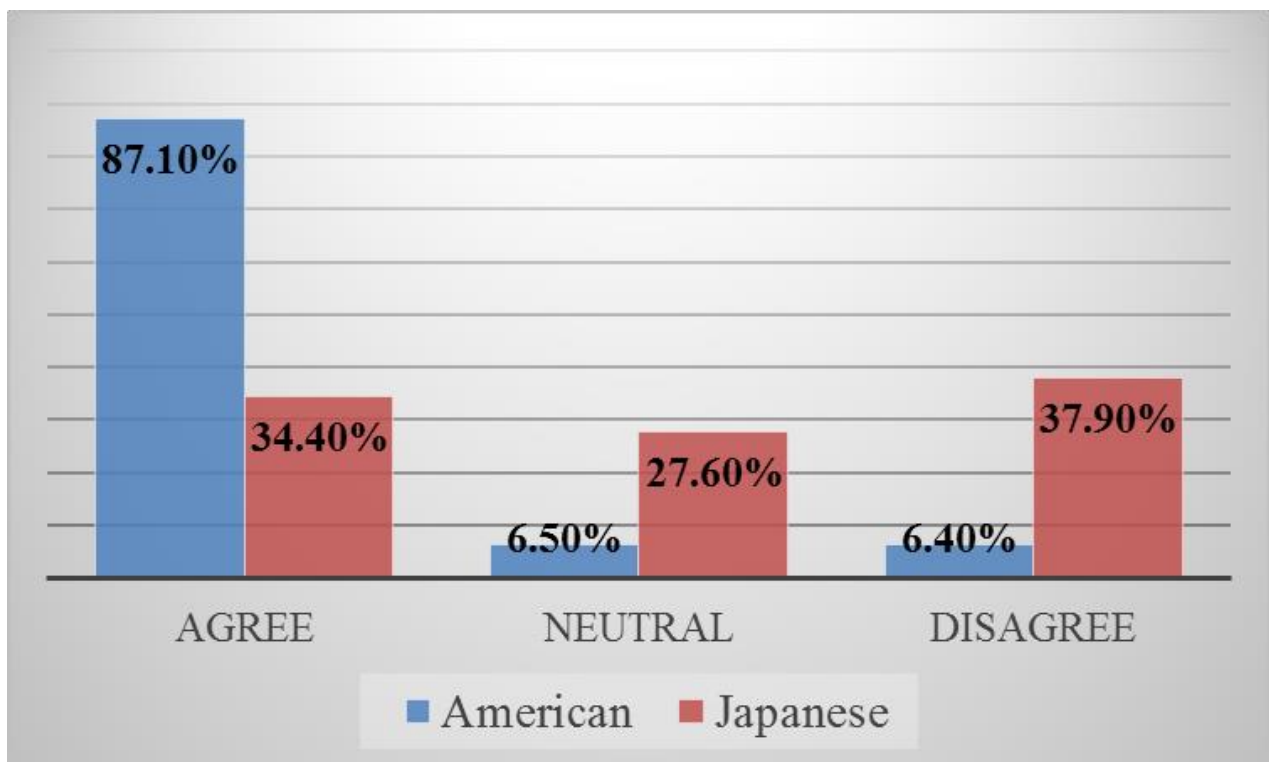


Figure 7: Gender Equality in Kabuki

America students believe that there should be a sense of gender equality in Kabuki meaning that women should be allowed to Kabuki, while Japanese students are against this notion (Figure 7).



The following is a summary of research question 1 findings. Both American and Japanese students show more interest in Traditional Kabuki If there were more comedic performances of Kabuki, University Students would see this art form at the theater. American University Students agree that women should be able to perform in Kabuki while Japanese students disagree with this notion

5.2 Research Question 2: In today’s society can university students grasp the true essence presented in Kabuki?

Figure 8: Distinguishing emotions within the make-up

Japanese university students were able to distinguish power, sadness, and anger. American students were able to distinguish all the emotions, including selfishness (figure 8).

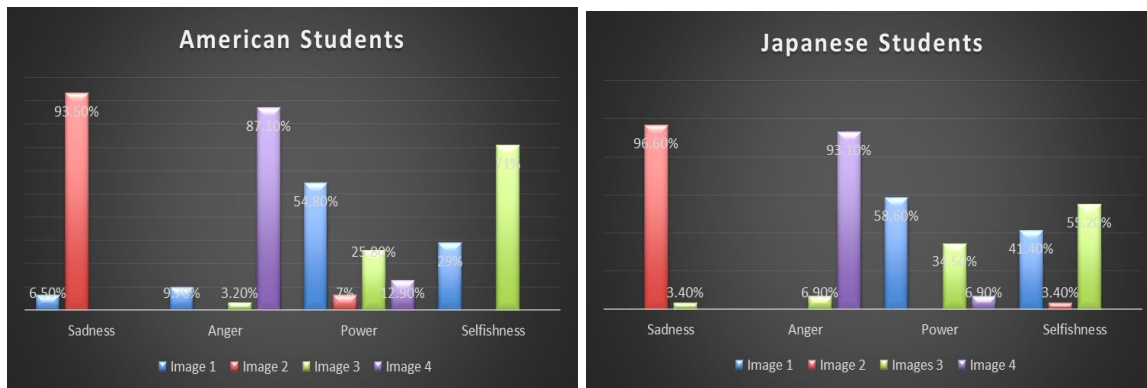
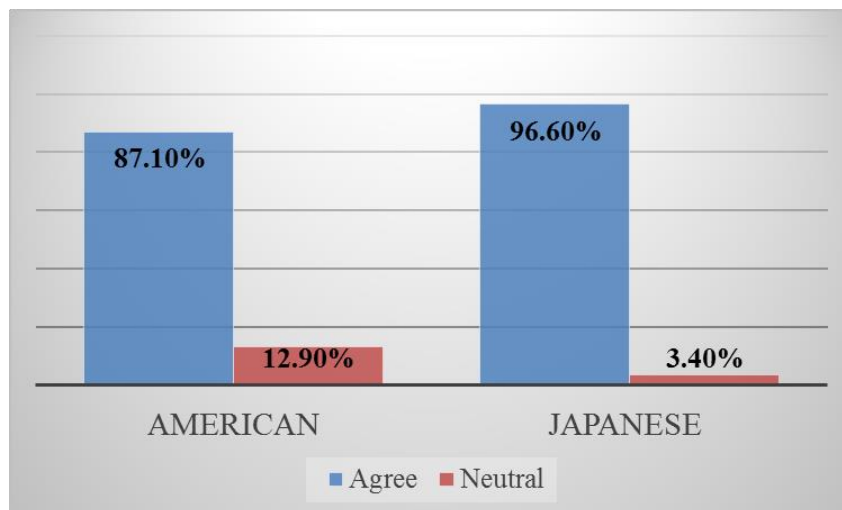


Figure 9: Kumadori and the Actor

Both Japanese and American Students agree that the make-up enhances the acting.





The following is a summary of the findings found in research question 2. American university students were able to distinguish all of the emotions represented in Kumadori. The Japanese university students were only able to distinguish 3 emotions represented in the Kumadori. Both American and Japanese university students agree that the Kumadori enhances the acting and overall experience.

## 6. Conclusion

University students are interested and recognize Kabuki as a performing art. Before my research I believed that university students showed no interest for Kabuki, but I was surely mistaken. Surprisingly, according to the research university students showed a greater interest and wanted to see Traditional Kabuki at the theater. American university students believe that women should be able to perform in Kabuki, while the Japanese students are against this notion. This can be due to culture within each respected country.

## 7. Limitation and Future Study

This research was conducted on a small scale with few participants, making it difficult to generalize. I want to explore on exactly how the make-up enhances the quality of the acting. I also want to explore in further detail on why American Students agree the women should be able to perform in Kabuki, while the Japanese students are against this.