

Are New Year's Cards Destined to Disappear?

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ABSTRACT

New year's cards are greeting cards sent at the beginning of the year, typically in the form of postcards or similar paper formats, and are a Japanese custom. These cards are meant to convey good wishes for the new year and express gratitude for kindness and support received in the previous year; sometimes they are accompanied by gifts. In Japan, sending new year's cards is widely practiced not only among relatives and friends, but also in professional and educational contexts, such as between business associates and classmates. Recently, there have been reports that the practice of sending new year's cards is in decline. Based on a review of previous research, this paper examines why new year's cards are declining in popularity and what the future holds.

Keywords: Decline of new year's cards, Rise of social media, Cessation of card sending

INTRODUCTION

A new year's card is a greeting card sent on paper, typically in postcard form or card, to convey good wishes for the new year, according to Japanese custom. In addition to celebrating the new year, they convey the sender's gratitude for kindness and support received in the previous year and, in some cases, are accompanied by gifts as tokens of appreciation. In Japan, it is customary to visit the homes of close friends and relatives within the first week of the new year to offer greetings and exchange gifts. While this custom still continues among close friends and individuals living nearby, sending new year's cards is a common alternative for visiting people who live far away, or for those who find it difficult to visit multiple people. New year's cards are now sent not only to relatives and friends but also in professional and educational contexts, such as between business associates and classmates.

Recently, there have been reports that the practice of sending new year's cards is declining¹⁾⁻⁴⁾. Why has this long-standing Japanese custom begun to decline? Furthermore, is it possible that the custom of sending new year's cards may disappear altogether? This paper examines why the number of new year's cards is declining and what the future holds, based on a review of previous research.

History and characteristics of new year's cards

The origin of new year's cards is said to date back to the Nara period (around 700 AD) or the Heian period (around 800 AD). At the time, it was customary to visit superiors in person for the new year; however, it was not possible to visit people who lived far away. As an alternative, the custom of sending new year's greetings and expressions of gratitude through letters emerged, and this practice is considered the origin of new year's cards. In the Edo period (around 1600 AD), sending new year's cards through couriers (a profession or person engaged in the delivery of letters, money, and goods) became widespread among common people. In the Meiji period (around 1900 AD), when the postal system was established, new year's postcards with lottery numbers appeared, bringing the practice closer to its modern form.

New year's postcards containing lottery numbers come with stamps attached and are sold by the post office. Each postcard has a number printed on it, and if the number matches the number drawn in the lottery, the recipient can win a gift ranging from a few dollars to several thousand dollars. Otoshidama (meaning "new year's gift") refers to money or gifts given by elders to children to celebrate the new year. Including Otoshidama with a new year's postcard is believed to bring good fortune in the new year. However, it is not necessary to use officially issued lottery postcards. Alternatively, individuals may use privately printed postcards with attached stamps and clearly mark them as "new year's greetings," which ensures they are treated as such a new year's greeting. Many Japanese people look forward to the lottery prizes on new year's postcards, and it is common to purchase lottery postcards issued by the post office and mail them after writing or printing messages on them. This practice is familiar to Japanese people.

New year's cards are sent primarily to convey the following three feelings: First, to celebrate the new year and mark its beginning. Second, to express gratitude for the kindness and support received during the previous year. Third, to express the wish for the same close relationship to continue in the coming year. There are certain manners to observe when sending new year's cards, such as how to use congratulatory greetings and address the card. It is also common to mail them at an appropriate time to ensure they arrive on new year's day. This timing reflects the cultural expectation because many people are happy to check their mailbox on new year's day morning to see if they have received new year's cards. New year's cards are not merely a formal greeting; they are a unique aspect of Japanese culture that nurtures connections and has been cherished to this day through its long history.

Decline in the number of new year's cards

In recent years, the number of individuals sending new year's cards has decreased. Figure 1 shows the number of new year's cards with lottery numbers that have been issued between 2004–2015. While 4.46 billion cards were issued in 2004—the peak year—this number declined to 760 million cards in 2026, approximately one-sixth of its peak level⁴). The number continued to decrease, especially from 2010 to 2026²). Furthermore, in just two years, from 2024 to 2026, it fell to about half³). While this figure only represents the number of new year's postcards issued with lottery numbers, these constitute the majority of those sent, and the number issued is determined based on anticipated mailing demand. Therefore, it can be concluded that the custom of sending new year's cards by mail is clearly in decline.

The reasons for this decline are thought to be those listed in Table 1^{2,3}). Around 2015, the postage for a postcard was about 40 yen, however, it increased to 63 yen in October 2019 in line with rising prices and transportation costs, and then to 85 yen in October 2024. This is considered one reason for the decline in demand. This refers only to postage costs, however, in reality, there are additional costs involved in writing and printing new year's postcards, so it has become more common to reduce the number of postcards sent. In recent years in Japan, concerns regarding personal information protection have made individuals less willing to disclose home addresses and other personal details. This can lead to situations where new year's cards cannot be sent because the recipient's address is unknown. In addition, the rise of digital communication has enabled individuals to send new year's greetings via email and social media, which is thought to have replaced the practice of mailing new year's cards. In a 2020 survey on tools used for new year's greetings, messaging applications such as LINE were used by 74.7% of respondents, surpassing the 60.7% who used traditional new year's cards. Following these were email (38.1%), Facebook (14.7%), X (12.6%), phone calls (9.2%), and Instagram (8.4%)¹). The use of new year's cards is declining because it is now easier to contact people without having to send them²). The fact that senders may have knowledge of the recipient's email address and phone number even if the home address is unknown, and the emergence of applications that enable users to create and send new year's cards via social media, are likely contributing factors to this trend. Furthermore, especially among older individuals, there has been a recent trend toward discontinuing the practice of sending of new year's cards altogether. In the past, it was customary to reply to received new year's cards, however, due to the effort and expense involved, it has become increasingly common and socially acceptable not to do so. Historically, in Japan, there has been a strong sense of obligation to reciprocate favors and fulfill social duties, as evidenced by phrases like repaying a favor and fulfilling one's duty⁵). However, this tendency is not limited to older individuals, even young people use the phrase "new year's card through," referring to receiving a card without sending one in return. As we have previously mentioned the culture of giving gifts (e.g. souvenirs) in Japan, however this practice is also becoming less common, especially among young people, suggesting a similar broader trend. Furthermore, it has become standard practice for companies to refrain from sending new year's cards for greeting purposes³). This may have had a ripple effect on the personal customs of sending new year's cards.

However, the decline in sending new year's cards, doesn't mean they have stopped exchanging new year's greetings altogether. As shown in Figure 2, individuals continue to communicate in ways other than new year's cards. Meanwhile, some individuals continue the practice while questioning whether they should discontinue it (Table 2)⁴). Even if they no longer feel the need or desire to exchange greetings, it's more accurate to say that many have come to the realization that there are other ways to connect besides sending new year's cards, rather than choosing to stop the practice entirely.

What will happen to new year's cards from now on?

Certainly, there are a certain number of individuals who think it's unnecessary to send new year's cards themselves. Most of them perceive that refraining from sending cards reduces the burden of preparation, alleviates concerns regarding social obligations, and can be easily substituted by alternative means of communication, such as social media⁴). On one hand, many who receive new year's cards often report positive emotional responses. On the other hand, others express concern about losing contact with individuals they cannot meet in person, or feelings of loneliness because it does not feel like a traditional Japanese new year. Considering these factors, it is unlikely that new year's cards will disappear completely (Table 2)³). However, their role appears to have changed significantly. One reason for sending new year's cards in the future is likely to be when a high degree of formality is required, such as in communication with superiors, relatives, or mentors. In addition, older individuals who may not be proficient in using

smartphones may continue to rely on traditional forms of communication. Furthermore, some individuals may perceive digital forms of new year's greetings (e.g., email) as impolite. A second reason is when individuals wish to share personal updates accompanied by photographs. Photographs are often used to inform distant acquaintances of major life events—such as marriage, childbirth, or travel—as they can convey information more effectively than text alone. In close and trusted relationships, such images may be shared digitally (e.g., as email attachments). However, in cases where recipients may have difficulty accessing digital files, or where concerns about data alteration exist, sending it as a new year's card may be perceived as a more secure or reliable medium. Third, paper may be considered more appropriate in certain situations, such as for condolence messages or winter greetings³⁾. When a death occurs in the family, it is customary to refrain from sending new year's cards the following year. Instead, bereavement postcard is sent as soon as possible to inform others of the passing, marking the period of mourning. The following year, instead of sending new year's cards, it has become a long-standing Japanese custom to send winter greetings postcards to express concern for the recipient's well-being during the coldest part of winter. While this custom may persist among older generations, the time may come when sending paper postcards is no longer considered the appropriate form of communication.

While new year's greetings using paper postcards are rapidly shifting to social media, paper cards will remain in use for contacting younger generations and the older individuals who are not accustomed to using social media. New year's cards will likely not disappear, but they will coexist with social media and other means, as one of several preferred means of communication³⁾. While social acceptance of ending or ignoring the tradition has grown, there are individuals of all ages who do not send any new year's cards at all or use other means of communication such as social media, but our research suggests that this shift accounts for only a portion of the overall decline in new year's cards¹⁾.

CONCLUSION

This paper first outlined the nature of new year's cards and then presented our opinion on their historical development in Japan and why they have been declining in recent years. While an increasing number of individuals now send new year's greetings via email or social media, new year's cards have remained a cultural tradition, conveying thoughtfulness and warmth through handwritten or printed messages. It is likely that a certain number of individuals still want to maintain this tradition, especially older individuals may be less inclined to change to new ways of greeting. Consequently, the practice of sending new year's cards is expected to continue, albeit on a smaller scale. However, it is expected that the practice of sending large volumes of cards out of habit will continue to decline, becoming more limited and selective in its use³⁾.

As post offices continue to issue new year's postcards with lottery numbers as a means of promoting or maintaining the tradition of sending new year's cards, postal authorities and their governing body, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, may consider implementing further measures to support this practice. If the price of new year's cards were lowered, or the variety and price of new year's gifts were increased, or other efforts to make new year's cards more appealing than other means of new year's greetings, there would likely be room for recovery. The custom of sending new year's greetings is likely to endure in Japan, increasing through social media. However, if a system were implemented to make sending new year's cards more advantageous, the decline in the number of new year's cards mailed might be successfully halted.

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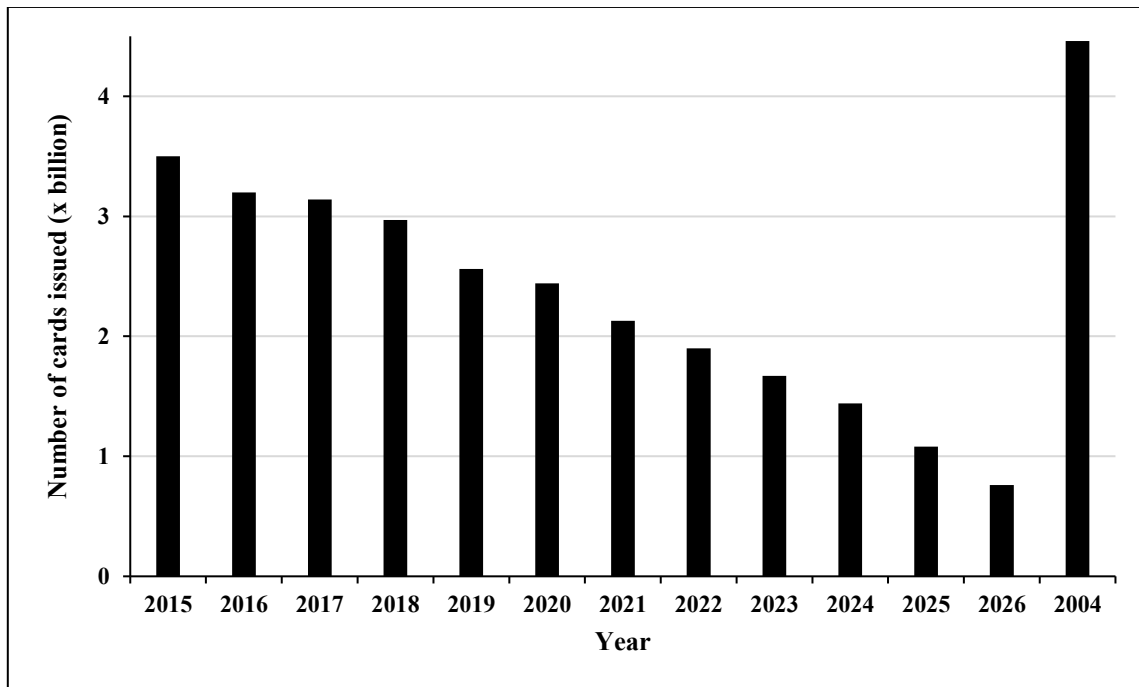


Figure 1 Number of new year's cards issued

Illustrates the number of new year's postcards with lottery numbers issued by post offices (not the actual number mailed). Based on data from references 3) and 4).

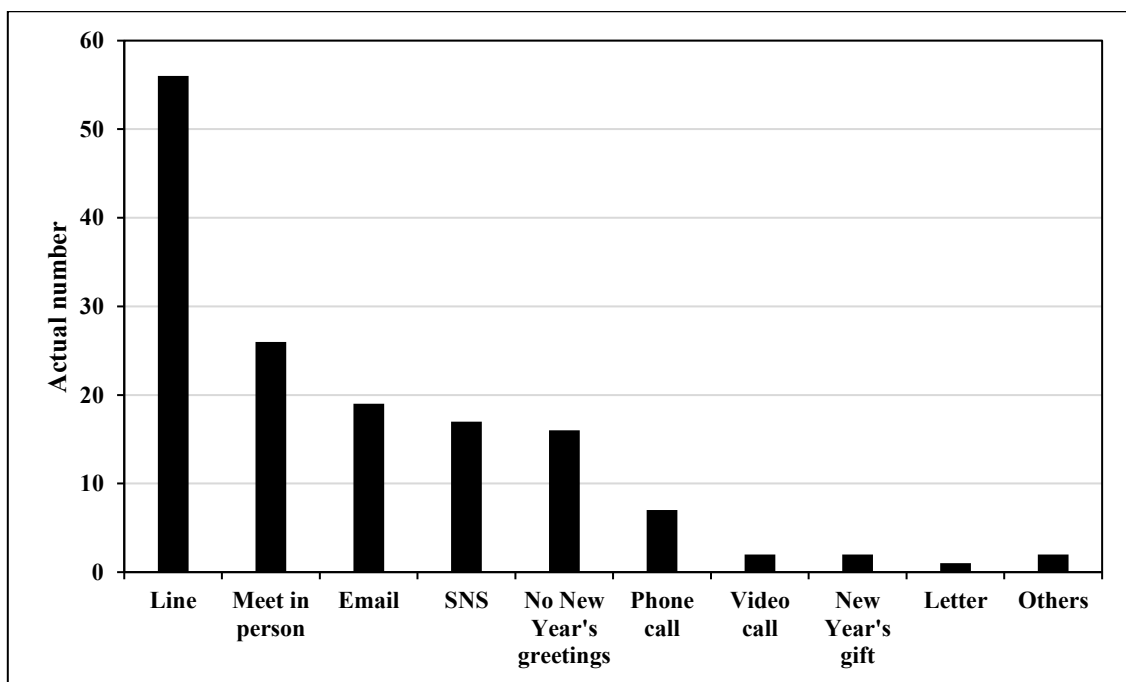


Figure 2 Methods of new year's greetings among individuals who do not send cards

Results of an internet survey conducted in September 2024 ($N = 83$; multiple responses) Based on data reported in reference 1).

Table 1 Reasons for the decline in sending new year’s cards

Reason	Explanation
It costs money and effort.	To send new year’s cards, individuals must first purchase new year’s postcards. When using online printing services or local print shops, additional time and effort are required for layout design, along with printing costs. Home printing requires printer ink and, in some cases, replacement of consumables; it also involves time for setup and potential printing errors. The price of new year's postcards increased from 63 yen in 2019 to 85 yen in 2024, due to factors such as consumption tax increases and rising operational costs. These rising costs have contributed to individuals discontinuing or reducing the number of cards sent.
It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain the recipient's address.	Stricter regulations on personal data protection have made it more difficult to obtain addresses. Until a few decades ago, names and addresses were commonly included in school directories, graduation yearbooks, and employee directories. As addresses are now typically shared only directly, many individuals perceive that the effort required to obtain them outweighs the benefits of sending cards.
Email, social media, and messaging applications are widely used.	Social media enables users to send greetings without requiring addresses. These methods require minimal preparation and no material costs, making them more convenient than traditional new year’s cards. In addition, services have emerged that allow users to send digital new year's cards to contacts known only through social media.
There is growing social acceptance for discontinuing new year’s card practices.	Whereas discontinuing the practice was previously considered impolite, expressions signaling the cessation of new year’s card exchanges have become widespread, significantly lowering the psychological barrier to doing so.

Based on the content reported in references 2) and 3).

Table 2 Reasons for continuing to send new year’s cards or hesitating to send them

Selected item	Breakdown of reasons
Continuing to send new year’s cards (with difficulty)	Because it is an established annual custom. Some individuals wish to share photographs of their children or family, even if they only send a limited number of cards. For some relationships, new year’s cards serve as the primary or sole means of communication. Cards are used to provide life updates to colleagues, relatives, and friends. Reciprocity norms encourage individuals to send cards to those from whom they received cards in the previous year.
Undecided about whether to continue or discontinue	Some individuals continue the practice annually but are reconsidering it due to rising postcard costs. The increasing number of individuals discontinuing the practice influences others’ decisions. Some are considering switching to social networking services as an alternative means of sending new year’s greetings. Individuals maintaining broad but relatively superficial social networks may consider reducing such connections. Relocation and the inability of others to access updated addresses also contribute to reconsideration.

This table is based on the results of a survey conducted in September 2024.

Based on the content reported in reference 1).



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