Using Japanese pop cultural heritage to create a tourist product
Exploring otaku tourism

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Japanese pop culture on global tourism patterns is substantial, specifically in the promotion and growth of otaku tourism. Japan has become a hub for global tourists due to its ability to attract with the allure of interacting with the environments and storylines of their beloved pop culture media. This study examines the distinctive combination of traditional and contemporary cultural aspects, evaluating its influence on Japan's tourism industry and on global perception. The economic and cultural benefits of using cultural exports to enhance the attractiveness of tourism are revealed through a literature review, with theoretical perspectives. This emphasizes the change in travel motivations towards genuine cultural experiences and the strategic significance of popular culture in promoting destinations. The findings indicate that Japan's strategy of blending its abundant cultural heritage with modern cultural manifestations provides valuable lessons for other destinations seeking to attract tourists based on cultural identity. This movement highlights the capacity of cultural experience to influence tourism preferences, positioning Japan as a prominent illustration of how culture impacts international tourism dynamics.

KEYWORDS

cultural heritage, destination branding, Japan, Japanese pop culture, otaku tourism, tourism

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global tourism landscape, Japan stands out for its unique blend of ancient traditions and vibrant contemporary culture, illustrating the impact of cultural identity interwoven with global media in establishing a nation's prestige as a premier travel destination (Craig, 2020a; Freedman & Slade, 2018). A prime illustration of this is Japan's pop culture, celebrated for its eclectic mix of elements that spark diverse interests and curiosities internationally (Tajima et al., 2018). Referred to as the epitome of contemporary Japanese culture, this phenomenon encompasses multiple facets of everyday life in Japan, such as manga (Japanese comic books), anime (Japanese animated movies and TV shows), video games, fashion, and cosplay (the act of dressing up as and personifying well-known characters from these forms of media) (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). The diverse array of cultural manifestations in

Japan is widely recognized as a substantial element in its attractiveness to tourists, including those from Western nations (Rich, 2011; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Simeon, 2006).

This study examines the wide-ranging attraction of Japan, focusing specifically on the significant impact of Japanese popular culture on the emergence of a distinct form of tourism, known as contents tourism. Analyzed particularly through the lens of otaku tourism, this burgeoning subgenre is driven by a worldwide desire to engage with media content deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Japan (Okamoto, 2015; Seaton et al., 2017). The primary objective of this research is to investigate how elements of Japanese pop culture contribute Japan's appeal as a tourist destination. It explores how the integration of Japan's cultural heritage with its contemporary pop culture attracts international tourists and influences their travel preferences. The research aims to understand the mechanisms through which cultural exports, particularly those related to entertainment and media, significantly shape Japan's tourism sector and stimulate economic benefits.

The captivating nature of Japanese popular culture has not only enhanced the nation's reputation on an international stage but has also significantly influenced the desires and encounters of foreign visitors (Craig, 2020a). Anime and manga, being fundamental components of this cultural export, have surpassed their initial audiences to motivate an international fan base that is progressively gravitating towards Japan to immerse themselves in the authentic environments depicted in their preferred stories (Kawamata et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This has led to the emergence of otaku tourism, which is a distinct form of contents tourism in which enthusiasts embark on journeys to renowned sites in popular culture (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Okamoto, 2015; Severino, 2022).

This promising manifestation of tourism highlights a substantial transformation in the incentives for travel where a quest for genuine cultural experiences and the interest in participating in media narratives converge (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Seaton et al., 2017). This exemplifies a more extensive pattern in which tourist destinations are selected not solely on account of their historical or scenic value, but also due to their affiliations with pop culture. Japan's skillful use of its popular culture to augment its tourism attractiveness provides valuable lessons for other countries aiming to exploit their cultural exports to attract tourists.

Further, the research acknowledges the ramifications of these patterns for parties involved both domestically and internationally. It contributes to the scholarly discussion regarding the intricacies of destination branding, cultural tourism dynamics, and the changing motivations of tourists in the era of globalization. Professionals in the tourism sector can enhance their ability to cater to the interests of this distinct traveller segment through the creation of targeted marketing strategies and on-site experiences informed by their comprehension of the allure of popular culture.

By integrating an examination of tourism dynamics and a comprehensive literature review with theoretical perspectives, this research endeavors to present a thorough exposition of the ways in which Japan's popular culture has come to symbolize the country's status as a tourist hotspot. It aims to investigate the wider implications of contents tourism and otaku tourism on management and marketing strategies for destinations. This research contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the intricate dynamics that influence the international perception of a nation, by analyzing Japan's adeptness in blending traditional and modern cultural elements to appeal to tourists from around the world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This article meticulously analyzes scholarly literature to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Japanese pop culture influences tourism, particularly its appeal to international visitors. This review examines 115 references, including academic articles, books, conference proceedings and reputable websites, each contributing insights into Japan's role as a culturally rich and geographically unique tourist destination. These sources, which range from seminal works to recent studies, collectively explore how Japan's distinctive cultural characteristics and geographical features engage and attract tourists. The extensive and varied literature underscores the depth of the research involved. Given the scarcity of integrated scholarly inquiries that link this cultural phenomenon to tourism activities, this review rigorously assesses how Japan, often perceived as geographically and culturally distant, has crafted an appealing persona. This crafted image is potent enough to foster deep emotional engagement, compelling individuals to travel and immerse themselves in the experiences it promises.

This literature review begins by examining how Japan's unique cultural traditions and geographical features contribute to its attractiveness as a tourist destination. The study then examines Japanese popular culture's global impact on audiences, providing examples for countries looking to boost tourism with pop culture. Thus, this theoretical undertaking advances knowledge of the dynamic relationship between culture and tourism and offers practical advice for capitalizing on cultural phenomena to boost tourism.

2.1. JAPAN'S CULTURAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL APPEAL

Japan is a country that fascinates with its blend of traditional and contemporary cultures, drawing visitors from around the globe to experience its unique identity (Berger, 2010; García, 2011). Known as the Land of the Rising Sun, it is esteemed for its safety, boasting one of the lowest crime rates worldwide, making it a highly secure destination for tourists (Berger, 2010). The Japanese people are often described as polite, hospitable and friendly, though they also maintain a conservative and somewhat nationalistic stance towards non-natives, indicative of a deep-rooted desire to preserve their cultural integrity (Bardsley & Miller, 2011; Berger, 2010; Komisarof et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022).

The distinctiveness of Japan's cultural identity, even compared to other Asian nations, is largely attributed to its geographical isolation as an archipelago and its rich historical tapestry that extends over millennia (García, 2011; Henshall, 2019; Otmazgin, 2016; Walker, 2015). This isolation, coupled with significant periods of self-imposed solitude from the global stage, has enabled Japan to cultivate a culture that is markedly different in a globalized era. Influences from China have been pivotal in shaping Japan's religious, linguistic and governmental frameworks, while the era of seclusion fostered the development of uniquely Japanese traditions. Moreover, Japan's transformation into an imperial power and its subsequent economic resurgence post-World War II have played critical roles in its national identity (García, 2011; Walker, 2015).

The Japanese language, with its three distinct writing systems (Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji) and layers of formality, mirrors the country's complex societal structure and philosophy towards life (García, 2011). Its intricate geography, comprising roughly 14,000 islands and stretching across the North Pacific Ocean, is characterized by a mix of rugged mountains, active and dormant volcanoes, including the iconic Mount Fuji, and a vast array of flora and fauna that enriches its ecological tapestry (The Tokyo Okinotorishima and Minamitorishima Islands, n.d.; Watanabe et al., 2024; Woolley, 2005).

Climate-wise, Japan experiences a wide range due to its extensive latitudinal span and geographic diversity, from the cold, humid continental climate of Hokkaido to the subtropical warmth of Shikoku and Kyushu (Chen & Chen, 2013; Hobbs, 2009; Shirane, 2012; Watanabe et al., 2024). This climatic variation supports a rich biodiversity and contributes to the seasonal beauty that Japan is known for, especially the springtime cherry blossoms and the vivid autumnal foliage (ElQadi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019).

Its natural beauty is matched by its susceptibility to natural disasters, including frequent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and seasonal typhoons that bring heavy rains and storms, showcasing the country's dynamic and often risky relationship with nature (Nishimura & Iguchi, 2011; Watanabe et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, Japan's approach to harmonizing with its environment is evident in its meticulous care for nature and the built environment, reflected in pristine streets, organized urban planning, and well-preserved natural landscapes (García, 2011).

Japan's intricate structure combines ancient mythology and significant historical events, positioning the emperor as a descendant of divine origins, highly respected within its cultural framework (García, 2011; Henshall, 2019). This reverence underscores its profound connection to its past, highlighted by archaeological discoveries dating back to the Jomon period, evidencing a civilization that has evolved significantly over millennia (Walker, 2015). The advent of Europeans in the 16th century, particularly the Portuguese, introduced a period of cultural exchange, subsequently leading to a phase of isolation aimed at preserving Japan's unique identity (Henshall, 2019; Walker, 2015; Yamashiro, 1989). The 19th century Meiji Restoration marked its leap into modernity, adopting Western technologies and governance, which propelled the nation into rapid industrialization and established its status as a major global power (Henshall, 2019; Kitaoka, 2018; Zatko, 2017). Despite challenges, including natural disasters and the aftermath of World War II's aftermath, Japan's resilience and the international appeal of its pop culture have been pivotal in its economic revival and global stature (Henshall, 2019; Koshino, 2019; Walker, 2015; Zatko, 2017). Hosting global events like the Olympics has showcased its blend of rich heritage and modern achievements, reinforcing its unique position on the world stage with particular focus in its unique and considered exotic culture (Craig, 2020a; García, 2011; Zatko, 2017).

Culturally, Japan is a treasure trove of experiences, from witnessing the ancient ritual of sumo wrestling to the refined elegance of geisha performances (Berger, 2010; Ochiai & Takeda, 2001; Stanley, 2013). The country's adoption of baseball, its serene rock gardens, and vibrant festivals like the Sakura (cherry blossom) viewing and Sanja Matsuri (a religious festival) offer a glimpse into Japan's multifaceted identity (Ikei, 2000; Moriuchi & Basil, 2019; Tekinalp & Yerli, 2017; Van Tonder & Lyons, 2003). Modern Japan is equally captivating, with its cutting-edge technology evident in everyday life, from high-tech toilets to the ubiquitous presence of pachinko parlors and the global phenomenon of its pop culture, including anime and manga (Brooks et al., 2008; García, 2011; Schilling, 2000).

The culinary landscape of Japan is another facet of its appeal, with traditional dishes such as sushi showcasing the nation's affinity for seafood, alongside the popular bento boxes that represent the Japanese knack for presentation and balance in cuisine (Berger, 2010;

García, 2011; Nishimoto et al., 2015). Convenience stores and 100-yen shops reflect the efficiency and pragmatism of Japanese society, catering to the needs of its people with a variety of goods and services (Nishimoto et al., 2015; Rahman, 2019).

Tourism in Japan has seen a significant uptrend, with the nation welcoming millions of visitors drawn by its exotic and diverse cultural and historical heritage, bustling cities, natural beauty, and the seamless blend of tradition and modernity (Arba, 2024; Berger, 2010; Funck & Cooper, 2013; García, 2011). Key attractions include the metropolitan allure of Tokyo and the historic charm of Kyoto, with visitors particularly flocking during the cherry blossom season and summer festivals. Major sources of tourists include neighboring countries like China and South Korea, as well as Western nations such as the United States and European countries, underscoring its global appeal (Japan Tourism Statistics, 2024a; Japan Tourism Statistics, 2024b).

Visitors are drawn not only by the iconic elements of Japanese culture, but also by the opportunity to engage with its rich historical narrative and experience the warmth and hospitality of its people (Berger, 2010; Funck & Cooper, 2013; García, 2011; Zatko, 2017). Japan's continuous growth as a tourism hotspot is a testament to its enduring charm and the curiosity it sparks among travellers seeking unique and enriching experiences (Berger, 2010).

In conclusion, Japan's identity as a destination is deeply rooted in its cultural richness, historical depth and the juxtaposition of its ancient traditions with cutting-edge modernity. This complex tapestry offers a broad spectrum of experiences, from the tranquility of natural landscapes and the solemnity of traditional ceremonies to the vibrancy of contemporary life and technological advancement. Japan's ability to preserve its heritage while embracing the future makes it an endlessly fascinating place for tourists, offering insights into a society that respects its past while looking forward to its future.

2.2. JAPANESE POP CULTURE AS A TOURIST RESOURCE

The profound impact of Japanese pop culture, particularly through the mediums of anime and manga, on global tourism and cultural exchange is both vast and nuanced (Condry, 2013; Craig, 2015; Craig, 2020b; Freedman & Slade, 2018; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007; Schodt, 1983). This cultural export has not only solidified Japan's place in the international arena but has also attracted a diverse global audience, drawn to the country to experience its unique pop culture phenomena firsthand (Kawamata et al., 2017; Lobo-Fernandes, 2005; Sheehan, 2017). The allure of Japanese pop culture, characterized by its captivating anime and manga, engaging video games, the enchanting 'kawaii' culture, and much more,

transcends mere entertainment, embedding itself into the fabric of daily life and influencing various aspects of consumer culture worldwide (Kawamata et al., 2017; Lamerichs, 2013; Sabre, 2013; Tajima et al., 2018).

Anime and manga represent the cornerstone of this cultural phenomenon, offering intricate storytelling, diverse characters, and unique art styles that captivate audiences across the globe (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007; Tajima et al., 2018). These forms of media have transcended cultural and linguistic barriers, fostering a global community of fans and enthusiasts. The narratives found in popular series such as *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1996–present), *Dragon Ball* (Toriyama, 1984–2024; series will persist), and *One Piece* (Oda, 1997–present) not only provide entertainment but also offer insights into Japanese culture, history and societal values, sparking a worldwide interest in exploring Japan beyond the screen (Bainbridge, 2014; Craig, 2020b; Mínguez-López, 2014; Singh, 2021; Sumilang-Engracia, 2018).

Anime, a highly esteemed cultural product from Japan, surpasses the traditional notion of cartoons by encompassing a wide range of genres and narratives that captivate a diverse audience beyond just children and adolescents. With their intricate storylines, rich histories and well-developed characters, anime appeals to a broad spectrum of viewers (Napier, 2005). It is a pivotal component of the Japanese entertainment industry, exerting significant influence across multiple domains such as film, video games and television, both domestically and globally. An acclaimed aspect of this medium is its extensive range and diversity, encompassing genres such as romance, comedy, tragedy and adventure. Additionally, it stands out from conventional Western animations and live-action films due to its profound exploration of psychological themes (Condry, 2013; Napier, 2005; Sato, 2007). Manga, acknowledged as Japanese graphic novels, is another vital element of Japan's popular culture, exerting a substantial impact on both domestic book sales and the worldwide dissemination of Japanese language and culture (Craig, 2020b; Sato, 2007; Schodt, 1983). Since World War II, it has become a significant primary source for anime productions and has undergone a transformation into its contemporary form (Schodt, 1983). Manga, in contrast to Western comics, possesses a wide-ranging appeal that spans all demographic groups, rendering it a distinctive and significant sector within Japan's publishing industry (Craig, 2020a; Santos, 2017). Manga encompasses a wide range of genres and employs unique narrative techniques, such as expressive character designs featuring exaggerated eyes, which intensify emotional involvement (Craig, 2020b; Santos, 2017). These elements emphasize manga's distinctive narrative style and its capacity to effectively communicate intricate emotions and stories, distinguishing it from Western counterparts (Cooper-Chen, 2011).

The global fan base for Japanese pop culture is notably diverse, encompassing casual fans who appreciate the artistry behind anime and manga; core fans who deeply engage with the culture through extensive content consumption; and enthusiastic fans who actively participate in the culture through cosplay, attending Japanese pop culture events, and contributing to fan-driven content such as fan art and fan fiction (Kawamata et al., 2017; Okamoto, 2015; Tajima et al., 2018). This categorization underscores the broad appeal and inclusive nature of Japanese pop culture, which welcomes individuals with varying levels of interest and engagement, thereby creating a vibrant, interactive community around all the elements that belong to Japanese pop culture (Gushiken & Hirata, 2014; Katsumata, 2012; Kawamata et al., 2017).

At the heart of the worldwide appeal of Japanese popular culture lies the dynamic and diverse ecosystem it engenders, distinguished by a mutually beneficial association among producers, distributors, and enthusiasts, alongside an assortment of components that cater to the interests of all, including but not limited to anime, manga, video games, fashion, gastronomy, sports, events, and art (Craig, 2020b; Severino & Silva, 2023). This ecosystem flourishes through the creation of both original content, produced by companies, and derivative content, created by consumers and active fans using material from the original content (Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This content is then distributed across multiple platforms, such as television, internet streaming services and printed media (Chambers, 2012; Clements, 2018; Craig, Adams et al., 2020; Denison, 2015).

The active participation of the fan community, through fan art, fan fiction, and especially cosplay, enriches this cultural landscape, fostering a rich, participatory culture that contributes to the continuous evolution and spread of anime and manga (Kawamata et al., 2017; Okamoto, 2015). For example, successful manga series and dōjinshi (fan-created or self-published works) often lay the groundwork for anime adaptations, video games, movies, and a wide range of merchandise, creating a synergistic effect that amplifies the popularity and visibility of both media forms (Craig, Adams et al., 2020; Denison, 2015).

Video games, another significant pillar of Japanese pop culture, have achieved global recognition and success, with iconic franchises like *Pac-Man* (Iwatani, 1980–present), *Donkey Kong* (Miyamoto, 1981–present), *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi, 1987–present) and *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1996–present) becoming integral aspects of cultural exchange (Atkins, 2017; Craig, Cuellar & Lirdluckanawong, 2020; Koizumi, 2016). These games, alongside revolutionary gaming consoles from companies like Nintendo and Sony, have showcased Japan's ability to merge technology with storytelling,

providing unique gaming experiences that draw heavily on Japanese culture, folklore, and aesthetics (Craig, Cuellar & Lirdluckanawong, 2020; Hutchinson, 2019). This fusion of traditional and modern elements in video gaming has not only entertained but also piqued global interest in the broader aspects of Japanese culture (Freedman & Slade, 2018).

The 'kawaii' culture, emphasizing cuteness and innocence, represents another aspect of Japan's cultural export. It influences global fashion, art and consumer products, with characters like Hello Kitty achieving iconic status and driving international interest in Japanese products and lifestyle (Koma, 2013). The global phenomenon of 'kawaii', with its emphasis on youthfulness and charm, appeals to a wide demographic, further enhancing Japan's cultural allure and contributing to the country's identity as a cultural powerhouse (Craig, 2020c; Freedman & Slade, 2018).

Recognizing the immense potential of pop culture as a strategic tool for tourism and diplomacy, the Japanese government launched the "Cool Japan" initiative (Close, 2018; Craig, 2020a). This ambitious strategy aims to promote Japanese arts, crafts, fashion, cuisine and entertainment worldwide, showcasing the country's innovative spirit and cultural richness (Craig, 2020a; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2014). By supporting industries related to anime, manga, video games, and 'kawaii' culture, the "Cool Japan" initiative seeks to expand its cultural influence and attract tourists eager to experience both the modern and traditional facets of Japanese life.

Tourist attractions in Japan often capitalize on the popularity of pop culture, with locales featured in anime and manga becoming pilgrimage sites for fans (Kaneko, 2013; Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). These attractions offer immersive experiences that blend entertainment with cultural exploration, drawing tourists in search of authentic pop culture experiences (Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Severino, 2022). Attractions such as the Ghibli Museum and Pokémon Centers not only celebrate Japan's creative industries but also serve as key destinations for cultural tourism, reflecting the significant impact of Japanese pop culture on fans and tourists alike (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Seaton et al., 2017).

In essence, Japanese pop culture, with anime and manga at its heart, is a formidable tool for tourism, leveraging its extensive appeal to attract visitors from around the globe (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). Through the "Cool Japan" initiative and other efforts, it harnesses this cultural capital to enhance its global image, stimulate economic growth, and promote cultural exchange (Craig, 2020a). This multifaceted approach not only celebrates Japan's creative output but also positions the country as a leading destination for cultural tourism, offering insights into a society that

respects its past while innovating for the future (Tajima et al., 2018). The enduring charm of Japanese pop culture and the curiosity it sparks among global audiences underscore its invaluable role in Japan's tourism and international relations strategy, strengthening its status as a significant cultural and economic asset.

2.3. Globalization, otaku tourism and anime pilgrimage

The rise of Japanese pop culture on the global stage has not only altered entertainment landscapes worldwide but has also significantly impacted global tourism trends, giving birth to a new era of travel motivated by a desire to engage with the cultural phenomena of anime, manga and video games (Akbaş, 2018; Hashimoto, 2011; Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kawamata et al., 2017; Palumbo & Calabrò, 2017; Rich, 2011; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Shōji, 2010). This wave of globalization, driven by the universal appeal of Japanese narratives and characters, has transcended traditional entertainment, embedding itself into the development of global tourism, creating a vibrant intersection where culture, entertainment and travel converge (Kawamata et al., 2017; Martin, n.d.; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015).

The Heisei period, from 1989 to 2019, marked a critical phase in the globalization of this Japanese trend, significantly contributing to Japan's economic growth and international stature. From this period onwards, Japanese popular culture assumed a significant role in the country's promotional strategies, as evidenced by its conspicuous appearance at major national and international events, including the 2020/21 Olympics and the countdown to the changing government era (Heisei to Reiwa period) (Craig, 2020a; Kelts, n.d.; Severino, 2022).

The worldwide influence of Japanese pop culture is clearly demonstrated by its widespread consumption (Parrot Analytics, 2018), with 42% of U.S. millennials identifying as anime enthusiasts (Carollo, 2023). This cultural phenomenon is also reflected in substantial attendance at events such as Japan Expo and Comiket (Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino & Silva, 2023). Notably, Comiket, considered the foremost global event for Japanese pop culture, recorded a significant increase of 31.57% in attendee numbers from 2018 to 2019 (Comic Market Committee, 2024). Such trends have notably impacted tourism in Japan (Martin, n.d.; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015), with areas like anime, fashion, and manga contributing to 16.2% of the principal motives for tourist visits to Japan (Arba, 2024).

Since the 1980s, and particularly with the advent of the new millennium, there has been a significant increase in the exposure and translation of Japanese films, books, animation series and video games for Western audiences, targeting the expanding fanbase of this culture (Iwabuchi, 2002). For instance, in 2023, the anime market alone in Europe constituted approximately 14% of the market share. Concurrently, the global valuation of this area (one of the key components of the Japanese pop culture trend), was estimated at 29 billion euros in the same year (Grand View Research, 2024).

At the heart of this cultural globalization lies the phenomenon of anime, a cornerstone of Japanese pop culture that has captivated audiences beyond its native shores (Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Kelts, 2006; Miller, 2019; Ramírez, 2018; Shiraishi, 1997). Anime's has received international acclaim with series like *Dragon Ball* (Okazaki et al., 1986–present), *Doraemon* (Shibayama et al., 1973–present), *Sailor Moon* (Satô et al., 1992–2016), and *Pokémon* (Yuyama et al., 1997–present) spearheading this popularity. This medium has been instrumental in popularizing Japanese culture globally, challenging the perception of animation as solely for children's entertainment and underscoring its essential role in Japan's global cultural outreach (Craig, 2015; Napier, 2005). The fascination for its narratives extends beyond mere viewership, compelling fans to embark on journeys to Japan, seeking the landscapes and cities that serve as backdrops to their favorite series (Kawamata et al., 2017; Tajima et al., 2018). This pilgrimage, driven by a blend of admiration and curiosity, is a testament to the profound impact of Japanese pop culture on its global audience (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015).

Manga plays a similarly influential role in shaping international perceptions of Japan. The diverse genres and themes explored in manga have attracted a wide readership, further broadening the appeal of Japanese pop culture (Napier, 2005; Shōji, 2010). The tangible nature of manga, coupled with the immersive worlds it creates, has spurred fans to visit Japan, not only as tourists but as enthusiasts eager to explore the origins of their beloved narratives (Hernández-Pérez, 2019; Kawamata et al., 2017; Mori, 2022; Seaton et al., 2017). This influence is particularly notable in France, where manga titles represent a significant portion of new literature translations, indicating the widespread acceptance of Japanese pop culture (Bouissou, 2014).

Other examples of this globalization are related with the film industry, with iconic Japanese contributions like *Godzilla* (Honda et al., 1954–present) and the works of director Hayao Miyazaki (like the Oscar-winning movie *Spirited Away*, 2001) having profound impacts, influencing major American productions, and demonstrating the global resonance of Japanese storytelling and artistic techniques (Chambers, 2012; Clements, 2018; Miller, 2019; Tsutsui, 2010; Yang, 2017).

The broad appeal of Japanese pop culture, extending to video games, fashion and cuisine, underscores its characteristic diversity and global acceptance (Allen & Sakamoto, 2014; Kawamata et al., 2017). Brands such as Hello Kitty have become household names

internationally, illustrating the universal appeal of Japanese merchandise, series, and films (Yano, 2018). Japanese cuisine has similarly gained international recognition, with exports and adaptations of Japanese dishes, such as the California Roll, exemplifying the global acceptance of Japanese culinary culture (Sakamoto & Allen, 2011; Tajima et al., 2018).

Japan's deployment of 'soft power' through its pop culture has successfully captured the attention of a broad audience, positioning Japan as an innovative, unique, and intriguing destination (Akbaş, 2018; Isshiki & Miyazaki, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2002; Palumbo & Calabrò, 2017). This appeal has been further enhanced by global celebrities, such as pop star Gwen Stefani and rock band Linkin Park, who have integrated elements of Japanese pop culture into their music and videos, respectively (Mikami, 2011).

Prominent international brands originating from Japan, such as Pokémon, have achieved worldwide recognition, with Pokémon identified as the highest-grossing franchise globally in 2019, surpassing other iconic American brands like Mickey Mouse and Star Wars (TitleMax, n.d.). This underscores the significant impact of Japanese pop culture on the global stage, with other Japanese brands also leading in international revenue generation.

The "Cool Japan" initiative has indeed successfully branded Japan as a 'cool' destination. This campaign has positioned Japan as a cultural superpower, celebrated by generations for its contributions to anime, manga, video games, and other elements that are popular in Japanese culture (Craig, 2020a; Seaton et al., 2017). The dissemination of Japanese cultural products as a significant element of the contemporary cultural landscape demonstrates the strategic use of artistic works in media as an effective tool for Japan's international promotion. This strategy has cultivated a growing fanbase worldwide, with 'otakus' increasingly engaging with Japanese pop culture through various media, events and travel, seeking firsthand experiences of the culture (Hashimoto, 2011; Sabre, 2013).

This global engagement has given rise to contents tourism, a form of travel motivated by media content such as films, books, and, notably and more recently, to the dynamic worlds depicted in anime and manga (Seaton et al., 2017; Yamamura, 2020). Contents tourism encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from visiting filming locations to attending fan events (Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). It is characterized by a desire to experience firsthand the settings and cultures depicted in various media, with Japanese pop culture serving as a significant draw for international tourists. This form of tourism transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, inviting enthusiasts to immerse themselves in the real-life counterparts of their fictional universes, thereby blurring the lines between reality

and fantasy (Seaton et al., 2017). Japan, with its rich array of cultural exports, and owing to its influential pop culture that has captivated a global audience, has emerged as a focal point for contents tourism (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Kaneko, 2013; Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015).

Within the realm of contents tourism, otaku tourism emerges as a distinct segment. Otaku denotes individuals with a passionate interest in elements related with Japanese pop culture, as anime and manga (B-Ikeguchi, 2018). Otaku tourism, a specific subset of contents tourism, caters to fans of Japanese anime, manga, video games, and related pop culture segments (Craig, 2020a; Okamoto, 2015). It is characterized by visits to locations celebrated in anime and manga, including shops, cafes, museums, and districts like Akihabara in Tokyo, dubbed the 'holy land of otakus' for its comprehensive offerings related to anime, manga, merchandise, and video games (Galbraith, 2019; Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, 2014; Seaton et al., 2017). This area, among others, has developed services and infrastructure, such as museums, cafes, restaurants and theme parks, to accommodate tourists and day visitors, thereby bolstering local economies (Craig, 2020a; Okamoto, 2009; Seaton et al., 2017). This form of tourism enhances local economies through the growth of tourism (Brazo & Fonseca Filho, 2018; Mori, 2022).

Anime tourism and anime pilgrimage are targeted at fans whose travel goals are closely linked to anime and manga (Denison, 2010; Okamoto, 2015). Anime tourism refers to the act of visiting certain locations that are connected to these visual Japanese pop culture elements (Matsuyama, 2022). This form falls under the genre of otaku tourism, encompassing a range of activities that involve Japanese popular culture (Okamoto, 2015; Yamamura, 2015). These activities include attending themed events, visiting museums, touring coffee shops and restaurants, and appreciating sculptures. The act of visiting these real-world settings allows fans to transcend the boundary between fiction and reality, offering a tangible link to the fictional worlds that have captivated their imaginations (Severino, 2022; Tajima et al., 2018).

Anime pilgrimage, the most immersive aspect of anime tourism, involves fans visiting specific sites featured in anime, often to replicate scenes, take photographs, and engage in local traditions or festivals depicted (Okamoto, 2015; Ono et al., 2020). This practice not only fosters a deeper appreciation for Japanese culture among international fans but also stimulates local economies. Towns and cities featured in popular anime have experienced an increase in visitors, leading to the establishment of new businesses and services catering to these fans (Okamoto, 2015; Steine, 2019). Furthermore, anime pilgrimages often extend beyond simple visits,

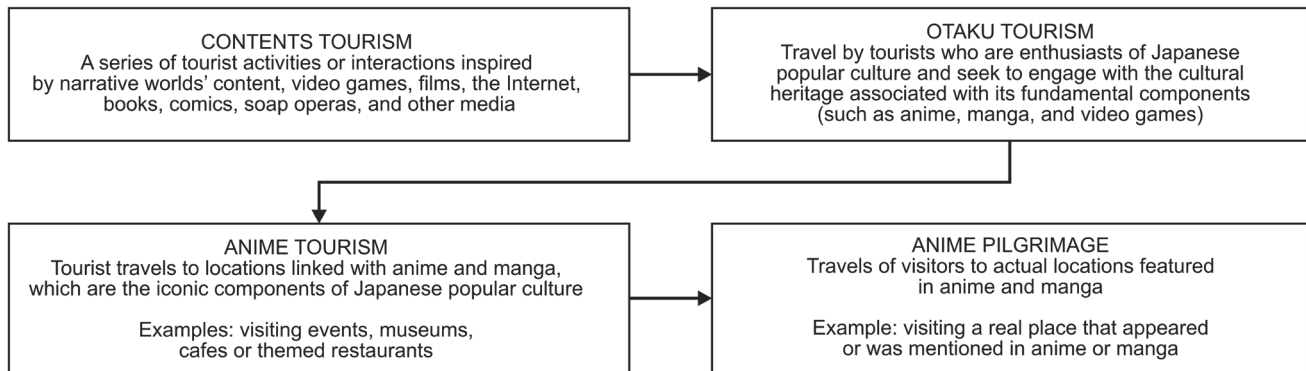| CONTENTS TOURISM
A series of tourist activities or interactions inspired
by narrative worlds' content, video games, films, the Internet,
books, comics, soap operas, and other media | → | OTAKU TOURISM
Travel by tourists who are enthusiasts of Japanese
popular culture and seek to engage with the cultural
heritage associated with its fundamental components
(such as anime, manga, and video games) |
| ANIME TOURISM
Tourist travels to locations linked with anime and manga,
which are the iconic components of Japanese popular culture

Examples: visiting events, museums,
cafes or themed restaurants | → | ANIME PILGRIMAGE
Travels of visitors to actual locations featured
in anime and manga

Example: visiting a real place that appeared
or was mentioned in anime or manga |

Figure 1. Relationship between concepts of tourism and otaku pilgrimage
Source: author, based on: Brazo and Fonseca Filho (2018), Okamoto (2015), Seaton and Yamamura (2015), Severino (2022), Steine (2019), and Yamamura (2015)

as fans participate in activities that deepen their connection to the narrative, such as engaging in local customs, supporting community projects, or attending events celebrating the anime (Okamoto, 2015; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Yamamura, 2015).

In summary, as shown in Figure 1, the anime pilgrimage is a facet of anime tourism, a broad notion that encompasses the world of anime and manga within the context of otaku tourism. These interconnected forms of tourism, driven by Japan's soft power and global cultural outreach, underscore the significant impact of pop culture on international tourism trends (Seaton et al., 2017). They reveal a growing segment of travellers motivated by a desire to connect with the cultural artifacts of their beloved media, offering a unique blend of cultural immersion, fandom celebration, and economic engagement (Seaton et al., 2017; Steine, 2019). Through contents tourism, otaku tourism, anime tourism and anime pilgrimage, Japan has not only expanded its tourism sector but also cultivated a global community united by shared interests and passions, further consolidating its status as a cultural superpower in the contemporary world.

3. Conclusion

This study reveals the dynamic interplay between Japan's rich cultural heritage and its vibrant pop culture, illustrating their collective impact on shaping Japan's global identity as a captivating travel destination. Japan's adept fusion of tradition with innovation not only attracts a global audience but also fosters a deep engagement with its diverse cultural landscape. The strategic leveraging of pop culture, especially through phenomena like anime and manga, serves as a testament to Japan's effective use of soft power, enhancing its tourism industry and facilitating cultural exchanges that underscore its international appeal.

The "Cool Japan" initiative exemplifies Japan's innovative approach to harnessing cultural capital, illustrating the powerful synergy between entertainment and tourism. This not only deepens global appreciation for Japanese culture but also contributes to economic growth and cultural diplomacy. The enthusiastic global response to otaku tourism activities highlights the significant role of pop culture in promoting cultural heritage while stimulating international tourism interest.

When contemplating the future direction of otaku tourism, it is crucial to acknowledge both the extensive opportunities and the potential challenges that may emerge. As Japan continues to capitalize on the global appeal of its pop culture, the influx of tourists drawn specifically to otaku-related activities is expected to grow. This surge offers substantial potential to broaden and enhance Japan's tourism offerings, promoting deeper cultural exchange and understanding, while also stimulating economic activity in lesser-known areas featured in popular media. However, managing this growth is imperative to ensure sustainability and to protect local cultures and environments. Overtourism, which could lead to overcrowding at popular destinations, poses a significant risk, potentially compromising the quality of visitor experiences and the integrity of local communities (Lee, 2022).

Looking forward, Japan's commitment to blending its historical legacies with modern advancements promises to further solidify its position as a premier cultural tourism destination. The allure of its pop culture, coupled with its historical and natural attractions, positions Japan as a unique destination for those seeking comprehensive cultural experiences. This underscores the importance of cultural identity in destination branding and suggests potential strategies for other nations to enhance their tourism appeal through cultural assets. The discussion also points to the need for further research into the impacts of globalization on cultural identity and tourism sustainability.

Japan's example highlights the transformative power of culture in bridging global communities, advocating a balanced approach to promoting cultural heritage that respects authenticity and encourages mutual appreciation. By leveraging its unique cultural offerings, Japan not only enhances its tourism appeal but also sets a precedent for cultural exchange and globalization. This study not only reaffirms Japan's influential role in the global tourism landscape but also encourages a broader reflection on how culture can be a pivotal force in shaping destination images and fostering global understanding.

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