

# ご当地キャラ (GOTOCHIKYARA) & ゆるキャラ (YURUKYARA) - THE FUSION OF POP CULTURE IN PLACE BRANDING IN JAPAN

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the prevalence and adoption of popular culture in the establishing of place branding in Japan. While Japan has been famously known as the land of anime, the obsession and attraction towards characters are not merely confined to games, films and comics. The adoption of characters as mascots by various products and services serve as a reminder of the pertinence of such characters in the social landscape. In the efforts of encouraging and further developing domestic tourism, local cities and prefectures have adopted different mascots accordingly (gotochikayara). After the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, inbound tourism took a plunge however statistics reflect that domestic tourism only took a 2% drop in June and July. These mascots are viewed as magnets in drawing a higher rate of domestic tourists. This study begins with the background and explanation of the cute or kawaii culture and the pertinence of characters and mascots. ‘The concepts of ‘gotochikyara’ and yurukyara are also introduced followed by the drivers of travel and destination choices. This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research approach where young adults (university students) are interviewed in order to deduce if their travel decisions were made based on the influence of ‘yurukyara’. The findings reveal that while yurukyara attracts children and the elderly, it is less appealing to young adults where travel decisions are not made based on yurukyara. However, there is still potential for yurukyara to grow stronger in the young adult segment if effective strategies are formulated and executed by the local governments.

## KEYWORDS

Domestic Tourism; Japan, Popular Culture, Gotochikyara, Yurukyara

## INTRODUCTION

Japan, a nation of many wonders where east meets west in a very unique way. This lies in the very fact that Japan has a fascinating fusion of both, traditional and modern elements. It's a nation where tradition and modernization coexists and forms the fabric of a diversified society. Simply take a stroll down Shibuya and you would be enveloped and awed by the bright, neon lights, the vibrant atmosphere and the flood of people. Turn into Harajuku and you would be greeted with the youngsters dressed in Gothic – Lolita styles. Around the corner, a stone's throw away lies Meiji Shrine – stepping into the grounds will instantly transport one away from the city of Tokyo and into ancient Japan. The various sights, sounds and colors of the nation from Hokkaido in the north to the Okinawa Islands in the south would prove enchanting and intriguing making Japan a captivating destination.

Domestic tourism is a very strong industry in Japan. Most Japanese take to traveling within the nation and there is an immensely wide array of domestic travel plans and packages that are tailored to the different needs of the travelers, for instance the ones offered by JR East under the JR East View brand name. Apart from relying on the appeal of local attractions, most towns and cities in Japan have also adopted a character to help boost tourism seeing that characters have always played an integral part in Japanese culture.

This paper examines the effectiveness in the adoption of cute culture by the local governments in the quest of revitalizing domestic tourism among the young adults. The first part of the paper will provide a look at the background of characters and their place in Japanese culture. Followed by the factors of tourism choices highlighted by Clark and Middleton (2007) and Cooper (2008). The methodology and findings of this study is then discussed. Finally, the discussion of the key issues that arose from this study is presented.

## CUTE CULTURE AND YURUKYARA

In terms of products and exports, Japan is often associated with commendable quality and cutting-edge technology. However, Japanese export is not limited to quality, hi-tech products. While Japan may be dimming as a manufacturing powerhouse in terms of its mainline industries surrendering ground to South Korea and China, it has re-emerged as a trailblazer in, of all things, pop culture (Craft 2005). Japan's Pop culture has been chalking big dollars and has attracted a massive following globally. Japanese names, *anime* and *manga*, have entered the international lexicon with a new generation of young Americans, Europeans and Asians have grown up watching not Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny but Japanese cartoons, from *Astro Boy* to *Doraemon*, *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball* and *Crayon Shinchan* (Craig 2000).

Cute culture is an integral part of Japanese popular culture. Cute or 'kawaii' culture has dictated the demand for goods and services; leading to the rise of 'maid cafes' and concepts such as grotesque cute (NBC News, 2006). There are unwritten rules of how to dress, carry oneself and behave; body gestures and the like that would qualify and determine if a person as cute. These 'rules' are religiously adhered to by, both women and men in their efforts to be seen as cute. Aside from clothing and displayed behavior, mascots and characters are key in embodying cute culture (Drake, 2001; Mead, 2002; Roach, 1999). Characters and mascots have become the face of various companies where they are believed to enhance the sales of products and services, even politicians are also using mascots (Kyodo News, 2012; Torres, 2012).

Cuteness is a common trait in Japan as it is ubiquitously found in decorations and illustrations (Schilling, 1997; Yano, 2000). From construction figures of rabbits to rice balls decorated to resemble pandas and other cute animals or characters, it is a very common sight to find cuteness in every nook and corner of the country. According to a survey done by CREA in 1992, 'kawaii' or cute is the most loved, widely and habitually used word in modern day Japan (CREA, November 1992, p. 58, quoted in Kinsella, 1995). Among the famous Japanese characters that embody the essence of cute ranges from Pikachu to Doraemon, the well-loved robot cat from the future. Popular cute culture icon, Hello Kitty is also another epitome of cuteness and has fans both locally as well as overseas (Belson & Bremmer, 2003). The appeal of cuteness has witnessed the success of characters in terms of sales of goods and brand equity. As of 2008, Hello Kitty alone has contributed to half of Sanrio's \$1 billion turnover (Walker, 2008).

Cute or *Kawaii* has been subjected to various definitions. McVeigh (2000) defines it according to different categories: baby, very young, young, maternal, teen, adult, sexy, pornography, child pornography, authority and corporate. On the other hand Yano (2004) defines it as interrelated dimensions of physical, relational/ emotional, and sexual. Masabuchi (1994) lists seven elements that define cute: smallness, naivete and innocence, youth (especially the very young), *amae*, roundness, pastel colors and animal-like qualities. The manifestation of these elements is typically found in the clothing and accessories as well as behavior and conduct for instance the trend in 2012 where young females would wear animal tails or fix the tails on to their bags as accessories or even get a complete animal costume (O'Neil, 2012; Weird News Asia, 2012; Wilson, 2012).

Overall, the core elements of cute are found in more 'negative' traits than positive such as grotesque, neediness, defenselessness, and the inability to stand alone as these evoke a sense of pity, that essentially leads to sympathy, even a maternal feeling and the need of wanting to protect (Harris, 2001; Lebra, 1984; Merish, 1996; West, 2008; Yano, 2004). Kinsella (1995) stresses that childlikeness where sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances form the definition of *kawaii*.

Cute culture basically began in the 1970s when Japanese teenage girls started writing in rounded childish letters and characters (MacEwan, 1995). It further gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s from a fusion of post-modern desire and infantile affectation (Belson & Bremmer, 2003). However, the psychological need to be cute is not a new concept that has recently emerged in Japanese society. On the contrary it has long been around in the Japanese culture, in the form of *amae* (甘え) or interdependence indulgence; a concept used to describe often a childish behavior that stems from the desire to be loved and to be indulged and taken care of (Doi, 1979). There is the element of dependence and this persists even into adulthood. Doi (1979) has also pointed out that the desire to look cute is a typical expression of *amae*; be in the clothing and appearance or even the usage of childlike words that demonstrate the distinction between children and adults has become blurred. While 'amae' is a cultural aspect other factors have also led to the exponential growth of cute culture. Escapism from the stress of everyday living and space constraints in the city has also been cited as reasons that the Japanese are fixated on cute things and fantasy (West, 2008).

Leveraging on the appeal of characters, local governments have introduced characters called 'yurukyara' (ゆるキャラ) that represent their respective towns. Yurukyara basically means 'loose character' and are referred to as 'loose' in a sense that it is badly executed design that aims to appear cute (but somehow ends up not). This was a term coined but Jun Miura, a kitsch connoisseur who unveiled his first yurukyara in 2002. Later, a boom that started in 2007, known as



## **2. Demographics**

Demographic variables such as age, social class, income, education are the most common used characteristics to analyze the tourism market. In Japan, the huge growth in the aging population has become one of the most attractive tourism segments for tour operators in recent years. This is noticeable with JR having constant campaigns and advertising to encourage older travelers, enticing them with the 'traditional beauty and landscapes of Japan'. Many elderly travelers voiced their feelings of safety and comfort traveling domestically versus abroad where they would stress over language and cultural differences.

## **3. Attractions and Climate**

Visiting a destination is often triggered by its scenic attractions and favorable climate. Examples are the numerous trips of Northern Europeans to the Mediterranean region for a seaside vacation or the flux of city dwellers to countryside locations. In Japan, national parks welcome a surge of travelers during the summer season where families and friends can enjoy hiking, camping and a host of outdoor activities while still being able to soak and relax in the hot springs.

## **4. Socio-Culture**

Socio-cultural attitudes towards tourism greatly vary between different nations. While in one country vacation is a luxury in another one it has become the norm to go on one or several holidays throughout the year. The length of vacation, the motivation factors for traveling and the expectations of a destination depend on each national cultural background and pose a challenge to tourism planners. In Japan, students in elementary schools, junior high schools and high schools often take school excursions and trip both domestic and international. On the other hand, office workers have limited vacation days and this definitely skews the destination choices to domestic spots.

## **5. Population Mobility**

The *mobility* of a population greatly influences tourism demand, especially for domestic tourism, as the ownership of a car makes visiting nearby locations possible and convenient. In Japan, car rentals are widely available hence the population is fairly mobile.

## **6. Governmental Regulations**

Governments around the world impose various rules and regulations to safeguard their population. Examples are laws for customer protection, fair competition, regulations on holidays, visa permits, and environmental protection.

## **7. Media and Promotions**

Promoting travel through media communications will bring awareness to the consumers and the possible subsequent purchase of the travel product. Advertising on billboards, train stations and leaflets as well as magazine and through tv programs are commonly done in Japan.

From a psychological perspective, Kolter and Makens (2006) outlined a list of determinants that influence travel, prestige, escape and relaxation, education, social interaction, family bonding and self-discovery.

### **1. Prestige**

People being able to afford a vacation, especially a long distance trip or an exotic location, have always been credited with a certain level of prestige.

### **2. Escape & Relaxation**

A basic human desire is the escape of the every day routine, and tourism marketing campaigns often incorporate the catchphrase 'escape'. The hot spring experience markets the timeless feel of old Japan, a place where one can go back in time and relax.

### **3. Education**

Tourism has often the purpose of increasing someone's knowledge and widening the understanding of other cultures. A very prominent historical example is the tour of Otaru or Nikko to learn the town's history.

#### **4. *Social interaction***

Meeting other people aside from the immediate surrounding has been identified as a very strong motivator for traveling resulting in the designing of appealing resorts and cruises.

#### **5. *Family bonding***

Whether between marriage partners or between parents and children, travel has become an effective tool in improving family interaction.

#### **6. *Self-discovery***

The desire to 'find oneself' can result from different triggers: for example a dramatic event in ones life such as the death of a family member or a divorce. Another example is temporary employment opportunities at resorts or youth hotels are appealing to young people who wish to engage in self-discovery. People embark on solo travels for self-discovery want to enjoy some alone time or to seek for answers within themselves. The growth in this segment has led to various tour packages aimed at the single traveler. An example is seen is the '*hitori tabi*' (travel alone) packages that are proliferating the market in Japan.

### **METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN**

As the focus of the study is to examine the effectiveness of yurukyara in encouraging domestic tourism, this study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research methodology, with the qualitative focusing on conducting an exploratory research in order to provide more comprehensive findings. Exploratory research is used in seeking insights into the general nature of a problem, the possible decision alternatives and the relevant variables that need to be considered with hypotheses being either vague and ill defined, or do not exist at all (Aaker, Kumar & Day, 2004).

330 sets of questionnaires were distributed to young, university adults between the ages of 18 – 24 with 58% males and 42% females. Young adults were the target of this study as the frequency of travel is higher within this age group versus working adults. The questionnaire contained a mix of various techniques where both open and closed ended questions were adopted. The closed ended questions adopted a 3 and 5-point Likert scale rating system. There were also multiple-choice questions and questions that required the respondents to rank in order of importance. The open-ended questions utilized projective methods of picture representation and word association techniques.

Qualitative research prioritizes the study of perceptions, meanings, and emotions in defining how social experiences are formed and interpreted in the socially constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2005). It is concerned with empathizing with the consumer and establishing the meanings that he/she attaches to products, brands and other marketing objects (Hague & Jackson, 1996). Therefore, the methods adopted by a qualitative researcher are used to gauge and look for attitudes, feelings and perceptions (Seidler, 2003). In terms of qualitative research, focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 10 groups of 8 participants each (a total of 80 participants).

### **FINDINGS**

Basically, the findings can be organized into the following key areas.

#### ***Recognition***

Around 57% of the participants were aware of only one yurukyara; out of which 36% knew of only the yurukyara from their respective hometowns. While the balance of 21% were aware of at least one yurukyara excluding the mascot from their respective hometowns.

#### ***Yurukyara Effectiveness – Reason for destination selection***

Based on the questionnaire and focus group discussions, only 6% indicate that they are interested to visit certain towns mainly because they are keen to 'meet' the yurukyara personally. When probed further as to the reasons for wanting to meet the yurukyara, 87% stated that the yurukyara had a positive image and was known to be very 'kind' hence, they felt the kindness of the yurukyara made the mascot attractive and cute, further propelling them to meet the

kind yurukyara. While 13% felt that the mascot was famous and that was the sole driving factor for them to go see the mascot.

### ***Destination factors/ choices***

While 6% cited that they would make travel decisions based on yurukyara, 94% listed other reason as factors that determine their choice of domestic destinations. The top factor was money and the costs involved in travelling followed by activities that can be enjoyed with friends or their travel companion. Mapped against the travelling factors by Kotler & Makens (2006), social interaction and escape and relaxation were the main two factors cited. 92% indicated that they made destination choices after discussing with their friends whom they usually travel with. Only 7% indicated that they have travelled solo.

### ***Character goods***

While only 6% cited yurukyara as a driving factor for them to visit certain towns, 84% indicated that they would purchase yurukyara merchandise if they happen to see it and found it cute while on their vacation.

### ***Perception***

A high percentage of 87% did not view yurukyara as an effective tool in increasing tourism as they felt the mascots were not attractive and did not possess strong enough appeal to get more people to visit the respective towns or cities. Out of this 87%, a staggering 78% were convinced that the introduction of yurukyara only appealed to a small segment of the public for instance children and 'otaku' ('geeks'). Some even questioned and debated the logic of introducing yurukyara versus running more 'direct' advertising methods such as aggressive commercials and offers to get more tourists. Most were indifferent towards yurukyara or had a negative perception altogether.

### ***Appeal***

96% felt that yurukyara was developed to target children; to get these kids to ask their parents to take them to the respective destinations in hopes of meeting the yurukyara. While on the other hand, 82% also felt that while yurukyara was targeted at children, Disneyland was more for young adults. Hence, while 96% were drawn to Disneyland and Disney characters, they were mostly interested in Duffy and Shellie May instead of Mickey and Minnie. Hence, in this case Disney characters were definitely one of the key driving forces in people to visit Disneyland.

## **DISCUSSION**

From the findings of the study demonstrate that yurukyara does appeal to a certain percentage of the society, it is by no means the most effective method of increasing domestic tourism among the young adult segment that tends to place importance on friends and socializing. While children and the elderly have been found to react positively towards yurukyara, not all young adults seem to be attracted to the mascots. Based on the study, young adults are more likely to prefer popular characters such as Duffy or manga characters versus yurukyara as they have more exposure with the former through trips to Disneyland, recommendation from friends or magazines.

Even though yurukyara was not found to be the major factor in garnering tourists from the young adult segment, the high percentage recorded in the intent of purchase of yurukyara goods can be viewed as a means of helping local industries and the local tourism sector. This was definitely seen as a contradiction since most of the participants had either an indifferent or negative view towards yurukyara yet they were willing to purchase the merchandise. The contradiction is found to stem from the fact that though they personally feel indifferent or negativity towards yurukyara, the implicit symbolism of the yurukyara that of representing the essence of the town is acknowledged. Hence, the merchandise translates to travel memories and souvenirs.

An interesting aspect was uncovered during the study. Most young adults who were aware of yurukyara and could name at least one yurukyara were only able to name the mascot from their hometown. Hence, the exposure that they have received from various local media has ingrained in them the existence of yurukyara. However, most of them were not interested to learn about other mascots in other local areas. Hence while the participants are well aware of the local prevalence of various yurukyara, it does not interest them to check up on other available yurukyara. Therefore the actual penetration rate of yurukyara is rather low.

The findings reveal a huge gap between the objective of the creation and adoption of yurukyara by local governments versus its success within the young adult segment. While characters continue to play an important role in the Japanese society, local governments should formulate strategies that can gain more public awareness; apart from the locals about the respective yurukyara as well as create a stronger appeal and value in the mascots in order to engage the young adults and solicit their interests. The strategy should encompass the mascots building relationships with the young adults and not only focus on local products and festivals but, rather humanize yurukyara so that the young adults can identify with the yurukyara.

### **The Road Ahead**

This study paves the way for future research in areas such as formulating strategies in bridging the gap between the objective of the yurukyara and the actual public perception as well as enhancing the appeal of yurukyara.

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