The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism: A Critical Analysis of the Cool Japan Forest Project

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Abstract: The use of the Cool Japan concept to revitalise inbound tourism has been promoted by the Japanese national and local governments as an element of regional revitalisation. While the effectiveness of the Cool Japan strategy has been recognised, there are several challenges. One is that the definition of Cool Japan itself is unclear. As the concept of 'cool' is subjective, there is a possibility that some things will be promoted as Cool Japan even if they are not fully expected to have a positive impact on the tourism industry and the economy in general. In addition, the economic effects of anime and manga, which are considered representative examples of Cool Japan, are dependent on personal interests and consumption activities. This paper analyses the risks and issues of using Cool Japan for inbound tourism promotion from a critical perspective, using the COOL JAPAN FOREST Project in Tokorozawa city, Saitama prefecture, as a case study. This paper draws comparisons with the strategy of Kyoto International Manga Museum, which has a similar ideological background to COOL JAPAN FOREST Project, to clarify the importance of integrating Cool Japan with local tourism assets as a part of broader tourism area design.

アブストラクト：インバウンド活性化のためのクールジャパンの活用は注目を集めてきた。この傾向は国家レベルのみならず地方レベルでも波及が進み、観光を通した地域活性化の一要素としてクールジャパンの活用が推奨されるようになった。クールジャパンの有効性が評価及び期待されてきた一方で、課題も存在する。一つは、クールジャパンという概念そのものの定義が曖昧であるということだ。「クール」という価値観は非常に主体的であるため、観光産業や経済全般に及ぼす好影響が十分に見込まれていないものも、クールジャパンとして打ち出される可能性がある。また、クールジャパンの代表的な要素とされるアニメやマンガは、個人的な興味関心や消費活動に依存しているともいえる。ごく限られた対象へ日本文化の一側面を見せているにすぎず、広域での経済効果やインバウンドの活性化に繋がらないという考えもある。本論文は、埼玉県所沢市が株式会社KADOKAWAと共同して進めるCOOL JAPAN FOREST構想とその拠点施設であるところざわサクラタウンを事例として、前述のような批判的視点から、インバウンド振興を目的としたクールジャパンの活用について分析する。「ポップカルチャーの発信拠点」としてインバウンド促進の役割を期待される一方で、訪日外国人の期待や需要とは乖離している現状がある。また、類似したイデオロギー的背景を持つ京都国際マンガミュージアムを比較対象として設け、施設単体ではなく、地域全体での回遊性やテーマ性を持った観光設計の重要性について論じる。

Keywords: Cool Japan, COOL JAPAN FOREST, inbound tourism, contents tourism, Kyoto International Manga Museum, regional revitalisation.

Introduction

Since the Japanese government introduced the concept of 'Cool Japan' into its national branding strategy in 2010 (Iwata 2020, p. 59) Cool Japan has become a slogan and theme not only for Japan's technologies and content industries, such as anime, manga, and games, but also for a wider range of fields including tourism, food, and traditional industries, thereby indicating its high versatility as a concept. The Cool Japan Strategy promoted by the Japanese government is aimed at communicating the attractiveness of Japan to the world as part of its national branding, and ultimately improving the economic impact of inbound tourism in the long run. The initiative has been positioned by the government as a large-scale and representative effort of its national branding, with the establishment of expert councils and specialised organisations, and the promotion of cooperation between the public and private sectors.

Numerous examples are introduced by the Japanese government as Cool-Japan-led success stories: for instance Arakurayama Sengen Park, Yamanashi prefecture, where visitor numbers increased as a result of photos shared online by a Thai tourist; and Koyasan, Wakayama prefecture, where the number of European tourists increased as a result of the efforts of a Swiss Buddhist priest on social media (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2019, p. 5). Other positive scenarios have been discussed by the Japanese government and expert councils in which the concept of Cool Japan improves and revitalises the image of Japan or a particular region. However, there are also risks inherent in the unrestricted use of the concept for branding. The subjective idea of 'cool' is ambiguous, which makes it possible to integrate everything arbitrarily under the name of Cool Japan (National Diet Library 2013, pp. 8-9). This problem is reflected in the financial issues of the Cool Japan Fund, which was established to support the overseas expansion of cultural products such as anime and Japanese cuisine as symbols of Cool Japan. In 2022, the government invested 106.6 billion yen and the private sector 10.7 billion yen in the hope of promoting Cool Japan in a wider range of fields. But most of the projects failed, resulting in deficit of 30.9 billion yen for the fund (Wakai 2022). Also, promoting manga and anime is not necessarily effective as it is likely to attract only a limited group of visitors, contrary to Japanese expectations that popular culture is appealing to inbound tourists in general (Close 2018, p. 37).

While most previous studies have discussed the positive roles and impacts of Cool Japan on branding and tourism development at a national level, it is also important to take a critical approach to evaluate the potential challenges of utilising Cool Japan at a regional level. This suggests more effective ways to develop the use of the concept for inbound tourism. This study hypothesises that tourism projects based on Cool Japan do not attract inbound tourists effectively unless they integrate with local tourism assets from a broader perspective. Through critical analysis of the COOL JAPAN FOREST Project (hereafter CJFP) and TOKOROZAWA SAKURA TOWN (hereafter Sakura Town) in Tokorozawa city, Saitama prefecture, various risks and problems of using Cool Japan for tourism development are revealed.[1] The analysis is further developed through comparative discussion of Kyoto International Manga Museum, which has a similar background to the CJFP in terms of its purpose and concept.

The Cool Japan concept

The Japanese government defines the Cool Japan concept as 'the attractions of Japan that render it cool (or have the potential to do so) in the eyes of the world' (Intellectual Property Strategy

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

Headquarters 2019, p. 1). It includes aspects of Japanese culture such as animation, manga characters, games, and Japanese traditional cuisine and products. The government also mentions that Cool Japan is not necessarily limited to things Japanese people consider cool, but also those things that people overseas consider cool, such as Shibuya Scramble Crossing and bento boxes.

The concept of Cool Japan is considered to mirror the Cool Britannia slogan in Britain in the 1990s, which gained prominence through Prime Minister Tony Blair's campaign to heighten national pride and self-esteem via its cultural industries (Valaskivi 2013, p. 8). The slogan aimed to improve the image of Britain by utilising popular and youth culture as national resources, an aim that Cool Japan shares. According to Valaskivi (2013, p. 4), the initial introduction of the slogan 'Cool Japan' can be traced back to the article 'Japan's Gross National Cool' published by American journalist Douglas McGray in 2002. In the article, he mentions the economic and political devastation of postwar Japan, but at the same time points out that Japan could have a massive influence on the world via cultural indicators such as GNC (Gross National Cool), as differentiated from economic ones such as GNP (Gross National Product) (Miura 2014, pp. 125-126). Since McGray's ideas were introduced in the magazine *Chūo Kōron* in 2003, the presence of the Cool Japan concept has increased in Japanese society (Matsui 2014, pp. 83-84).

The increased attention on Cool Japan has also triggered a shift in the mindset of policymakers towards strengthening soft power at the national level. While military and economic power are referred to as a country's 'hard power', 'soft power' is defined as a 'non-traditional way for a country to influence another country's wants or its public values' (Nye 1990, p. 166), and Cool Japan has come to be recognised as a new means to enhance national power. The introduction of policies that incorporate the Cool Japan concept by central government ministries and agencies has been called the 'Cool Japan Craze' (Matsui 2014, p. 81), indicating the Japanese government's desire to increase Japan's global competitiveness, improve economic strength, and reinforce its soft power.

Government initiatives related to Cool Japan

The government focused on conceptualisation of Cool Japan until 2010, after which it began to reflect the concept in actual policies. The New Growth Strategy announced by the cabinet in 2010 positioned 'Intellectual Property, Standardization Strategy, and the overseas development of Cool Japan' as one of the twenty-one elements of the National Strategy Project, followed by the establishment of the Cool Japan Promotion Office in the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (Iwata 2020, p. 59). The government's Cool Japan efforts over the period from the following year to the present can be divided into three main phases: 'enhancing the dissemination of information (2012-2014)', 'achieving economic growth (2015-2018)', and 'developing a more in-depth strategy (2018-present)' (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2019, p. 4). In the first phase, a Minister for Cool Japan Strategy was established for the first time in the second Abe administration. In the second phase, the Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council, established in January 2015, formulated the Public-Private Joint Initiative for Cool Japan Strategy in June of the same year, and established the Public-Private Partnership Platform to promote collaboration between the public and private sectors and different industries to create new businesses. Lastly, in the third phase, the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters developed the 'Cool Japan Strategy' as part of the Intellectual Property Strategy Vision (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2019, pp. 3-4). In 2013, the Cool Japan Fund was also established as a public-private fund. It is responsible for

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

providing funds to develop attractive Japanese products and services considered to be part of Cool Japan, and to link them to outbound and inbound travel (Cool Japan Fund 2024).

The Cool Japan Strategy as nation branding

The Cool Japan Strategy is positioned as a 'brand strategy' for Japan's economic growth. It aims to develop effectively (1) information dissemination (*jōhō hasshin*), (2) overseas products and service development (*kaigai tenkai*), and (3) inbound domestic consumption (*inbaundo shinkō*), as priority areas (Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council 2015). The strategy emphasises its role in discovering and disseminating the attractiveness of Japan, not only from a domestic perspective, but also from an objective global perspective. Currently, the Minister for Cool Japan Strategy is playing a central role in promoting the Cool Japan Strategy in collaboration with the Cool Japan Public-Private Partnership Platform, Cool Japan Ambassadors, regional producers, and central ministries.

The term 'nation branding' is defined as 'a process by which a nation's images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience' (Iwabuchi 2015, pp. 422-423). In analysing the Cool Japan strategy as a form of nation branding, it is important to note that, in addition to building a nation's image externally, it also plays a role in strengthening national power inwardly. Through a series of branding processes, a nation as a whole is made aware of its shared images and future goals, thereby creating a stronger sense of national self and self-esteem (Valaskivi 2013, p. 6). This secondary purpose of nation branding is reflected in the proposal titled 'Creating a New Japan: Connecting Culture and Industry, Japan and Overseas' (Atarashii Nippon no sōzō: 'bunka to sangyō', 'Nippon to kaigai' wo tsunagu tame ni), which was published by the Cool Japan Advisory Council in 2011. The report was released in the year of the Great East Japan Earthquake, and it emphasises the need to promote recovery from the disaster and the revitalisation of Japan through the Cool Japan Strategy (Cool Japan Advisory Council 2011, p. 1). The focus is not on the external aspect of marketing products and services recognised as Cool Japan overseas, but on the internal aspect of increasing the pride and confidence of Japanese nationals through their own reaffirmation of the essential and fundamental values of the spirituality (*seishinsei*), empathy (*kyōkanryoku*), acceptance (*juyōryoku*) and vitality (*jizokuryoku*) of the nation of Japan (Cool Japan Advisory Council 2011, p. 2). This inward perspective suggests that the Cool Japan Strategy functions in redefining Japan itself and its nationals.

Issues of the Cool Japan Strategy

While the definition of Cool Japan encompasses a wide range of industries, including fashion, food, regional specialties, and tourism, some problems have been identified in promoting the concept as a national and regional development strategy. In particular, there is ambiguity in the Cool Japan Strategy itself. The Cool Japan Strategy has not yet established specific performance indicators or statistics, making it difficult to objectively monitor and evaluate the strategy. Another factor is that the strategy is based on the subjective value of 'cool', which also makes it impractical to analyse the current situation as data and to come up with effective measures for improvement. In fact, the government also acknowledges that it does not officially or legally define 'cool' because it is difficult to determine what is 'cool', and they focus instead on developing areas that can be potentially expanded (National Diet Library 2013, p. 8). This ambiguity in the national strategy may

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

lead to an uncontrollable increase in the budget spent on related policies, making it more difficult to gain the public's understanding. In other words, the fact that a wide range of things is now considered to be a part of Cool Japan means that it is possible to receive public funding and seek support from the national or local government by using the term 'Cool Japan', which may lead to the promotion of Cool-Japan-related projects without regard to their future prospects or benefits. The public sector, namely governments and municipalities, can also benefit from the vagueness of Cool Japan as it enables policymakers and stakeholders to enlist anything that can be somehow connected with a non-defined idea of Japaneseness. Utilising the minimally clarified concept of Cool Japan and Japaneseness with lots of space for individual understanding has effectively helped local and national governments to include a variety of products and campaigns in the same category and maximise chances to gain economic benefits (Tamaki 2019, pp. 10-13).

Also, some have questioned the benefits that can be brought by popular culture, including anime and manga, as a core theme of Cool Japan. In 2006, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially announced the beginning of 'pop-culture diplomacy' to establish better understanding and trust of Japan utilising both pop culture and traditional culture as diplomatic tools. However, pop-culture diplomacy has often been criticised for being only a one-way projection of Japanese culture and for not presenting a specific future goal (Iwabuchi 2015, p. 420). While it is true that even a one-directional approach can be effective in increasing understanding of Japanese culture and society, it is challenging to go beyond mere personal media consumption to national benefits in economic development and inbound tourism.

Cool Japan and inbound tourism

The focus of Cool Japan has gradually shifted from marketing products and content overseas as an export business to utilising content to induce tourists to visit Japan. In 2003, the government-led tourism revitalisation initiative called 'tourism-oriented nation' (*kankō rikkoku*) was launched to tackle Japan's stagnant economy with its declining birth rate and ageing population (Jang and Kim 2024, p. 245) and inbound tourism became one of the highest priority policies for the government to stimulate the economy and the domestic labour market. At the same time, Cool Japan, or concepts and things that are considered attractive to tourists from overseas, started to be promoted primarily as a key strategy to energise inbound tourism.

The beginning of this combination of Cool Japan and inbound tourism was marked by a joint action plan to boost the number of inbound tourists announced by the Japan Tourism Agency, the Japan National Tourism Organization, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and Japan External Trade Organization in 2013 (Jang and Kim 2024, p. 246). While a wide range of activities, tourist sites, and cultural products were promoted under the umbrella term of Cool Japan, contents such as anime and manga were considered to be especially effective in motivating targeted segments of inbound tourists. The government issued a booklet titled Japan Anime Tourism Guide in 2011, and Japan Anime Map and the Cool Japan Daily blog in 2012, all of which target popular culture fans visiting Japan as tourists (Seaton and Yamamura 2015, p. 7). Cool Japan has been introduced into inbound tourism strategies through events and initiatives such as the World Cosplay Summit in Nagoya, which was a private initiative with public support. However, there is no fully developed and unified government strategy. Close (2018, p. 43) argues somewhat critically that Cool-Japan-themed events such as anime and manga events are attractive to those with strong interest in the genres, but they are not influential enough to motivate new demographics to visit Japan.

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

Cool Japan and regional development

Cool Japan is strongly characterised as a national inbound strategy, but it is also positioned as a new theme for regional development and city planning. In fact, the government has presented an image of regional development patterns utilising the Cool Japan concept. The core idea is to promote regional revitalisation by commercialising Cool Japan resources found in Japanese regional areas and expanding overseas business via foreign visitors to Japan, exports, and direct investment (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2018, p. 10). This framework is supported by national-level programs, such as funding by the Cool Japan Fund, overseas expansion support by the Japan External Trade Organization, and the National Strategic Special Zones system (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2018, p. 5). In this image proposed by the government, introducing Cool Japan in city development plans is mentioned as one of the effective methods for their local branding.

Within the context of promoting Cool Japan, the government considers the presence of 'stories' to be important in analysing and clarifying the essence of the concept (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2018, p. 10). One example of utilising stories to achieve Cool Japan and regional development is contents tourism. The concept of contents tourism was publicly defined for the first time in 'Investigative Report on Regional Development by the Production and Utilisation of Contents such as Film' jointly published by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2005 (Yamamura 2016, p. 109). The report defines contents tourism as a form of 'tourism with the intention of promoting travel and related industries by utilising contents related to the local area (movies, television dramas, novels, manga, games and so on)' (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism *et al.* 2005, p. 49). Yamamura (2015, p. 61) describes the report as revolutionary in that it clarifies the fundamental idea of adding 'narrative quality' (*monogatarisei*) and 'theme' (*tēmasei*) as a regional-specific atmosphere and image generated by contents, and it conveys to local governments the importance of developing tourism through contents, not objects.

One example of combining Cool Japan and contents tourism to achieve regional development is the efforts of the city of Nagoya. Nagoya has positioned Cool Japan as part of its overall brand strategy and has promoted cosplay as a new culture that will enhance the city's brand power (Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters 2017, p. 2). Specific initiatives include raising the city's presence by hosting the World Cosplay Summit and developing contents through a joint industry-government-academia project titled 'Project 758', in which the numbers of the project name correspond to the hiragana characters na-go-ya.[2] The government has widely introduced Nagoya's success as an example of the cross-sectoral involvement of different stakeholders to realise Cool Japan's regional development. One of the successful factors of Nagoya is stories that link the existing local resources and contents, such as the relationship between a local shopping district and anime characters. Also, as a 'cosplay host town' the city has fostered a positive relationship between the city, cosplayers, and contents by recognising the city's landmarks as official cosplay-supporting facilities (Nagoya City n.d.) The story-based development of a region can appeal to tourists from Japan and overseas, enhancing the possibility of success in regional development.

On the other hand, some local development plans have failed due to the ambiguity of the Cool Japan concept. Rinku town in Osaka prefecture formulated a strategic plan for its urban development as a 'Cool Japan Front'. The aim was to attract visitors from both Japan and abroad by creating a town that would gather Japan's proud culture, such as anime, manga, and games, as well

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

as a town where Japanese nationals themselves could discover the strength of Japan, with Cool Japan as the key concept (Osaka Town Promotion Division 2014, p. 1). However, there were no applications for the role of project management company and the decision was made to cancel the project in 2016. A survey of companies revealed that the reasons it did not attract applications to the manage the project included the short project period, the difficulty of recovering investments, and the problems of establishing business schemes under the theme of Cool Japan (Osaka Prefectural Government n.d.). The lack of a specific scenario of Cool Japan itself can be a barrier to the participation of stakeholders. An assumption that things referred to as Cool Japan are always popular overseas can lead to an excessive reliance on the concept. However, the reliance promotes an emphasis on benefits-driven aspects of the Cool Japan Strategy and an increase in initiatives that do not reflect the real demand and objective perspectives of inbound tourists who do not have an existing interest in Cool Japan contents (Close 2018, p. 37).

Tourism overview of Saitama prefecture and Tokorozawa city

Tourism in Saitama prefecture is characterised by its high percentage of domestic tourists either from within the prefecture or on day trips from adjacent prefectures (Local Finance Bureaus 2024, p. 1-2). In 2019, it was reported that around 135 million tourists visited the prefecture, which ranked second among the thirty-two prefectures for which such data was collected (data for big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya was not collected), but only 1.5 per cent of them stayed overnight in the prefecture (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 9).

Visitors from abroad, however, are likely to visit the prefecture for individual and business purposes, and only twenty-eight per cent of visitors come for tourism and leisure purposes, which is much lower than the national average of 65.5 per cent (Tokorozawa City n.d., p. 14). The number of tourists to the prefecture from overseas had increased to around 6.5 million in 2019, followed by a significant decrease to 80,000 in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 13). According to data from Japan National Tourism Organization (2024a), the foreign visitor rate of Saitama prefecture in 2023 was 1.1 per cent, which ranked twenty-fourth among all of the prefectures in Japan. As a future goal, Tokorozawa city has set a target of 650,000 inbound tourists in 2026 (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 30).

One of the challenges addressed in Saitama prefecture's strategic plan for tourism for the period 2022 to 2026 is the small number of overnight stays and long trips, which ironically is caused by one of its strengths: convenient transportation to the Tokyo metropolitan area and nearby regions. To overcome the challenge, the city aims to promote round-trip routes in cooperation with destination management organisations and multiple municipalities (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 20). Also, creating and promoting further the uniqueness of Saitama prefecture is another key policy of this plan. The plan especially emphasises the promotion of tourism with anime products, which are expected to help establish an image of the prefecture as a destination for anime pilgrimage, and to develop anime-related events and tourism products (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 26). Anime pilgrimage (*anime seichi junrei*) is when fans visit sites related to anime works, and is an important theme within contents tourism (Okamoto 2015, p. 12). There are several anime works that were set in cities in Saitama prefecture: *Anohana: The Flower We Saw That Day* (Chichibu city), *The Anthem of the Heart* (Chichibu city), *Lucky Star* (Kuki city), and *Encouragement of Climb* (Hanno city) (Saitama Prefecture 2022a, p. 26). There is also the Moominvalley Park (Hanno city) based on the popular Finnish characters created by Tove Jansson. Using these anime as new tourism assets beyond each municipality has become part of the prefecture's approach to attracting more visitors.

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

Shifting the focus to Tokorozawa city, the number of tourists from outside the prefecture was around six million before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the numbers dropped to 2.5 million in 2020 (Tokorozawa City 2023a, p. 13). However, tourist numbers rebounded to about 7.4 million in 2022, and ranked third among the other cities in the prefecture after Koshigaya city and Saitama city (Saitama Prefecture 2022b). This indicates the favourable conditions for the tourism industry in Tokorozawa city.

Tourism development is mentioned as one of the sectors the city wants to focus on in its industrial promotion vision published in 2018. The document shares some elements with the strategic plan of Saitama prefecture. It mentions enhancing the ease of getting around by building up a network of tourist sites within the city to attract visitors with different interests and purposes. Another strategy is wide-area branding in cooperation with other cities and prefectures under the shared theme of anime pilgrimage to strengthen the brand and synergies (Tokorozawa City 2023a). These strategies indicate the importance of measuring the impact of tourism-related initiatives not only as an independent project but also as a component of wide-area management in relation to surrounding assets and environments. Also, the recognition of anime as the city's strength has heightened the expectation for a newly-developed project, Cool Japan Forest Project, to lead to the success of its branding both for domestic and international tourists.

Cool Japan Forest Project

Cool Japan Forest Project (CJFP) in Tokorozawa is an ongoing representative example of tourism development that incorporates the Cool Japan concept. It is run as an industry-government collaboration with Kadokawa Corp., a leading Japanese media conglomerate. The target area of the CJFP extends around a radius of 500 metres from the base facility, Sakura Town, and the whole of Tokorozawa is expected to benefit from the project through revitalisation and rebranding. The term 'forest' in the project name indicates a broad space where Tokorozawa's industry and culture coexist with an abundant green landscape. The project has the following four purposes: (1) Creating a 'harmonising city of green (*midori*), culture (*bunka*), and industries (*sangyō*), (2) Introducing Cool Japan from Tokorozawa to the world, (3) Embodying a new regional revitalisation as a form of public-private partnership (PPP), and ultimately (4) Making the city attractive to visit and live in (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016, pp. 5-8). From a cultural perspective, the project focuses on creating synergy between traditional culture in Tokorozawa and contemporary culture, including contents produced by Kadokawa Corp., by packaging both as Cool Japan. The project instigators expect this to have a positive influence on attracting tourists from overseas. From an industrial perspective, the project also aims to develop the 'Tokorozawa Silicon Valley' specialising in the content and IT industries. It encourages related businesses to create an industrial cluster and stimulate the economy beyond the employment created at Sakura Town (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016).

The project was initiated in 2015 when Kadokawa Corp. proposed a collaborative plan to construct a cultural complex at a former Tokorozawa sewage treatment plant and attract domestic and inbound tourists to the city using the Cool Japan concept. Tokorozawa city and Kadokawa then decided to carry out city-scale development centred on this project (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016, p. 10). The entire development process is divided into three terms with major milestones and specific plans for each stage (Figure 1). The project received a government subsidy of around forty-eight million yen in 2015 for its pioneering contribution to public-private regional development (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016, p. 12).

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

	Stage 1: 2016 - Foundation (*Kiban seibi*)	Stage 2: 2020 - Results creation (*Seika sōshutsu*)	Stage 3: 2026 - Future development (*Mirai e no hishō*)
Tokorozawa city	• Infrastructure improvement • Transport improvement • Environmental preparation to accept foreign tourists	• Enterprise invitation to the project area • Ongoing environmental maintenance	
	• Enterprise invitation to the project area • Ongoing environmental maintenance		
Kadokawa Corp.	• Constructing TOKOROZAWA SAKURA TOWN		
Tokorozawa city and Kadokawa Corp.	• Collaborating with local shops and companies • Organising events	• Achieving the five major objectives of the plan: 1. Cultural Complex 2. Japan Pavilion 3. Entertainment 4. Venture business development 5. Agriculture	

Figure 1: Three stages of the COOL JAPAN FOREST Project
Source: Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. (2016)

Tokorozawa Sakura Town

At the centre of the project is Sakura Town, built by Kadokawa Corp. in 2020. It consists of the Kadokawa Culture Museum (Figure 2), Musashino Reiwa Shrine (Figure 3), and a complex containing restaurants, a Da Vinci Store bookstore (Figure 4), and event halls (Japan Pavilion). The best known facility that gets most media coverage is the Kadokawa Culture Museum, whose concept is 'fusing together a library, an art museum, and a natural history museum' (Kadokawa Culture Museum 2024). Inside the museum, Book Street and Bookshelf Theater (Figure 5) are permanent exhibitions. There are also temporary exhibitions featuring anime and manga characters, and both Japanese and non-Japanese artists. The books, manga, and theatre technologies are mostly provided by Kadokawa Corp., making it distinctive from other public-owned museums. Moreover, as a facility themed around Cool Japan, the connection between anime and manga contents is emphasised in several places. For example, Canteen Kadokawa, a restaurant managed directly by Kadokawa Corp., serves dishes featuring Kadokawa manga and anime characters. Moreover, the Da Vinci Store bookstore offers merchandise from various anime, manga, and games, in collaboration with the Anime Tourism Association (Figure 6). As a hub for anime tourism, Sakura Town was certified as the first Fudasho Spot (a base for pilgrimage) by the Anime Tourism Association (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations 2021).

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

Figure 2: Kadokawa Culture Museum

Figure 3: Musashino Reiwa Shrine

Figure 4: Da Vinci Store

Figure 5: Bookshelf Theater

Figure 6: Anime goods display, Da Vinci Store

All photos by the author: 12 May 2024

Sakura Town also used to have a hotel called EJ Anime Hotel, whose concept was 'staying in your favourite story' (*sukina monogatari ni tomaru*).[3] The hotel aimed to provide a special lodging experience when guests could spend time together with their favourite anime, manga, or video game. This was achieved through creating a place filled with designs and items inspired by the

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

works. The hotel was expected to be the centrepiece of the tourist attraction as the only hotel of its kind in Japan, but it closed on 31 May 2023, two-and-a-half years after its opening. There have been various assumptions about what caused the hotel to close, but the high prices of rooms and competing hotels with similar concepts subsequently opening in more accessible areas in Tokyo were mentioned as major reasons (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2023).

The project proposal for Sakura Town gave concrete targets for visitor numbers. The target annual visitor numbers were 770,000 to 1,470,000, seventy per cent of whom were expected to be visitors from neighbouring areas (within a range of ten kilometres) and thirty per cent from places further away (beyond a range of ten kilometres), including inbound tourists (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016). While the former group was more likely to visit the area frequently for casual purposes, such as shopping and borrowing or reading books at the library, the latter group was expected to be tourists with lower visit frequencies (Tokorozawa City and Kadokawa Corp. 2016). In 2020, it is estimated that around 396,000 people visited Sakura Town, and 64,000 people visited the Kadokawa Culture Museum. In the following year, over one million people came to Sakura Town, and 269,000 people visited the museum. While there is no official record of the number of inbound tourists to the museum in 2020 due to the Covid-19 entry restrictions, it is reported that approximately 13,000 foreign tourists visited the museum in 2021 (Agency for Cultural Affairs n.d.).[4]

Another factor indicating the influence of Sakura Town is how interested people are in visiting the new tourist attraction. One of the sets of data analysed by a system called RESAS (Regional Economy Society Analyzing System, which visualises big data from the public and private sectors, such as industrial structure, demographics, and human flows) identifies destinations searched for using navigation services via websites and smartphones. The data shows Sakura Town was the second most searched-for access route via public transport in Saitama prefecture following Seibu Dome in 2020, and the fifth most searched for place to access by car following other popular sites such as Tokorozawa Aviation Memorial Park and Sayama Lake (Tokorozawa City 2023a, p. 13). While it is necessary to take into account the unusual impact of Covid-19 on each tourist site in the city, the fact that Sakura Town ranked high in the data means it gained attention as a new destination.

In addition to increasing visits and interest in Sakura Town as leisure and tourism facilities, Sakura Town is believed to have significant inward effects within the city. According to one member of the Tokorozawa city hall staff (interview with the author, 28 August 2024), the project is focused more on inward community development than strengthening inbound effects. This is partly because the project was carried out in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, when targeting inbound tourists was not necessarily realistic and practical as a goal. The member of city hall staff also mentioned that after the Covid-19 pandemic focus returned to the original objectives of attracting inbound tourists and increasing positive perceptions among local residents towards the city. To achieve the latter goal, it is essential to disseminate and enhance the Tokorozawa brand and create an area that citizens feel proud of through environmental improvements in the city (Tokorozawa City 2021). The 2023 Tokorozawa city residents survey shows that 86.5 per cent of residents feel attached to the city (Tokorozawa City 2023b, p. 12), and the city aims to raise this figure to ninety per cent (Tokorozawa City 2021, p. 20). Also, an issue mentioned as a challenge for the city is the stagnant level of residents' satisfaction with public measures related to art and traditional culture. Thus, the city strategically intends to raise awareness of the region's distinctive culture and industry as elements of Cool Japan through the entire project, with the goal of achieving a higher satisfaction rate of forty-six per cent from the current figure of 18.5 per cent (Tokorozawa City 2021, p. 20).

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

Inbound tourists' expectations and popular culture

The tourism strategy of Tokorozawa city emphasises the use of elements of Cool Japan and popular culture, including anime and manga, to strengthen its branding and to respond to the expansion of inbound tourism after the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as previously mentioned, the CJFP, especially Sakura Town, has yet to prove its effectiveness in generating inbound tourism. It has mostly been expected to bring inward effects within the community, mainly because the initiative was developed during the pandemic when inbound tourism was on pause. Even so, there is room to examine how much demand there is for popular culture and Cool Japan themed facilities among inbound tourists.

   One useful survey examining the demands of inbound tourists is the 2024 survey of consumption trends conducted by JNTO. Inbound tourists were asked what they expected to enjoy in Japan before their visit. The results when multiple answers were permitted (blue bar) indicate broad tourist motivations for visiting Japan. Figure 7 shows the top five results, plus those relating to popular culture, out of a total of twenty categories (Japan National Tourism Organization 2024b, p. 24) (Figure 7). The categories relating to Japanese popular culture were relatively low down the list of motivators. When the same question was asked with only a single answer allowed, a similar conclusion emerged: popular culture is the primary motivator for only a small percentage of total visitors (green bar).
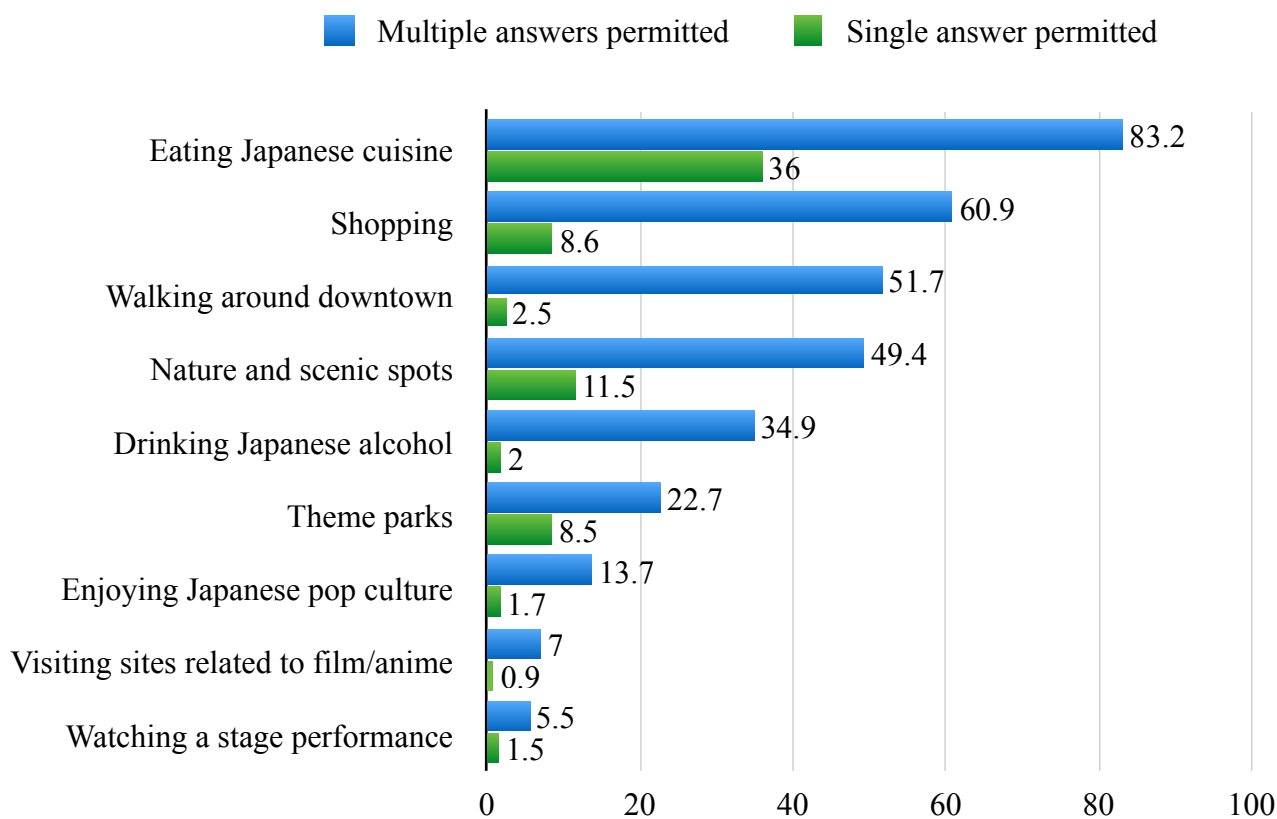

Figure 7: What inbound tourists had expected to experience before their visit to Japan (all nationalities/regions). All numbers are percentages.
Source: Japan National Tourism Organization (2024b, p. 24)

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

The same survey also established what inbound tourists actually did on their visit, and what they want to do next time (Figure 8).
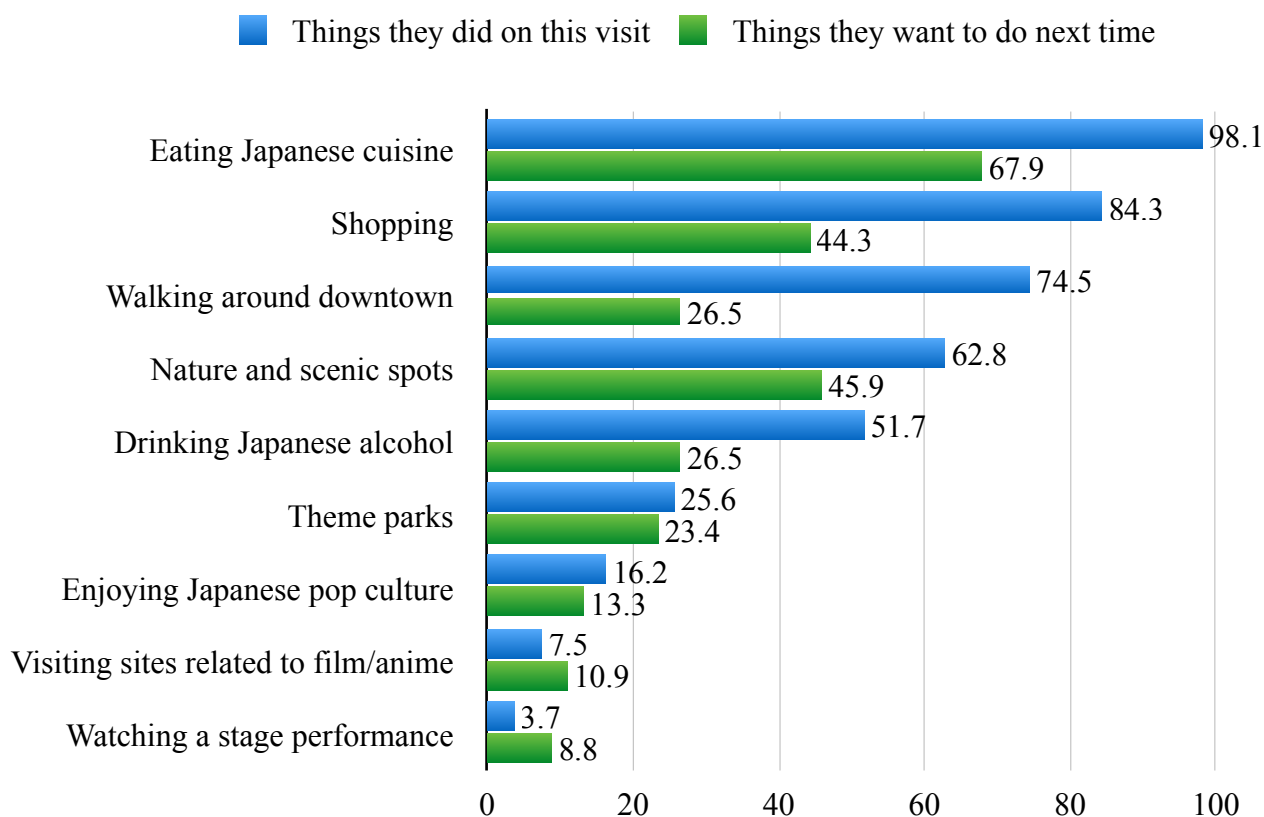

Figure 8: What inbound tourists did on their trip to Japan, and what they want to do on their next visit (all nationalities/regions, multiple answers allowed). All numbers are percentages.
Source: Japan National Tourism Organization (2024b, p. 25)

The data on what inbound tourists actually did during their stay in Japan shows that the majority of them experienced 'eating Japanese cuisine' (98.1 per cent), 'shopping' (84.3 per cent), and 'walking around downtown' (74.5 per cent), while a much smaller percentage of tourists chose 'visiting sites related to film/anime' (7.5 per cent) or 'enjoying Japanese pop culture' (16.2 per cent) (Japan National Tourism Organization 2024b, p. 25). These figures indicate that there is a significant gap between the expected role of popular culture as a tourism inducer and the actual demand among inbound tourists. This clarifies that the concept of Cool Japan, if interpreted narrowly to mean manga and anime, is not necessarily effective within the bigger picture of inducing inbound tourism to Japan. It only appeals to a limited group of visitors who are already interested in exploring Japanese popular culture by themselves. However, given that a wide range of things including Japanese cuisine are also recognised as Cool Japan, the fact that few people expected to enjoy or actually enjoyed pop culture on their visits does not negate the effect of Cool Japan itself. Ultimately, it is necessary to implement a comprehensive strategy that reflects the demands of a wider range of inbound tourists, rather than focusing on the specific category of pop culture, especially manga and anime.

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

A comparison with the Kyoto International Manga Museum

As demonstrated above, it is not necessarily effective to utilise the concept of Cool Japan and popular culture as Japan's primary tourism assets on the assumption that they are always favourably recognised and accepted by inbound tourists. However, at the same time, there are facilities in Japan that continue to attract foreign visitors over the long term while focusing on popular-culture-related themes such as manga and anime. One example is the Kyoto International Manga Museum (KIMM).

KIMM is a joint project of Kyoto city and Kyoto Seika University. Its objectives are to collect, store, and exhibit manga materials, conduct research on manga culture, and hold exhibitions and events based on materials and research (Kyoto International Manga Museum 2024a). The museum plays two main roles, one as a museum and the other as a library. It provides visitors with opportunities to browse a wide variety of manga from the Edo period to the present, including both domestic and international works. The origin of the museum dates back to 2003 when Kyoto Seika University proposed to the city to utilise an old elementary school building as a manga storage facility and museum. Since its opening in 2006, the number of visitors has continuously increased, reaching four million total visitors in 2023 (Kyoto International Manga Museum 2024b).

Common elements of Sakura Town and Kyoto International Manga Museum

Sakura Town and Kyoto International Manga Museum share some features. First, both of the projects are cooperative initiatives involving multiple sectors. The Cool Japan Forest Project (CJFP) is a public-private partnership between Tokorozawa city and Kadokawa Corp., while KIMM is a public-academic cooperative initiative involving Kyoto Seika University, Kyoto city, and related government agencies. In the case of KIMM, the land and building were leased free of charge by Kyoto city, and the museum received financial support from the Ministry of Education, Culture Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for the first ten years after its establishment. The facility itself is mostly run by Kyoto Seika University, which also provides the majority of the budget (Yamada 2018, p. 30).

This public-private character of the projects leads to the second shared aspect, which is their original focus on community development, or *machizukuri*, and not just tourism. KIMM was designed not merely as a manga storage facility, but also as a museum that can make contributions to the city and the local community. When the initiative was first proposed, there was opposition to it among residents as they were concerned about public safety and were not sure how the facility would benefit their community. However, the chief of the Agency for Cultural Affairs at the time gave two lectures on the importance of manga and explained some of the benefits it would bring to the community. These included the connection between the university and the community, and the space in the museum that would become a community centre. As a result, the project gained understanding from residents (Yamada 2018, p. 30).

The third shared element is that the content industry is positioned as one of the themes of both cities. In order to attract younger-aged tourists and develop its economy in a new way, Kyoto city has carried out several initiatives regarding the content industry, including the organisation of KYOMAF, the city-led manga/anime trade fair, which is the largest in western Japan, and establishment of support programs for future manga artists. In the context of these efforts, KIMM is expected to contribute to the further development of the city's contents industry (Kyoto City 2017,

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

p. 12). The three aspects mentioned above indicate that both projects play similar roles in the community as popular-culture-related facilities.

The success of Kyoto International Manga Museum

While Kyoto International Manga Museum and Sakura Town have these features in common, various data indicate the success of KIMM in contributing to the city's tourism. KIMM has seen a steady increase in the number of visitors including both domestic and international visitors. In 2016, ten years after its opening, twenty-five per cent of all visitors were inbound tourists (Murata 2017, p. 8). According to one member of the museum's administrative staff, the figure was 27.3 per cent in 2023 (interview with the author, 21 October 2024).

Analysing KIMM from an inbound and contents tourism perspective, there are three aspects that motivate tourist visits. The first is that the facility focuses on manga in its broader cultural context rather than as a purchasable product. The museum stores approximately 300,000 items ranging from Meiji period (1868-1912) magazines to popular manga series today. Of these, 50,000 can be read freely anywhere in the museum (Amano 2017, p. 33). As the museum aims to preserve the culture of manga, it displays a wide range of works without being bound by the framework of a specific era, publishing company, artist, or language. This feature makes the facility distinctive as an open place to see and experience manga as a representative part of the culture of Japan, and not as a business.

As such, the museum has met the demands of inbound tourists in its cultural and educational aspects. There are other manga-related facilities in Japan, such as the Tokiwaso Manga Museum in Tokyo and Osamu Tezuka Manga Museum in Hyogo, that have become destinations for international visitors. However, KIMM highlights manga as a cultural medium and not merely as a product. This is evident from the bilingual introduction to manga in its Main Gallery, which was built to satisfy requests from visitors who visit KIMM for educational purposes (Berndt 2012, p. 146). Researchers have reported that Western visitors to manga museums have higher expectations for learning something through the exhibits than Japanese visitors, who are more likely to simply enjoy leafing through manga works on bookshelves (Berndt 2012, p. 141). In other words, the museum's intention not only to exhibit manga as entertainment materials but also to introduce it as a historical and cultural medium meets the expectations of international visitors.

According to the results of a survey aimed at foreign visitors to the museum, 100 per cent of them agreed with the idea that with this museum a new tourist site had been added to Kyoto as a symbol of Cool Japan (Murata 2017, p. 10). By contrast, Sakura Town and Kadokawa Culture Museum are largely run by Kadokawa Corp. Their exhibits focus on the company's products, which makes the facility more business-focused and less characteristic as a place to learn about culture. This feature also strengthens its tendency to attract specific fan groups of anime and manga produced by Kadokawa Corp., not a wider category of inbound tourists in general. This is an important structural difference between the two facilities, and between public-academic partnerships and public-private partnerships. Although both of the facilities are in a cooperative relationship with the public sector, the latter is strongly characterised by its pursuit of profit.

The business-focus of Kadokawa Culture Museum is also reflected in its admission fees. A one-day passport for the museum for one adult (university students and above) costs 3,100 yen on weekdays and 3,500 yen on weekends, while an adult ticket to Kyoto International Manga Museum costs 1,200 yen. One of the reviews posted by a foreign tourist on the Trip Advisor page for Sakura Town (Trip Advisor 2024) says:

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

> I enjoyed my experience overall, but it was definitely not worth the price (about ¥3000!). I really wish the book area in particular ('Edit Town' and the 'Book Theater' – the things covered by the standard ticket) were free, because they have an interesting concept and let you browse through all the books, but you could theoretically have a similar experience at a nice public library for free.

This review, and others voicing a similar complaint, indicates that the high prices for a cultural facility can lead to dissatisfaction and less motivation among visitors, especially those who are more interested in seeing manga and anime products as a culture exploration and not as a fan activity. To have popular culture products as the main theme of a facility, it is necessary to understand that business and culture are two sides of the same coin and there is a certain level of risk in focusing on specific companies or products.

The second aspect of the Kyoto International Manga Museum is that it has been positioned as a supplementary attraction, and not the main reason for visiting Kyoto. In other words, the museum contributes to expanding the scope of tourism in Kyoto. Kyoto has long been a major inbound tourist destination, with shrines and temples being the mainstay of the city's tourism. The museum offers a new way to enjoy manga as a supplementary attraction. As Murata (2017, p. 12) explains, visitor-attracting industries, such as tourism, require visitors' satisfaction to be obtainable in a single visit, and he observes that consumers tend to have a strong desire to maximise their utility of spatial travel while minimising its costs. Positioning the museum as a new regional tourism resource in addition to Kyoto's original assets, and providing tourists with new routes for enjoying old and new Japan both increase the city's potential to attract visitors, including those who do not necessarily intend to visit museums as primary destinations. In a survey answered by foreign visitors to the museum, more than ninety per cent answered positively when asked if the presence of this museum contributed to an increase in the length of their stay in Kyoto (Murata 2017, p. 9). One of its strengths, therefore, is not only its popular culture theme, but also the fact that it has a high level of connection with other facilities and places. In this respect, Sakura Town still has room for improvement in terms of strategic connections with other tourist attractions within both Tokorozawa city and Saitama prefecture.

The third and final factor that makes Kyoto International Manga Museum an inbound tourism attraction in Kyoto is its successful packaging within promotion of Kyoto as a city of popular culture contents. Since with the creation of the museum, Kyoto city has focused on the utilisation of contents, and in 2017 the city released guidelines for the promotion of the Kyoto city contents industry. In addition to the museum, other initiatives include an industry-academic-public cooperation project showcasing mix-media content, the Kyoto Cross Media Experience (KYOTO CMEX); a comprehensive manga/anime trade fair, the Kyoto International Manga Anime Fair (KYOMAF); and projects supporting the development of aspiring manga artists (City of Kyoto 2017, pp. 6-7). Another initiative is using anime or manga contents to promote tourism in the city. For example, the city introduced contents into its tourism promotion by offering cultural experiences such as manga drawing workshops at the museum and creating tour courses for fans wanting to visit real-life anime locations (Kyoto City 2017, p. 12). Moreover, KYOMAF's theme is the combination of the city's brand as the ancient capital of Japan and contemporary culture such as manga, anime, and games. Visitors can not only enjoy booths featuring artists' works, cosplay areas, or voice actors making appearance on the stages, but also experience Kyoto's traditional crafts (Kyoto International Manga Anime Fair 2024). The Kyoto International Manga Museum is also one of the venues for this event and plays a part in citywide tourism promotion around the core theme of

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

popular culture contents. This strategic tourism promotion at a municipal level indicates that it is more effective to establish an overarching theme to attract tourists to the area as a whole rather than developing an independent strategy as a museum. Tourism campaigns involving tie-ups with anime and manga works have been implemented in several cities in Saitama prefecture such as Kuki and Chichibu cities. However, Sakura Town has not yet hosted comprehensive tourism campaigns or large-scale trade fairs beyond the city boundaries, thereby making the most of the contents related to cities in Saitama prefecture.

Conclusions

Cool Japan has been positioned as a major policy to enhance the country's economic and cultural competitiveness and soft power. In particular, the use of the Cool Japan concept has been recommended at the national and regional levels as an effective tool for generating inbound tourism and regional revitalisation. Indeed, local tourism can be revitalised through anime pilgrimages, and the region's popularity and visitation rates can increase through popular-culture-related events, such as the World Cosplay Summit.

However, there is a certain level of risk in considering Cool Japan to be a magical term that leads to absolute success in generating inbound tourism. It is important to effectively utilise Cool Japan elements in ways that suit the strengths and characteristics of each region, rather than promoting goods and services without any restrictions under the title of Cool Japan. In particular, when considering the incorporation of Cool Japan into inbound tourism, it is critical to have a wider range of target visitors, and not simply a limited niche market. Few inbound tourists come to Japan for the primary purpose of experiencing mixed-media Japanese popular culture, unless they are interested fans to begin with. Nevertheless, popular culture such as anime and manga is often synonymous with the Cool Japan slogan. In order to be attractive to a wider range of tourists, creating a place that is easy for them to stop by as a supplementary attraction in an existing destination, rather than trying to create a new destination, is one of the effective strategies. In this way, Cool Japan elements can play an important role in complementing the original assets and attractions of the region. According to Seaton (2020, p. 231), the broad touristic appeal of a destination can be more important than the appeal of the contents when planning a trip, even when the tourists are highly motivated to visit sites related to the contents. A more beneficial and successful collaboration between the Cool Japan initiative and tourism strategies starts with the combination of Cool Japan elements with local assets from a larger perspective of the region's tourism as a whole.

Applying these findings to the case of the TOKOROZAWA SAKURA TOWN (Sakura Town) and the COOL JAPAN FOREST Project (CJFP), there are two main conclusions. One is that the museum considers manga mainly as an entertainment product and exhibit. The high price and lack of educational features to let visitors learn about manga as a culture may make a wider range of tourists hesitant to stop by. The other is that the museum has not done enough to collaborate with anime works set in the prefecture or the city, or to co-host anime and manga events inside and outside the prefecture. The limited involvement in tourism planning in the wider area makes it difficult to attract new demographics as a supplementary attraction for visitors to the region. Cool Japan elements are most effective when they complement tourism in a region as a whole, and not when they are relied upon excessively.

While this article has focused on the cases of museums in Saitama and Kyoto, there are various types of popular-culture-related museums in Japan, including museums themed around specific authors and those with theme-park-like elements. Critically analysing how each facility relates to

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

and contributes to inbound tourism based on the different characteristics and situations of each region is useful for drawing lessons regarding how the utilisation of popular culture, as a representative example of Cool Japan, generates inbound tourism.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] These official English names are typically rendered all in capital letters. This article uses the acronym and lower case versions for ease of reading.

[2] *Nana* means seven, *go* means five, and *ya* is one possible pronunciation of the Chinese character for eight.

[3] For the hotel's interior design, see Nihon Keizai Shimbun (2023)..

[4] Inquiries regarding data since 2021 were made by the author, but representatives of both Tokorozawa city and Kadokawa Culture Museum said that the data is not publicly disclosed.

International Journal of Contents Tourism,
Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
The Use of 'Cool Japan' in Inbound Tourism

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Vol. 8 (2025), pp. 1-22.

KUDO Yuma,
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About the *International Journal of Contents Tourism*

The *International Journal of Contents Tourism* (https://contents-tourism.press/) is an open-access, refereed scholarly journal exploring the phenomenon of 'contents tourism', defined as travel behaviour motivated fully or partially by narratives, characters, locations and other creative elements of popular culture forms, including film, television dramas, manga, anime, novels and computer games. IJCT publishes articles of various lengths, from original research papers through to short blog entries. It is based at Hokkaido University, Japan, and the editors-in-chief are Professor Takayoshi Yamamura (Center for Advanced Tourism Studies) and Professor Philip Seaton (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).