

# A Study on the Lyrics of Japanese Pop Music From 2008 to 2020

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This paper examines the lyrics of the Top 10 songs on the annual Billboard Japan charts from 2008 to 2020, analyzing their word count, density, and linguistic composition, while also identifying recurring themes. The results indicate that the average word count and density of lyrics had generally increased over the period, though the use of foreign languages remained relatively stable. Additionally, songs with a theme of “love” consistently dominated, regardless of the time period. These trends reflect the accelerated pace of society and the commercial nature of popular music.

*Keywords:* Japanese pop music, song lyrics, Billboard

## Introduction

Music is an indispensable art form in social life worldwide. In recent years, the growth of the streaming media industry has significantly contributed to the flourishing music industry. Lyrics constitute a vital element of songs. The nature of lyrics undergoes a slow transformation over time. Nevertheless, they are frequently regarded merely as an accessory, resulting in the neglect of their role in driving the popularity of music.

Past research by Bradley (1971) highlights the importance of repetitive motifs in shaping listeners' preferences. Randel (1999) defines the term “repetitive motif” as a recurring subject in a musical piece, with lyrics playing a key role in representing these motifs. In terms of lyrics, Misaki (2002) notes that, in the past, lyrics written by the artist often provided insight into the artist's inner world, whereas today, they more clearly reflect the listeners' own emotions. Lyrics also possess literary value, as evidenced by Japanese musicians who have won the Akutagawa Prize for Literature, and by Bob Dylan, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Additionally, Davies and Bentahila (2008) suggest that the use of code-switching in lyrics can subtly enhance the poetic and aesthetic quality of a song, leaving a deeper impression on listeners.

The content and nature of lyrics can serve as a reflection of societal trends. According to the *2020 Japanese Internet White Paper*, Yuvel Gobban, a graduate student at Ohio State University, analyzed the Top 10 songs on the Billboard charts from 1986 to 2015. His research found that the average length of preludes, which were about 20 seconds in the 1980s, had shortened to approximately five seconds by the 2010s.

Building on this, this paper examines the lyrics of the Top 10 pop songs on the Billboard Japan charts from 2008 to 2020, analyzing how the lyrics have evolved over time. This is done by examining their word count, density, and linguistic composition, while also identifying the themes of songs. The paper is structured into three

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main sections: The second section describes the data collection and analysis, the third discusses the findings and their implications, and the fourth provides the conclusion.

### Data Collection and Analysis

This study first collected the Top 10 songs from the annual Billboard Japan charts between 2008 and 2020, excluding the 10 English-language songs and the nine songs that appeared multiple times, resulting in a total of 119 Japanese songs. The duration of each song was then obtained from an online repository, and the word count for each song was extracted from the “Uta-Net” website. Billboard Japan is a series of Japanese music charts operated by Hanshin Content Link under the exclusive license of the American music magazine Billboard. Yu and Ying (2015, p. 18) note, “The Billboard is seen as a resourceful informant in this research since it traverses and signifies the complex relationship among business, musicians, music, and consumers”. It defines not only what is popular, but also what popularity is (Hakanen, 1998). The Oricon chart, currently the most recognized in Japan, was not chosen because the market for CD sales has been significantly influenced by additional incentives such as handshake tickets and concert advance tickets. This trend, particularly the rise of Japanese idol culture, has led to the mass purchase of multiple copies of CDs by fans, impacting the accuracy of chart rankings.

This study calculated the average lyric word count and lyric density for each year. Lyric density is defined as the total number of words divided by the song’s total duration. This metric helps assess whether the trend of shorter song preludes, reflective of the changing times, is also reflected in the lyrics. Additionally, the study analyzed songs with the presence of foreign words and calculated their total proportion in the lyrics. The results of statistical analysis are as follows.

### Results and Discussion

#### Statistics of Word Count and Density of Lyrics

Figure 1 illustrates the changes in the average lyric word count for the Top 10 songs on the annual Billboard Japan charts from 2008 to 2020. The data show a general upward trend in the average number of lyrics over this period, with 2016 serving as a clear boundary. Prior to 2016, the average number of lyrics was consistently below 500 words, except in 2008, while after 2016, the average number of lyrics remained above 500 words, except for 2018. Although the overall trend is upward, the peak for this period occurred in 2008, with an average of 558 words. A closer examination of the data reveals that this spike was influenced by one song in 2008, which contained 959 words, thus significantly impacting the overall result.

Figure 2 reveals that while the average duration of songs showed a slight downward trend from 2008 to 2020, the change was minimal, with most songs averaging around 4.5 minutes. However, the average lyric word count emerged as the primary factor influencing lyric density. This is further confirmed by Figure 3, which depicts a general upward trend in average lyric density during the same period, suggesting that singers are performing more lyrics within a limited timeframe.

The *Japanese Internet White Paper* (Arakawa, 2020) explains the shortening of song preludes in recent years. With the advent of streaming platforms, listeners can easily skip songs that fail to capture their interest immediately. To avoid being skipped and to quickly engage their audience, artists have increasingly opted for shorter preludes. This shift not only affects the structure and duration of songs but also influences the average lyric density. These findings indicate how changes in song lyrics reflect broader societal and technological developments over time.

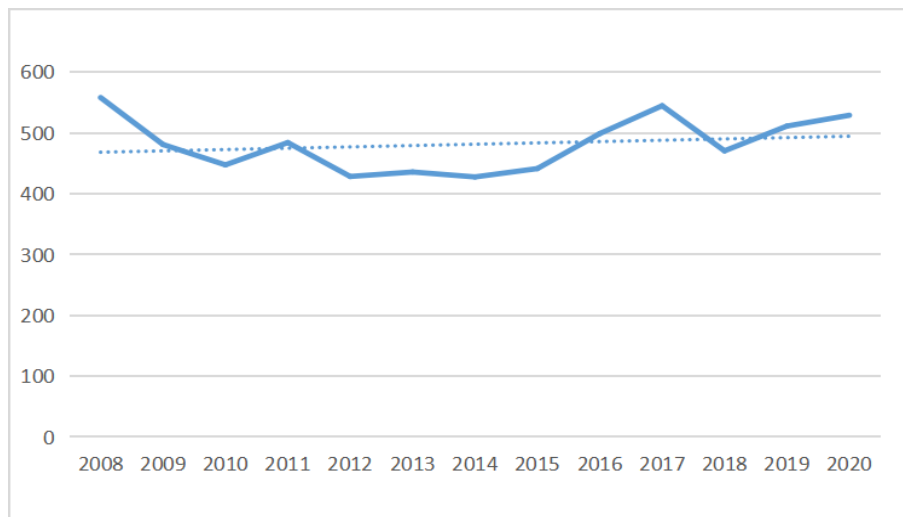


Figure 1. The average lyric word count from 2008 to 2020.

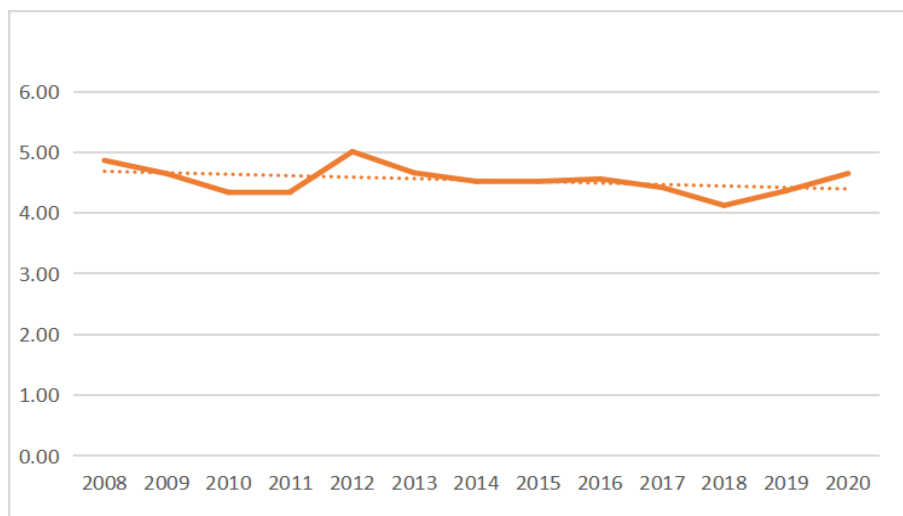


Figure 2. The average listening duration of songs from 2008 to 2020.

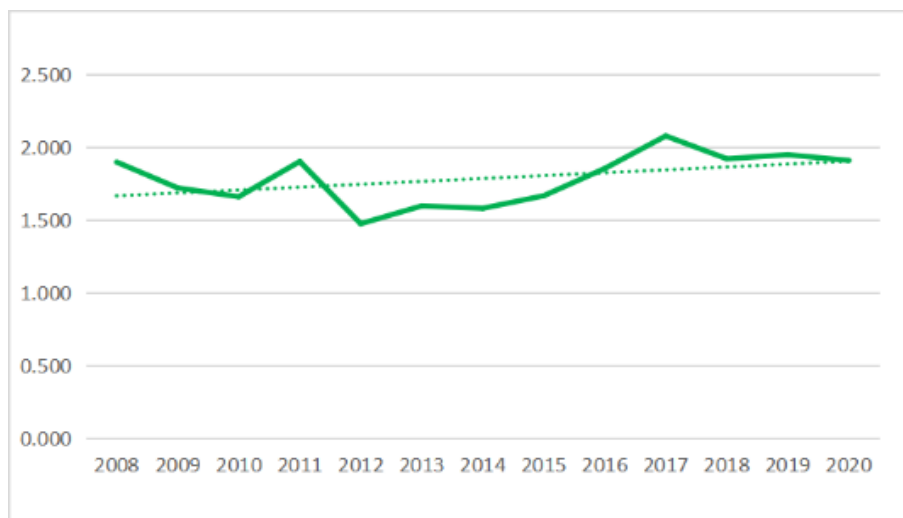


Figure 3. The average lyric density from 2008 to 2020.

### Usage of Foreign Words

An analysis of the 119 songs by year revealed that although songs featuring significant use of English appeared on the list annually, their numbers were relatively small, and the percentage of English in individual songs remained largely consistent. Consequently, no clear trend in the use of foreign languages in lyrics was observed during this period. However, the study did uncover a notable prevalence of foreign languages in song titles. Figure 4 illustrates the trend in the proportion of songs with foreign language titles (including English rendered in katakana) from 2008 to 2020. While the overall trend shows a decline, the average proportion remains notably high at nearly 60%, reflecting the strong influence of Western culture on Japanese music.

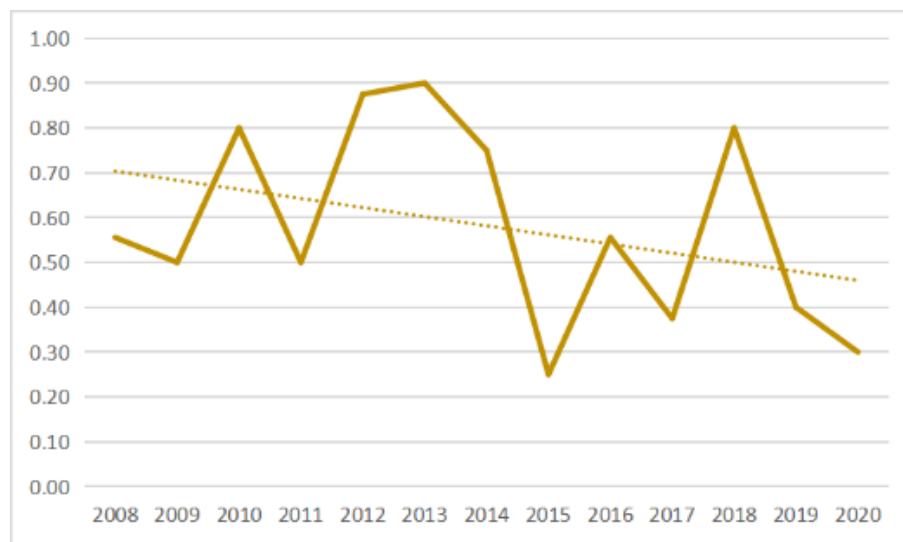


Figure 4. Usage of foreign words in song titles from 2008 to 2020.

### Motif

In this study, the theme of each song was inferred by analyzing its album information and identifying high-frequency words in the lyrics. Figure 5 presents a word cloud generated using World Art software, illustrating the frequency of thematic words in 119 songs from 2008 to 2020. The visualization clearly highlights that the theme of “love” dominates a significant portion of the songs. Based on the data, love-themed songs account for approximately 39% of the total.

The predominance of “love” as a theme in popular music is not unique to Japan. Starr and Waterman (2003) observe a similar trend in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. Several subsequent studies have confirmed that “love” is consistently the most common content word in lyric corpora (Werner, 2012; Motshenbacher, 2016). Pop music is often created with the intent to appeal to a broad audience and achieve commercial success. Climent and Coll-Florit (2021, p. 470) explain that “the evocation of feelings of falling in (and out of) love unfailingly exerts a powerful attraction on all kinds of audiences”, making the prominence of this theme unsurprising.



## Conclusion

This study identifies a general upward trend in the average word count and density of lyrics in Japanese pop music from 2008 to 2020. These findings reflect the influence of the accelerated pace of modern society and the growth of the streaming industry on song composition. While no significant changes were observed in the use of foreign languages within lyrics, a notable proportion of songs featured foreign language titles, averaging around 60%. This indicates the strong influence of Western culture on Japan in the context of globalization.

The theme of “love” accounts for approximately 39% of the songs analyzed, underscoring its enduring popularity. This can be attributed to its relatability to listeners and the inherently commercial nature of popular music, which prioritizes audience appeal. As Machin (2010, p. 11) noted, “it is clear that love songs have changed over the years and can, therefore, be expected to reveal broader cultural changes in terms of gender and sexuality-related discourses”. While the overarching theme of “love” has remained constant, its nuanced meanings have evolved. Future research could explore how the specific connotations of “love” and its acceptance by audiences have shifted over time.

This study provides an initial understanding of how societal changes have influenced song lyrics. However, it has certain limitations, including the small sample size, which restricts the feasibility to thoroughly analyze trends in the use of foreign words within lyrics. These limitations should be addressed in future research.

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