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# Executive summary of The Nippon Foundation Global Nikkei Young Adult Research Project

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## 1. Introduction

The Global Nikkei Young Adult Identity Project examines the beliefs, behaviors, and identifications of young adults of Japanese ancestry between ages 18 to 35. The study asks the question, “What does it mean to be Nikkei in the 21st century?” and seeks to understand how young adults feel and express their Japanese heritage, their connection to their family and local Nikkei community, ancestral link to Japan, and engagement with other Nikkei communities throughout the Japanese diaspora. For this research project, Nikkei is defined as “Japanese emigrants and their descendants throughout the world.” Data was collected from a worldwide survey administered in four languages (English, Japanese, Spanish, and Portuguese) and focus groups conducted in 11 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, The Netherlands, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

## 2. Historical Background

Japanese migration en masse did not begin until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century following American Admiral Commodore Matthew Perry use of gunboat diplomacy in 1854. The Meiji Restoration period in 1868 marks the beginning of large-scale emigration from Japan. As part of the introduction of a new Western economic system and tax structure, Japan’s rapid industrialization created economic and social upheaval with many rural farmers facing decreasing wages and unemployment. In conjunction with the boom of the United States economy, the first 150 Japanese laborers left Japan to the Kingdom of Hawai’i to work on sugar plantations.

Since then persons of Japanese ancestry have traveled and settled across the globe. By the end of the 1990s and early 21st century, this included the return migration of the descendants of early pioneer emigrants to Japan. Moreover, Japan’s position in the world economy found its citizens working, living, and settling throughout Europe, as well.

Relative to the historic diaspora, contemporary global Nikkei can be divided into three primary groups. The first group are the descendants of pioneer Issei who emigrated from Japan in late 19th through the mid-20th century. These pioneer Japanese migrants can be divided into two primary groupings. The first are the migrants departing to Latin America, Hawai’i, and North America. Hailing predominantly from “main island” rural agricultural regions and Okinawa, the early émigré worked as laborers, share croppers, small business owners, and in light manufacturing. As Japanese women joined these pioneer men, they formed families and created Japanese immigrant communities featuring faith, cultural, and economic organizations. Tied strongly to their Japanese home prefectures, Kenjinkai formed the backbone of the ethnic community infrastructure. Today the descendants of the pioneering Issei (1st) form the Nisei (2nd), Sansei (3rd), Yonsei (4th), Gosei (5th), and Rokusei (6th) generations. The second pioneer Issei group traveled to the Philippines and throughout Asia. Contemporary Sansei, Yonsei, and later generation descendants in these countries possess

a history complicated by Japanese imperialism in the early to mid-20th century and feature persons of mixed Japanese and Asian ethnic ancestry.

A second cohort of Nikkei applies primarily to the United States, comprised of international families created from the marriage of Japanese women to U.S. military men during the occupation of Japan following World War II. Due to restrictive immigration legislation in the U.S., these international Nikkei families would be the primary Japanese immigrants between 1940 and 1965, establishing a continual conduit of Japanese and mixed Japanese emigration. These Japanese come from urban and metropolitan areas of Japan, as well as Okinawa.

The third cohort involves the Japanese emigration post-1960s. To distinguish between descendants of Issei pioneers, this group is generally referred to as Shin Issei, or New Issei (1st generation). Shin Issei migration patterns establish homes at a truly global scale. Shin Issei and their children Shin Nisei (2nd generation) live in countries on every continent, except for Antarctica. They comprise both mono and interracial families. Shin Issei also features migration from urban regions versus the pioneer cohorts' more rural background.

In the Nikkei young adult (18-35 year old) population of the study, we find each of the Japanese emigrant cohort demographic patterns represented among the target respondents. The descendants of the "pioneer" migrants are generally Sansei, Yonsei, Gosei, and Rokusei, while the military bride cohort are Sansei and Yonsei and the post-1965 migrants tend to be Shin Issei and Shin Nisei. Regionally, the Australia/New Zealand and Europe cohorts were predominantly Shin Nikkei, while the Nikkei from Asia, the Americas, and Africa were comprised of Shin Nikkei and Sansei or later generations.

### **3. Research Methodology**

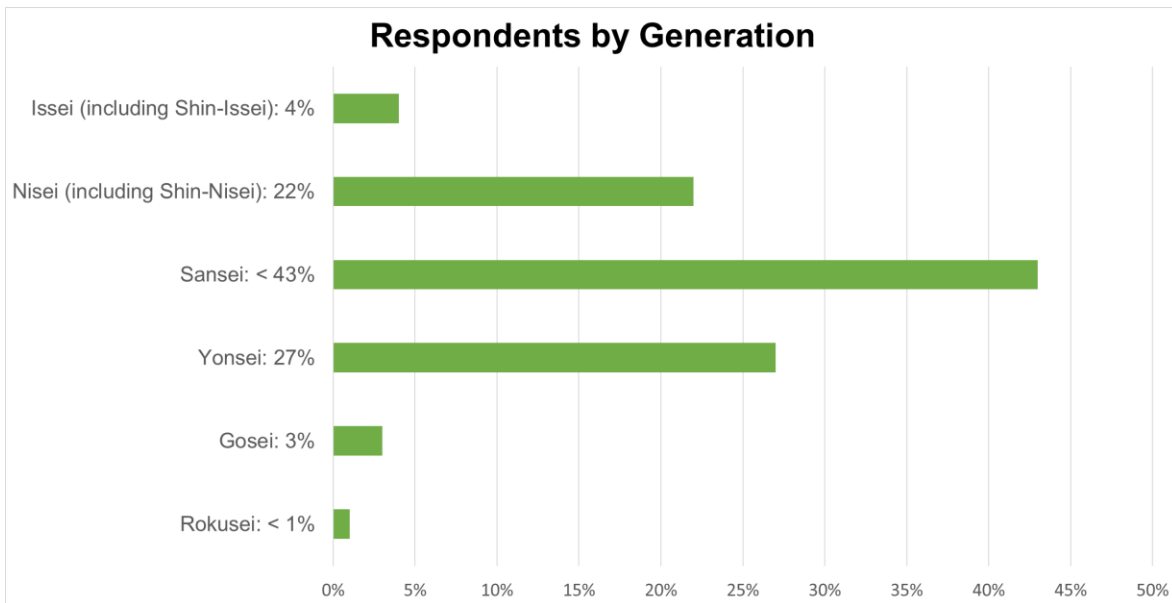
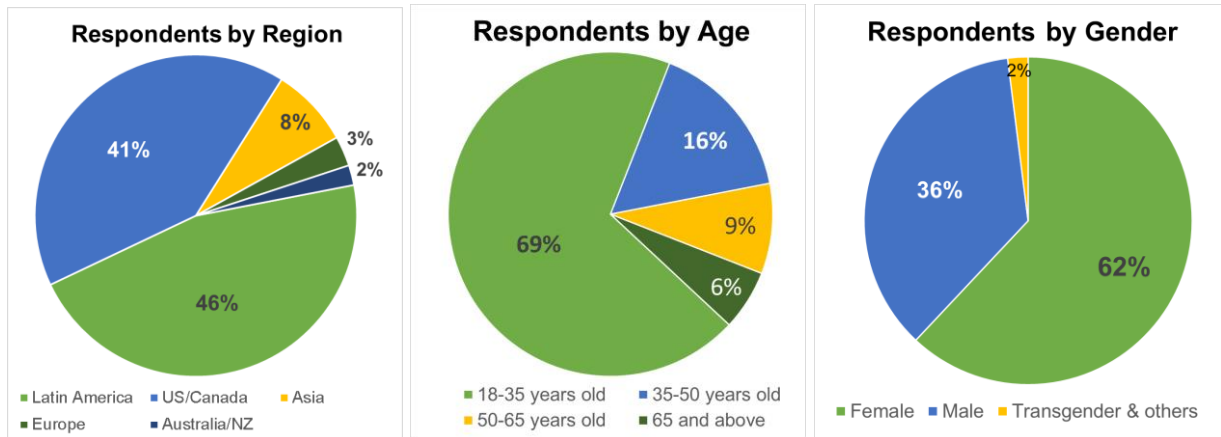
In order to gain a holistic understanding of Nikkei around the world, a mixed methods approach was implemented in order to answer the question, "What does it mean to be Nikkei in the 21st century?" A "Triangulation Design" approach (Creswell, Plano Clark, et al., 2003) was employed whose purpose is "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122). In order to best respond to the research question and develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1990), the research team applied a convergence model where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed on the same phenomena (Creswell, 2006) of culture, identity, connection to family, the local Nikkei community, the global Nikkei diaspora, and Japan.

The team utilized two methods of data collection: an online survey, which was initially tested with a pilot survey, as well as a series of focus groups. The online survey was first piloted in the Los Angeles area between January 2-6 2019 and aimed to assess the connectedness of Nikkei around the world with Japan. The survey was open in two stages: 1) January 27 to February 28, 2019 and 2) March 8 to April 15, 2019. The survey was conducted in four target languages: Japanese, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. To provide a greater understanding, depth of insight, and emic perspective of the meaning of a Nikkei identity, local community activities, and transnational engagement, the project conducted focus groups in 12 cities. Three were administered in North America (Los Angeles, Honolulu, Vancouver), four in South America (São Paulo, Lima, Buenos Aires, Asunción), two in Europe (London, Amsterdam), and three in Asia and Oceania (Tokyo, Davao, Sydney). Part of the research design was to reflect and verify trends from the preliminary global survey responses through focus groups which sought to provide contextual insight into the identities and culture of young adults of Japanese descent around the world in their own respective community settings.

## 4. Findings

### a. Demographics

The survey collected 6,309 responses in total, although not all respondents answered every question. The final report uses a base sample of N = 3,839 (derived from a cross tabulation of age and generation). Data from respondents who are 35 years old and above were used as a comparison to the target age group for the research.



An important demographic finding of the study revealed that a majority (approximately 55%) of the Nikkei young adults were mixed race. This finding held across generational status. Additional demographic information about the young adults included: 79% are Nikkei and 21% Shin Nikkei.

b. What Does it Mean to be Nikkei?

*“To be Nikkei is to understand and practice Japanese principles while adapting to the values of the country of origin. Nikkei is the person who can find the balance between the two worlds.” (Brazil)*

The concept and definition of the term Nikkei is quite complex and diverse. The responses showed that how Nikkei is defined and its significance (or lack of) varied across the diaspora. Many young adults of Japanese descent strongly identified with their Japanese roots even though they did not necessarily use the term Nikkei as part of their identity. For example, in more recently established Japanese communities, like in Australia, the term was seen as an “American term.” Nikkei in the Netherlands echo a similar sentiment stating that the term Nikkei is not used there nor in Europe, but instead, the term *hafu* or Japanese were used to describe someone of Japanese descent. In fact, in the United Kingdom, as the Japanese community encompasses recent migrants and a newly established community, it was acknowledged that there was “no concept of the term Nikkei” nor the term Japanese British.

Canadians of Japanese descent also do not identify as Nikkei or with the term Nikkei, but see themselves as Japanese Canadian. However, it was acknowledged that the idea behind a Nikkei identity symbolizes the allowance for people to not only identify with both the Japanese culture and a second or more cultures, but to also reclaim one’s heritage and identity.

Being Nikkei for young adults in the United States is more significant than being connected just by blood; it is a shared sense of culture, belonging, and community. “It means to know that you are part of a community that is greater than yourself.” Being Nikkei not only is an individual expression, but also one of “shared experience,” “shared meaning,” and “shared cultural memory.” Like Japanese Canadians, it is important to mention that Americans of Japanese descent use the term Japanese American much more than the term Nikkei. Nikkei in the United States also represents a political identity where “WWII drastically shaped the experiences of Japanese Americans.” For many of these young adult Japanese Americans, they feel a sense of responsibility to learn about their family’s history and how “the internment experience greatly shaped a lot of values, morals, and beliefs (and even lack of ‘Japaneseness’) for later generations of Japanese Americans.”

The term Nikkei was most prominent in Latin America, specifically in Brazil, Peru, Argentina, and Paraguay. In Brazil, while young adults both self-identify and are labeled “*japonês*,” they are able to code switch in conversation using both Portuguese and Japanese words. In Peru, the notion of being Nikkei is unique and positive and young adults enjoy the blend of both cultures. An example of this combination is the creation of the special term “*ponja*,” which describes a Peruvian of Japanese descent. Peruvians of Japanese descent also acknowledge that they are Peruvian first, but take tremendous pride in being Japanese. A respondent commented that “Nikkei is the identity between the home country and Japan and it is related to values and cultures. Therefore, choosing to be Nikkei represents values.” Like in Peru, young Nikkei adults in Argentina and Paraguay take pride in having a strong connection to both their Argentine and Japanese cultures and nationalities.

Data revealed that Japanese values and Japanese heritage are two main components that strengthen Nikkei identity.

Japanese Values: Japanese values were clearly important to global Nikkei young adults as they consistently identified a set of traditional values including *Gambaru* (do your best), *Sonkei* (respect), *Shojiki* (honesty), *Kansha* (gratitude), *Giri* (duty/obligation), *Reigi* (politeness), and *Mottainai* (to not waste). These traditional values inform the shared Nikkei young adult worldview—that is how they see themselves in relation to the world around them. One of the most common themes around the world was pride in not only having

Japanese values that are learned from family and community through cultural activities, but also sharing these values with the broader local society and future generations.

Japanese Heritage: Nikkei are initially connected through family and knowledge of shared ancestry with the “motherland.” It is not to say that “blood” relations are unimportant to the Nikkei young adults, they are. But, “blood” relations are the starting point of the connectedness. Nikkei young adults push the boundaries of the definitions and meaning of Japanese-ness and Nikkei-ness as they live out their multiple concentric and simultaneous identities toggling among being Japanese, Nikkei, and citizens of the home/countries of residence, local communities, and family. They are seeking the connectedness in the everyday living that solidifies and ultimately strengthens/grows that connection.

c. Values

Japanese values are passed down through generations, and they make up a significant part of Nikkei identity. Participants were asked to rank 12 values in the order that shaped their identity. 82% of the young adults selected “*Gambaru* (do your best)” as the most important value, which was common across all age groups and regions. “*Sonkei*” (respect) came in second (78%), followed by “*Kansha*” (gratitude) as the third highest (69%). Interestingly, “*Mottainai*” (not to waste) was fourth amongst the young adults with 68%, unlike other age groups that ranked it around the seventh highest on average. This may be because it intersects with this age groups’ emphasis on sustainability and environmental justice.

d. Cultural Components

This section looked at what cultural components were important through the lens of language, food, pop culture, and festivals. Many of the focus groups, including the United States, Brazil, Peru, Australia, and the Philippines specifically mentioned how the Japanese culture is perceived as positive, which subsequently allows the Nikkei communities to be seen in a positive light in the host society.

Language: although self-rated, young adults have different levels of Japanese language proficiency. 7% do not speak at all; 29% speak a few words; 25% speak a little, 22% speak somehow;; 17% speak a lot. Compared to the older generation, whose most popular level was at “somehow” to “a little”, we can see that Japanese proficiency is generally lower amongst the younger generation. This may be attributed to the fact that younger generations are not required to use Japanese language on a daily basis - 23% said they never use Japanese and 21% said they use Japanese once a month. On average, more than 80% of young adults’ speaking, reading, and writing skills are at beginner to intermediate level. Over 50% of the respondents, across all age groups, learned Japanese both at home and outside of home. Despite the proficiency level, 73% of the young adults strongly expressed the importance of improving their Japanese language proficiency. This is much higher than older age cohorts which was 61% on average.

Food: 34% of young adults typically eat Japanese food once or twice a week at home and 36% eat a few times a month outside of home. This was more or less similar to other age cohorts. Shin Nikkei have a higher tendency of eating Japanese food at home; 31% eat 5 times or more at home while only 11% of Nikkei did. Frequency of eating outside of home depends on accessibility to Japanese restaurants; in Asia it is evident that more people eat Japanese food outside of their home than at home because it is available everywhere at a low cost. For certain regions, particularly in the United States, eating out at a Japanese or Japanese American restaurant is a way of expressing community support.

Pop Culture: overall, the highest engagement with Japanese pop culture was through anime (21%) followed by manga (14%) and karaoke (13%). Anime in particular was the most engaging platform amongst all regions for young adults. While both Shin Nikkei and Nikkei are engaged with anime, more Shin Nikkei are engaged with Japanese social media presumably due to Japanese language proficiency. Overall, young adults were much more engaged with Japanese pop culture compared to older generations, who are not engaging with Japanese pop culture at all.

Cultural Celebrations: 56% of young adults selected *Oshogatsu* (New Year's Day) as the most important festival to celebrate, which was common across all age groups and regions. Second most important was *Obon*. The manner in which New Year and *Obon* celebrations are practiced—particularly in the Americas—highlight both family and community engagement. *Oshogatsu* practices are not simply a nuclear family event—it involves extended family gatherings combining multiple households. Indeed, oftentimes family members stop in two or three other homes on New Year's Day. *Obon* celebrations combine family and community. While the religious memorial services of *Obon* focus on family engagement, the odori dancing and accompanying festivities are shared by the entire community. These two cultural celebrations highlight both family and Nikkei community connection to Japan.

Community Participation: For all age groups, social and cultural organizations were marked as the top two most important organizations Nikkei are affiliated with; 22% with cultural organizations and 15% with social organizations. 48% rate cultural organizations as “very important” and 27% as “somewhat important”. This was highlighted in Asia and throughout the Americas. Community engagement is critical for Nikkei, young adults also express a sense of isolation. For example, a focus group participant from Peru mentioned “Nikkei organizations are very closed among its members, that intimidates when you do not know anyone” and organizations need to include more young adults and Shin Nikkei. Compared to older age cohorts, younger generations are less involved with religious organizations and kenjinkai, but more with Japanese language schools (12%). However, equally, 12% are not involved in any organization, which is a lot higher than other age cohorts. This is particularly evident in Europe and Australia, where community infrastructure is absent.

Through this section, a strong correlation between Japanese language proficiency and cultural behaviors was observed. There are unique relationships between language variables; Japanese values, participating in Japanese activities, and the preparation of Japanese food. The higher Japanese language proficiency one has, the higher frequency of preparing Japanese food at home and participating in Japanese activities. Despite this, any knowledge or use of Japanese language appears key in young adult Japanese cultural practices, beliefs, and values.

#### e. Connectedness

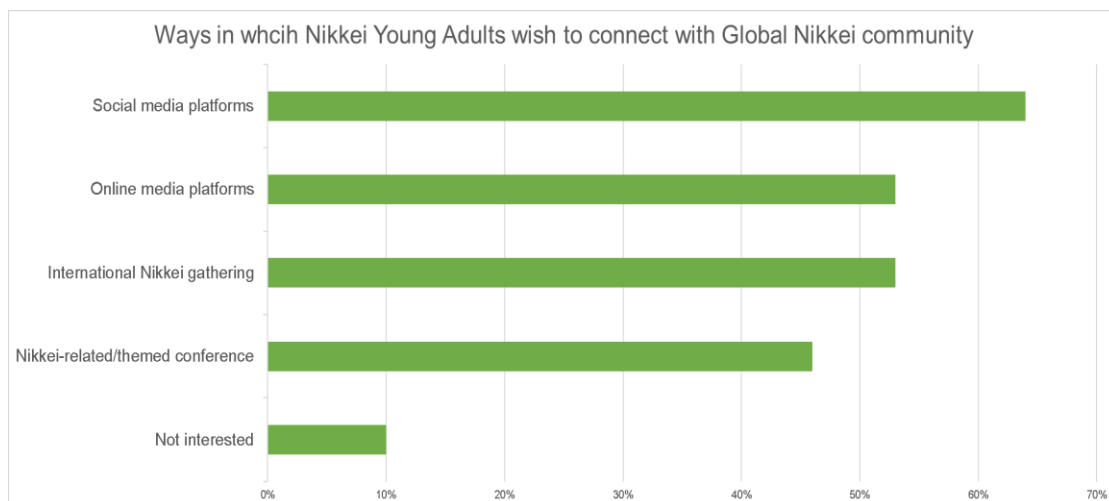
This section looked into Nikkei connections from different aspects. Participants were asked to rate their connectedness to each component on a Likert scale from 1 to 10—1 being the least and 10 being the most. We categorized 1-3 as weak, 4-6 as average, and 7-10 as strong. Throughout the focus groups and analyses of the survey data, our respondents identified three overlapping and simultaneous identities that formed their “Nikkei identity.” Family, local, and transnational identities converge to create a sense of Nikkei identity that goes beyond descriptive labeling, i.e. person of Japanese descent. It is the interactive nature of these identities that form the basis for the nascent development of a “Nikkei” identity among the young adult respondents.

Connectedness to Individual Nikkei Identity: “It means to be proud of my Japanese heritage, and of the cultural values that have been instilled in me. (United Kingdom)” 74% of young adults felt a strong connection to Nikkei identity. This was more or less about the same compared to other age cohorts, which shows how strong Nikkei identity is across all generations.

Connectedness to Local Nikkei Communities: Nikkei identity is not only formed through individual perception and construction, but also through group membership. In Latin America and Asia, 53% of the young adults felt a strong connection; 46% did in the U.S. and Canada; while not so much in Europe and Australia with 17% each. In Europe and Australia, they felt the closest connection to Japanese (language) schools. This is most likely attributed to the lack of Nikkei infrastructure in Europe and Australia.

Connectedness to Home Country and Japan: While 71% felt a strong connection to their home countries, 48% had strong feelings of connectedness towards Japan. If those with moderate connectedness is included, it goes up to 79%. 69% were proud about Japan hosting the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics games. There was a promising response that 85% of respondents would cheer for Nikkei athletes competing in international competitions. Many are proud of having a sense of attachment for both countries and cultures. “Nikkei also means ‘to be doubly red and white’ (Peru).” Although there is a conspicuous interest in being connected to Japan, many also expressed complexity due to the experience of identity crisis; the focus group participants mentioned that they are being considered as Japanese in their home countries but *gaikokujin* in Japan.

Connectedness to the Global Nikkei Community: The Global Nikkei Survey revealed that while young adults of Japanese descent maintain their own sense of a Nikkei identity individually and within their family and/or local community, they do not necessarily know much about other Nikkei in the diaspora, nor the challenging experiences of their ancestors. While Nikkei young adults do have a shared sense of Japanese values, they lack the knowledge of other communities’ (immigration) histories, cultural values, and everyday ethnic experiences. Hence, one of the key findings of this research is that Nikkei young adults desire to build a global community and develop a transnational connection and understanding of a global Nikkei identity. Interestingly, 90% of young adults were interested in being connected with Nikkei from other countries, while 10% showed no interest.



## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Nikkei young adults continue to have a strong sense of Nikkei identity, and they are interested in expanding their Nikkei global network, as well as strengthening ties to Japan. This research project highlights the way in which young adult Nikkei communities around the world “view, interpret, and do” culture. Some communities have a rich, vibrant, and well-established history, like in the Americas, while others, such as Australia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, are newer and more recent. However, despite the difference in immigration history and community development, young adult Nikkei maintain a common thread of incorporating everyday ethnicity into their lives by engaging with Japanese culture. Nikkei young adults around the world continually shape and define their own identity construction processes. This, in turn, allows them to learn, do, and perpetuate both Japanese and Nikkei culture at the individual, familial, community, and global levels. One of the key findings of the project is the fact that the Nikkei communities are seen by both in-group members and outside society as positive and unique. An Australian Nikkei participant reflected about the uniqueness of the community by stating, “There is a veneration of Japanese culture that doesn’t exist in the same way (for other immigrant communities) in Australia”

In conclusion, this research project illustrates that the various Nikkei communities in the diaspora acquire knowledge and culture at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Young adult Nikkei identities are constructed at the individual level by their own beliefs, values, and behaviors in addition to being shaped by their interactions with their families and communities. Data revealed that these cultural exchanges occur also at the meso level through the learning of the Japanese language, partaking in cultural celebrations, involvement in cultural and social organizations, and participation in Japanese cultural activities. This study also demonstrates that it remains important to maintain and strengthen the connection between individual Nikkei and Nikkei communities with Japan. In addition, Nikkei history and current community development throughout the diaspora not only need to be shared amongst Nikkei globally, but also within Japan. It is evident that young adult Nikkei are heterogeneous and diverse and can experience either a symbolic connection with Japan through the use of technology/social media or direct contact with the Japanese culture by traveling to Japan through work, education, and leisure/tourism. Thus, the creation of a diverse global Nikkei network is paramount in the understanding of the continual construction and renegotiation of identity (Japanese and Nikkei) at the individual, community, and global levels as well as nurturing the partnership and connection with Japan.