

## Pop culture tourism: A perspective from Japan

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### Abstract

Consumers who patronize pop culture would desire to connect with it and therefore tend to travel to destinations related to that culture. This is referred to as “pop culture tourism.” Among various genres, such as movies, TV dramas, music, games, animes, and so on, movies were the major topic of research interest in the 1990s, and thereafter, TV Drama since 2000. This was largely due to the Korean Wave that became popular throughout Asia and beyond during that time. Meanwhile, the impact of anime on tourism has been mainly studied in Japan. Since there were only a few studies on the differences between the genres, this study attempts to bridge this gap through a literature review in this field. The findings reveal some similarities and differences in tourists’ motivations, experiences, and the like, across genres. Several issues that need to be discussed in the future are also mentioned.

### Keywords

Pop culture tourism  
Screen tourism  
Anime tourism

### Introduction

Due to the development of the Internet and modern media, as well as the new business models in the cultural industry these days (e.g., Subscription Video On Demand or SVOD), people have unprecedented easy access to a vast and diverse range of cultural products from different parts of the world. The current cultural traffic is much more dynamic and multi-directional than in the past.

This cultural reception has a profound impact on consumers’ lifestyles, attitudes, and behavior. People travel to certain destinations, purchase goods and services, and learn different languages to feel the connection with the fictional stories of their interest. This phenomenon is well-known in the tourism industry (Whang et al., 2016).

Studies on tourism triggered by pop culture began in the 1990s and have been gaining more research interest since 2000 (Frost, 2010). Among the various genres, movies garnered the most interest for research in the 1990s. However, since then, TV drama has also emerged as a much-discussed subject, largely due to the Korean Wave (also known as Hallyu) that started in Asia. Meanwhile, the influences of anime on tourism have been discussed by several researchers in Japan. This study attempts to bridge the gap through a review of the literature on the different genres.

### Pop culture tourism research overseas

Mainly focusing on big-budget Western movies, pop culture tourism was a minor topic in tourism studies in the early 1990s (e.g., Riley & Van Doren, 1992, Riley et al., 1998). Researchers assume that the discussion based on movies is also applicable to TV dramas (Kim & Wang, 2012). However, the Korean Wave has attracted significant interest in TV dramas, because its initial popularity was majorly due to such media (Beeton, 2006; Kim et al., 2009).

Several terms refer to tourism related to pop culture (Kim & Wang, 2012), for instance, “film-induced tourism” (Beeton, 2006), “movie-induced tourism” (Riley et al., 1998), and

“screen tourism” (Kim et al., 2009). In Japan, the term, “content tourism” is widely accepted (Okamoto 2018a, 2018b, Otani et al., 2018; Seaton & Yamamura, 2016). We use “pop culture tourism” here to refer to tourism originating from various genres of pop culture, “screen tourism” for tourism originating from movies and TV dramas, and “anime tourism” for tourism triggered by animes.

Studies on the influence of pop culture on consumer behavior in tourism are closely related to other research fields, especially media and communication, cultural studies, and sociology, among others. Tourists’ intentions to visit, and post-visit satisfaction and loyalty are the most common outcome indicators. Meanwhile, as antecedent indicators, audience involvement, tourist motivation, perceived value, destination image, on-site experiences, celebrities, and so on, are frequently used (e.g., Kim, 2012; Teng & Chen, 2020). Some of these concepts are specific to the tourism area (e.g., destination image, and on-site touristic experiences), while the others are derived from other research fields. For instance, one of the key concepts in pop culture tourism, audience involvement, is defined as “personal interest in, or arousal” to pop culture (Whang et al., 2016), originating from “parasocial interaction” in sociology (Giles, 2002).

Several studies claimed the importance of examining the emotional aspect of consumer behavior in tourism. Whether audience involvement, destination image, or on-site touristic experience are considered, the emotional aspect is more important than the cognitive aspect (e.g., Kim, 2012; Kim & Wang, 2012). This is because audiences build an emotional connection with stories or characters, and that forms the core experience of pop culture consumption.

### Anime tourism in Japan

Anime/manga is one of the most well-known Japanese pop cultures in the world. According to the *Anime Industry Report 2021* by the Japan Animation Association, the anime market in 2020 was worth 2.42 trillion yen. Although impacted by the

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COVID-19 pandemic, like most other industries, it fell by a nominal 3% from the previous year, owing largely to the strong demand for entertainment worldwide. The global share has been growing continuously over these years and surpassed the domestic market for the first time in 2020.

As with the other pop culture genres, fans of anime often visit sites related to them. Anime tourism is called “Seichi-junrei” (“seichi” means “sacred sites,” and “junrei” means “pilgrimage”) in Japanese. This type of tourism appeared in the 1990s and became popular in the 2000s (Okamoto, 2018a, 2018b). Studies on anime tourism started in the late 2000s, with numerous papers published in the 2010s.

#### *Tourists' behavior in anime tourism*

As in the case of screen tourism, anime tourists feel great pleasure in visually confirming epic scenes at the original sites, and recreating scenery by photographing it from the same angles (Teng & Chen, 2020). Meanwhile, there are characteristic patterns in anime tourists' behaviors (Okamoto 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Otani et al., 2018).

In anime tourism, some tourists engage in “cosplay,” and even visit with cars, motorcycles, or bicycles decorated with anime characters. They leave comments or drawings in notebooks, also drawing their favorite characters on Ema (a small wooden plaque hanging at shrines in Japan, on which visitors write prayers or wishes). They also leave anime goods, self-made “fanzines” or fan magazines, and drawings at local stores/restaurants or facilities (train stations, tourist information centers, etc.), if it is allowed. They actively post their on-site experiences on the Internet through live streaming on sites, creating and archiving databases for other fans. Since these tourists are so passionate, the revisiting ratio in anime tourism is much higher than in the other genres (Okamoto, 2018a).

They also enjoy interactions with local communities and residents (Okamoto, 2018a, 2018b; Otani et al., 2018). Masubuchi (2021) identified types of motivation for anime tourism through a survey: (1) the desire for self-approval; (2) to explore and liberate oneself; (3) to share the fun with companions; and (4) to connect with local people. This is similar to Macionis and Sparks' (2009) conclusion for screen tourism, but it seems that the motivations to share the enjoyment with others and to connect with the local community and residents were observed only in anime tourism.

Demographically, young males (under their 40s, mainly in their 20s-30s) constitute most anime tourists, although there are some exceptions. This is the opposite of Korean dramas which usually attract more female audiences than male ones.

#### *Characteristics of anime*

As a genre of pop culture, anime differs significantly from other media in terms of the way of representation, or aesthetic values.

First, compared to movies and TV dramas, anime is more likely to stir the imagination of audiences. Meanwhile, places portrayed in anime are inevitably different from reality, so no matter how many times one visits the sites, there can be different discoveries every time (Okamoto, 2018a, 2018b). It is one of the reasons why anime fans revisit the same place several times. Second, there has been a “do-it-yourself” (DIY) culture in the anime industry so that fans can recreate/re-edit characters or stories (such as making fanzines, videos, or games) (Okamoto, 2018a; Otani et al., 2018). Additionally, often being “digital natives” and familiar with digital technology, anime fans archive related information and interact with other fans online to connect with their peers around the world (Okamoto,

2018a). Third, anime fans are considered to have a strong sense of community that might come from a social position. Passionate anime fans are called, “Anime-otaku” in Japanese. There are still relatively strong negative stereotypes about anime-otaku, being related to concepts such as “gloomy,” “communication disorder,” “social withdrawal,” and so on (Okamoto, 2019). Anime fans are also aware of this problem, which is why they add “Ita” (which means “ouch” in Japanese) in a self-mocking manner to describe their passion for anime as something “embarrassing” (from the perspective of traditional values). Under these circumstances, anime tourists have been trying to make a good impression and build good relationships with local communities and residents by improving their manners.

#### **Conclusion**

By bridging screen tourism studies overseas and anime tourism studies in Japan, we found some interesting points to discuss.

To a greater or lesser extent, the nature of pop culture tourism has a close relationship with the style of media presentations and aesthetic values. Therefore, it is important to understand this connection to interpret consumer behavior in this field. Several studies have shown that TV dramas differ significantly from movies in terms of their way of presentation, interaction with audiences, and degree of influence (e.g., Kim et al., 2009). Anime seems similar to TV dramas in that these two genres both allow audiences to build a deeper sense of audience involvement and strong emotional bonds with the stories or characters. These findings indicate that audience involvement is one of the key concepts in pop culture tourism.

Meanwhile, there are significant differences in comparing anime with movies and TV dramas. For instance, authenticity is considered important for visit intentions and loyalty, as it constitutes on-site touristic experiences (Kim, 2012), although its role in anime tourism might be different. Additionally, there is an imbalance in the main target audiences between genres. In the case of popular music, young people compose the main market, and in Korean TV dramas, the proportion of female audiences tends to be higher (Kim & Wang, 2012; Teng & Chen, 2020; Whang et al., 2016). In such cases, it is difficult to define whether consumer behavior is influenced by genre characteristics, or by the demographic traits of audiences. Therefore, age or gender perspectives might be needed to be taken into consideration in future studies (Okamoto, 2019).

Issues on local communities are rarely researched in pop culture tourism. However, tourism may have an impact on local communities and resident identities, while attitudes and behaviors of the local community constitute on-site experiences of tourists and post-visit satisfaction. As such, future research may benefit from anime tourism studies in Japan.

Finally, as mentioned above, besides American or European pop cultures, which have been gaining international popularity for several decades, global pop cultures are now easily accessible to the public. Considering this multi-directional culture transportation, a more systematic comparative analysis, both in terms of the cross-cultural and cross-genre reception of pop culture and their influences on consumer behavior in tourism, is needed in the future (Iwabuchi, 2004).

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