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Case Study

Social Issue Based Brand Transformation: Strategies of the Luxury Beauty Brand SK-II



Source: SK-II

01/2022-6681

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Introduction

Through decades of development, SK-II had become a leading luxury beauty brand in Japan. However, its customers were constantly courted by a growing number of rival brands and changes in society and among consumers made it difficult for the brand to stay compelling. By the end of 2019, the strategies that had propelled it to success were losing momentum. How could the executive team bolster brand relevance, drive growth and outpace the competition?

The Market – Japan

Economy and Demography

With a GDP of over \$5 trillion in 2019, Japan had the third largest economy in the world after the United States and China (see Exhibits 1 and 2). It was the largest developed economy in Asia and the second largest globally. Its population, 126.26 million in 2019, was equivalent to the combined populations of France and the United Kingdom. This and high per capita income (45,180 in PPP dollars) made it a prime market for premium goods and services.

The decade from 2010 saw no growth in Japan's population. The median age, 48, was significantly higher than in the US (38.4)² or EU (43.7).³ The under-20s represented 6.53% of the population, 20.95% were between 20 and 39; 27.73% between 40 and 59; 34.79% were 60 or above. Women made up 51.41% of the population. The average age at which they married was 29.4 (31.1 for men) and had their first child at 30.7. Similar gender and age distribution trends were anticipated in the decade from 2020 (see Exhibits 3-5).

Gender Disparity

Traditionally, a significant portion of Japanese women stopped their career after marriage or pregnancy to stay home and had primary responsibility for childcare and housework. According to a 2019 government report, women on average spent 7 hours 34 minutes on housework, and 3 hours 45 minutes on child care every day. Men spent 1 hour 23 minutes on housework, and 49 minutes on childcare⁴. In Japanese society, the archaic expectation remained that to be a perfect wife and mother, women should focus less on their professional development and more on the household. As a result, Japan ranked 28th of 29 developed (OECD) countries in terms of the environment for working women (Exhibit 6).

Women were therefore heavily outnumbered in the workforce from age 20-30. For those who pursued a career, few were on the “regular employee” track (正社員) and many opted for “non-regular” jobs (契約社員, 派遣社員, アルバイト) that offered less career advancement

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org>

² <https://www.census.gov>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu>

⁴ 内閣府 少子化社会対策白書 (令和元年版) [Cabinet Office's Annual Report on Declining Birthrate (2019 Edition)]

and fewer hours (see Exhibit 7). Ambitious women often preferred not to marry at the “expected” age (under 30) so that they could pursue a full-time career and attain professional success.

Gender disparity in employment hampered Japan’s economic growth. Progress towards gender equality had started since the early 2010s, with the introduction of government policies to foster women’s careers – fairer salaries, flexible work schedules, childcare support, management training, and efforts to encourage men to take more responsibility for childcare and housework. Although gender disparities remained, these policy changes meant that more women stayed in or re-joined the workforce and continued to pursue a career (see Exhibits 8 - 10). Women’s average incomes increased correspondingly, as did discretionary spending on premium goods and services.

The Diffusion of Digital Technology

Japan is one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world. From smart vending machines to hotels staffed by robots, technology permeates every facet of daily life. In 2019, internet usage among people aged 20 to 60 exceeded 95% (rates were similar for women and men). Household income was highly correlated with internet usage. Smartphones were the most popular internet access device, with computers and tablets in second and third place, respectively (see Exhibits 11-13).

Japanese consumers had shifted from traditional media (e.g., television, radio, newspapers, magazines) to online sources. For entertainment-related content, the majority preferred online sources (see Exhibit 14). YouTube, for example, surpassed 98 million monthly active users by the end of 2019. Social media platforms were rapidly expanding, with Twitter reaching 45 million monthly active users, Instagram 29 million, and Facebook 28 million. Japan’s indigenous messaging app, LINE, surpassed 83 million users in 2019.

Ecommerce was growing by 9% per year. In 2019, it accounted for more than 6% of retail expenditure in Japan (over \$163.5 billion).⁵ Consumers were expected to spend over \$2,594 online per capita per year by 2022, across a wide spectrum of product categories (see Exhibits 14 and 15). Regardless of whether they purchased on or offline, they often conducted research online to inform the purchase decision, and were knowledgeable about brands, products and services.

The Premium Beauty Market

The market for premium beauty and personal care products grew to reach ¥1,689 billion in 2019⁶ (see Exhibit 16). Over 86.6% of products were sold through offline distribution outlets, including major department stores like Takashimaya and Isetan, as well single-brand stores in premium locations. The remaining 13.4% were sold via online channels, including ecommerce portals like Rakuten and brands’ own websites (Exhibit 17). Although some brands had begun shifting their marketing communications towards internet-based and

⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce Report: Japan - Growth in Ecommerce

⁶ The average exchange rate from USD to JPY in 2019: \$1 ≈ ¥109

mobile-based platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook), most devoted a large portion of the budget to advertising media such as TV commercials, billboards and magazine ads. The premium beauty market was highly competitive – no brand had more than 6% of the market – with domestic brands holding the leading positions. Of the top ten brands, only two were operated by firms headquartered outside Japan: SK-II and Chanel (see Exhibit 18), and SK-II had originated in Japan.

The main competitors of SK-II were Japanese skincare brands like Pola and Clé de Peau Beauté. Pola was the brand with the highest sales revenue. Founded in 1929, the brand had over 4,000 distribution outlets throughout Japan. Focused on the high-end consumer segment, it was positioned as an advanced technology skincare brand. Its flagship products were anti-ageing serums and skin whitening creams, sold at premium prices. For example, Wrinkle Shot Serum N (20g) was priced at ¥14,850 (inc. tax) and White Shot CXS (25ml) at ¥16,500. Pola's brand communications did not typically feature celebrities but emphasized the advanced technology and efficacy of its products (see Exhibit 19).

The Shiseido group operated multiple major brands, including ELIXIR, Maquillage, Shiseido, and Clé de Peau Beauté. ELIXIR and Maquillage were intro-level premium brands; Shiseido, mid-level; and Clé de Peau Beauté, the most luxurious. Founded in 1982 to cater to the top consumer segment, Clé de Peau Beauté⁷ had skincare and makeup product lines, nationwide distribution, and some of the highest prices in the market. For example, its skincare product Le Sérum (50ml) was priced at ¥27,500; the foundation cream Teint Fluide Éclat Mat (35ml) retailed at ¥14,300. The brand was positioned as an international luxury beauty brand from Japan. Its brand communications featured major international stars such as Felicity Jones (see Exhibit 20).

SK-II also competed with high-end European and American brands like Chanel, Estée Lauder, and Lancôme. Priced at premium level, these brands projected their Western origins in brand communications and were distributed in major department stores, but none came close to the premium Japanese brands in terms of market share or sales revenue.

SK-II

The Rise of SK-II in Japan

The history of SK-II goes back to the 1960s. It began with a quest by SK-II scientists to understand why elderly sake brewers had wrinkled faces but extraordinarily soft and youthful hands, which were in constant contact with the sake fermentation process. It took years of research for the scientists to isolate PITERA™ (ピテラ™), a naturally derived skin conditioning agent.⁸ In 1980, SK-II launched its iconic Facial Treatment Essence (a.k.a Miracle Water),

⁷ French for the “key to beautiful skin”

⁸ Extracted from a proprietary fermentation process using a unique yeast strain (Galactomyces Ferment Filtrate), which is exclusively owned by SK-II

which contained over 90% PITERA.™ Since then, every product from SK-II has contained PITERA™ as a signature ingredient.

SK-II became part of Procter & Gamble in 1991 and grew into a leading brand in subsequent years. Positioned as “the luxury Japanese beauty brand specialized in highly efficacious skincare”, it targeted the high-end consumer segment—mature, well-off women. Branding communications (e.g., billboard and magazine ads, TV commercials) featured the Japanese film star Kaori Momoi⁹, who served as the primary brand spokesperson for two decades. In addition to creating an association with a leading celebrity, the ads emphasized the efficacy of SK-II products in helping women achieve crystal clear skin. Its products had premium pricing, such as Facial Treatment Essence (160ml) at ¥18,700 and Genoptics Ultraura Essence (50ml) at ¥26,400. Distributed by major department stores throughout Japan, by the late 2000s SK-II had grown to ¥800 million in retail value globally.

Growing Number of Challenges

In the early 2010s, SK-II encountered a number of challenges. Sales started to decline by mid to high single digits annually. Albeit perceived to be prestigious, consumers associated the brand with women in the 40s through 50s age group. Despite the highly loyal customer base, the brand had difficulty attracting new, younger consumers, who were vital to growth. Furthermore, Japanese consumers' media habits were changing. Younger segments were spending increasingly less time on traditional media such as TV channels and magazines, and switching to social media and online streaming. As such, SK-II's extant brand communications approaches were losing effectiveness. Thus, strategic changes were required to address these challenges and rejuvenate the brand.

The Transformation of SK-II

A new, diverse leadership team came on board in 2010,¹⁰ who spearheaded SK-II's transformation. After extensive research on consumers of high-end skincare products (see Exhibits 22 and 23), the team decided to focus the brand on a specific segment – “young executives” (full-time professionals aged 25 to 35).

SK-II's research indicated that the young executives were driven by different motivations – they sought career advancement, but also felt that they should get married and have kids in accordance with societal expectations. They appreciated the notion of the “ideal Japanese woman” who looks impeccable and conforms to social norms, but they also wanted the freedom to pursue their own hobbies and adventures, which might not fit the ideal mould. Given the incongruence, it was clear from the research that young executives were under constant pressure – to find the right person, get married, and have children, all within a strict

⁹ Kaori Momoi (桃井 かおり) was born in April, 1951. She starred in numerous Japanese films and TV shows, and won major awards including on the Japanese Academy Awards for Best Actress as well as for Best Supporting Actress.

¹⁰ The executive team included Sandeep Seth, YoeGin Chang, Mayu Arao, Gayoon Jung, Shuqi Fu, Kylene Campos, Kaisy O'Reilly, Tabbal Tarek and Nishida Fumiko among others.

timeframe. These comprised what SK-II termed “The Box” that limited young executives from pursuing their dreams, aspirations and chosen path.

Based on the research findings, SK-II developed a new brand tagline, #CHANGEDESTINY, to inspire women and start a dialogue. The goal was to encourage more women to overcome the pressures they faced and shape their own destiny. SK-II centred its brand communications on young executives and their life stories, which created an even stronger emotional connection with consumers. This established SK-II as a brand that understood the social pressures on young executives and inspired them to pursue their own destiny.

SK-II’s brand communications celebrated young women who had overcome social pressures and had taken their future into their own hands. In 2015, the brand started to use #CHANGEDESTINY (#運命を変えよう) in media campaigns like [Dream Again](#), [The Expiry Date](#) and [Timelines](#) across digital and social media platforms.

SK-II also began to shift away from traditional media such as TV and magazines, and largely increased the focus on digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Over 80% of brand communication resources supported digital endeavours. A young, Japanese celebrity [Haruka Ayase](#)¹¹ became the new brand spokesperson, helping associate the brand with a younger, more vibrant image. In 2017, SK-II launched the “[Face the Wild Face the Camera](#)” (大自然への挑戦) campaign, showcasing celebrity brand ambassadors like Kasumi Arimura traveling to some of the harshest places in the world to put PITERA™ Essence to the test. In 2019, to globalize the brand image, SK-II launched the social media campaign [#BareSkinChat](#) (すっぴん素肌トーク), featuring international celebrities such as Chloë Grace Moretz and James Corden. SK-II also recruited the American musician John Legend to create a song for the brand. The musical video for the song, “[Oh PITERA™](#)” (Oh ピテラ™) was viewed more than 4 million times on the Japanese YouTube within a year.

In addition to working with major celebrities, SK-II also engaged with influencers (who interact with consumers by showcasing, promoting or recommending products/services on social media). Specific influencers were selected based on criteria such as whether they were authentic users and fans of SK-II products and whether they would passionately showcase their skin transformation journey. SK-II supported their efforts to show how they used the brand’s products in postings and videos on social media platforms. The brand also held dedicated offline and online events, where influencers could [experience the SK-II’s latest products](#) and skincare experiences and even [interact face-to-face with other influencers](#) in the SK-II community.

Furthermore, SK-II started digitizing the shopping experience as its younger consumers found the traditional beauty retail environment of walled counters quite intimidating and pressurizing. Consumers started shying away from shopping in this environment to avoid feeling a pressure to buy. SK-II wanted to take the intimidation and pressure out of shopping

¹¹ Haruka Ayase (綾瀬 はるか) was born in 1985. An actress, model and singer, she has starred in many Japanese films and TV programs, and won major awards including the Blue Ribbon Award for Best Actress, the Japanese Television Drama Academy Awards for Best Actress and for Best Supporting Actress.

for skincare in the offline retail space, give control back to the consumer, and give her the option to learn, browse and shop at her own pace on her own terms.

In 2018, the brand launched the first of its [Future X Smart Stores](#) in Tokyo (see Exhibits 24A & 24B), where in a digitally-enabled self-service pop-up store, consumers could create interactive art on digital walls using facial expressions, receive a personalized skin analysis with a proprietary SK-II skin scan while sitting in a booth without any direct contact, unlike other skin scans in the market. An interactive skincare wall then displayed a comprehensive analysis of each user's skin condition with a set of tailored recommendation based on the results. The consumer could decide which products to purchase without feeling pressured by sales staff (unlike the conventional retail experience).

SK-II also began to transform its existing retail stores in Daimaru Shinsaibashi, Hankyu Umeda, Isetan Shinjuku and Matsumoto Kiyoshi in Ikebukuro (see Exhibit 25). Beauty advisors (front-line sales staff) were trained to interact with consumers like beauty influencers and cater to younger consumers who preferred to browse on their own and only receive assistance when needed. Self-service vending machines were installed in some of the stores so that consumers could complete the purchase on their own.

As shown in Exhibit 17, the transformation helped reignite SK-II's growth, making it one of the top brands in the premium beauty market in Japan.

Strategic Decision Making

Despite this success, the executive team at SK-II must consider the on-going challenges, examine different strategic options, and formulate a path for the future.

Positioning and Target Segment(s)

Given the digital transformation of the brand, should its positioning be changed? For example, should it be repositioned as "the most high-tech skin care?" Or should it continue the current positioning but present it differently? Why? How?

Should SK-II continue to project a global brand image in Japan? Or should it focus on its Japanese heritage in this market? What are the trade-offs?

Should the brand go after other consumer segments in addition to women in the "young executive" segment? Why?

Brand Communications and Engagement

Although the brand had been refreshed and had built a younger identity, SK-II needed to emotionally connect with younger consumers, attract more of them to experience the brand, and further lower the average age of its consumer base. To this end, SK-II needed to articulate appropriate brand communications.

As part of the brand's digital transformation, SK-II engaged with many influencers on social media to help promote its products, which enhanced interactions with target consumers. As SK-II had no direct control over the content on social media (e.g., what influencers might post), there were risks to the brand as well. How should the brand select and collaborate with the influencers to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits?

The brand's communications featured major international and Japanese celebrities (e.g., Chloë Grace Moretz, Haruka Ayase, James Corden, John Legend, Kasumi Arimura). Should the brand shift away from celebrities and focus the majority of its resources on working with "regular" influencers? Why?

More generally, how should SK-II engage with consumers online to foster a stronger relationship with the brand?

SK-II's digitization efforts thus far had been largely focused on pre-purchase and during-purchase experiences. What should the brand do to further engage with consumers in the *post-purchase* phase?

Product Portfolio, Pricing and Distribution

SK-II's current product portfolio focused on skincare. Should the brand expand into colour cosmetics? Why?

Should the brand offer an "SK-II for Men" line? Why?

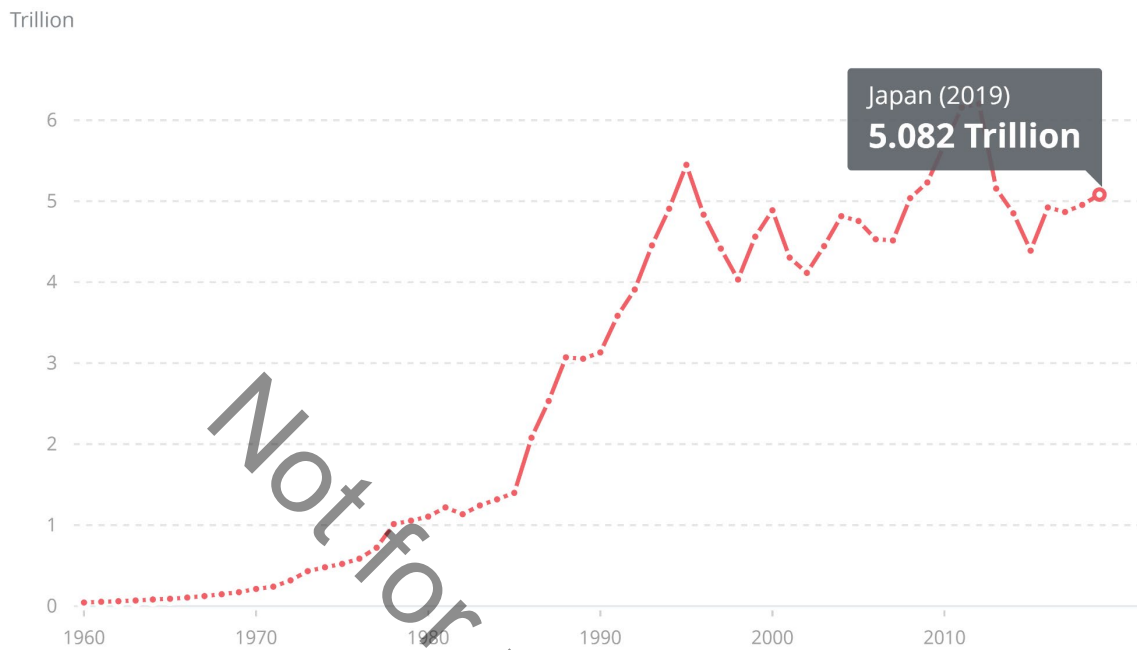
Should the brand launch a lower priced "SK-II Lite" line to cater to price-sensitive consumers? Or launch an even more premium line to cater to those seeking higher-end luxury goods? Or both? Why?

When SK-II offers discounts (e.g., in the holiday season), should it go for price discounts (e.g., 20% off the retail price) or in-kind discounts (e.g., a free product for purchases over a certain amount)? What are the trade-offs?

Given the digital transformation, should SK-II shift distribution away from physical stores and focus on ecommerce? Why?

If SK-II retains its offline stores (à la Future X Smart Store), how should the stores be staffed? Should SK-II still have beauty advisors who help consumers select products? If not, how should beauty advisors contribute to the increasingly digitalized customer experience?

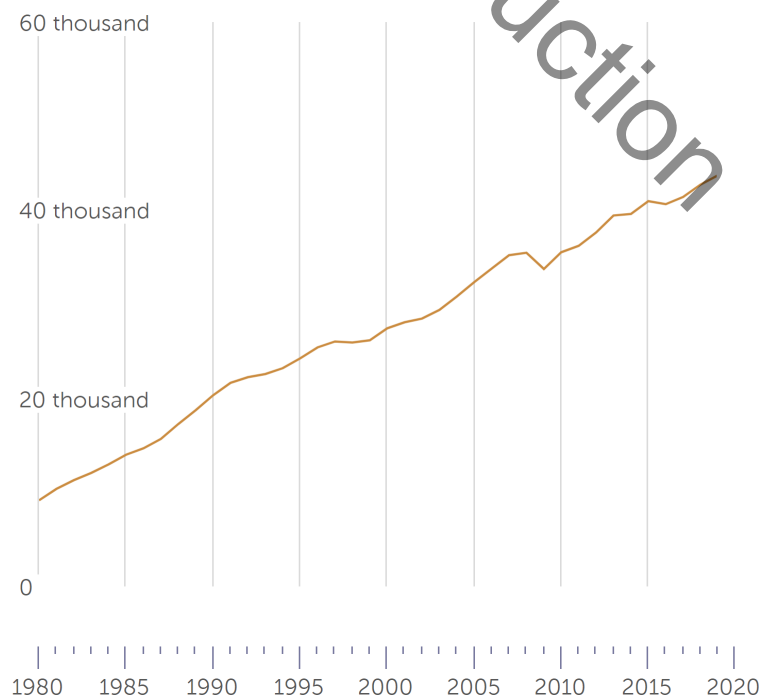
Exhibit 1
Japan's GDP in USD (1960-2019)



Source: The World Bank

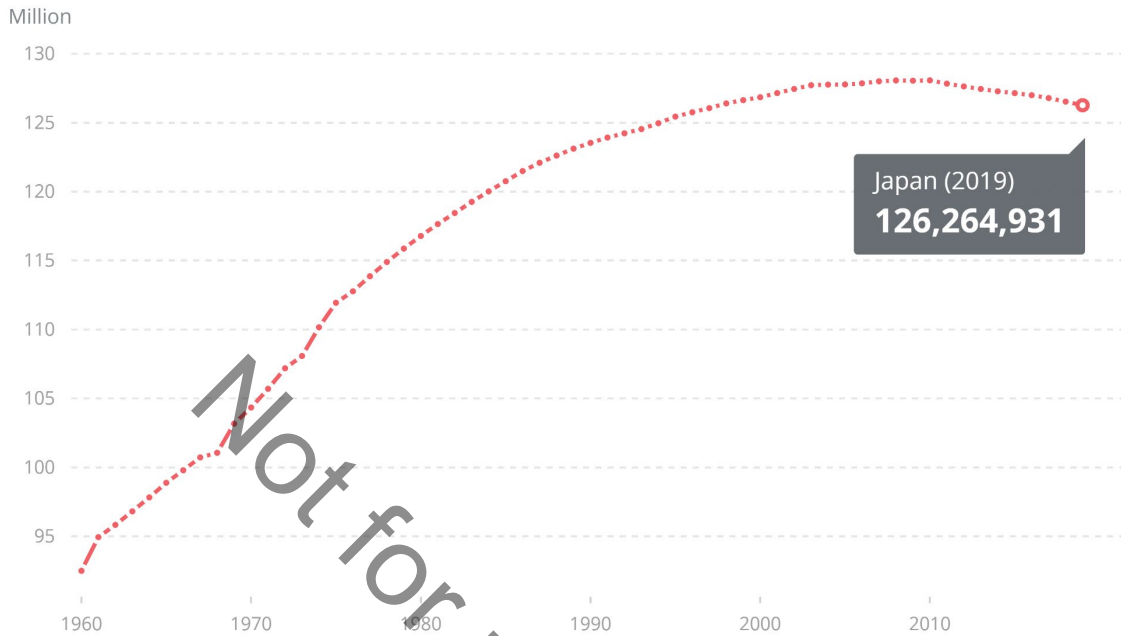
Exhibit 2
Japan's GDP Per Capita (1980-2019)

— GDP per capita, current prices (Purchasing power parity; international dollars per capita)



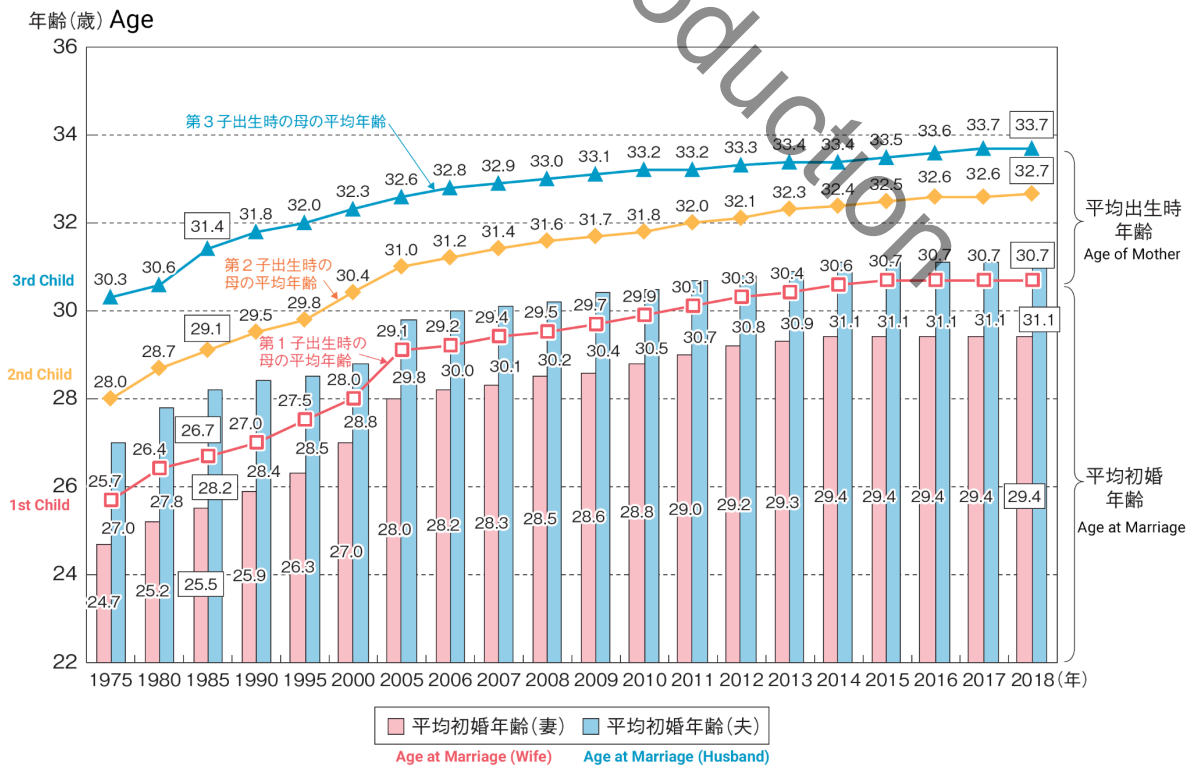
Source: The International Monetary Fund

Exhibit 3 Japan's Population (1960-2019)



Source: The World Bank

Exhibit 4 Average age at marriage and childbirth



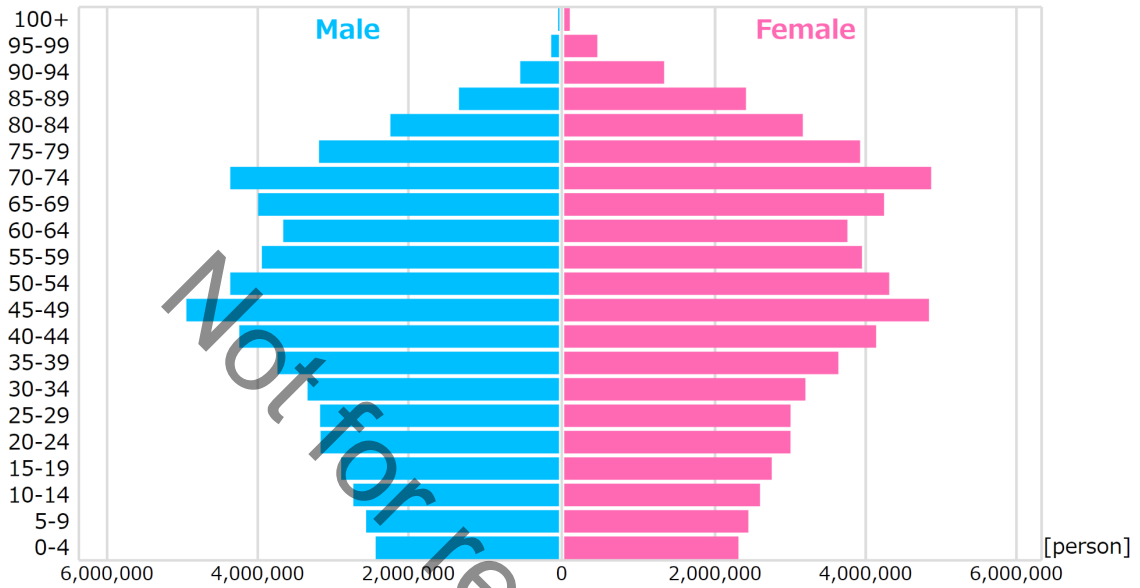
Source: Cabinet Office, Japan

Exhibit 5 Projections of Japan's Population

time: 2020

Japan

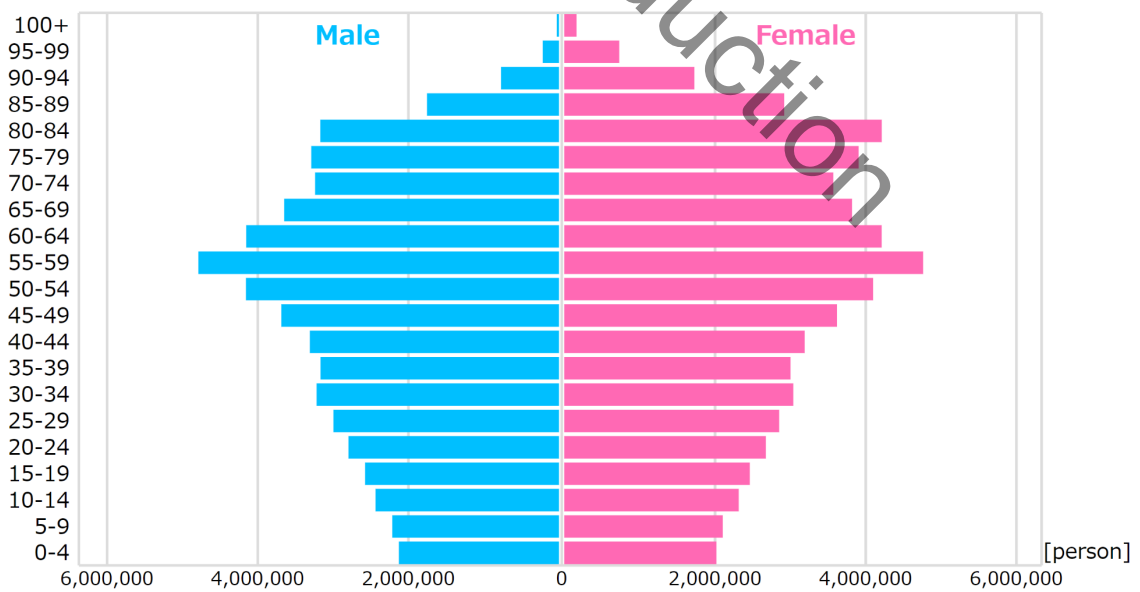
Population projection



time: 2030

Japan

Population projection



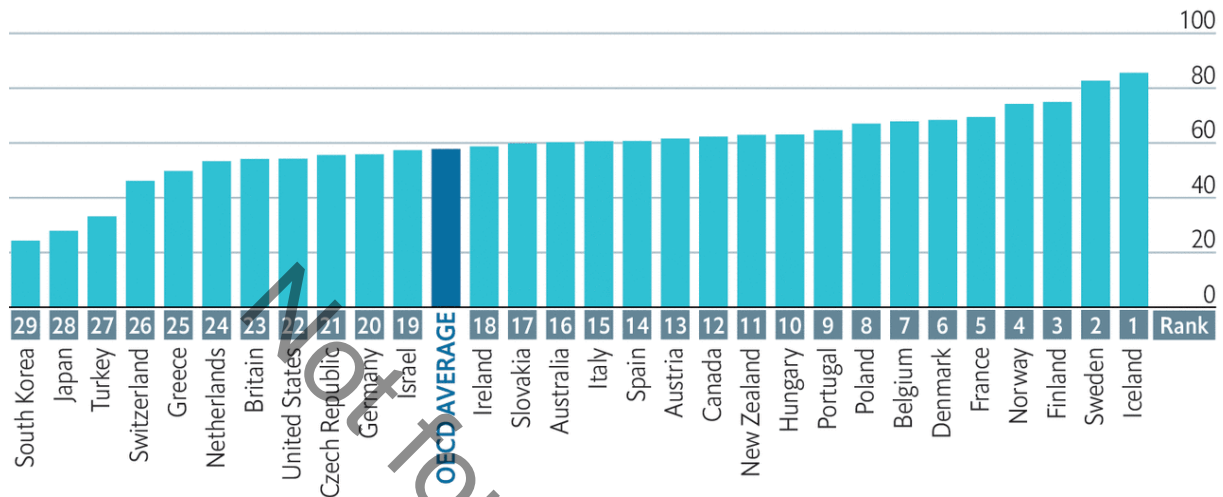
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 6

Ranking of Environment for Working Women (2019)

Glass-ceiling index

Environment for working women, 2019 or latest, 100=best

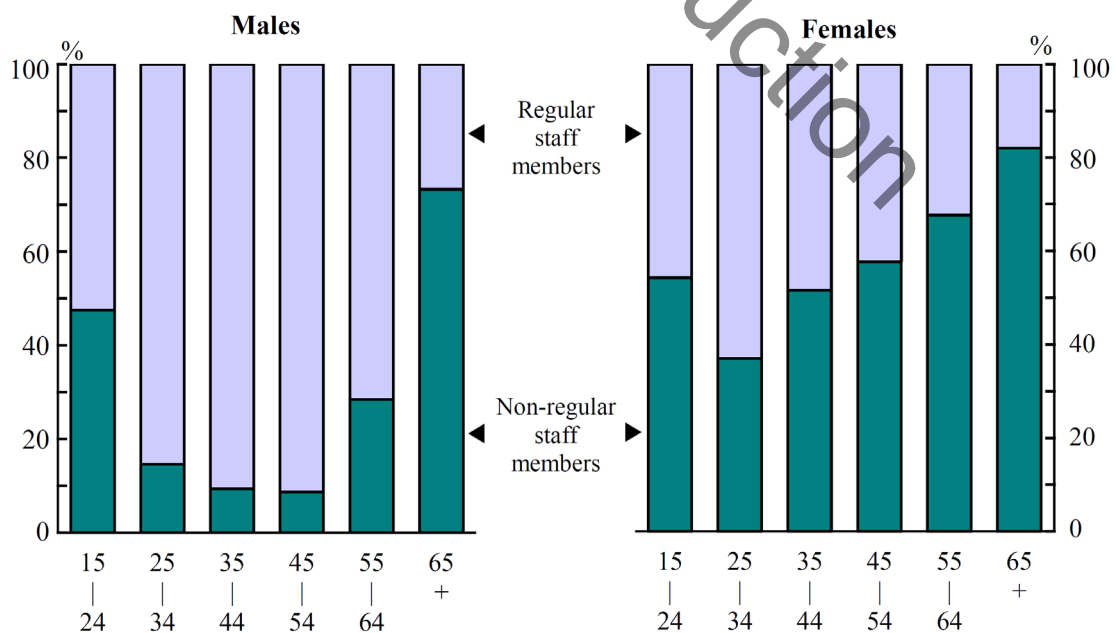


Sources: European Institute for Gender Equality; Eurostat; MSCI ESG Research; GMAC; ILO; Inter-Parliamentary Union; OECD; national sources; *The Economist*

Source: The Economist

Exhibit 7

Employment Type across Gender and Age (2019)



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 8 Abenomics¹² Initiative on Empowering Women



WOMEN

- **Bolster health support** for women at various life stages
- Offer greater **assistance to single parents**, irrespective of gender
- Make available further and **recurrent education for women** returning to work after child-care leave
- Provide female candidates with executive leadership training programs from the world's leading business scholars
- **Eliminate all forms of violence against women** including spousal violence, sex crimes, prostitution, human trafficking, sexual harassment, and stalking
- **Promote men taking child-care leave** and being more active with domestic tasks

▶ Achievements

- ▶ From 2012 to 2019, **the number of women joining the workforce** increased by about

3.3million



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications "Labour Force Survey"

- ▶ **Women in management positions** in the private sector approaches

10%



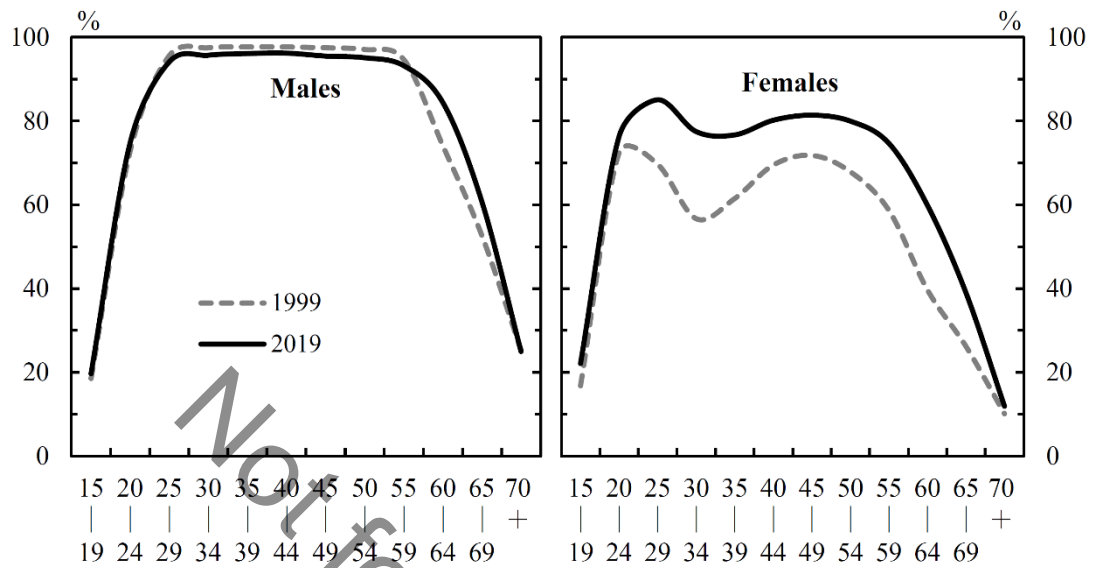
Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare "Basic Survey on Wage Structure"

Source: Cabinet Public Relations Office, Japan

¹² Abenomics (アベノミクス) refers to the economic policies implemented by the Government of Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from 2012 to 2020.

Exhibit 9

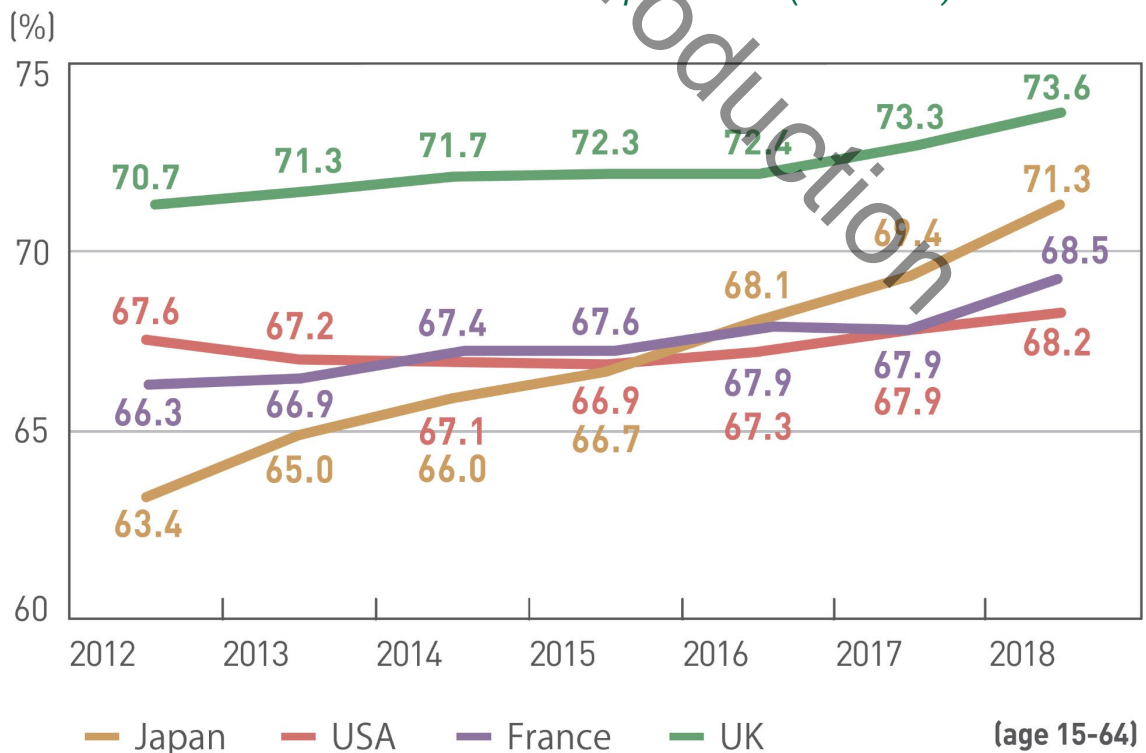
Labour Participation Rate across Gender and Age (1999-2019)



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

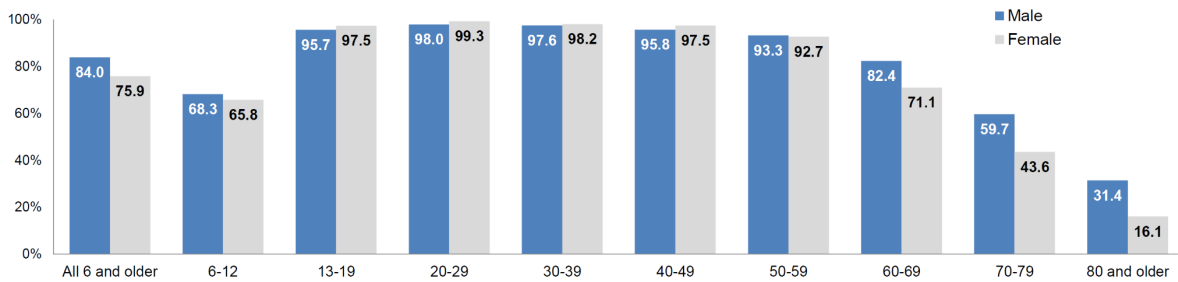
Exhibit 10

Women Labour Force Participation Rate (2012-2019)



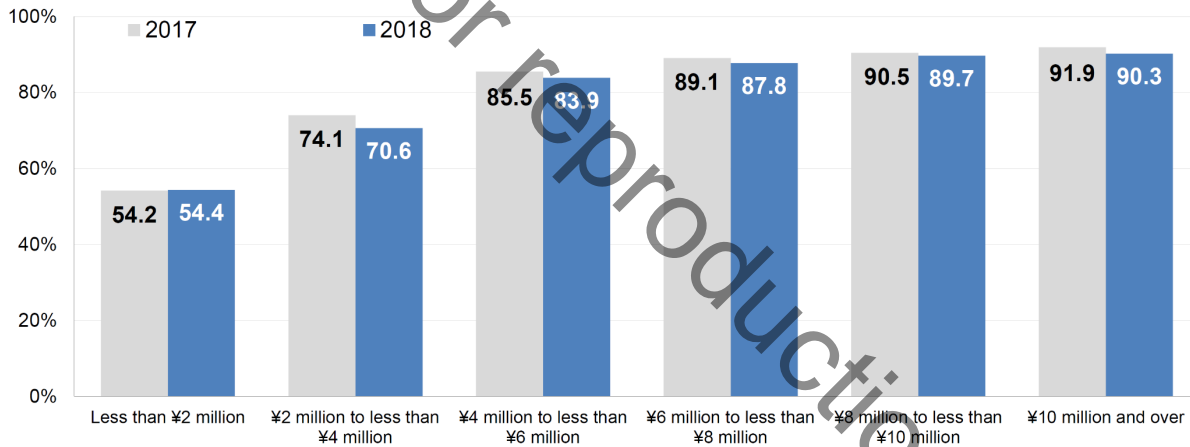
Source: Cabinet Public Relations Office, Japan

Exhibit 11
Internet Usage across Gender and Age



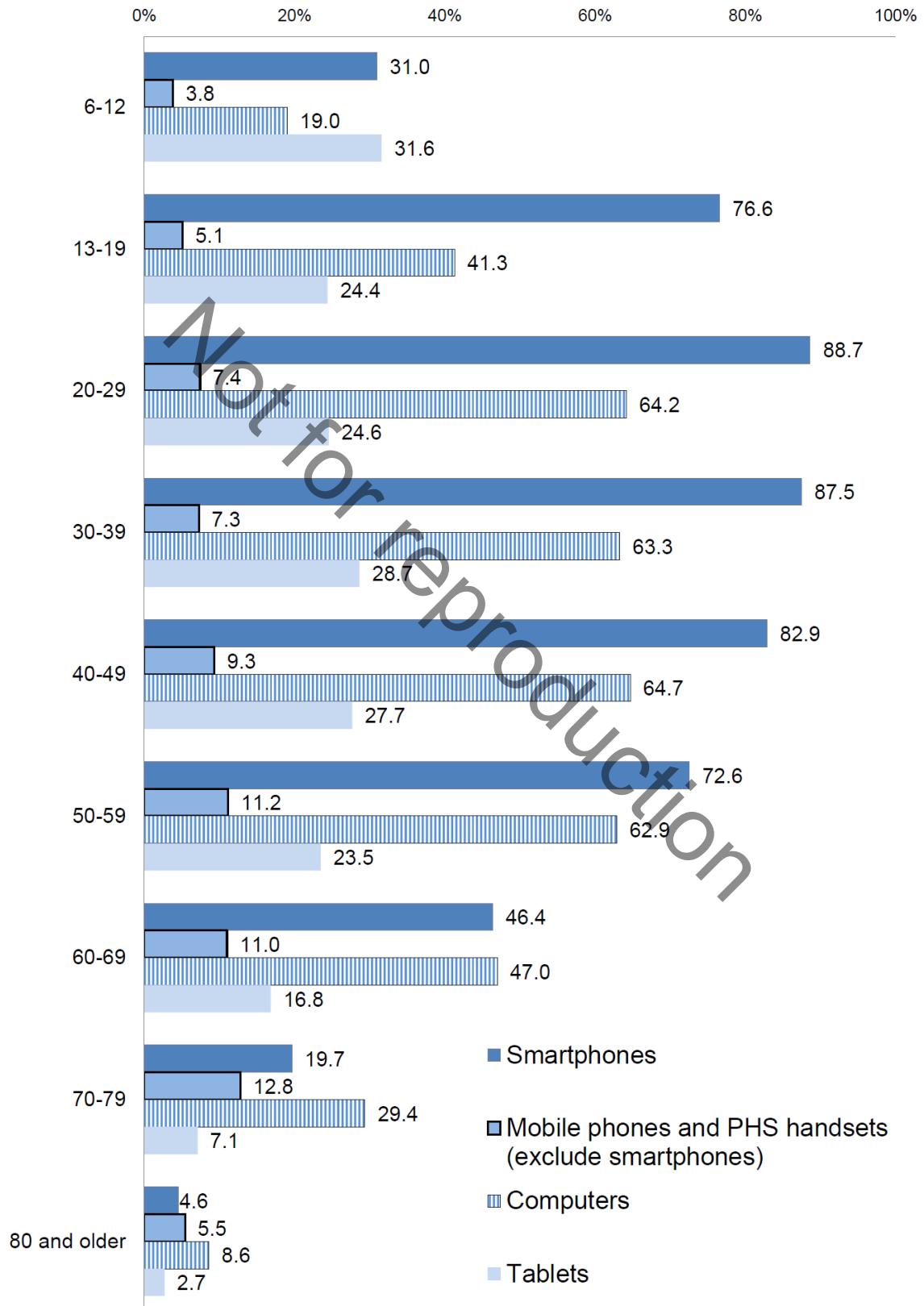
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 12
Internet Usage across Household Income



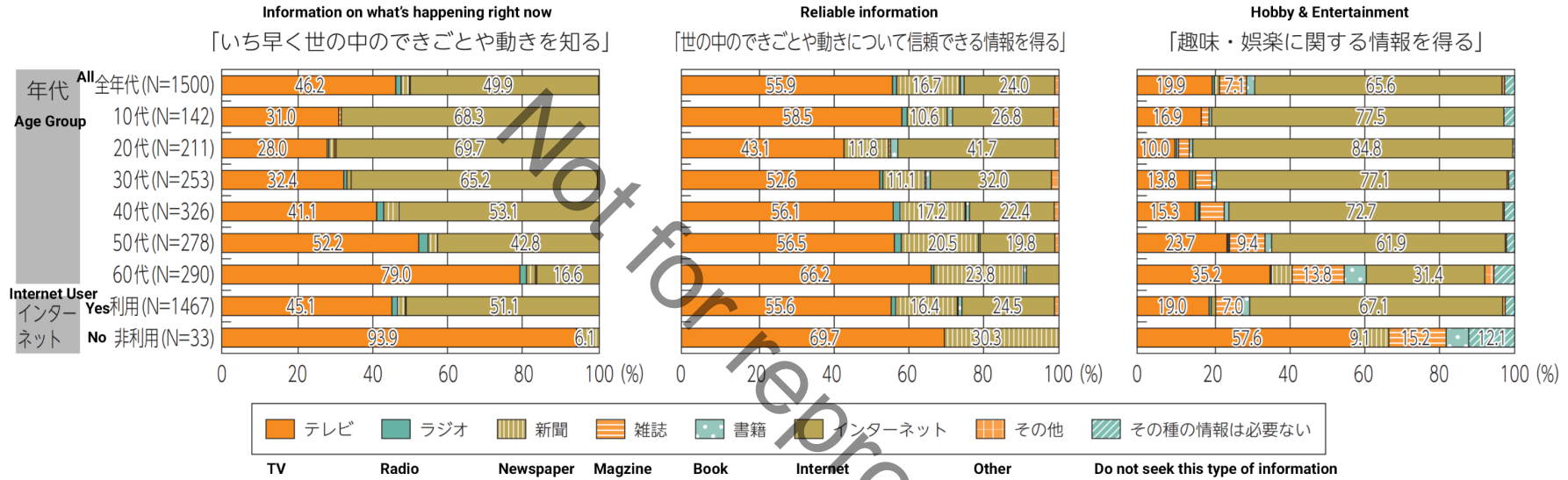
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 13
Devices for Internet Access across Age



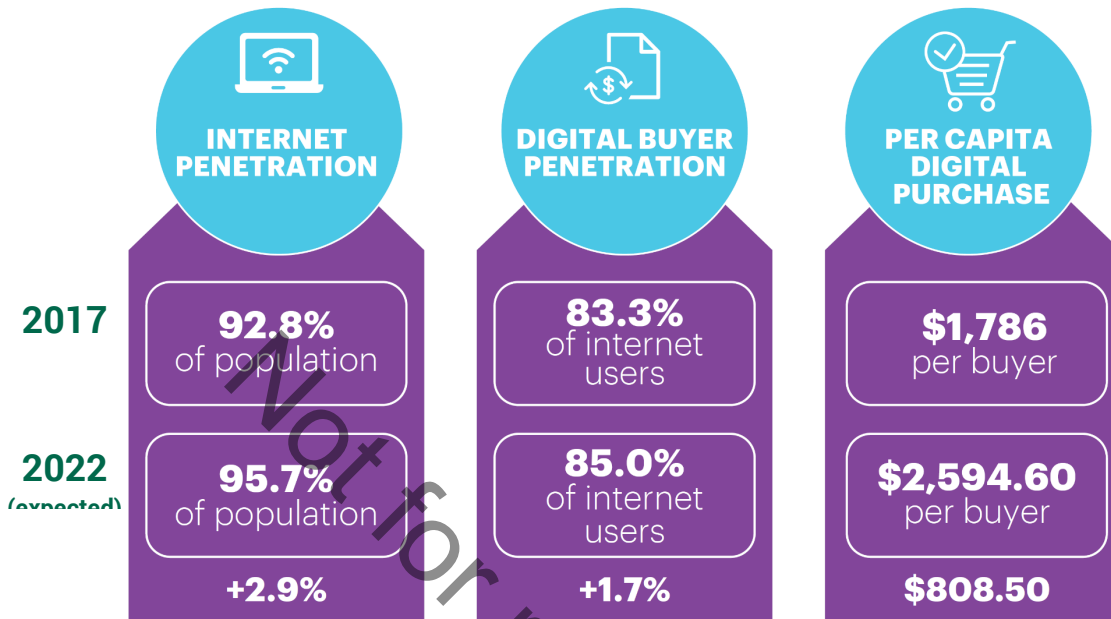
Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 14 Media Consumption across Age Groups



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan

Exhibit 15A
Internet and Ecommerce Penetration



Source: Accenture Report – Insights to Digital Commerce

Exhibit 15B
Top Online Purchase Categories



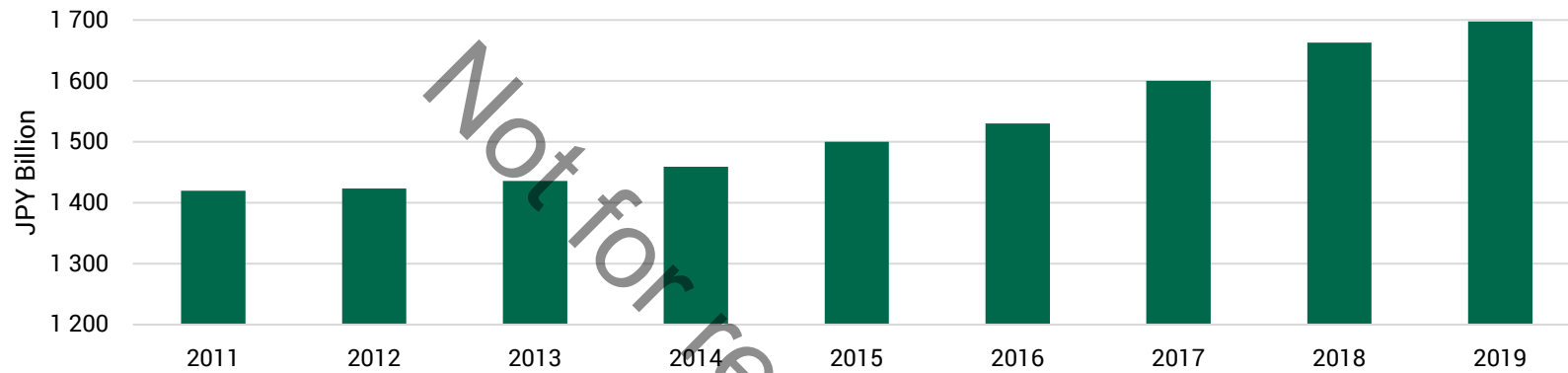
Source: J.P. Morgan 2019 Payments Trends – Global Insights Report: Data has been provided to J.P. Morgan Merchant Services by Edgar, Dunn and Company via E-Commerce Foundation and EDC.

■ Percentage of total e-commerce value

Source: JP Morgan Report – Ecommerce Payments Trends, Japan

Exhibit 16

Market Size of Premium Beauty and Personal Care Products in Japan (2011-2019)



Source: Euromonitor Market Report

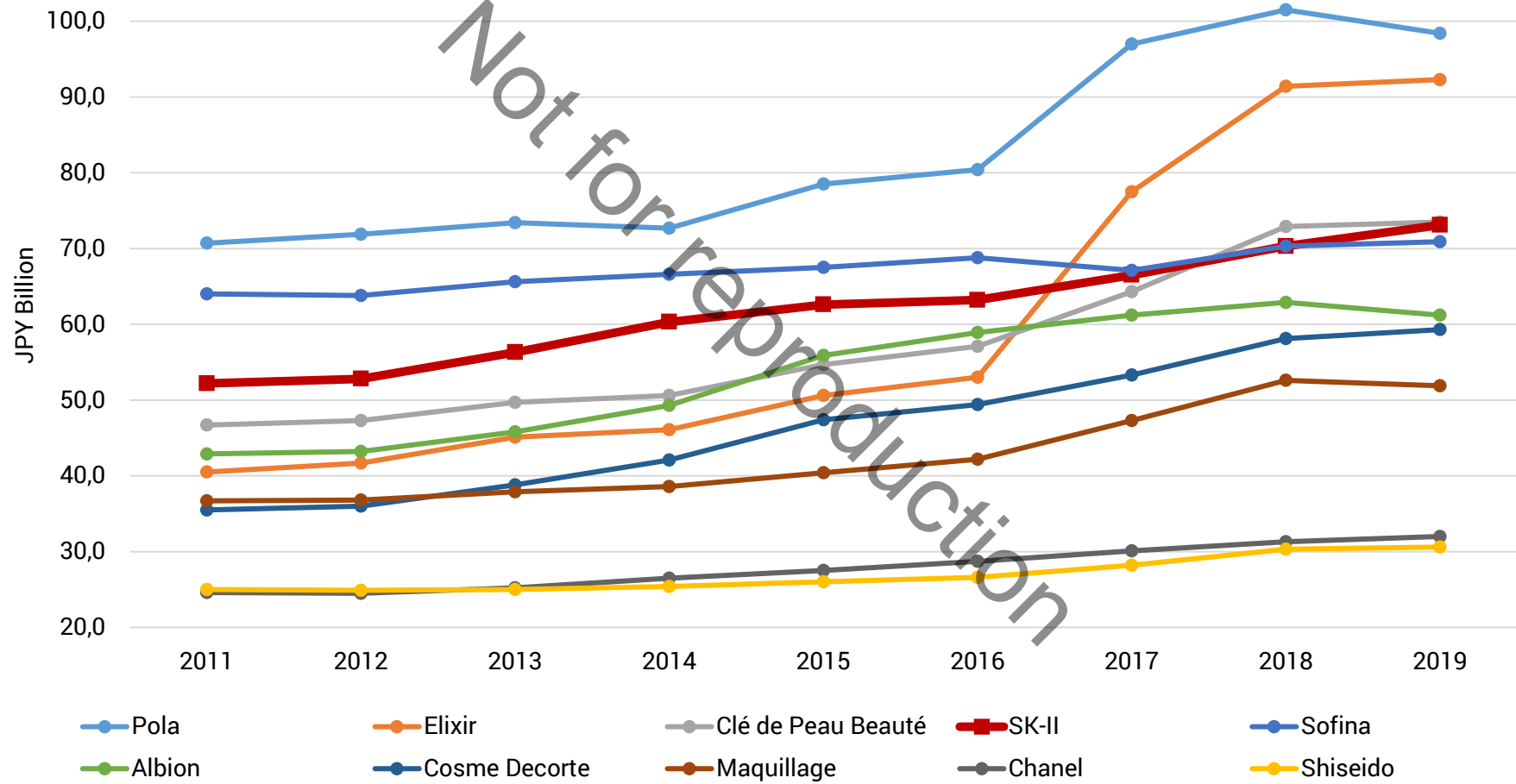
Exhibit 17

Share (%) of Luxury Beauty Sales by Channel in Japan (2011-2019)

Channel	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Offline	87.2	86.4	86.6	86.4	86.8	87.0	87.0	86.8	86.6
Online	12.8	13.6	13.4	13.6	13.2	13.0	13.0	13.2	13.4

Source: Euromonitor Market Report

Exhibit 18
Revenue of Top 10 Brands in Premium Beauty and Personal Care (2011-2019)



Source: Euromonitor Market Report

Exhibit 19
Ad for POLA Wrinkle Single Shot

<p>00:00:02</p>	<p>2017年当時</p> <p>00:00:11</p>	<p>ポーラが追求したシワの原因の考察は</p> <p>00:00:18</p>
<p>好中球エラスターゼ</p> <p>00:00:27</p>	<p>好中球エラスターゼ</p> <p>00:00:34</p>	<p>好中球エラスターゼが 真皮成分を分解してしまう事が</p> <p>00:00:41</p>
<p>好中球エラスターゼ</p> <p>好中球エラスターゼが 真皮成分を分解してしまう事が</p> <p>00:00:50</p>	<p>好中球エラスターゼ</p> <p>シワの原因の一つだった</p> <p>00:00:57</p>	<p>シワ発生のメカニズムを 世界で初めて発見</p> <p>00:01:04</p>
<p>そのシワ発生のメカニズムを 世界で初めて発見。</p> <p>00:01:11</p>	<p>そのシワ発生のメカニズムを 世界で初めて発見。</p> <p>00:01:18</p>	<p>ニールワン</p> <p>ポーラ独自の有効成分ニールワンが</p> <p>00:01:25</p>
<p>ニールワン</p> <p>ポーラ独自の有効成分ニールワンが</p> <p>00:01:32</p>	<p>好中球エラスターゼの働きを抑制</p> <p>00:01:39</p>	<p>私たちは 進化を止めずシワへの追求を終わらせない</p> <p>00:01:46</p>
<p>私たちは 進化を止めずシワへの追求を終わらせない</p> <p>00:01:53</p>	<p>私たちは 進化を止めずシワへの追求を終わらせない</p> <p>00:02:00</p>	<p>これからもシワへの研究を続けていく</p> <p>00:02:07</p>
<p>これからもシワへの研究を続けていく</p> <p>00:02:14</p>	<p>これからもシワへの研究を続けていく</p> <p>00:02:21</p>	<p>ポーラは、 もういちど、 シワ改善を変えます。</p> <p>00:02:28</p>
<p>ポーラは、 もういちど、 シワ改善を変えます。</p> <p>00:02:35</p>	<p>NEW リンクルショット 誕生。</p> <p>2021.1.1</p> <p>00:02:42</p>	<p>POLA</p> <p>00:02:49</p>

Source: POLA

Exhibit 20
Ad for Clé de Peau Beauté Teint Fluide Éclat Mat



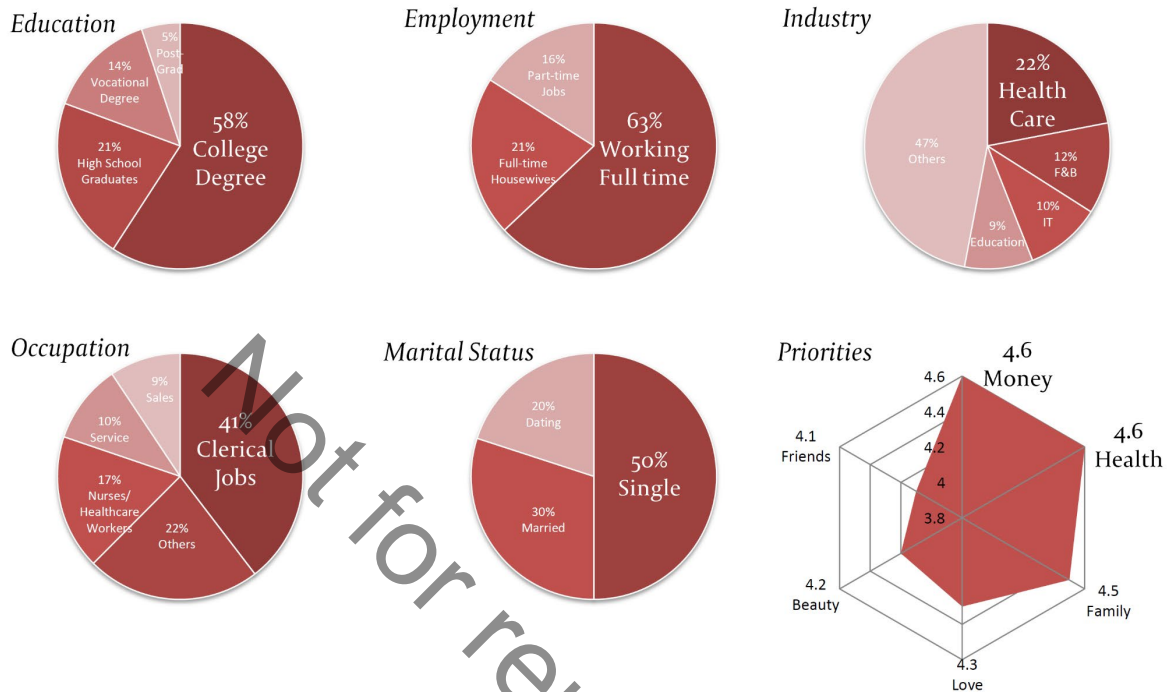
Source: Clé de Peau Beauté

Exhibit 21
SK-II Products



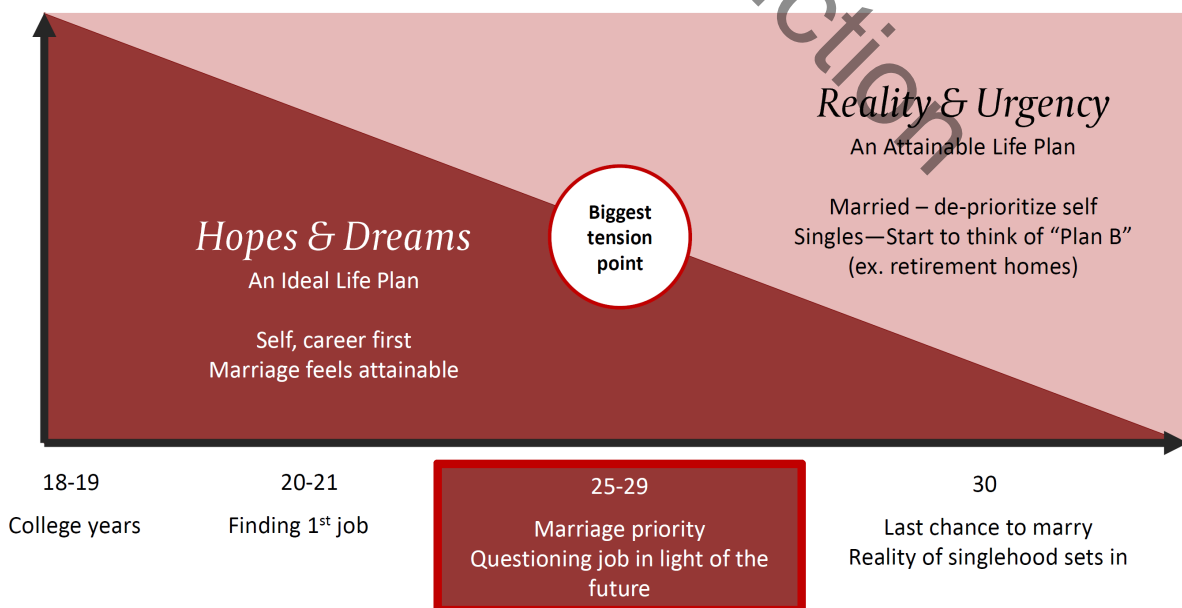
Source: SK-II

Exhibit 22
Consumers of Premium Skincare Products in Japan



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 23
Tensions between Career and Marriage across Age



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 24A
Future X Smart Store



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 24B
SK-II Magic Ring



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 24B Cont'd
SK-II Magic Scan



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 25
Hankyu Umeda SK-II Counter



Source: SK-II

Exhibit 25 Cont'd
Matsumoto Kiyoshi Ikekuburo Flagship Store



Source: SK-II