

Research Horizons

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Softly, Softly, Anime Fans are Drawn to Japan

The popularity of anime, Japanese animated television shows and films, is motivating Hong Kong fans to visit Japan in a powerful example of cultural “soft power”, argue the SHTM’s Dr Wantanee Suntikul, Ms Carmen Li and a collaborator in a recently published research paper. Focusing on the reaction of Generation Y anime fans from Hong Kong to the Japanese government’s promotion of anime content under the “Cool Japan” initiative, the researchers provide ground-breaking evidence of how and why promoting a country’s popular culture abroad can motivate inbound tourism. Their results understandably have profound implications for destination marketers and policy makers in Japan and beyond.

Hearts and Minds

Tourists today, the researchers observe, are more sophisticated and more demanding than ever before, placing destinations under increasing pressure to find new and better ways of attracting visitors. Nowhere is this pressure felt more keenly than in the Asia-Pacific region, where growing competition has recently led to a rise in innovative strategies to entice tourists by advertising countries’ unique cultural assets abroad.

This is an important part of countries’ wider strategic drive to gain global influence by exercising “soft” power. The researchers explain that whereas “hard” power involves the use or threat of force, soft power “represents a more indirect way of influencing people based on the attraction of ideas and culture”. It is focused on winning hearts and minds, and it works best when based on popular culture, given the enormous influence such content has on people’s attitudes and values.

The researchers show that innovative soft-power strategies “can be significant tools for building positive impressions, counteracting negative impressions and gaining cultural power.” Films, novels, and games, for example, “can stimulate travel to the destinations associated with them”, which in turn helps to forge a positive image of the destinations overseas. The use of such tools has already had “a demonstrable effect on tourism” in the Asia-Pacific region, the researchers report, as overseas enthusiasts flood in to visit the production studios of popular films and television series.

Cool Japan

The researchers show that Japan is a shining example of the

judicious use of soft power. This is exemplified by the “Cool Japan” initiative, launched in 2012 to promote Japan through content such as animation (anime), comics, films, fashion and food. Testament to the success of this initiative, and to the government’s decades-long strategy of nation branding, Japan is emerging as a cultural superpower. “The new and cooler image of Japan projected to the world”, write the researchers, “has been well embraced throughout the world, and especially in the Asia-Pacific region”.

Anime is one of the most convenient channels for spreading Japanese culture. “Japan’s dissemination of anime as a cultural diplomacy product”, the researchers explain, “has aroused the desire of people around the world to better acquaint themselves with Japanese culture”. Some of its biggest fans are in Hong Kong, where Japanese popular culture has been enormously popular since the 1970s – long before Hello Kitty, icon of *kawaii* (“cute”), was appointed as ambassador to Hong Kong as part of the hugely successful “Visit Japan” campaign.

The researchers note that “the anime content of such promotional endeavours appeals primarily to younger Hong Kong citizens, the so-called ‘Generation Y’”. In 2017, 2 million tourists from Hong Kong,

equivalent to about 29% of the region's total population, visited Japan. Many of these visitors were members of Generation Y and anime enthusiasts, passionate about the medium's "complex storylines and engagement with often profound themes of human existence".

It may seem no great leap to assume that anime consumption actually motivates young people in Hong Kong to travel to Japan. Surprisingly, however, very little empirical research has investigated the relationship between this pop culture medium and Generation Y's actual travel intentions and behaviour. Recognising that such insights "would be useful to destination management and marketing organizations, as well as broader soft power pop culture promotion initiatives", the researchers set out to fill this gap.

Anime Fans

To explore the real travel behaviour of Hong Kong's vast pool of young anime consumers, the researchers set out to survey Hong Kong citizens born between 1981 and 2002 who had watched anime at some point in their lives. These members of Generation Y completed a questionnaire at two large anime-related events, Comic World Hong Kong and C3 in Hong Kong.

Ultimately, the researchers were able to collect information on anime consumption and motivation to visit Japan from 208 members of Generation Y. The composition of the sample was itself interesting. A slight majority of the respondents were female, which, the researchers suggest, may reflect the recent rise of "female-centered narratives" in Asian manga. More of the female respondents had visited Japan than their male counterparts, but the male respondents generally tended to watch more anime than females.

Anime and Travel

Analysing the survey's results, the researchers found that they "affirm earlier findings that those who consume anime are motivated to travel to Japan and possess a positive image of the destination". Indeed, "animation" was the respondents' top reason for visiting Japan (to attend anime-related events, for example).

However, the picture is a little more complicated, as the researchers note that "this positive effect is dependent upon, and somewhat proportional to, the extent of one's involvement with anime in terms of time spent". They found that viewers classified as *enthusiastic* (who watched Japanese anime for three or more hours per week) exhibited a very strong desire to attend anime-related events/attractions and visit Japan as an anime destination. However, the researchers warn that "merely casual engagement with the medium is not sufficient to influence such a desire".

This finding has far-reaching implications for destination marketing organisations (DMOs), policy makers and even governments, say the researchers, as it shows that "measures that promote increased consumption of anime, as an instrument of Japanese soft power, could indeed play a role in motivating youth to desire to visit Japan". DMOs should aim to develop "anime products and events that meet the unique needs and preferences of different groups of anime fans, constituting different potential tourism subniches".

The researchers add that young people with less interest in anime may be deterred by their parents and teachers, many of whom disapprove of anime's often sexualised portrayals of romance. Perhaps, then, Japanese DMOs might also consider ways of promoting a more wholesome image of the medium among

members of Hong Kong's older generation to help maintain and grow this invaluable source market for tourism.

Beyond Japan

This study offers a striking demonstration of how travel motivation can be understood within the dynamics of soft power and provides the first empirical segmentation of anime consumers that links degrees of anime involvement with motivation to travel. "As competition among tourism destinations increases in the Asia-Pacific region", note the researchers, "understanding these nuances can provide a valuable marketing advantage". But the implications extend beyond tourism to geopolitics, and from Japan to the global stage, as any country that wields soft power has a better chance of attracting investment, exporting its products and getting its own way in foreign policy.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Attracting tourists is an increasingly important part of states' "soft power" initiatives.
- Japan is very successful in promoting its culture overseas, especially through anime content.
- Young people in Hong Kong who consume lots of anime are more likely to travel to Japan.
- Japan could introduce measures to encourage high levels of anime consumption overseas to further stimulate tourism to Japan.

Elizabeth Agyeiwaah, Wantanee Sunkikul and Li Yee Shan Carmen (2019). "'Cool Japan': Anime, Soft Power and Hong Kong Generation Y Travel to Japan". *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, pp. 127-148.