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When Prophecy Failed in July 2025, Japan: Who Believed and How Did They React to Disconfirmation?

Ryota Sakakibara^{1§} , Hiroki Ozono^{2§} 

[1] Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Showa Women's University, Tokyo, Japan. [2] Faculty of Law, Economics and Humanities, Kagoshima University, Kagoshima, Japan.

[§]These authors contributed equally to this work.

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Corresponding Author: Ryota Sakakibara, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Showa Women's University, 1-7-57 Taishido, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo, 154-8533, Japan. E-mail: r-sakakibara@swu.ac.jp

Supplementary Materials: Code, Data [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

A widely publicized prophecy proclaiming that a major disaster would strike Japan on July 5, 2025 was disconfirmed, providing a rare opportunity to examine public reactions to a failed prophecy. Two surveys were administered before (July 3) and after (July 10) the predicted date; Japanese adults who completed both waves ($N = 318$) provided matched pre-post data. We first tested prophecy belief by relating pre-survey belief to individual differences in reflective thinking, scientific reasoning, and conspiracy mentality. We subsequently assessed hindsight and retrospective biases by comparing pre- and post-July 5 belief ratings, anxiety, and precautionary actions (stockpiling, schedule changes, information sharing). Finally, we evaluated “moving the goal-post” using linear mixed-effects models predicting three prophecy-fulfillment criteria (casualties, location, temporal window) using survey time, pre-survey belief, and their interactions. Pre-survey belief was negatively related to reflective thinking and scientific reasoning and positively related to conspiracy mentality. Paired-samples t-tests yielded a pattern consistent with memory reconstruction: after learning that the prophecy failed, participants recalled lower pre-prophecy belief, anxiety, and precautionary actions than initially reported. In the mixed-effects models, evidence of goal-post moving emerged only for the temporal window criterion: the effect of time was significantly positive at high (+1 SD) prior belief but non-significant at low (-1 SD); no interactions appeared for casualties or location. Overall, susceptibility to unfounded claims varied



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with cognitive style and conspiracy mentality, and learning that the prophecy failed led to post-hoc changes in both recollection and evaluative criteria.

Keywords

prophecy, hindsight bias, retrospective bias, moving the goal-post

Highlights

- Research on failed prophecies has rarely captured responses both before and after disconfirmation.
- Using a rare real-world case in Japan, this study tracked belief in the July 5, 2025 prophecy and reactions to its failure.
- Stronger belief was associated with lower reflective thinking and scientific reasoning, and higher conspiracy mentality.
- After the prophecy failed, participants downplayed their prior belief, anxiety, and precautionary actions, while goal-post moving appeared only for the temporal window.

A prophecy positing that a major natural disaster would strike Japan on July 5, 2025, spread widely across East Asia, particularly in Japan. The rumor originated from a manga created by an artist based on a dream she had—an account entirely lacking any scientific basis. Nevertheless, public interest in the prophecy intensified day by day, particularly given the occurrence of a series of earthquake swarms in the Tokara Islands region of southwestern Japan in and around June 2025. Some people reportedly postponed travel plans or evacuated to inland areas perceived to be protected from the impact of tsunamis. Fortunately, however, no major disaster occurred on July 5. Although this episode might appear trivial or absurd at first glance, it is a psychologically intriguing rare case. It is highly unusual for an unverified prophecy to spread spontaneously and become widely shared by millions, or even tens of millions, of people.

Although psychological research that directly examines people's beliefs and behaviors in the context of real-world prophecies is not particularly abundant, several important studies have been conducted. A classic example is the field study by [Festinger et al. \(1956\)](#), which examined how committed members of a small religious group responded when an apocalyptic prophecy failed. [Sharps et al. \(2013\)](#) investigated beliefs surrounding the Mayan-calendar prophecy that the world would end on December 21, 2012. Nearly half of their sample endorsed the prophecy beforehand, and more than 10% continued to believe it even after it failed to occur.

Beyond such doomsday prophecies, research has also been conducted on earthquake predictions and prophecies, which are more similar to the July 5 prophecy of our study. For example, [Ohta and Abe \(1977\)](#) examined public reactions when the Coordinating

Committee for Earthquake Prediction (CCEP)—a government-appointed expert committee that coordinates earthquake prediction research and monitoring among national agencies and universities in Japan—issued an official earthquake prediction. They found that many residents reported heightened anxiety and that people tended to perceive both the predicted magnitude and the expected time of occurrence as more extreme (larger and sooner, respectively) than what had actually been communicated. In a different cultural context, [Norman et al. \(2012\)](#) investigated reactions to a hoax chain message predicting an imminent earthquake in Ghana. They reported that, even after learning that the information was false, many respondents indicated that they would still be willing to believe future earthquake predictions, regardless of the information source.

Despite the theoretical interest of these studies on real-world prophecies, they have several limitations. First, only a few studies (e.g., [Festinger et al., 1956](#); [Sharps et al., 2013](#)) have collected data before the date specified in the prophecy; changes in people's psychological states before and after its supposed fulfillment thus remain unclear. Second, studies focusing on highly committed cult members (e.g., [Festinger et al., 1956](#)) rely on very atypical samples, constraining the generalizability of their findings to the broader population. Third, relatively little work has systematically examined who believes in prophecies—that is, the psychological determinants and individual-difference variables that predict stronger belief in prophecies.

The Present Study

To address these limitations, we collected data from the general public both before and after July 5, 2025. Our study's first aim is to identify who believed the prophecy—that is, which individual-difference psychological variables predict belief. The second aim is to examine the cognitive reactions that emerged after the prophecy failed.

As potential predictors of belief, we focused on reflective thinking, scientific reasoning, and conspiracy mentality. Because the July 5 prophecy lacked a scientific basis, we hypothesized that lower levels of reflective thinking and scientific reasoning would predict stronger belief, which is consistent with evidence showing that such tendencies reduce resistance to unfounded claims (e.g., [Yelbuz et al., 2022](#)). Conversely, a stronger conspiracy mentality is associated with greater susceptibility to pseudoscientific information (e.g., [Lewandowsky et al., 2013](#)) and is therefore expected to predict stronger belief in the prophecy. Along with these considerations, we examined several cognitive biases that may have manifested after the prophecy failure. First, hindsight ([Roese & Vohs, 2012](#)) and retrospective biases—misremembering one's prior level of worry as being lower than it actually was ([Morgenstern & Barrett, 1974](#))—were assessed by directly comparing the participants' reports before and after July 5. After learning that the prophecy had failed—that is, after updating their knowledge—individuals might reconstruct their memory of pre-prophecy beliefs and precautionary actions in light of the new information ([Roese & Vohs, 2012](#)). Another study reported similar results related to the pandemic—

when people were asked one year later to recall their initial levels of interest and risk perception at the onset of COVID-19, they systematically underestimated those initial levels (Yamagata & Miura, 2023). Accordingly, we expected that they would tend to recall their prior belief in the prophecy and the extent of their precautionary actions before the prophecy as weaker than they actually were. We then analyzed the “moving the goal-post” effect—shifting the criteria or reinterpreting the evidence (Tsapos, 2023)—using both pre–post comparisons and models that included belief in the prophecy as a moderator. As Festinger et al. (1956) reported, when a believed prophecy fails, people may shift the criteria for what would count as fulfillment of the prophecy or attempt to reinterpret the prophecy. These responses can be understood as efforts to reduce the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) produced by disconfirmation. Accordingly, the stronger one’s prior belief, the greater the dissonance, and the more likely it is that such goal-post moving will occur. In the present study, cognitive dissonance is considered to be an underlying mechanism only for “goal-post moving,” whereas hindsight and retrospective biases are conceptualized as post-event reconstructive processes that do not require a dissonance-based account.

Method

Participants

On July 3, 2025 (pre-July 5 survey) and July 10, 2025 (post-July 5 survey), we recruited participants from the Yahoo! Crowdsourcing monitor pool. The recruitment notice stated that the survey would not collect any personally identifying information, that participation was voluntary, and that respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty¹. Only those who provided informed consent were included in this study. Among the participants who completed both the pre-July 5 and post-July 5 surveys, 41 individuals who reported being completely unaware of the July 5 prophecy were excluded from the analyses. The final sample comprised 318 participants (107 women, 209 men, and two who selected “other” or did not provide a gender response; $M_{\text{age}} = 51.21$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.69$). In both surveys, the participants received electronic money equivalent to 10 JPY

1) It should be noted that, although the prophecy was known to some individuals via social media and other channels beforehand, it appears to have become widely recognized among the general public only after the Japanese government publicly addressed it in late April, stating that predicting earthquakes is impossible. Due to the timing of the ethics review schedule at the authors’ affiliated institution, obtaining formal approval before the first survey on July 3 was not feasible. Furthermore, under the regulations of the ethics committees at both authors’ institutions, ethics review is not invariably required for all research studies involving human participants. Consequently, this study was conducted without a formal ethics review or exemption; instead, we ensured that all participants were fully informed of the study content and ethical considerations and obtained their informed consent prior to participation in accordance with the Japanese Psychological Association’s *Ethical Principles of Psychologists*.

as compensation, an amount in line with our previous online study (Sakakibara & Ozono, 2021).

Measures

Belief in the Prophecy

In the pre-July 5 survey (July 3), belief was assessed using the question “Do you think this prophecy will come true?” In the post-July 5 survey (July 10), participants answered the retrospective version, “As of July 3 (one week ago), did you think this prophecy would come true?” In both surveys, participants rated their responses using a 7-point Likert scale.

Reflective Thinking

Reflective thinking was measured using the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT; Frederick, 2005; Toplak et al., 2014; Japanese version: Harada et al., 2018). The CRT comprises seven questions that assess one’s ability to inhibit intuitive but incorrect responses and arrive at analytically correct answers. Participants provided open-ended responses, and the total number of correct answers was used as the CRT score.

Scientific Reasoning

Scientific reasoning was measured using the Scientific Reasoning Scale (SRS; Drummond & Fischhoff, 2017; Japanese version: Goto et al., 2023). The SRS presents 11 short scenarios that assess one’s knowledge of basic scientific concepts. The participants judged whether each scenario was correct or incorrect, and the total number of correct responses was used as the score².

Conspiracy Mentality

Conspiracy mentality was measured using the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al., 2013; Japanese version: Majima, 2024), which comprises five general conspiracy belief items, each rated on an 11-point scale from 0% to 100% in 10% increments, indicating the degree of agreement ($\alpha = .90$).

Prophecy-Related Impact

On July 3, the participants rated the extent to which the following applied to them: “Has this prophecy made you feel anxious?” (anxiety), “Have you been stockpiling water, food, or other supplies because of this prophecy?” (stockpiling), “Has this prophecy affected your plans around July 5?” (schedule changing), and “Have you spread this prophecy to others via social media or in conversation?” (information sharing). Responses were rated

2) CRT and SRS were linked to data from another survey conducted between January 2024 and May 2025.

using a 7-point Likert scale. On July 10, the same four items were prefaced with “As of July 3 (one week ago)” and presented in the past tense to the participants who answered using the same scale.

Prophecy Fulfillment Criteria

Participants were asked about the criteria under which they would consider the prophecy to have been fulfilled with regard to (a) the number of casualties (casualties; 0: zero, 1: a few, 2: dozens, 3: hundreds, 4: thousands, 5: tens of thousands, 6: hundreds of thousands, 7: millions), (b) the location of the disaster (location; 1: around Japan, 2: somewhere in Asia, 3: somewhere in the world), and (c) the temporal window of the disaster (temporal window; 1: on the day itself, 2: within a few days before or after July 5, 3: within a few weeks, 4: within a few months, 5: within a few years). The same items were administered on July 3 and July 10.

Data on additional variables were also collected. The complete list of items and their wording are available via the Open Science Framework (OSF) (see [Sakakibara & Ozono, 2026](#)).

Statistical Analysis

First, to examine who believed in the prophecy, we calculated correlations between belief in the prophecy at the time of the pre-July 5 survey and CRT, SRS, CMQ, gender, and age. Second, to test for hindsight and retrospective biases, we conducted paired-samples *t*-tests comparing pre- and post-July 5 scores for belief in the prophecy and perceived prophecy-related impact. Finally, to examine the “moving the goal-post” effect, we fitted linear mixed-effects models in which the three prophecy fulfillment criteria items served as dependent variables. In these models, survey time point, belief in the prophecy (pre-July 5 survey), and their interaction term were entered as fixed effects. When a significant interaction effect was observed, we conducted simple slope analyses to examine the effect of survey time point separately for participants with low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) belief in the prophecy. All analyses were conducted in R version 4.5.0 using the psych ([Revelle, 2024](#)), lme4 ([Bates et al., 2015](#)), and lmerTest ([Kuznetsova et al., 2017](#)) packages.

Results

In the pre-July 5 survey conducted on July 3, the mean for belief in the prophecy was $M = 2.18$ ($SD = 1.21$), and only five participants scored 5 or higher. This indicates that the vast majority of the participants did not believe in the prophecy. Therefore, the subsequent analyses should be interpreted in light of this distribution—as relative

comparisons within a sample in which those who strongly believed the prophecy were very few in number.

First, we calculated the correlations between belief in the prophecy (July 3) and CRT, SRS³, CMQ, gender, and age (Table 1). CRT and SRS were significantly negatively correlated with belief in the prophecy, whereas CMQ exhibited a significant positive correlation⁴. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that lower levels of reflective thinking and scientific reasoning, as well as higher levels of conspiracy mentality, would be associated with stronger belief in the prophecy. Gender was also significantly correlated with belief in the prophecy. Because gender was dummy coded (men = 1, women = 0), this result indicates that women scored higher than men on belief in the prophecy.

Table 1
Correlations Among Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Belief in the prophecy	—				
2. Reflective thinking	-.12*	—			
3. Scientific reasoning	-.16**	.34**	—		
4. Conspiracy mentality	.29**	-.20**	-.19**	—	
5. Age	-.09	.02	-.06	.04	—
6. Gender (men = 1, women = 0)	-.29**	.15**	.02	-.09	.08

* $p < .05$. * $p < .01$.

Subsequently, to examine hindsight and retrospective biases, we ran paired-samples *t*-tests on July 3 (pre-July 5 survey) and July 10 (post-July 5 survey) ratings of belief in the prophecy and prophecy-related impact (Table 2). For hindsight bias, belief scores were significantly lower at post than at pre ($t(317) = 6.41, p < .001, d = 0.36, 95\% CI_{diff}[0.20, 0.38]$), consistent with hindsight bias. Regarding retrospective bias, post-July 5 survey scores were significantly lower than pre-July 5 survey scores for anxiety, stockpiling, and schedule changing (anxiety: $t(317) = 4.84, p < .001, d = 0.27, 95\% CI_{diff}[0.16, 0.38]$; stockpiling: $t(317) = 4.97, p < .001, d = 0.28, 95\% CI_{diff}[0.16, 0.38]$; schedule changing: $t(317) = 2.83, p = .005, d = 0.16, 95\% CI_{diff}[0.05, 0.26]$), whereas information sharing showed no pre–post difference ($t(317) = 0.16, p = .872, d = 0.01, 95\% CI_{diff}[-0.11, 0.12]$)⁵.

3) Participants who failed the SRS check test ($n = 42$) were excluded from the dataset when calculating the correlation between SRS and belief in the prophecy.

4) In a multiple regression model with belief in the prophecy as the dependent variable and the other variables as predictors, the association with CRT disappeared. This is likely due to its correlation with SRS and the resulting reduction in explanatory power.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Paired t-tests for Pre–Post Scores

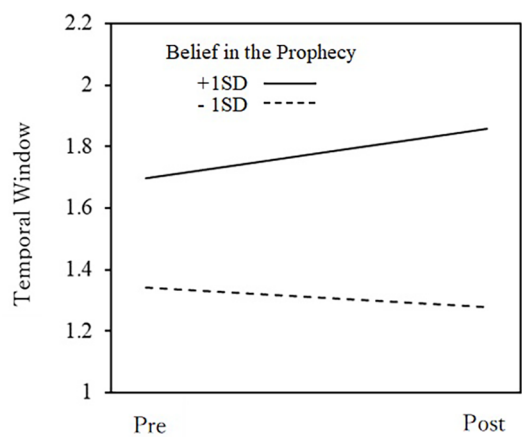
Variable	Pre (July 3)		Post (July 10)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Belief in the prophecy	2.18	1.21	1.89	1.13	6.41	< .001	0.36
Anxiety	2.37	1.46	2.10	1.34	4.84	< .001	0.27
Stockpiling	1.91	1.28	1.64	1.12	4.97	< .001	0.28
Schedule changing	1.70	1.13	1.55	1.06	2.83	.005	0.16
Information sharing	1.52	1.14	1.51	1.08	0.16	.872	0.01

We examined the “moving the goal-post” effect by conducting linear mixed-effects models for the three prophecy fulfillment criteria items (casualties, location, and temporal window). For each item, survey time point (pre/post), belief in the prophecy (pre-July 5 survey), and their interaction were included as predictors. In all cases, the main effect of time point was not significant (casualties: $B = 0.15$, 95% CI $[-0.05, 0.36]$, $p = .140$; location: $B = -0.04$, 95% CI $[-0.10, 0.02]$, $p = .236$; temporal window: $B = 0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.13]$, $p = .221$). A significant interaction was observed for the temporal window criterion, whereas no significant interaction effects were found for the other variables. Simple slope analyses showed that, when belief in the prophecy was at +1SD, time point was significantly positively associated with the outcome ($B = 0.16$, 95% CI $[0.05, 0.28]$, $p = .005$), whereas, when belief was at -1SD, time point was not significant ($B = -0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.18, 0.05]$, $p = .284$) (Figure 1). These results suggest that the “moving the goal-post” effect was present to some extent.

5) To examine the potential effect of repeatedly measuring belief in the prophecy within a short period, 330 participants from a separate sample were asked about their belief in the prophecy only on July 10. An independent-samples t-test comparing this group with the main dataset revealed no significant difference.

Figure 1

The Result of the Simple Slope Analysis



Discussion

This study aimed to examine who believed in the July 5, 2025, disaster prophecy and what cognitive responses emerged when it failed. Using pre- and post-July 5 surveys, we assessed predictors of belief in the prophecy—reflective thinking, scientific reasoning, and conspiracy mentality—and investigated the cognitive biases following its failure. Belief in the prophecy was negatively associated with reflective thinking and scientific reasoning and positively associated with conspiracy mentality. Although few participants strongly endorsed the prophecy, belief scores declined significantly after July 5, consistent with hindsight bias. Retrospective bias was likewise observed, broadly consistent with predictions. Among participants with relatively stronger pre-July 5 belief, a “moving the goal-post” effect was also observed.

First, notably, in contrast to the widespread public attention and commotion—reflected in the present survey by a recognition rate of approximately 89% (318 out of 359 respondents)—very few participants in our online sample reported strongly believing in the prophecy. Accordingly, the distribution of belief was strongly concentrated at the lower end, suggesting a floor effect. This absolute level of belief should, however, be regarded as descriptive of this specific sample rather than as a precise population estimate. Moreover, these data pertain only to Japanese respondents. In Hong Kong, for example, many people who believed in the prophecy reportedly cancelled their trips to Japan, resulting in a more than 30% decrease in tourist arrivals compared to previous years⁶. This suggests that the degree of belief in the prophecy may have varied across countries.

Most Japanese respondents did not strongly believe in the prophecy, although there were individual differences in the lingering suspicion that it might come true, which were explained by reflective thinking, scientific reasoning, and conspiracy mentality. Notably, the explanatory power of reflective thinking and scientific reasoning was particularly weak. Although previous research has consistently demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of reflective thinking and scientific reasoning are less likely to believe in poorly substantiated information (Yelbuz et al., 2022), the decision to accept or reject a given piece of information is not solely determined by logical or analytical thinking. Rather, it is shaped by motivated reasoning (Kahan, 2013) and individuals' worldviews and belief systems (Ozono & Sakakibara, 2024). In the case of the present prophecy, it is plausible that individuals who habitually favor sensational, emotionally charged information, even when it is scientifically unfounded, were unable to fully dismiss the possibility that the prophecy might come true.

As expected, hindsight bias regarding the prophecy and retrospective bias were generally observed, but the "moving the goal-post" effect was only partially evident. The "moving the goal-post" effect emerged only for the temporal window criterion, possibly because the prophecy was strongly associated with the specific date of July 5, whereas its content regarding the number of casualties and the location of the disaster was less salient. Consequently, the latter criteria may have been vaguely defined from the outset, leaving no need to shift—or even no possibility of shifting—the goal-post. In contrast, the temporal window was clearly recognized; thus, once July 5 had passed, the prophecy would have been seen as having failed, creating the necessity to move the goal-post. These findings suggest that post-event cognitive biases may vary depending on the nature of the target being recalled and the aspects of the relevant event that were most salient to people.

The findings of this study are important in the following respects. First, a weakly substantiated prophecy capturing widespread public attention and triggering a societal commotion is rare. Taking advantage of this unique opportunity, we collected data demonstrating that psychological phenomena typically observed in highly unusual, socially constrained, or experimentally controlled environments can also be observed—at least to a considerable extent—in a natural setting. Second, people's responses following the failure of the prophecy offer important insights for risk communication. As Norman et al. (2012) demonstrated, even after being deceived by misinformation, people may continue to believe similar information regardless of its source. Conversely, as the "cry-wolf" effect (LeClerc & Joslyn, 2015) suggests, once people have been misled by prior warnings, they may cease to trust subsequent alerts, even when those alerts are grounded in scientific evidence. Although the present study did not address this issue directly, future research should examine the distinct conditions under which experiencing hindsight and

6) <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/07/16/japan/tourism-growth-quake-rumor/>

retrospective biases serve to increase or decrease risk perception. Moreover, although not initially anticipated, the fact that most people did not actually believe in the prophecy, despite the public attention and media coverage it received, provides an important reference point for understanding people's attitudes toward similar future events.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to individuals who participated in an online survey. Such individuals may have more frequent exposure to online information than the general population and may have encountered more diverse information pertaining to the prophecy (including skeptical or corrective information), which could have introduced bias into the results and may partly explain why relatively few participants in our sample strongly believed in the prophecy.

Second, the age distribution of the sample was skewed toward older participants. Because the data were not collected evenly across younger and older age groups, generalizations should be made with caution.

Third, because the phenomenon under investigation occurred in Japan, the data were limited to Japanese participants. Whether the present findings would apply to similar phenomena in other countries or cultural contexts remains unclear.

Fourth, although this was an online survey, we did not implement specific procedures to detect or exclude responses generated by large language models (LLMs). Thus, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that a small portion of the data may include such AI-generated responses.

Fifth, although previous research has examined in detail the mechanisms and functions of hindsight and retrospective biases (e.g., [Levine et al., 2009](#); [Roese & Vohs, 2012](#); [Schacter et al., 2024](#)), we were not able to explain these biases observed in the study in terms of specific psychological processes or variables. Building on previous work, future studies should assess a wider range of psychological variables in order to clarify the processes that give rise to these biases. Finally, this study was not preregistered, which somewhat limits the strength of the confirmatory claims that can be made.

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Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contributions: Ryota Sakakibara—Conceptualization | Methodology | Formal analysis | Investigation | Writing – original draft | Writing – review & editing | Visualization. Hiroki Ozono—Conceptualization | Methodology | Formal analysis | Investigation | Writing – review & editing.

Ethics Statement: Because the prophecy entered broad public awareness only after the Japanese government's late-April 2025 statement, and the review timeline at our institution made it infeasible to obtain approval before July 3, the study was conducted without prior ethics review or formal exemption. Furthermore, under the regulations of the ethics committees at both authors' institutions, ethics review is not invariably required for research involving human participants. The ethics committee at the corresponding author's institution specifies that review is mandatory only if: (1) the study constitutes medical research involving human participants; (2) it is an interventional study; (3) it involves physical or psychological intrusion beyond a minimal level; or (4) it collects personally identifiable data. We judged that the present study met none of these criteria. Accordingly, the survey was conducted in accordance with the Japanese Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists. All participants were fully informed about the study and relevant ethical considerations, and provided informed consent prior to participation.

Data Availability: All data and analysis code are available on OSF (see Sakakibara & Ozono, 2026).

Supplementary Materials

All data and analysis code are available on OSF (see Sakakibara & Ozono, 2026).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Sakakibara, R., & Ozono, H. (2026). *When prophecy failed in July 2025, Japan: Who believed and how did they react to disconfirmation?* [Data, code]. OSF. <https://osf.io/g2v5p>

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