

# EXPLORING IPAD DIGITAL LITERACY IN JAPANESE FRESHMAN STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*As technology becomes increasingly prevalent in all aspects of education, it is important to understand students' abilities to use digital devices in an efficient, effective way; abilities that are referred to as "digital literacy". Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) requires all incoming freshman students to own an iPad for use in classroom activities. It is assumed that they are already familiar with the usage of such devices or will acquire the necessary skills through using them in class.*

*This paper presents the findings of an iPad Digital Literacy survey given to a total of 859 incoming freshman students at KUIS, in 2017 and 2018, at the beginning of their first semesters. The survey consists of 43 questions in which the students assess their own ability to perform a variety of iPad based tasks that they will likely be expected to perform in their classes. The survey is anonymous and offered in English with Japanese translation.*

*It was found that basic usage of iOS devices was reasonably well understood, possibly from previous exposure to iPhone use, but common office application functions were largely unknown.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Japanese ICT landscape

Japan has been described a nation that is "saturated" in technology (Lockley, Promnitz-Hayashi, 2012) and so it is no surprise that the fields of secondary and tertiary education are awash with ICT and technological initiatives. In 2009 the Japanese government published a vision to establish a digitally enhanced educational environment by 2015 (IT Strategic Headquarters, 2009) while more specifically, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has required that ICT be included in High School curricula since 2011 (MEXT, 2011).

ICT also features prominently across the Japanese university landscape. This might be "informal" use of mobile devices such as smartphones by the students to photograph notes or access vocabulary building apps (Barr, 2011) or the institutionally mandated use of PC or tablet computers. However, the promise of an innate ICT or digital fluency in the "digital natives" proposed by Prensky (2001) never really materialised in the scholastic setting (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010) and the adoption of innovative technology in tertiary education provides students with an additional challenge. There are also broad differences in ICT literacy between the genders (Farmer, 2008). Thus, without explicitly examining the digital literacy of incoming freshman students, universities are left to simply assume a certain level of competence. However as this study highlights, these assumptions are not always well founded. Given the increasingly important role that ICT, and in particular mobile technology,

is now playing in education, an unresolved lack of digital literacy could actually hinder the students' progress through their university programs.

### **ICT at Kanda University of International Studies**

The surveys were undertaken at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), which is a Japanese university located in Chiba with around 4,000 students, with approximately 80% of those students female. The introduction of iPads into the curriculum began in 2013 with the advanced track courses as a trial, and then the following year with all freshman classes taught in English at the university. It was deemed by the administration that iPads were preferable over personal laptops for the ease of use and interconnectivity between the devices. iPads also provide a standardised experience, allowing all students to use the same apps and services, without compatibility issues. KUIS encourages all teachers to take advantage of iPads in their lessons. However the affordances offered by this mobile technology cannot be fully realised if the students lack the required levels of digital literacy (Goundar, 2011).

In 2016, the English Language Institute's (ELI) CALL Research Group at KUIS identified a disparity between ELI lecturer's assumed knowledge of freshman student ICT abilities upon entering university and what those students were actually capable of accomplishing. The decision was made to conduct a survey during the first weeks of the academic year with freshman students, asking them a series of questions to better ascertain their ICT abilities. The results would then be disseminated among the ELI lecturers to better inform their lesson practices. Armed with this more accurate knowledge of what students can and cannot do in regards to digital literacy, lecturers would be better able to take advantage of the affordances of a digital classroom.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Corbel & Gruba (2004), define digital literacy as covering both the ability to use basic computer functions, as well as using ICT for problem solving and supporting critical thinking.

The observed digital literacy of Japanese freshman students has historically been less than one would expect. The Japanese Ministry of Education itself recognised that ICT implementation and practice in Japanese schools has not been advancing at a similar rate to other industrialized countries (MEXT, 2011). Most studies regarding the digital literacy of Japanese freshmen have focused on analysing the self-assessments of these students across a range of their perceived ICT abilities. Despite the ubiquitousness of mobile devices such as smartphones among Japanese students, they have been found to be less competent than other Asian students in ICT (Towndrow & Vallance, 2012).

Other studies have been more positive. Lockley and Promnitz Hayashi (2012) looked at the self-assessments regarding ICT competence of 105 freshman students at KUIS and reported that ICT in education was viewed favourably and basic ICT abilities were present. While more demanding ICT skills were not as evident, generally speaking the students had little difficulty in acquiring them when needed. Kubota (2014) notes that the 743 Japanese freshmen she studied at an unnamed Japanese university displayed a familiarity with ICT but required a paradigmatic shift from being passive to active users of the technology around them.

Cote and Milliner (2017) asked 115 Japanese freshman students at a college in Tokyo to self-assess a range of computer based skills and found that almost all of the subjects displayed very limited capabilities, particularly in terms of using productivity applications such as word processors and presentation software.

## **METHOD**

During the 2nd semester of 2016, the researchers designed and created a series of survey questions that would best ascertain the digital literacy of freshmen required for KUIS freshman courses. The researchers identified which of the questions created would pose issues for both English second language students and students who may be familiar with iPad ICT skills but may be unaware of specific terminology related to the knowledge that the survey wished to uncover. After refining the language used in the questions, the decision was made to also provide a Japanese translation. Since all students were equipped with iPads, the survey was distributed digitally via Google Forms with the ability to identify individual participants disabled, providing for anonymous data collection. For purposes of limiting the data collection to only those students entering university for the first time, students were requested to enter their current year of study at university, and those not indicating their status as freshman were removed when parsing the results. Students were also asked for their permission for the data to be used for research purposes, of which 100% agreed.

The data collection period was conducted during the first semesters of both 2017 and 2018 with incoming freshman students at KUIS. ELI lecturers teaching the compulsory Freshman English course were encouraged to ask their students to take time in class during the opening couple of weeks of the first semester to take the survey. Of the responses received, 408 students participated in 2017 and 454 participated in 2018, providing a total of 862 responses. Among the 2018 responses, 3 respondents were identified as being sophomore students repeating their first year Freshman English course and were removed from the dataset, bringing the total number of respondents to 859.

At the conclusion of both data collection periods, the more than 36,900 data points were parsed and collated into charts. A selection of the most interesting and notable results were disseminated amongst the ELI lecturers and presented at domestic conferences.

## **RESULTS**

The opening questions focused on iOS related skills such as downloading (Q. 4), deleting (Q. 5) and updating apps (Q. 7) and were answered positively by over 90% of respondents. Just over 70% also understood how to shut down an app that had stopped functioning (Q. 10).

Regarding connectivity, 90% of respondents knew how to switch Wi-Fi networks (Q. 11). However when we look at more classroom based functions the picture is not quite so bright. Just over a quarter of respondents could not use the AirDrop function (Q. 12) which is widely used in classes to share information between students (Fig. 1).

12. Do you know how to use AirDrop to send and receive files?  
 (AirDropを使ってファイルを送ったり、受け取る方法を知っています)

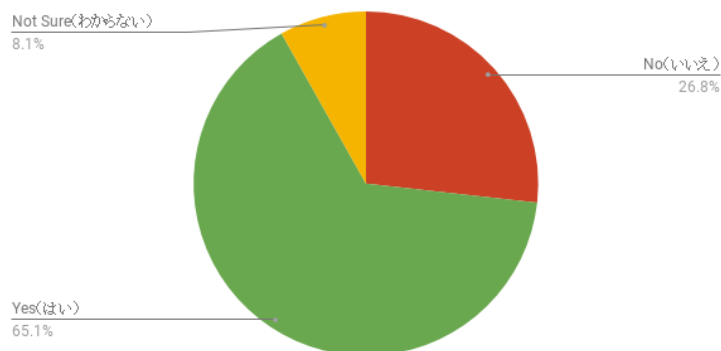
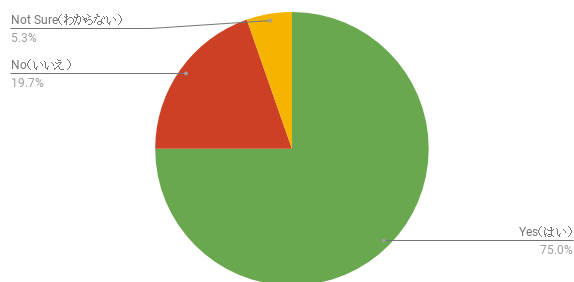


Figure 1: Ability to use the iPad AirDrop function

Around a third of respondents could not change their iPad name (Q. 13) or use two apps at the same time (Q. 14). Again these functions are central to the smooth running of many freshman classes at KUIS.

The ability to record sounds and voices (Q. 17) was widely evident (75%) but the ability to subsequently edit those sounds (Q. 18) and voices was not (Fig. 2).

17. Do you know how to record a sound or voice? (音声を録音する方法を知っていますか)



18. Do you know how to edit a sound or voice? (音声を編集する方法を知っていますか)

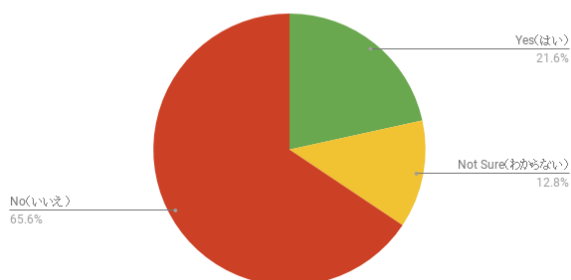


Figure 2: Comparison between the ability to record a sound (left) and to edit that sound (right)

Regarding presentation software skills, the results were fundamentally negative. The ICT skills being tested in this section were generally active in nature; adding slides (Q. 20), changing slide design (Q. 21), changing slide order (Q. 22) and inserting images onto slides (Q. 23). These questions were answered with the positive “Yes (はい)”, by just 16.1%, 33.1%, 33.5% and 38.2% respectively.

When asked about spreadsheet skills applicable to apps such as *Microsoft Excel* and *Google Sheets*, the students consistently responded in the negative for each of the three questions asked. The inability to make use of the most common spreadsheet functions, *Autosum* and *Average* was found to be over 70% (Q. 24 & 25), while the ability to take data and make a chart was found to be more divided with 53% responding “No (いいえ)” and 12.8% “Not Sure (わからない)” (Q. 26).

Questions concerning students' word-processing skills covered many of the basic functions encountered when creating written assignments. When asked questions about skills such as the ability to change fonts, text sizes and colours, and copy-pasting text, more than two-thirds of students responded positively (Q. 27, Q. 29). Students were however more evenly split when asked about their ability to add and move images (Q. 31, Q. 32), with "Yes (はい)" receiving 55.1% for inserting and 42.0% for moving. Similar results were found for knowledge of formatting skills such as line spacing (Q. 33). Other word-processing skills such as bullet points and numbering performed more poorly (Q. 28) with only 32.9% of students responding positively. Of particular note was the students' reported inability to use the document spell checker, with only 19.8% of students indicating knowledge of how to use it (Fig. 3).

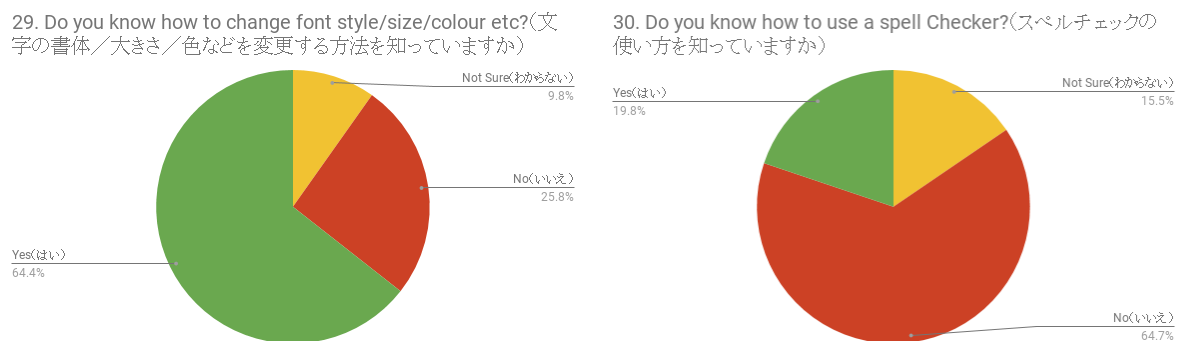


Figure 3: Comparison between knowledge of basic document text formatting options (left) and knowledge of spell checking function (right)

In regards to general PDF related skills, the majority of respondents were unaware of how to interact with a PDF. Changing a document to a PDF (Q. 35) and typing on top of a PDF (Q. 36) both had overwhelmingly negative responses, ("No (いいえ)") with 69.2% and 72.5% respectively.

Another portion of the survey asked students to gauge their experience with Google Drive. Included were questions asking if students knew how to make documents (Q. 39), share documents (Q. 40), and change who can view and edit documents on Google Drive (Q. 41). All three questions were answered mostly with the negative, "No (いいえ)", at 54.6%, 57.9%, and 68.1% respectively.

Two of the questions involved linking an iPad to external hardware; a projector (Q. 19) and a printer (Q. 34). In both cases the students were generally unaware of how to do this (Fig. 4).

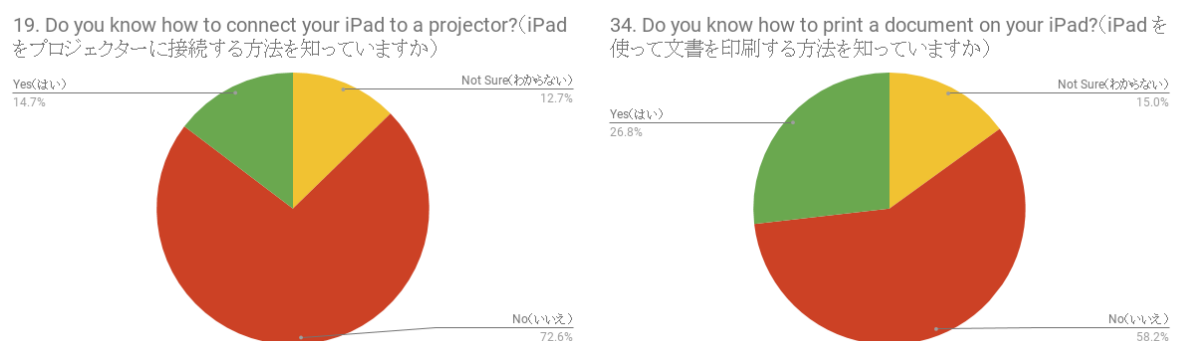


Figure 4: Connecting to external devices

## LIMITATIONS

As others have noted, asking Japanese students to self-assess their own abilities opens up the risk of distorted results due to their cultural inclination towards modesty and self-criticism (Lockley and Promnitz-Hayashi, 2012; Cote and Milliner, 2017). In addition, conclusions that can be ascertained from the results of this survey are limited, as the participants were predominantly female, arts major freshmen. It is likely that different conclusions would be reached if the survey were given to, for example, male science major freshmen.

It may also be that the respondents were not clear about the terminology used in the survey, which can be somewhat jargonistic, despite being offered in both English and Japanese. For example the students may be able to create a bulleted list despite not knowing that it is called a bulleted list.

## DISCUSSION

A pattern in the results suggest that the ICT skills freshman students possess upon entering university are strongly related to those used in daily life for social or communicative purposes. The results suggest that abilities related to this “social” digital literacy (i.e. those needed for social network systems, YouTube, email etc.) were easily transferable into the academic setting, while many of the “academic” digital literacy related abilities (e.g., Google Drive, working with documents and presentations) were largely absent.

Skills specific to the iOS platform, on which both iPhones and iPads operate, were well known to over 90% of the respondents. This is likely a result of the popularity of iPhones in Japan as opposed to other smartphone operating systems. Functions such as downloading (Q. 4), deleting (Q. 5) and updating apps (Q. 7) are identical between iPhones and iPads. General device skills such as connecting to Wi-Fi (Q. 11) and using the airdrop system (Q. 12), were also mostly positive. However it would seem that there is quite a limited set of iPhone skills (basic iOS skills) that transfer smoothly to the iPad in the academic setting.

The divergence between the students’ ability to record a sound (Q. 17) and their ability to edit that sound (Q. 18) echoes Kubota’s (2014) concerns about the generally passive nature of the ICT abilities of Japanese freshmen. This is also supported by survey questions related to presentation slide creation (Q. 20-23), document editing (Q. 27, 29, 31-33) and the use of spreadsheets (Q. 24-26).

Although the survey suggests that many productivity app skills are poorly understood, classroom observation suggests that they take little time for students to grasp and frequent use is very effective in reinforcing the necessary skills. That said, great care needs to be taken not to turn freshman lessons into IT lessons. Most skills can be picked up implicitly through task-based activities that still focus on the actual subject being taught. If IT is taking up too much lesson time then it is the wrong IT for the lesson.

## CONCLUSION

While the overall picture of Japanese Freshman students' digital literacy is improving, it is important not to confuse "social" digital literacy with "academic" digital literacy. Although the former can aid the development of the latter, the two are still distinct.

Tertiary education institutions would do well to run digital literacy surveys with their freshmen as the information that can be gathered serves two key functions:

- 1 - They give the instructors a fuller picture of their students' abilities, what can be peer taught and what needs explicit instruction.

- 2 - They can provide the students with their own needs analysis, showing them the skills that they are expected to master while also showing them the extent to which their peers have mastered these skills.

Freshmen teachers should be aware of the digital literacy required by the courses they teach and understand that, in spite of their students' immersion in a digital everyday environment, the specific digital literacy required for academic purposes can rarely be assumed to be present.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey Questions and Results

1. How old is your iPad? ( あなたの iPad は何年前のモデルですか )
  - Less than 1 year old ( 1 年未満前): **46.2%** 1 - 3 years old(1 ~ 3 年前): **14.9%**
  - More than 3 years old ( 3 年以上前): **2.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **36.3%**
2. How much memory does your iPad have? ( あなたの iPad のメモリ容量は次のうちどれになりますか )
  - 16GB: **4.2%** 32GB: **27.9%** 64GB: **8.4%** 128GB: **28.6%** 256GB: **8.3%**
  - Not Sure (わからない): **22.7%**
3. Is your iPad Wi-Fi only or 4G LTE ( あなたの iPad の通信規格は Wi-Fi のみですか。または 4G LTE ですか )
  - 4G LTE: **31.4%** Wi-Fi only (Wi-Fi のみ): **57.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **11.0%**
4. Do you know how to download an app? ( アプリのダウンロード方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **199.4%** No (いいえ): **0.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **0.4%**
5. Do you know how to delete an app? ( アプリを削除する方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **97.3%** No (いいえ): **1.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **1.1%**
6. Do you know how to make more memory available? ( メモリ容量を増やす方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **14.0%** No (いいえ): **71.0%** Not Sure (わからない): **15.0%**
7. Do you know how to update the apps on your iPad? ( iPad のアプリを最新版に更新する方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **90.5%** No (いいえ): **6.0%** Not Sure (わからない): **3.5%**
8. Do you know how to create app folders? ( アプリのフォルダを作成する方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **60.6%** No (いいえ): **25.3%** Not Sure (わからない): **14.1%**
9. Do you know how to edit pictures inside Photos (i.e. crop, straighten etc)? ( 画像を編集する [ 画像の切り抜き / 画像をまっすぐにする等 ] 方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **74.9%** No (いいえ): **17.4%** Not Sure (わからない): **7.7%**
10. Do you know how to shut down/reset an app that is not working? ( 動かなくなったアプリを閉じる / 再起動する方法を知っていますか )
  - Yes (はい): **70.1%** No (いいえ): **18.1%** Not Sure (わからない): **11.8%**

11. Do you know how to switch Wi-Fi networks? ( Wi-Fi ネットワークを切り替える方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **90.7%** No (いいえ): **4.7%** Not Sure (わからない): **4.7%**

12. Do you know how to use AirDrop to send and receive files? ( AirDrop を使ってファイルを送ったり、受け取る方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **65.1%** No (いいえ): **26.8%** Not Sure (わからない): **8.1%**

13. Do you know how to change your iPad name? ( iPad の名前を変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **57.6%** No (いいえ): **32.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **10.2%**

14. Do you know how to use two or more apps at the same time? ( 複数のアプリを同時に使用する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **45.2%** No (いいえ): **37.1%** Not Sure (わからない): **17.7%**

15. Do you know how to use Google Image search? ( Google で画像検索をする方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **92.6%** No (いいえ): **4.9%** Not Sure (わからない): **2.5%**

16. Do you know how to edit an image or photo? ( 画像や写真を編集する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **74.9%** No (いいえ): **18.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **6.5%**

17. Do you know how to record a sound or voice? ( 音声を録音する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **75.0%** No (いいえ): **19.7%** Not Sure (わからない): **5.3%**

18. Do you know how to edit a sound or voice? ( 音声を編集する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **21.6%** No (いいえ): **12.8%** Not Sure (わからない): **65.6%**

19. Do you know how to connect your iPad to a projector? ( iPad をプロジェクターに接続する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **14.7%** No (いいえ): **72.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **12.7%**

20. Do you know how to add new slides to a presentation? ( 新規のスライドをプレゼンテーションファイルに追加する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **16.1%** No (いいえ): **71.4%** Not Sure (わからない): **12.6%**

21. Do you know how to change the design of your slides? ( スライドのデザインを変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **33.1%** No (いいえ): **55.7%** Not Sure (わからない): **11.2%**

22. Do you know how to change the order of your slides? ( スライドの順番を変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **33.5%** No (いいえ): **54.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **12.3%**

23. Do you know how to insert an image on a slide? ( スライドに画像を挿入する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **38.2%** No (いいえ): **50.1%** Not Sure (わからない): **11.8%**

24. Do you know how to use the Autosum formula? ( オート SUM 関数の使い方を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **14.2%** No (いいえ): **71.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **14.6%**

25. Do you know how to use the Average formula? ( Average 関数の使い方を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **14.0%** No (いいえ): **71.0%** Not Sure (わからない): **15.0%**

26. Do you know how to make a chart? ( グラフの作り方を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **34.2%** No (いいえ): **53.0%** Not Sure (わからない): **12.8%**

27. Do you know how to copy/cut/paste text? ( テキストをコピー / 切り取り / 貼り付けをする方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **70.5%** No (いいえ): **21.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **8.3%**

28. Do you know how to use bullets/numbering? ( 箇条書き / 段落番号の設定の方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **32.9%** No (いいえ): **50.9%** Not Sure (わからない): **16.2%**

29. Do you know how to change font style/size/colour etc? ( 文字の書体 / 大きさ / 色などを変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **64.4%** No (いいえ): **25.8%** Not Sure (わからない): **9.8%**

30. Do you know how to use a spell Checker? ( スペルチェックの使い方を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **19.8%** No (いいえ): **64.7%** Not Sure (わからない): **15.5%**

31. Do you know how to insert images? ( 画像を挿入する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **55.1%** No (いいえ): **33.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **11.7%**

32. Do you know how to move images? ( 画像を移動する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **42.0%** No (いいえ): **42.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **15.4%**

33. Do you know how to change the line spacing? ( 行間隔を変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **46.4%** No (いいえ): **40.4%** Not Sure (わからない): **13.2%**

34. Do you know how to print a document on your iPad? ( iPad を使って文書を印刷する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **26.8%** No (いいえ): **58.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **15.0%**

35. Do you know how to change a document to a PDF? ( 文書ファイルを PDF に変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **17.0%** No (いいえ): **69.2%** Not Sure (わからない): **13.8%**

36. Do you know how to type on top of a PDF? ( PDF にテキスト [ 文字 ] を入力する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **12.8%** No (いいえ): **72.5%** Not Sure (わからない): **14.7%**

37. Do you know how to attach a file to an email? ( email にファイルを添付する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **67.0%** No (いいえ): **23.9%** Not Sure (わからない): **9.1%**

38. Do you know how to use a messenger app such as Messenger, Skype, LINE or FaceTime? ( Messenger、Skype、LINE または FaceTime などのメッセージングアプリの使い方を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **84.5%** No (いいえ): **10.9%** Not Sure (わからない): **4.7%**

39. Do you know how to make documents on Google Drive? ( Google ドライブを使って文書を作成する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **33.2%** No (いいえ): **54.6%** Not Sure (わからない): **12.3%**

40. Do you know how to share documents on Google Drive? ( Google ドライブを使って文書を共有する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **27.6%** No (いいえ): **57.9%** Not Sure (わからない): **14.5%**

41. Do you know how to change who can view and edit your documents on Google Drive? ( Google ドライブを使って、文書を閲覧できる人または文書を編集できる人を変更する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **15.5%** No (いいえ): **68.1%** Not Sure (わからない): **16.4%**

42. Which of these SNS Apps do you use regularly? (more than 1 choice OK) ( 次の SNS アプリのうち、よく使うものはどれですか [ 複数回答可 ] )

(Top 5 combinations shown)

- Twitter, LINE, Instagram: **40.4%**
- LINE: **17.1%**
- LINE, Instagram: **14.7%**
- Twitter, LINE: **13.3%**
- Facebook, Twitter, LINE: **5.9%**

43. Do you know how to limit who sees your posts? ( あなたの投稿を閲覧できる人を制限する方法を知っていますか )

- Yes (はい): **84.1%** No (いいえ): **11.3%** Not Sure (わからない): **4.6%**