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 as well as generating huge revenues for the specific towns and prefectures.

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 both interviewed and asked to complete a questionnaire in order to deduce if their travel decisions were made based on the influence of 'yurukyara'. The findings reveal that while yurukyara does play a role, it is less appealing to young adults where travel decisions are not stromgly 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

1. 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 'yurukyara' by the local Japanese prefectural governments in the quest of revitalizing domestic tourism among the young adults. The factors that drive destination selection will be examined accordingly as well as the purchase of local character goods. 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.

2. Literature Review

2.1 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 $1billion 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 with the objectives of gaining popularity and increasing tourists. 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 the 'gotochikyara boom' ("the local mascot boom") led to continual growth in the number of local mascots being introduced as illustrated in Figure 1(Yurukyara Grand Prix, 2012 & 2013).

Figure 1 Number of 'Yurukyara' in each prefecture/ metropolis/ city in 2012 & 2013. Adapted from Yurukyara Grand Prix, 2012 & 2013.
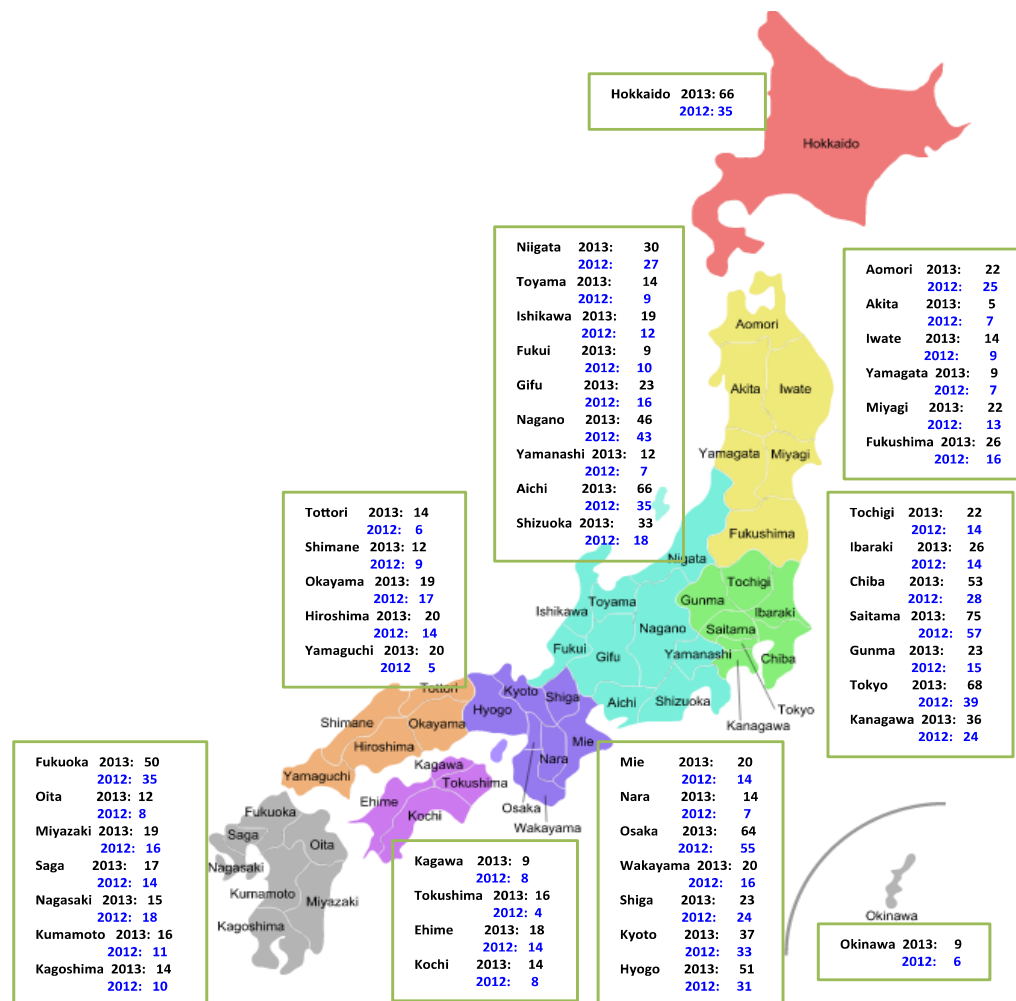
While characters are supposed to embody cuteness, yurukyara has been the total opposite. The artists who create yurukyara mascots are amateurs as local goverments are unable to pay the charges of professional artists who are able to create adorable characters on par with Hello Kitty; for example in the case of Hikonyan, the yurukyara from Hikone castle as paid around a million yen for his work. Each yurukyara is created to showcase the famous product or attraction of the local city or town, in most cases the character takes the form of the famous produce or attraction of the town. For instance, Nara city office created Sentokun,

a caricature of the Great Buddha at Todaiji festooned with antlers resembling the deer that roam freely about the grounds of the temple while Marimokkori, the green yurukyara from Kushiro city in Hokkaido was created to resemble the famous green algae balls found in Akan lake. While yurukyara does not possess the cuteness of Doraemon or Hello Kitty, it does not prevent the hosting of the annual yurukyara contest where the 'best' yurukyara is selected each year (Torres, 2012).

Yurukyara also reaches out to the public and communicates to them through social media as well as public events such as sports and games organized by the local governments to help increase the awareness and establish the relationship between the public and the respective yurukyara (Suzuki, 2012). The public views that they are able to 'understand' the characters and have a good relationship with them, hence the 'cuteness' and appeal of the yurukyara increases substantially. These efforts by the local governments have bore fruit as the number of visitors increase exponentially whenever the yurukyara makes a public appearance at a public event, particularly children and the elderly (Hughes, 2010; Suzuki, 2012). Character goods have steadily been raking in massive revenues as good of these characters are sold not only in their respective 'hometowns' but for the more popular characters such as the mascot created by government of Kumamoto prefecture, Kumamon, the goods are available all over the nation for instance, in 2012 Kumamon generated a total of US$ 285 million in revenue from the sales of its goods (Otagaki, 2013).

2.2 Why Do We Travel?

Various factors influence consumers' decision-making when selecting, and deciding on their vacation destinations. Middleton and Clarke (2007), Cooper and Hall (2008) as well as Kotler (2006) have identified and categorized the various factors that determine the travel choices that consumers make which in turn affects the demand for tourism.

1) Economic factors and comparative prices

These are the most important determinants for leisure vacation as well as business trips. The good performance of an economy almost guarantees high average disposable income, which is essential for tourism consumption. Additionally, tourism research confirms that the price of a destination, compared to its competitors, is still the most dominant factor in the short term.

2) Demographics

Demographic variables such as age, social class, income, and education are the most commonly used characteristics to analyze the tourism market. In Japan, the huge growth in the aging population has become one of the most attractive 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. The availability of bullet trains that run from Hokkaido to Kyushu contribute to providing transportation options apart from local trains, buses, cars and planes to travelers.

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. The various national parks in Japan such as Shiretoko in Hokkaido and the Aso-Kuju in Kyushu are governed by regulations to ensure preservation and 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, namely 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, increasing the self-esteem and social status of the individual.

2) Escape & Relaxation

A basic human desire is the escape of the everyday 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 while those in Ito Peninsula emphasize the theme of relaxation.

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.

3. Methodology and Study Design

As the focus of the study is to examine the effectiveness of yurukyara in encouraging domestic tourism among the young Japanese segment, 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 from different prefectures across Japan. Young adults were the focus of this study as the frequency of travel is higher within this age group versus working adults. On top of that, young adults tend to visit Disneyland and character theme parks more than the other age groups. This segment also has a high propensity to purchase character goods. The questionnaire contained a mix of various

techniques where both open and closed ended questions were adopted. The closed ended questions adopted a 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. The factors that influence domestic travel destinations and activities were examined. The questions also explore the perception towards different characters in order to illustrate the strength of positive perception and preference toward yurukyara that will contribute towards destination selection.

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).

With the continual growth in registered numbers of yurukyara, and the increase in revenue from sales of character goods.

4. Results

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

4.1 Recognition

Around 57% of the participants were aware of only one yurukyara as shown in Table 1; out of which 36% knew of only the yurukyara from their respective hometowns. While the balance of 21% were aware of at least one other yurukyara excluding the mascot from their respective hometowns.

Table 1 Awareness of Yurukyara

Aware

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	188	57.0	57.0	57.0
	No	142	43.0	43.0	100.0
	Total	330	100.0	100.0	

4.2 Purchase of Yurukyara Goods

Table 2 Purchase of Yurukyara Goods

Purchased Yurukyara Goods from the Characters' Towns

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	129	39.1	39.1	39.1
	No	201	60.9	60.9	100.0
	Total	330	100.0	100.0	

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Over 60% of the respondents did not purchase their yurukyara goods from the characters' towns. As the goods are widely available all over the nation, trips to the specific towns are unnecessary.

4.3 Favorite Character

An interesting finding was the listing of favorite characters. More than 50% of the respondents named Disney characters as their favorite. This is followed closely by the characters from anime and manga recording 46.1%. While the yurukyara check box was provided in the questionnaire, none of the respondents selected it.

Table 3 Favorite Character

Favorite Character

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disney	178	53.9	53.9	53.9
	Manga and Anime	152	46.1	46.1	100.0
	Total	330	100.0	100.0	

4.4 Perceived Yurukyara Target

The respondents were asked to indicate the target market for yurukyara. A little over 50% indicated children. However, 21.2% were unsure of the target market.

Table 4 Perceived Yurukyara Target

Yurukyara Target

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Children	167	50.6	50.6	50.6
	Young adults	42	12.7	12.7	63.3
	Elderly	51	15.5	15.5	78.8
	Do not know	70	21.2	21.2	100.0
	Total	330	100.0	100.0	

4.5 Relationships

Both awareness of yurukyara and visiting the towns of yurukyara (excluding wanting to meet the characters), and awareness and buying yurukyara goods have very weak negative correlations. The former has a very weak negative correlation, $r(328) = -0.158$, $p < 0.01$ while the latter also reflects a very weak negative correlation, $r(328) = -0.118$, $p < 0.05$. The correlations are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Correlations

		Awareness	Meet Yurukyara	yurukyara's place(excl. meet)	Buy yky good	Yurukyara
Awareness	Pearson Correlation	1	-.013	-.158**	-.118*	.031
	Sig. (2-		.815	.004	.032	.571
	N	330	330	330	330	330
Meet Yurukyara	Pearson Correlation	-.013	1	.165**	-.091	.071
	Sig. (2-	.815		.003	.098	.201
	N	330	330	330	330	330
Visit yurukyara's place(excl. meet)	Pearson Correlation	-.158**	.165**	1	.297**	.051
	Sig. (2-	.004	.003		.000	.356
	N	330	330	330	330	330
Buy yky good	Pearson Correlation	-.118*	-.091	.297**	1	.001
	Sig. (2-	.032	.098	.000		.983
	N	330	330	330	330	330
Yurukyara	Pearson Correlation	.031	.071	.051	.001	1
	Sig. (2-	.571	.201	.356	.983	
	N	330	330	330	330	330

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Traveling with the sole purpose of meeting yurukyara and visiting the local place of the character (excluding meeting the yurukyara) reflected a very weak positive correlation, $r(328) = 0.165$, $p < 0.01$.

1) Yurukyara Effectiveness - Reason for destination selection

Based on the focus group discussions, visiting certain towns mainly because they are keen to 'meet' the yurukyara personally was ranked last among the list of travel motivation factors. When probed further as to the reasons for wanting to meet the yurukyara, the participants discussed 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 another reason was also that they felt that the mascot was famous and that was the sole driving factor for them to go see the mascot. Participants selected other factors (which will be discussed in the next section) as main reasons that fuelled their travel destination selection showing the yurukyara's lack of effectiveness in attracting the young adult segment. It was also found that Disney ranked first in the choice of characters among the young adults with a majority of them consuming Disney merchandise and going to both Tokyo Disneyland and Disneysea. Hence, this shows that characters do appeal to young adults namely mainly Disney followed by Japanese manga and anime characters.

2) Destination factors / choices

Factor analysis was conducted to examine the number of factors that affect destination choices. There are four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, contributing to approximately 62% of the total variability as shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Total Variance Explained

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.447	22.245	22.245	2.301	20.917	20.917
2	2.031	18.462	40.707	2.113	19.209	40.126
3	1.285	11.681	52.387	1.318	11.983	52.109
4	1.037	9.431	61.818	1.068	9.709	61.818
5	.807	7.334	69.152			
6	.742	6.744	75.896			
7	.670	6.086	81.983			
8	.610	5.544	87.527			
9	.548	4.980	92.507			
10	.510	4.636	97.143			
11	.314	2.857	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The Rotated Component Matrix shows the factor loadings for each variable as illustrated in Table 7 below. Factor 1 can be grouped under tourist activities that include visiting local sights, hotsprings and spa as well as outdoor activities such as skiing, snowboarding and hiking. Roadtrip adventures which include making random stops and enjoying the sights and activities that they can find along the way also fall under the Factor 1 umbrella. As any one of these variables increase, so will the other three.

Table 7 Rotated Component Matrix

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Price	.039	.038	-.018	.951
Cost Effectiveness	.162	.779	.038	-.125
Meet Yurukyara	-.173	-.773	-.029	-.184
Visit Loc fm yurukyara	-.009	-.176	.751	-.259
Buy yky good	.039	.074	.835	.200
Being with friends	.068	.677	-.141	.033
food tourism	-.583	.614	-.040	.007
visit sights	.751	.069	.055	.002
hotsprings & spa	.568	.050	.097	.070
Outdoor activities	.745	.097	-.010	.010
Roadtrip-destination not important	.675	.135	-.143	-.025

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 4 iterations.

Factor 2 on the other hand measures cost effectiveness of the trip (and not just the price that they have to pay to travel), going on trip with friends and enjoying local delicacies.

Surprisingly Factor 3 only covers visiting the local areas or rather hometowns of the yurukyara as well as purchasing yurukyara goods. Meeting the character themselves was not a key variable.

Finally Factor 4 denotes price; the cost of making the trip.

Mapped against the travelling factors by Kotler & Makens (2006), social interaction and escape and relaxation were the main two factors cited. During the focus group discussions 92% indicated that they made destination choices after discussing with their friends whom they usually travel with and that usually would be heavily influenced by the cost of travel and projected spendings.

5. 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 and only effective method of increasing domestic tourism among the young adult segment that tends to place importance on friends and socializing. 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. Also, the focus group discussions gave a slightly different set of results from the questionnaire as from the focus groups, most of the participants stated that they do not make travel choices based on yurukyara. On the other hand, from the survey, Factor 3 reflected visiting the hometown of yurukyara as well as buying the goods as key variables that contribute to destination decision-making and choice.

Even though meeting the 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. Also, the respondents also were rather unsure of the main target of these characters. This presents the opportunity for local governments to focus on building a stronger brand with a core target segment and communicate it clearly to the mass public.

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.

6. 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. Even though the revenues from the sales of yurukyara goods have been skyrocketing, most people did not make the purchase from the yurukyara towns as the goods are made available all over the nation. Hence, this creates an interesting future study on the actual pull of the goods in improving domestic tourism.

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