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Digitalization and Country Image Formation: Longitudinal Evidence from Japanese University Students' Perceptions of Russia

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Abstract. This article examines the longitudinal dynamics of Japanese university students' perceptions of Russia and their sources of information in the context of changing international relations under the conditions of the digitalization of the global information environment. The empirical basis of the study consists of six waves of original sociological surveys conducted at Japanese universities in 2007, 2012, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Using quantitative and qualitative analysis of closed- and open-ended questions, the research identifies changes in patterns of international information consumption and in associative images of Russia across different periods. The findings indicate a gradual shift in how young Japanese audiences obtain information on international affairs: the role of online sources has been steadily increasing, while the importance of traditional mass media, particularly print newspapers, has been declining within this age group. At the same time, traditional media continue to exert a notable influence on Japan's information landscape as a whole, especially among older generations, reflecting the multi-layered nature of foreign policy perception formation. The analysis also reveals the growing prominence of visual and geographical associations, as well as an increasing personalization of Russia's image through its political leadership. The escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022 led to a temporary rise in negative, conflict-oriented associations; however, this effect proved to be short-lived and weakened in subsequent years. Despite sustained geopolitical tensions, interest in cultural dimensions of Russia's image, most notably national cuisine, has shown a modest but consistent increase. The findings of the study demonstrate how the digital information environment and event-driven coverage of international crises influence the formation of state images in the mass consciousness of young audiences, underscoring the dynamic nature of these perceptions and dependence on media context in the digital age.

Key words: digitalization, international image of the country, Japanese youth, shifting of information sources

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Цифровизация и формирование образа страны: лонгитюдные данные о восприятии России студентами японских университетов

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Аннотация. Рассмотрена долговременная динамика восприятия России японскими студентами университетов и используемых ими источников информации в контексте трансформации международных отношений в условиях цифровизации глобальной информационной среды. Эмпирическую основу исследования составляют данные шести волн оригинальных социологических опросов, проведенных в университетах Японии в 2007, 2012, 2021, 2022, 2023 и 2024 гг. С применением количественного и качественного анализа закрытых и открытых вопросов выявлены изменения в структуре информационного потребления и ассоциативных образах России в различные периоды. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о постепенном изменении моделей получения японской молодежью международной информации: роль онлайн-источников последовательно возрастает, тогда как значение традиционных средств массовой информации, прежде всего печатных изданий, в данной возрастной группе снижается. Вместе с тем традиционные СМИ сохраняют заметное влияние в информационном пространстве Японии в целом, особенно среди старших возрастных когорт, что отражает многоуровневый характер формирования внешнеполитических представлений. Анализ позволил обнаружить усиление визуальных и географических ассоциаций, а также рост персонализации образа России через фигуру ее политического руководства. Начало специальной военной операции (СВО) в 2022 г. привело к временному увеличению негативных, конфликтно-ориентированных ассоциаций, однако данный эффект носил краткосрочный характер и ослаб в последующие годы. Несмотря на сохраняющуюся геополитическую напряженность, интерес японских студентов к культурным аспектам образа России, прежде всего к национальной кухне, демонстрирует умеренный, но устойчивый рост. В результате исследования было установлено, каким образом цифровая информационная среда и событийно обусловленное освещение международных кризисов влияют на формирование образов государств в массовом сознании молодежной аудитории, подчеркивая их изменчивость и зависимость от медиаконтекста в цифровую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: цифровизация, международный имидж страны, японская молодежь, смещение источников информации

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Introduction

Digitalization has significantly expanded the capacity of states and non-state actors to engage with global audiences and influence public discourse on domestic and international issues, accelerating the circulation of political information and interpretations of events (Fasinu et al., 2024). In international relations scholarship, it has long been recognized that the perception of states and international processes is closely linked to the images constructed and transmitted through the media (Boulding, 1956). From this perspective, international relations can be understood as a space for the formation and transformation of state images within the global information environment.

This study shifts the analytical focus away from diplomatic practices or foreign policy institutions to the examination of state images and the mechanisms through which they are constructed in public consciousness. A state image is understood here as a set of stable associations, representations, and evaluations mediated through communication networks, shaping interpretations of international events. This approach frames the concept of “image politics” as an important dimension of international relations that complements, but does not replace, the analysis of power and institutional dynamics (Tehrani, 1999).

The strategic significance of mediated state images is further heightened in the context of increasing international tensions and the growing role of the media in interpreting conflicts and crises. Contemporary international disputes are increasingly accompanied by an intense informational dimension, within which competing narratives shape public understanding of events and influence their political interpretation

(Webster, 2003, p. 57). Under such conditions, state images in foreign publics become a critical, though often underestimated, factor in international relations. Public opinion surveys serve as an empirical tool for mapping these images and tracing their correlation with bilateral relations, which in turn influence policy decisions and interstate interactions (Chugrov & Streltsov, 2017).

Despite the growing body of research, two significant gaps still exist. First, most studies of national images and mediated public opinion focus predominantly on Western audiences. Second, while digital media are widely acknowledged as a key factor in shaping contemporary state images, empirical research has rarely examined how different information sources relate to variations in perception among socially and politically salient groups. Consequently, the relationship between media consumption and the formation of state images outside the context of direct conflict or formal alliances has not been fully explored.

This article addresses these gaps by investigating the sources through which Japanese audiences form perceptions of Russia. Japan, as a highly technologically advanced society¹ deeply integrated into global information flows, provides a context in which transnational media narratives circulate with relatively low structural barriers. At the same time, Japan occupies a distinctive position in the international system, characterized by complex historical relations with Russia, the absence of direct military confrontation, and

¹ 118.6 million Internet-users represent 94.0% of 126 million Japanese residents. For comparison: India—1.24 billion (88.0%), China—1.13 billion (80.0%). Russia takes 9th position—146 million citizens (85.0%) and Japan completes the top 10. See: Top 10 Countries with the Highest Number of Internet Users in 2026 // Icon Polls. April 16, 2025. URL: <https://iconpolls.com/blogs/top-10-countries-with-the-highest-number-of-internet-users-in-2026> (accessed: 14.10.2025).

variable diplomatic engagement. This configuration allows for the analysis of mediated perceptions of Russia in a context not determined by active conflict or rigid alliance structures.

Within this national context, the study focuses on university students as a strategically significant social group situated at the intersection of intensive media use,² high educational capital, and ongoing political socialization. Research indicates that educational attainment is a strong predictor of engagement with diverse news sources³ and engagement with political discourse. As future professionals, opinion leaders, and potential members of political and administrative elites, university students' perceptions of foreign states not only reflect current trends in mediated image formation, but also have implications for the long-term evolution of foreign policy discourse.

In this context, it is necessary to address the following research questions:

- Which sources of information do Japanese university students rely on when forming their perceptions of Russia?
- How are patterns of media consumption related to changes in the image of Russia held by this audience?
- To what extent do different types of information sources—such as domestic mass media, international news agencies, and digital or social media—correspond to distinct interpretive frameworks and evaluative orientations toward Russia?

² Globally, 19.0% of online users are aged 18–24, and over a third of users are between 25 and 34 years old. See: Distribution of Internet Users Worldwide as of February 2024, by Age Group // Statista. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272365/age-distribution-of-internet-users-worldwide/> (accessed: 14.10.2025).

³ Nielsen R. K., Fletcher R. The Importance of Public Service Media for Individuals and for Society // Reuters Institute. June 14, 2023. URL: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/importance-public-service-media-individuals-society> (accessed: 03.11.2025).

Drawing on original survey data collected by the author at Japanese universities, the study seeks to contribute to debates in International Relations on mediated public opinion, image politics, and the role of communication environments in this process.

Methodology

Choice of Target Group for the Present Study

In various fields of research on the effects of country image, different groups have served as the primary objects of analysis. Studies in business and marketing typically focus on tourists and consumers, whereas research in communication science emphasizes the role of foreign journalists, and public diplomacy scholarship generally targets the attitudes and sentiments of foreign publics (Buhmann, 2016). Importantly, different social groups tend to construct distinct images of social entities, shaped by their positions, experiences, and patterns of information consumption (Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2010).

In the present questionnaire-based study, university students were selected as the target group. The participants were aged 18–24, which is a life stage associated with the formation of youth identity, collective habits, and relatively stable ways of interpreting social reality. These shared formative experiences within this age cohort may contribute to similar attitudes and interpretive patterns may contribute to the emergence of similar interpretive frameworks and attitudes (Mannheim, 1952). Moreover, university attendance distinguishes these young adults from their non-student peers, as it statistically increases the likelihood of their later inclusion in intellectual or managerial elites and their potential role in shaping future educational and societal trajectories (Zielińska & Sokuryanska, 2016).

Many respondents were enrolled in programs such as Political Science, Law, International Relations, or Economics. This background indicates a higher probability of political engagement, which may directly influence democratic behavior (Sunshine Hillygus, 2005, p.41) and future involvement in international or policy-related fields. From a methodological perspective, the relatively homogeneous characteristics of the student population facilitate analytical clarity by limiting the influence of structural differences within the sample. Detailed information regarding sample composition and methodological controls is provided in the methodology section.

At the same time, concentrating on university students necessarily entails a degree of elite bias, as this group does not reflect the full range of socioeconomic backgrounds and life experiences present among Japanese youth. However, despite this limitation, university students constitute a strategically significant subgroup. Their active engagement with media, high levels of education and ongoing political socialization position them at the intersection of knowledge production, public discourse, and future policy influence. As future professionals and potential opinion leaders, many of whom may later occupy positions within administrative or political elites, their perceptions of foreign states, formed during this formative period, are likely to shape broader societal narratives and policy attitudes in the long term. Studying this group therefore provides insights not only into contemporary patterns of media consumption and country image formation, but also into the emergence of future trends in international relations discourse, making them a highly relevant population for understanding mediated perceptions of foreign countries.

University students constitute a particularly important segment of the youth population,

with dynamic political preferences, evolving patterns of political behavior, and relatively high levels of media exposure and political awareness. Their active involvement in meaning-making processes related to international politics, global norms, and national identity makes them particularly suitable for examining the formation and interpretation of country images. By addressing this socially and politically consequential group, the study contributes to understanding how mediated perceptions of foreign states are constructed in Japan (Zhilina, 2023; 2024).

Participants

This study draws on survey data collected across multiple waves between 2007 and 2024, involving students from several Japanese universities.

The first wave of data collection was conducted at Japan Women's University (JWU) in October 2007, followed by a second wave at Aoyama Gakuin University between April and July 2012; each of these surveys included 400 respondents.⁴

Subsequent waves were conducted between 2021 and 2024 using anonymous online questionnaires. Participating universities during this period included Osaka City University (renamed Osaka Metropolitan University in 2022), Takushoku University, Kansai University, Kobe University, Kwansei Gakuin University (Kangaku), Doshisha University, and Aoyama Gakuin University.

The 2007 and 2012 datasets are used primarily as reference points to contextualize long-term trends, while the core empirical analysis of this study focuses on data collected

⁴ The research project “*Representations about neighboring countries—Japan and Russia: Comparative Studies*,” conducted in 2007 and 2012, was supported by grants of The Japan Foundation.

between 2021 and 2024, reflecting contemporary patterns of media use in the digital environment. Respondents were primarily aged between 18 and 24, with a small number of respondents, who slightly outside this range—were graduate students of named Universities. These “nearby” categories allowed to take into account the continuity of educational and professional trajectories and further enrich the analysis without reducing the homogeneity of the main group.

The gender distribution across the most recent survey waves was as follows:

- 59.4% male and 40.6% female in 2021,
- 56.9% male and 43.1% female in 2022,
- 55.7% male and 44.3% female in 2023,
- 58.3% male and 41.7% female in 2024.

Sample sizes were 155 respondents in 2021 and in 2022, 106 respondents⁵ in 2023, and 165 respondents in 2024.

Although the sample sizes for the most recent waves are relatively modest, they are sufficient for identifying indicative trends and patterns within a clearly defined and relatively homogeneous population group—Japanese university students. This population is particularly well suited to examining shifts in preferences for information sources about Russia and related changes in perceptions and attitudes towards this country in the digital era.

Data Collection

Data collection took place in October 2007, April-July 2012, and April-July during each year from 2021 to 2024.⁶ Participation

was entirely voluntary. In 2007 and 2012, questionnaires were distributed in university classes and completed only by students who agreed to participate. From 2021 onwards, data were collected through online surveys administered via *Google Forms*. The data collection process involved sending an initial email explaining the purpose of the study and providing a link to the questionnaire. Additional announcements were posted on university student group chat platforms. To ensure anonymity, the email collection function was disabled, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. All participants received sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding participation, and the confidentiality of the collected data was strictly maintained.

All questionnaires were conducted in Japanese. The use of online surveys allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at their own pace and without direct interpersonal pressure, thereby reducing the likelihood of socially desirable responses.

Mixed-Methods Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Japanese students’ perceptions of Russia.

Quantitative Analysis. Responses to three closed-ended questions were explored: sources of information about Russia, knowledge about the contemporary Russian economy, and perceived sufficiency of available information.

Qualitative Analysis. Responses to three open-ended questions were assessed: participants’ attitudes toward Russia, perceptions of Russia’s national characteristics, and views of Russian citizens. These responses were systematically coded using thematic

⁵ In Japan, people are often overwhelmed by numerous online surveys, as online research is extremely popular in the country, which may lead them to simply ignore some invitations. Another factor contributing to the low participation rate in online surveys is a general reluctance to share personal information online due to concerns about potential misuse.

⁶ The online survey was carried out via the Internet with the assistance of university professors and instructors mentioned above universities.

analysis. Recurring themes, associative patterns, and interpretive frameworks were identified, capturing nuances not evident in the closed-ended questions.

Integration of Findings. Quantitative patterns (e.g., media source preferences) were compared with thematic clusters from open-ended responses to assess how specific sources relate to particular perceptions of Russia. This combination allowed the study to provide both numerical trends and contextually rich insights, enhancing robustness and interpretive depth.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards for human subject's research: voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants could withdraw at any time, and no personal identifiers were collected.

Findings

The Dynamics of the Role of Individual Information Sources in Shaping Perceptions of Russia

Technological innovation, particularly in information and communication technologies,

has significantly transformed international relations, affecting both methodology and content (Isinkaye, 2023, p. 52). At the same time, these advances have introduced challenges, including widespread misinformation. Young people are exposed daily to a high volume of often conflicting information, which may hinder the formation of clear opinions. Understanding which information sources shape young Japanese students' perceptions and attitudes toward Russia is therefore critical (Table 1).

The international and political news environment has shifted dramatically over the past two decades. The era when political information was confined to a few network news channels and major newspapers has ended. Today, traditional media such as newspapers and television compete with diverse online platforms, and young Japanese increasingly rely on the Internet to access information about foreign countries.

Survey data indicate the following trends in sources of information about Russia among Japanese university students (sample sizes: 155 in 2021 and 155 in 2022, 106 in 2023, 165 in 2024. Age range: 18–24, including a small number of graduate students; gender distribution detailed in the Methodology section).

Table 1. The Dynamics of the Role of Individual Information Sources In Shaping Perceptions of Russia in 2007–2024 (Multiple-choice)

Sources of Information	The proportion of Japanese students, %					
	2007	2012	2021	2022	2023	2024
The Internet	12.0	17.4	69.7	73.2	55.7	56.6
TV	42.1	48.2	54.2	74.0	48.1	57.2
Books	5.8	4.5	21.3	14.6	20.8	10.2
Lectures	3.0	13.2	42.6	35.8	57.5	44.0
Talking with friends	2.8	5.5	7.7	11.4	7.5	10.2
Journals	2.2	2.5	3.2	1.8	1.9	3.6
Newspapers	31.0	7.9	10.3	17.9	9.4	13.9
Radio	1.0	0.8	2.6	0.8	2.8	1.8
Others	0.1	—	2.1	1.6	0.0	0.0

Note. Cell color coding is used to visualize changes in indicator values: green indicates an increase compared to the previous period, red—a decrease, and yellow—no significant change.

Source: compiled by L.V. Zhilina on the base of polls conducted at the Universities of Japan in 2007–2024.

Table 2. Degree of Japanese University Students' Satisfaction with the Amount of Information about Russia in 2007–2024 (Closed-ended question)

Sufficiency of information	The proportion of Japanese students, %					
	2007	2012	2021	2022	2023	2024
Information is insufficient	73.7	77.5	71.0	64.2	61.3	64.5
Satisfied with the volume of information	3.3	6.3	23.6	17.1	23.6	24.1
Difficult to answer	23.0	16.2	5.4	18.7	15.1	11.4

Note. Cell color coding is used to visualize changes in indicator values: green indicates an increase compared to the previous period, red—a decrease.

Source: compiled by L.V. Zhilina on the base of polls conducted at the Universities of Japan in 2007–2024.

– The Internet is gradually replacing television. Interest in online information about Russia increased from 12.0% in 2007 and 17.4% in 2012 to 69.7% in 2021, reaching 73.2% in 2022, the highest recorded level, with students consistently citing it as their primary source.

– Television remains an important source, though trends have fluctuated. The proportion of students identifying TV as their main source grew from 41.2% in 2007 to 74.0% in 2022, before declining in 2023–2024.

– Books. Following earlier declines (5.8% in 2007, 4.5% in 2012), interest surged to 21.3% in 2021, reflecting renewed engagement with detailed, structured content despite the broader shift toward digital resources (Detlor et al., 2011).

– Lectures have become increasingly significant, rising from 3% in 2007 and 13.2% in 2012 to 57.5% in 2023. Beyond delivering content, higher education institutions now guide students through complex information flows, fostering critical thinking, global perspectives, and informed judgments.

– Conversations with friends remain relatively limited. In 2022, 11.4% of students discussed Russian news with peers, the highest recorded rate, which fell to 7.5% in 2023, possibly reflecting fatigue or reluctance to address controversial topics.

– Over the past two decades, newspapers have lost young readers, declining from 31.0%

in 2007 to 13.9% in 2024. Nevertheless, 17.9% of students continue to consult newspapers, indicating persistent, albeit diminished, relevance.

– Journals and radio have consistently remained marginal sources, with use never exceeding 3.6% among students.

Despite exposure to multiple information streams, young people continuously decide which information to trust, ignore, or classify as misleading (Schulz, Fletcher & Nielsen, 2024, p. 4057). Each encountered piece of information contributes to their broader informational environment, whether actively processed or not (Table 2).

The increasing accessibility of diverse, predominantly digital sources has contributed to higher levels of satisfaction with the information available. As a result, the proportion of students who perceived information on Russia as insufficient declined steadily between 2021 and 2023, reflecting both the expanded availability of information and the more selective patterns of consumption.

Multidimensional Perceptions of Russia among Japanese University Students

Digital media have become an integral part of young people's daily lives. Individuals rely on these technologies for information and communication, and the Internet has effectively removed geographical boundaries, enabling the real-time dissemination of news to a global

Table 3. Associations with Russia among Japanese Students in 2007–2024 (Open-ended question), % of Respondents

Associations with Russia	The proportion of Japanese students					
	2007	2012	2021	2022	2023	2024
Cold climate	25.9	16.1	18.7	10.3	16.0	16.0
Geographical associations	9.7	13.8	24.7	21.8	17.0	18.5
Historical and political figures	8.9	7.2	19.3	14.6	11.4	22.5
USSR, socialism, communism, CPSU	8.3	7.9	6.7	1.8	9.3	4.5
Sports and athletes	6.6	3.7	6.0	3.0	1.0	2.0
National cuisine	6.3	7.1	6.0	6.7	9.2	11.0
Negative incidents and facts	7.5	6.1	5.3	18.8	15.0	12.0
National dances, ballet, shows, culture	4.6	1.7	5.0	9.7	4.1	4.5
National symbols	5.7	4.4	3.3	3.0	6.0	3.5
Beautiful people (women), white skin	4.6	6.1	2.7	2.4	2.0	1.5
Northern Territories	2.8	5.2	1.3	–	–	–
Particular color	2.7	2.6	1.0	–	1.0	–
Multinational state, nation	–	–	–	3.0	3.0	–
Strong	–	–	–	–	3.0	–
Army	–	–	–	–	–	1.5
Others	6.4	15.1	–	4.9	2.0	2.5
No answer	–	3.0	–	–	–	–

Note. Cell color coding is used to visualize changes in indicator values: green indicates an increase compared to the previous period, red — a decrease, and yellow — no significant change.

Source: compiled by L.V. Zhilina on the base of polls conducted at the Universities of Japan in 2007–2024.

audience (Hassan et al., 2021). As digital information flows become central to contemporary society, countries that are geographically distant may be perceived as closer, as digital technologies reduce perceived distances. Nevertheless, geographic proximity continues to influence the formation of country images. Japan's closeness to Russia shapes students' perceptions differently compared to countries that are more distant, as citizens of neighboring states are generally more attentive to each other's news due to potential economic and political implications (Ingenhoff, Segev & Chariatte, 2020; Tanikawa, 2019; Segev, 2016). When analyzing public opinion regarding foreign policy, it is important to consider the underlying geopolitical culture that informs such attitudes (O'Loughlin, Tuathail & Kolossov, 2005).

Table 3 presents the associative categories through which Japanese students articulate

their perceptions of Russia. Rather than reflecting a simple aggregation of individual opinions, these categories represent interpretive frames through which Russia is symbolically positioned within the international system.

The categories identified in students' responses can be analytically grouped into several interrelated dimensions. The following sections examine some of these dimensions.

1. Cold Climate and Geographical Associations

First, a set of spatial and geopolitical associations reflects Russia's positioning as a territorially vast and climatically extreme neighboring state, highlighting the enduring role of geography in the international perception.

Geographical perceptions constitute one of the most stable components of Japanese students' images of Russia, underscoring the enduring relevance of spatial factors in inter-

national perception. Over nearly two decades, Russia has been consistently associated with “cold and harsh climatic conditions,” reflecting a long-standing climatic stereotype rooted in both geographical knowledge and cultural representations. In 2007, 25.9% of respondents described Russia as “a country where there is a lot of snow,” “always cold,” or simply “a cold country” due to its “northern location.” Some students provided more vivid depictions, noting that “in winter, people eat ice cream to balance their body temperature with the cold environment” or that “people wear fur caps”—the latter sometimes illustrated in student drawings.

Beyond climate, students’ references to “Russia’s vast territory” reveal a geopolitical imagination in which “size,” “distance,” and “natural resources” are closely intertwined. Early survey waves emphasized “Russia’s remoteness” and “northern location,” while more recent responses increasingly link geography to economic and political attributes, such as “natural resources” and “strategic positioning.”⁷

In 2021–2023, students also mentioned specific cities and regions, such as Vladivostok, Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Kamchatka Peninsula, Siberia, and the Trans-Siberian Railway. By 2024, only Siberia and the taiga had been mentioned, with no city names referenced.

Importantly, the perception of Russia as geographically close and socially distant, frequently articulated as “a close neighbor that does not feel close,” illustrates a symbolic boundary that persists despite the physical

proximity. This ambivalence reflects a broader geopolitical tension in Japan—Russia relations, where spatial closeness does not necessarily translate into perceived familiarity or affinity.

Following 2022, contemporary political developments began to overshadow purely geographical associations, indicating a shift from spatial imagery toward politically mediated interpretations.⁸ This decline in geographically focused associations suggests that geopolitical events can temporarily reframe or displace more stable spatial perceptions in students’ cognitive maps of Russia. By 2023, only 17.0% of respondents mentioned geographic keywords.

2. Political / Historical Figures

Second, political and historical associations reveal a strong personalization of Russia’s image around political leadership. In 2007 and 2012, 8.9 and 7.2% of respondents, respectively, associated Russia with political and historical figures, mentioning names such as President Vladimir Putin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Lev Trotsky, and members of the Romanov family, including Nicholas II, Alexander I, and Catherine II. In 2021, similar figures were recalled, with the majority citing Vladimir Putin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Catherine II, and Nicholas II.

The prominence of Putin in students’ responses became particularly notable over time. In 2012, 70.7% of respondents who mentioned political figures specifically referred to him. This proportion increased to 78.3% in 2021, and following the onset of the 2022 special military operation in Ukraine,

⁷ In 2007 and 2012, 9.7% and 13.8% of respondents, respectively, used geographically associative keywords, describing Russia as “a country far from Japan” (with some noting it was “a neighboring country”), “near North Korea and China,” “country near Hokkaido,” “Siberia,” “big northern country,” or “a country with a large territory and diverse cultures.”

⁸ Perceptions of Russia shifted further in 2022, with respondents emphasizing both its size and current events: “The biggest country in the world,” “a big country, and now there’s a war,” or “a close big country, but I don’t know much about it!”

96.6% mentioned only Vladimir Putin. In 2023, this figure mentioning peaked at 97.8% before declining to 84.4% in 2024.⁹

The increasing dominance of President Putin in respondents' associations, particularly after 2022, indicates a growing personalization of Russia's country image. This trend intensified during periods of heightened international tension. In later survey waves, references to political leadership increasingly replaced references to political institutions or historical figures, with national identity primarily associated with the President.

3. Negative Emotions Towards the Country

Third, affective and normative evaluations capture shifts in moral and political judgments, especially in response to contemporary conflicts. Negative perceptions of Russia among Japanese students were relatively low and stable in 2007, in 2012 and 2021, with 7.5%, 6.1%, and 5.3% of respondents expressing such views, respectively. Japanese youth associated Russia with events and conditions such as the "Chechen war," "difficult social conditions,"¹⁰ low societal safety,¹¹ "the legacy of the Cold War," "instability,"¹² "political and financial instability,"¹³ and "strained relations with other countries."¹⁴

The outbreak of the 2022 special military operation in Ukraine led to a sharp increase in negative perceptions, rising to 18.9% of respondents. Students' references to "war,"¹⁵

"authoritarian governance," "media control," and "strained relations with the West" indicate the emergence of an image of Russia, framed in Japanese and Western media discourse.

By 2023, the proportion of negative associations had stabilized at around 15.0%, decreasing slightly to 12.0% in 2024. The longstanding "Northern Territories issue" ("Japan's claims to the Southern Kuril Islands") dispute between Russia and Japan appears to have little influence on students' perceptions. Despite sustained government efforts, the Japanese public remains relatively uninformed about this issue, far below the level anticipated by organizers of propaganda campaigns (Streltsov, 2024, p. 82). While 2.8% mentioned this issue in 2007 and 5.8% in 2012, awareness had declined to 1.8% by 2021, and no respondents mentioned it in 2022–2024. Although the issue remains in Japan politically significant, public awareness among students appears limited. Notably, the longstanding territorial dispute over "the Northern Territories" plays only a marginal role in students' perceptions. This may indicate that mediated global narratives exert a stronger influence on the image formation than nationally specific diplomatic issues, particularly among younger and digitally oriented audiences.

4. The Association of Russia with Attributes of the Communist Past

In 2007, 8.3% of students associated Russia with the "USSR," "socialism," "communism," or "the Communist Party." This proportion fluctuated slightly in 2012 (7.9%) and 2021 (6.7%), before declining to 1.8% in 2022. Interestingly, in 2023, the share

⁹ Calculated by the author.

¹⁰ "Society gap is big," "People are poor."

¹¹ "Danger," "Russian Mafia," "There are many crimes," "Terrorism."

¹² "Country where economy is not stable," "Economical problems in the country."

¹³ "There is no transparency in political situation," "Military State."

¹⁴ "It fought against Japan many years ago," "It is on bad terms with Japan"... and "with Europe."

¹⁵ "War with Ukraine," "incursion into Ukraine" or "the country is at war now," "bad relations with the West" and

"Russia has very negative politics," "Russia faces political challenges," and "Russia is an occupier" with "a totalitarian government."

of respondents linking Russia with these concepts increased sharply to 9.3%, possibly reflecting heightened media attention to historical narratives. By 2024, this indicator had decreased again to 4.5%.

5. Cultural, Symbolic, and Lifestyle-Related Associations

Finally, cultural, symbolic, and lifestyle-related associations—such as cuisine, culture, sports, and physical appearance—constitute elements of Russia’s cultural image, albeit with varying degrees of salience over time.

National cuisine image as significantly factor of the country image. Limited communication with a foreign country or its citizens is not sufficient, as a country’s image cannot be evaluated solely based on its overall performance. In this particular context, the image of a nation’s cuisine may in some way affect the country’s overall image because it has a stronger effect than emotional associations (Chi, Huang & Nguyen, 2019; Lai, Wang & Khoo-Lattimore, 2020). This research revealed an interesting fact: since 2007, when 6.3% of respondents associated Russia with national cuisine, this number had increased to 11.0% by 2024.¹⁶ This suggests that, where direct people-to-people contacts are limited, cuisine promotion may *play a supporting role* in shaping general country images.

Russia’s achievements in sport and famous athletes. By contrast, associations related to sports—once a visible component of Russia’s international image—have declined sharply in recent years. The authorities of certain

countries have long recognized the political and economic power of major sporting events and have approached them as a kind of promotional and economic tool, which has allowed them to strengthen the image in the world (Dašić, 2021, p.98). In this way the country image may be changed by hosting international mega-sport events, or successful participation in such events. If in 2007 6.6% (highest) of respondents cited sports disciplines in which Russia has achieved success¹⁷ (gymnastics, figure skating, hockey and football), the FIFA, World Cup and Russian sportsmen (Eugene Pluschenko, Andrey Arshavin, Alina Zagitova) as associative notions then over the last five years of examinations the percentage of Japanese students connecting the image of Russia with its achievements in sport appeared successively decreasing: 6.0% in 2021, 3.0% in 2022, and 1.0% in 2023. In 2024, this figure changed slightly and appeared 2.0%.

This trend likely reflects Russia’s reduced participation in international sporting events, illustrating how the erosion of symbolic visibility can diminish a country’s soft power resources. Taken together, these findings indicate that while cultural and lifestyle-related associations retain the potential to support a more nuanced image of Russia, their influence is increasingly constrained by dominant political narratives.

Culture-bound elements as associations. Cultural references, including “literature,” “ballet,”¹⁸ national symbols,¹⁹ and popular

¹⁶ Students referred to Russia as a potential food destination: “The country has plenty of delicious traditional dishes to try.” The most mentioned Russian foods were “borsch,” “pirozhki” (pies), and “blini” (wheat pancake). Also, for Japanese respondents, Russia is well-known for “vodka.” Some of respondents listed in one line: “borsch, Putin, communism”; “vodka, pirozhki, Putin,” etc.

¹⁷ For example: “Russia is renowned for ballet and sports such as figure skating and rhythmic gymnastics, which compete for beauty of expression” (2021).

¹⁸ Students mentioned the “great Russian ballet,” “national dances,” “masterpieces of Russian painting.”

¹⁹ The cultural dimension also included stereotypical references to national symbols such as “the Kremlin,” “beautiful churches,” “Red Square,” “Matryoshka,” “national clothing,” and “fur caps” (“shaggy caps”). In 2022, only 3.0%

characters, “songs”²⁰ constitute a persistent but secondary dimension of Russia’s image among Japanese students. These associations reflect elements of cultural soft power, grounded in long-standing transnational cultural exchange, rather than recent political developments. The survey results indicate that Japanese students possess a wide range of knowledge about the culture of their neighboring country, Russia, and this knowledge is not limited to only a few aspects. Some respondents also referred to “Cheburashka”²¹ (2007–2024) and “Winnie-the-Pooh”²² (2012–2022) as symbols associated with Russia.

The influence of Russian literature was among the key factors shaping positive attitudes toward Russia among Japanese youth. Authors such as Gogol, Tolstoy with *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky, whose works *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* were frequently cited, played a notable role in forming such perceptions. However, cultural associations did not exceed 5.0% in all surveys conducted in Japanese universities between 2007 and 2024, except in 2022, when 9.7% of respondents mentioned cultural aspects related to Russia.

Physical appearance and aesthetic perceptions. Perceptions of physical appearance, particularly references to “the

beauty of Russian women,”²³ represent one of the most depoliticized dimensions of Russia’s image. While such associations were more salient in earlier survey waves, their gradual decline suggests a diminishing role of aesthetic imagery in students’ overall perceptions.²⁴

This trend may indicate a broader shift toward more politicized and issue-driven interpretations of Russia, in which symbolic or aesthetic elements are becoming increasingly overshadowed by geopolitical considerations. Perceptions of physical appearance, particularly references to the beauty of Russian women, represent one of the most depoliticized dimensions of Russia’s image. While such associations were more salient in earlier survey waves, their gradual decline suggests a diminishing role of aesthetic imagery in students’ overall perceptions. This trend may indicate a broader shift toward more politicized and issue-driven interpretations of Russia, in which symbolic or aesthetic elements are increasingly overshadowed by geopolitical considerations.

The Discussion will focus on the most significant categories and thematic groups and examine how they contribute to the formation of Russia’s image.

Discussion

From the perspective of image politics, the analytical significance of these findings lies not only in the frequency of particular associations, but also in the underlying narratives and evaluative logics that shape them. The categories reveal how political,

of such mentions—the lowest figure since the surveys began—but this share rose sharply in 2023 to 6.0%, marking the highest recorded value.

²⁰ In 2007 some students mentioned pop-group Tatu and singer Zemfira in 2024.

²¹ Cheburashka is the hero of a series of books and cartoons in the USSR.

²² Originally, Winnie-the-Pooh first appeared in the children’s book by the English writer A.A. Milne. In the 1960s and 1970s, Winnie-the-Pooh became very popular in the USSR thanks to the films of the Soyuzmultfilm studio—it is the reason why Japanese students mention it in association with Russia. Some respondents listed in one line: “Winnie-the-Pooh, vodka, Siberia,” “Cheburashka, cold, Putin,” etc.

²³ “The beautiful people with a white skin,” “people like dolls” and “beautiful girls,” “the unique beauty of Russian women.”

²⁴ In 2012, 6.1% of respondents noted this, but interest gradually declined over the next decade: 2.7% in 2021, 2.4% in 2022, 2.0% in 2023, and 1.5% in 2024.

cultural, historical, and affective dimensions of Russia's image are selectively combined within students' perceptions.

Importantly, these perceptions emerge at the intersection of mediated information flows and broader geopolitical contexts, where digital media act not merely as channels of information but as sites of meaning production. In this sense, students' associations reflect both exposure to transnational narratives and domestically embedded interpretive frameworks.

Digital media and the formation of Japanese perceptions of Russia. The digitalization of information has not merely transferred traditional news content to online platforms, but also has transformed the very logic of news production and consumption. Online news media function as hybrid spaces that merge elements of print journalism, television, and radio, while privileging immediacy, interactivity, and visibility (Widholm, 2008, p. 84). Driven largely by the preferences of Generation Z, news organizations have increasingly adapted to platform-specific environments dominated by algorithmic distribution and video-centric formats. Platforms such as *TikTok* and *Instagram*²⁵ have become key gateways to news exposure for younger audiences, often eclipsing traditional "legacy media" such as newspapers and television. This shift reflects a broader process of mediatization, whereby political information is shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital platforms, rather than just journalistic norms alone.²⁶ In Japan, this transformation is

accompanied by an increasing reliance on visual cues in the perception of foreign countries.

Geographical imaginaries and media images. Visual media appear to structure cognitive associations with Russia, contributing to the formation of geographically oriented imaginaries. The proportion of respondents associating Russia with spatial characteristics, such as its "large territorial size" or "harsh climatic conditions," increased from 9.7% in 2007 to 21.8% in 2022, and this was positively coincided with the expansion of Internet use.²⁷

These patterns indicate that for Japanese students, the formation of perceptions is largely shaped by the coherence between visual images and their contextual framing, rather than by the acquisition of specific factual details; these images do not correspond directly to objective reality but operate within what Kramer (1993) describes as the "fact-world" of perception.

From an International Relations (IR) perspective, this underscores the role of digital media in shaping the symbolic construction of state images, which in turn influences the cognitive frameworks through which foreign policy and bilateral relations are interpreted.

Historical and cultural associations. Historical events continue to shape national stereotypes (Kunczik, 1997, p. 3), including perceptions of Russia. Historical and political associations, including references to the USSR, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the KGB, also persist,

²⁵ The social network *Instagram* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

²⁶ Young People Are Abandoning News Websites—New Research Reveals Scale of Challenge to Media // The

Conversation. June 14, 2023. URL: <https://theconversation.com/young-people-are-abandoning-news-websites-new-research-reveals-scale-of-challenge-to-media-207659> (accessed: 03.11.2025).

²⁷ Growing geographical associations with Russia: 9.7% in 2007; 13.8% in 2012; 24.7% in 2021 (max) and 21.8% in 2022. It correlates with growing Internet users: 12.0% in 2007, 17.4% in 2012, 69.7% in 2021, and 73.2% in 2022.

suggesting that formative historical orientations continue to influence contemporary perceptions of Russia. Between 2007 and 2012, Japanese students tended to focus on Russia's domestic situation, whereas in later years their associations increasingly reflected contemporary geopolitical developments.

In the absence of sustained people-to-people contact, cultural symbols serve as accessible interpretive bridges. As Maximova (2018) argues that national images are more easily internalized when they are introduced through familiar cultural experiences. National cuisine, in particular, functions as a form of soft power (Nye, 2005; Solleh, 2015), capable of generating affective proximity and positive impressions even under politically adverse conditions. Food represents an affordable, non-political, and sensory mode of cultural engagement, amplified by the rise of social media and food blogging in Japan. Platforms such as *Instagram*²⁸ and *Pinterest* transform eating into a performative and socially validated experience, encouraging experimentation with unfamiliar cuisines and facilitating symbolic cultural connections.

These findings highlight that cultural and historical associations operate alongside media exposure to shape perceptions, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of national images central to soft power dynamics in IR.

Emotional and practical perceptions of the country. Despite geopolitical tensions, Japanese students' interest in Russian culture—Russian national cuisine—continued to grow. This divergence highlights the distinction between emotional-symbolic perceptions and practical-cultural engagement. Descriptions of

Russia as “mysterious,” “dark,”²⁹ or “unpredictable” reflect affective responses rooted in literary and media representations rather than direct experience.

The lack of stable, experience-based reference points limits the consolidation of long-term attitudes. As a result, sympathies and antipathies remain fluid and susceptible to short-term media stimuli. Notably, at the peak of negative sentiment, respondents did not conceptualize Russia as a “neighboring country,” suggesting a persistent psychological distance despite geographical proximity. The so-called emotional nature of associations with Russia only leads to fluctuations in preferences and assessments of the neighboring country.

Media-driven personalization of the country image. A notable trend in the data is the increasing personalization of Russia's national image. Media coverage has shifted towards leadership-centric frames, emphasizing the President's persona over structural political processes (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; 2014 p. 992). Over time, this personalization has intensified: while earlier respondents distinguished between the Russian people and political leadership, later surveys reveal a tendency to equate national identity with the leader himself,³⁰ particularly in the context of the special military operation in

²⁹ For example: “A little dark image. Maybe I've read too much Dostoevsky”—reflects a lack of direct experience and a reliance on mediated representations.

³⁰ In 2007 only some of the respondents connected Russian people with the persona of Russian President: “I know nobody (Russians) only Putin—because I have seen him in TV news”. Then, in 2022: “I believe that the invasion is not the whole nation, but the Putin administration, so the image of the nation is not aggressive, but the same as before”. In 2023–2024 respondents superimposed the persona of the political leader of the country on the nation as a whole: “They are like Putin,” and “a people following President Putin.” At the same time students did not make the distinction between the country and the political leader (“Putin's Russia,” “Putin's government,” “Putin's policy”).

²⁸ The social network *Instagram* (part of the *Meta* group of companies) is banned in the Russian Federation. *Meta* is recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation (*Editor's note*).

Ukraine. This convergence reflects the simplifying logic of media narratives and demonstrates how personalization mediates the construction of state images.

In IR terms, leadership-focused frames can amplify or distort perceptions of state behavior, impacting soft power, public diplomacy, and the interpretive lenses through which foreign policy actions are assessed.

Geopolitical event-driven volatility of perceptions. The perception of Russia as “a military threat” intensified further due to Japan’s geographical proximity. References to “nuclear weapons” and “military power” in the 2024 survey indicate the interaction of mediated images with regional security concerns. At the same time, the selective exposure theory provides a useful interpretive lens: while individuals tend to favor attitude-consistent information (Taber & Lodge, 2006), periods of high-intensity crisis can disrupt this tendency and temporarily reshape perceptions (Westerwick, Kleinman & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014).

The outbreak of the special military operation in 2022 triggered a sharp increase in negative associations with Russia among Japanese students, with 18.8% explicitly citing war-related factors. Yet this spike proved temporary, declining to 15.0% in 2023 and 12.0% in 2024, underscoring the event-driven and volatile nature of mediated attitudes.

This pattern reflects the dynamics of visual politics in the digital age. As Mortensen (2017, p.1142) and Williams (2018, p. 880) note, contemporary conflicts are experienced primarily through image-saturated media environments. States compete not only through military and diplomatic means but also through symbolic struggles over visual representation. Media attention is “impulsive” and episodic,

closely tied to salient events, which explains the temporal concentration of negative sentiment in 2022.

For IR, this demonstrates that public perceptions of states are not only mediated but also highly contingent on salient geopolitical events, with implications for both diplomatic signaling and public diplomacy strategies.

Here it should be stressed, that at first glance, the findings may appear to diverge from nationwide public opinion surveys in Japan, which have consistently reported “predominantly negative” attitudes toward Russia in recent years. However, this apparent discrepancy is largely methodological and interpretative in nature and does not indicate an empirical inconsistency between the two sets of data.

The present study examines Japanese students’ spontaneous associative responses, which capture cognitive and cultural representations of Russia, rather than explicit political assessments of its foreign policy or international behavior. Open-ended associative measures are particularly effective in identifying symbolic images and general frames of reference, yet they are less sensitive to latent or context-driven negative attitudes, which are more likely to emerge in response to direct evaluative questions commonly used in mass opinion surveys.

Furthermore, the characteristics of the student sample suggest a lower degree of politicization in the perception of international affairs compared to the general population. Younger respondents tend to engage with foreign countries through an educational, cultural, and transnational lens, which contributes to a predominantly neutral or ambivalent image of Russia. In this context, the predominance of neutral and positive associations should not be interpreted as evidence of

“a stable favorable attitude,” but rather as an indicator of social and political distance, as well as the limited salience of Russia as “a political issue” among Japanese students.

The role of digital media in shaping public perception. Digital media environments, characterized by visual saturation, algorithmic amplification, and transnational circulation, play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of foreign countries. For Japanese youth, foreign policy events are often experienced as distant and virtual phenomena, mediated almost entirely through images and narratives, rather than through lived interaction.

The globalization of media systems has eroded states’ capacity to monopolize national narratives. Digital technologies enable information to circulate beyond regulatory borders (Matos, 2012), transferring agenda-setting power to media organizations and journalists (Marten, 1989). These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding mediated perceptions as a core component of contemporary soft power and image diplomacy.

Implications for International Relations. The findings suggest that Japanese students’ perceptions of Russia are shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, mediated visual content, and contemporary geopolitical events. Positive cultural or symbolic associations can facilitate mutual understanding and support soft power objectives, whereas negative portrayals, especially during crises, can reinforce stereotypes and transient biases.

From an international relations perspective, these findings highlight the critical role of public perception within the broader environment of diplomatic relations. Image, reputation, and mediated narratives are not ancillary to state power; they constitute essential elements of contemporary international politics. As Wang (2006) argues,

a favorable international image functions as a resource for mutual understanding within the international system. Policymakers and media actors must therefore consider both the content and the medium of communication, recognizing that representation and perception are inseparable from the practice of international relations in the digital age.

Conclusion

The expansion of the Internet and digital media has fundamentally reshaped the way young Japanese citizens perceive foreign countries. Visual content, leader-centered media representations, and culturally mediated forms of engagement collectively contribute to a dynamic and multidimensional image of Russia. While historically rooted frames continue to inform these perceptions, contemporary geopolitical events and patterns of digital media consumption increasingly shape the interpretation of foreign states. This highlights the growing role of transnational information flows in shaping global public opinion.

Japanese university students’ consumption of television and digital news related to Russia intensified during periods of heightened international tension, particularly in 2022. At the same time, there has been a clear long-term shift towards online news as a primary information source. Episodic increases in television viewing during crises indicate that traditional broadcast media retain relevance alongside digital platforms. For policymakers and public diplomacy practitioners, this hybrid media consumption pattern suggests that effective international communication strategies must consider the complementary roles of both traditional and digital channels, rather than relying exclusively on either.

The study also found that young Japanese citizens engage with international affairs through diverse and often uncoordinated media narratives. Students rely on multiple news sources to follow developments related to Russia, reflecting both heightened informational awareness and the absence of stable, shared interpretive frameworks. In this context, perceptions of foreign countries remain fluid and event-driven, responding more strongly to salient developments than to long-term political evaluations. From a policy perspective, this volatility implies that reputational gains and losses may be amplified but short-lived, emphasizing the need for sustained, coherent, and strategically consistent communication efforts.

Importantly, these findings complement national-level public opinion surveys in Japan by revealing significant variation across social and demographic groups. Targeted analyses of youth and student populations could serve as early indicators of emerging perceptual trends, which could influence future foreign policy debates and levels of public support for international engagement.

Overall, this study underscores the policy relevance of understanding how digital media

environments shape perceptions of foreign states among younger generations. In a media landscape, characterized by visual saturation, algorithmic amplification, and the transnational circulation of content, representation and perception are inseparable from the practice of international relations. Governments, media organizations, and public diplomacy actors need to recognize the interaction between media formats, content, and audience characteristics to manage international reputation, mitigate misperceptions, and engage foreign publics effectively.

As with all empirical research, this study has some limitations. Although the longitudinal design provides insight into evolving trends, the sample is not fully representative of the broader student population. Therefore, findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. Future research could employ larger and more diverse samples and extend the analysis to additional national contexts. Comparative cross-national studies would further illuminate how cultural and media environments influence the relationship between digital communication and public perceptions of foreign states, contributing to more context-sensitive and effective policy approaches.

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