



INTERNATIONAL YOUNG SCHOLARS JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES

Exploring Japan's Soft Power: The Consumption of Japanese Popular Culture Among Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

The evolving state of globalization has prompted countries around the world to amplify their influence and establish favorable multilateral relationships. With the emergence of soft power, many countries opted for a softer approach through popular culture to persuade others to achieve what they want. However, it is not certain that soft power will work as planned. There are not many studies conducted about the effect of popular culture among Malaysians in shaping their views of a country. Hence, this study aims to discover Malaysians' consumption of Japanese popular culture and to understand if Japanese popular culture is capable of shaping Japan's image. A phenomenography approach was used to gather insight into Malaysians' experiences with Japanese popular culture along with their views towards Japan. Through purposive sampling, 10 Baby Boomers and 10 Millennials were selected as participants for an open-ended survey. Collected data were then analyzed by using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, assisted with NVivo. The findings of this study suggested that Japanese popular culture as a soft power tool succeeded in fostering positive images for Japan with admiration for Japanese popular culture products. No apparent generational gap was found in the participants' responses. In addition, the findings offer in-depth future research for the soft power field in Malaysia.

Keywords: soft power, Japanese popular culture, baby boomers, millennials

INTRODUCTION

The rise of soft power is seen to be prevalent in the current age of technology. In most developed nations, utilizing soft power can benefit them economically and assist in image building. As first coined by Nye (1990, p. 168), soft power is “the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own”. It grants “the ability to get what you want through attraction” (Nye, 2004, p. 256) instead of its hard power counterpart which focuses on force and coercion. In other words, the absence of threats or payments will not interfere with the process of securing cooperation with others (Nye, 2004, p. 60).

Soft power comes in many forms, with popular culture as one of its most notable. Popular culture is believed to have a strong foothold in ones' contemporary aspects of lives which are usually singled out to be on constant changes due to the development of technology (media). The widespread of media breaks the barrier between people, bringing them closer. Popular culture is beyond 'silly' and 'fun' (Clapton, 2015), as it reflects the common standards and beliefs of a community. Concerning this, people's daily life can be influenced by popular culture (Delaney, 2007). As quoted by GansBoriskin and Tisinger (2005) “the more people watch television [or other forms of popular culture], the more they tend to think that the real world resembles the popular cultural one”. Among the practices and texts of popular culture that occupied most of adults' and children's time are music, films, TV, novels, social media, tourism, news, digital games, and sports. The results of these practices can shape its receivers' behaviors, political beliefs, and foreign policy.

This study aims to explore Malaysians' consumption of Japanese popular culture and to study if the usage of soft power has allowed Japan to recover from its post-militarism image. It predominantly focuses on the exertion of soft power through well-known Japanese popular culture such as anime, manga, J-pop, cuisine, J-drama, and fashion. Although there are plenty of studies done on the relationship between soft power and popular culture, little was found in the comparative studies between Malaysians of different generational background: Baby Boomers and Millennials.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Soft power allows the influence exerted by Japan to be willingly accepted, although the main agenda of using soft power do have similarities with its hard power counterpart. Research by Otmazgin (2008) showed that such cases could be seen in South Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, and China whereby the

acknowledgement of Japan's soft power exists with said popular culture being practiced in daily life.

Popular culture remains significant because it offers satisfaction to people and has appealing factors that is enjoyed by many (Dukut, 2018), hence the reason it is used as a tool of persuasion instead of coercion such as war and military. As a useful soft power resource, popular culture is capable of dominating media and technology while shaping preferences in other nations. (Lux, 2021).

However, there is no assurance that soft power will work as intended (Gudgeirsson, 2014) since there are loopholes when applying soft power where the influence of Japanese popular culture is concerned. Japan's relations with neighboring nations during the post-war have improved with the aid of its popular culture, but possibilities of historical tensions could factor in reducing Japan's soft power. This goes hand in hand with the issue pertaining to soft power in this study where there might be contrasting perceptions among people of different generations who are exposed to Japan's soft power through popular culture. The lack of research on such a topic adds to the unclarity of the phenomenon. This study seeks to answer the views of Malaysian Baby Boomers and Millennials towards Japanese popular culture and how does Japanese popular culture shape(s) Japan's image among Malaysian Baby Boomers and Millennials?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft Power

The term 'soft power' was famously coined by Nye (2008), as using attraction instead of force to get your desired outcome. The term 'force' is translated as hard power, in which the usage of war, military, and money are involved. Soft power is also described as being equivalent to the influence of culture (Nye, 2006). To further indulge in the concept of soft power, the word 'want' holds a prominent role that leads an individual to acquiesce in his decision when dealing with influences. In this sense, accepting cultural influence by their own will and are devoid of protest. This is where the line between soft power and hard power is drawn. The main contrast between these two powers is the way they form acceptance towards their target. While soft power influences the targets' behavior by affecting their preferences, hard power on the other hand governs their circumstances. Soft power is just as crucial as the command of hard power. A nation will be at a greater advantage if its power is made justifiable towards others as they only deal with minimal resistance to gain what it wants. When one's culture and system of ideals are deemed appealing, others will follow by their own volition (Lai & Yu, 2019). As stated by Cooper (2004), both soft power and hard power pursue the same ideals but through different methods.

Japanese Popular Culture in Malaysia

Popular culture constitutes several definitions. However, three significant characteristics became evident throughout the definitions. Popular culture is highly affiliated with (i) mass media such as television and radio, (ii) consumer-oriented and (iii) usually prompts the consumers to become followers or fans of the products of popular culture, ranging from genres to performers (Moody, 2010). The massive drive behind the elevation of popular culture is the existence of a platform where consumers were encouraged to rate performance and leading them to become fans. This platform can be found through free media as well as online media. Furthermore, the nature of popular culture allows the interconnection between artists and their fans regarding the works or contents that they released.

In an empirical analysis conducted by Warren (2014), focus was given to soft power, mass media and the production of power for a country which he found that one of the most vital tools to seek peace and stability in the modern world derived from the infrastructure of mass media. Warren elaborated that such a tool can lower the possibility of creating civil war by multifold. He also claimed that mass media holds upon the message and idea that indirectly shapes the behavior of its audiences in terms of maintaining the supremacy of a nation and preventing civil war.

The enactment of Japan's soft power was made clear by one of Japan's foreign policies, known as 'Cool Japan', a project that deals with the global promotion of Japanese anime, cuisine, and fashion (Yee, 2017). The Japanese government is determined to utilize popular culture as a tool of diplomacy which Cool Japan has its section in the Japan Diplomatic Bluebook. The Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs also supported Cool Japan project by claiming that cultural diplomacy tools such as popular culture, along with traditional culture and art can amplify the trust and understanding that foreign countries have towards Japan (MOFA, 2017). With all the buzz and interest in Japanese popular culture, McGray (2002) pointed out this phenomenon as 'Japan's Gross National Cool'. A similar situation was found in modern Malaysia where the amount of youth indulged in Japanese popular culture rose despite being a former colony of Japan (Chau, Nur Atiqah Syairah & Valerie, 2020.)

On the other hand, it is no new news that Japanese popular culture has reached Malaysia. Apart from its main role as cultural product, it also created images of Japan and allows Malaysian to view Japan differently. In Malaysia, imported entertainment product can easily be accessed as the local entertainment industry indeed relies on them. Japanese popular culture is one of the varieties of foreign popular culture products consumed by Malaysian people (Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hamisah Hassan & Mohd Nizam Osman, 2011). According to a

survey conducted by the Japanese External Trade Organization (2007), as of 2006, there were 13 programs including 10 animation programs from Japan broadcasted on Malaysian terrestrial channels. As for satellite television ASTRO, it broadcasted two Japanese channels which are: Animax and NHK World. It will not come off as a surprise if the products of Japanese popular culture will be further acknowledged as a brand with massive commercial prospective in the future (Koulikov, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative research design is used to focus on extracting meaning that the participants shared through their experiences and opinions. By employing qualitative research, the meaning of one's ascribed experiences can be better interpreted as researchers gain access to the feelings and thoughts of the studied participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In a detailed manner, phenomenography approach is used to evaluate how the participants concluded certain events. It aims to explore the way people perceive, experience, and create meanings out of phenomena around them through qualitative methods. (Marton, 1986). Since this research involves cross sectional study of the participants and their experiences, it is vital to pinpoint the main issue that adheres to their beliefs (Moustakes, 1994) as there are various ways for individuals to undergo a phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997).

The conduction of this research involved the distribution of open-ended survey through Google Form. Data collection began with the researcher listing out potential participants for the study. Later, the participants were personally contacted and after gaining their approval, the researcher proceeded with sending the link of Google Form to the participants through WhatsApp. After the data was collected, member checking was done by having the participants confirmed the results of their data.

20 respondents from different generational backgrounds were chosen through purposive sampling: 10 Baby Boomers (5 male & 5 females) and 10 Millennials (5 males & 5 females). There are also several requirements when choosing the participants: i. Malaysian ii. Have experienced or been exposed to Japanese popular culture iii. Well-versed in Malaysia's history with Japan. For this study, the researcher made sure to shortlist the participants with fulfilled requirements before distributing the survey as selecting participants with adequate knowledge and experience for the studied phenomenon is also required (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The instrument employed for this research was an open-ended survey with questions adopted and adapted from Otmazgin (2012) and Simeon (2006) (see

Appendix 1). To produce results, the written responses from Google Form were then imported into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) and underwent the procedure of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006).

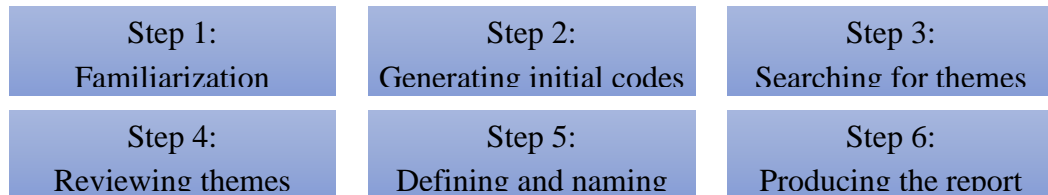


Figure 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006)

FINDINGS

Three themes pertaining to the research objective and research question of this study were generated. A demographic profile showing the types of Japanese popular culture experienced by each generation is also included (see Appendix 2). The participants are labeled as 'BB' and 'M' for Baby Boomers and Millennials, respectively.

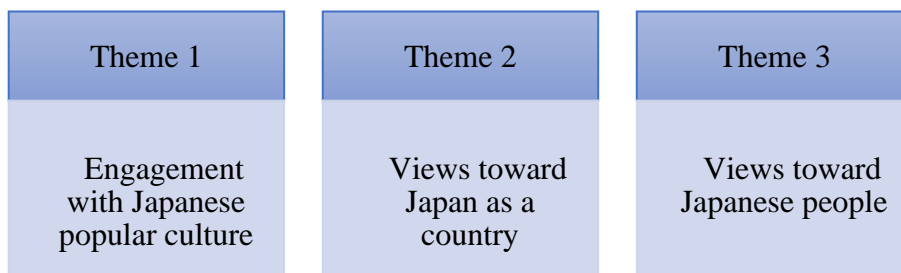


Figure 2: Themes

Engagement with Japanese popular culture

From the data analysis, it can be deduced that all 20 participants experienced Japanese popular culture at some point in their life. The theme will also explore two sub-themes that were found to be related: i) Consumption of Japanese popular culture, and ii) Views toward Japanese popular culture. 10 out of 10 Millennials described their active experiences with Japanese popular culture. Japanese music emerged as the most engaged popular culture with 9 out of 10 Millennials (5 females, 4 males) as active listeners. Interestingly, 6 participants (3 males, 3 females) who are currently learning Japanese language agreed that listening to

Japanese songs help improve their Japanese proficiency. Next, anime is also an integral part of popular culture consumption among Millennials with 8 out of 10 Millennials confessed to being a fan of it. While both Millennials and Baby Boomers admitted being consumers of Japanese popular culture products, their interests were shown to be different. Baby Boomers showed a strong acknowledgement towards sushi (cuisine), *Oshin* (J-drama) and traditional culture. 6 out of 10 Baby Boomers wrote that they were aware of Japanese popular culture especially sushi. It can be noted that Baby Boomers lacked active or direct experience(s) with Japanese popular culture. However, this research has allowed 3 out of 10 Baby Boomers to reminisce about their past experiences of watching Japanese television programs when they were young. The popular J-drama *Oshin* had once taken place in their life. A fan of *Oshin* (BB1) acknowledged the popularity of the drama, “When I was young, in the early 90s there was a popular Japanese drama named *Oshin* which was translated into Malay language and was popular among Malaysians.”

Interestingly, when asked about opinions toward Japanese popular culture, 18 out of 20 participants mentioned ‘traditional’, ‘unique’, ‘interesting’, and ‘distinctive’. Japanese popular culture is considered rare and preserved from external influences. The participants stated that they were amazed at how Japan is capable of retaining traditions in their popular culture. Other responses from Baby Boomers and Millennials also held similar views: “Their culture is very unique and not like others” (M6), and “Rich in culture and have an identity of its own. Like kimono is very unique and so are their food” (BB2).

Views toward Japan as a country

This theme produced two sub-themes that provided insights into how Malaysians view Japan as a country, particularly those that experienced Japanese popular culture. The first sub-theme revolves around the sentiments shown by Baby Boomers and Millennials toward Japan. Based on the analysis, 20 out of 20 participants held positive views toward Japan. 10 out of 10 Baby Boomers mentioned Japan as a ‘beautiful’, ‘clean’ and ‘developed’ country. Although Baby Boomers were found to have low engagement with Japanese popular culture, they generally have favorable views towards the country. While the entirety of Baby Boomers gave positive views, Millennials on the other hand were found to be a little critical in their views towards Japan. It is to be noted that Millennials had a richer experience with Japanese popular culture as compared to Baby Boomers. While sharing their admiration towards Japan, they also addressed minor unfavorable opinions. Only one participant (M8) mentioned past Japanese militarism. Participants M3 and M5 pointed out ‘the other side of Japan’ and the level of stress among Japanese citizens. Nevertheless, their interest in Japanese

popular culture is still intact. 7 out of 10 Millennials described Japan as 'unique', and 'modern'. 2 out of 5 male Millennials even stated their desire to live in Japan.

The second sub-theme discovered that 5 Baby Boomers and 5 Millennials included in their responses on how Japan is upholding their traditions amidst modernization. This view transcends generations as Baby Boomers also shared their fascination with the co-existence of Japan's tradition and advanced technology. BB5 defined Japan as "beautiful and lovely with a rich culture and history". For BB7, Japan gives off the impression of "progressive and at the same time retaining its culture".

Views toward Japanese people

Among the surveyed participants, some had the experience of meeting Japanese people, especially Millennials. In the answers given by the participants, positive descriptions such as 'discipline', 'polite', 'nice', and 'hardworking' were found the most. 5 out of 10 Baby Boomers praised Japanese for being disciplined although they only had the chance of knowing them through media platforms. Some of their responses include a sharing by BB6 who indicates that he had heard stories from his father who was a soldier during the Japanese occupation in Malaya (currently Malaysia). But as he never met a Japanese, he could only describe them through what has been shown in media. As for Millennials, 7 out of 10 implied that Japanese people are nice and polite. M6, who is a fan of anime linked Japanese people with "polite and well organized". However, Millennials were also found to give diverse thoughts when asked for their opinions. A participant (M8) acknowledged the past act of Japanese colonialism. While M5 recognized Japanese as nice people, she also expressed her opinion about the other side of Japanese people which is beyond what is portrayed by their popular culture.

In general, Malaysians surveyed for this research have consumed Japanese popular culture in various ways. They showed admiration for Japanese popular culture products and praised Japan for being capable of retaining its tradition alongside modern advancement. Positive views towards Japanese people were demonstrated although some had their opinions shaped purely through media. While Millennials highlighted some negative aspects of Japan, it does not dominate their overall views towards the country, as well as their interest in Japanese popular culture

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study showed favorable responses towards Japan and its popular culture, with only 1 participant stated about Japan's past militarism. Nonetheless, no overwhelming ambivalence towards Japan was detected. These

findings are compatible with the survey done by Pew Research Centre in 2013 on Asian countries' attitudes towards Japan. Out of 7 countries surveyed, Malaysia topped the rank with 80% of the respondents showing a positive attitude towards the country reflecting the outcome of Japanese government in their advocacy of cultivating a likable image for Japan through popular culture (Daliot-Bul, 2009).

In Malaysia, Japanese popular culture is common and gained a cult following in the past few years it was introduced. A sense of familiarity with the popular culture flourished among Malaysian of different generational backgrounds. A study by Yamato (2012), elucidated that anime, manga, J-pop and J-drama were among the most consumed popular culture in Malaysia. Its consistency in popularity can be seen in a 2006 survey by Yomiuri Shimbun (cited in Peng 2007) where anime, manga, J-drama, and cuisine emerged as the Japanese popular culture that Malaysians were most inclined to. As a soft power tool, Japanese popular culture aided in the shaping of Japan's image among Malaysians. Interestingly, a study by Tavitiyaman (2016) showed a similar result with the influx of foreign youth migration and tourism to Japan that originated from their interest in Japanese popular culture. In addition, Japanese popular culture is not considered a short-live trend but a lifestyle among Millennials instead. Supported by Widaarhesty & Pradipta (2016), the globalization of Japanese popular culture has taken a turn in influencing the lifestyle and perception of youth towards Japan. The spread of Japanese popular culture allowed Millennials to be introduced to Japan with fascination that propelled them to learn more about the country alongside their admiration for it. 10 out of 10 Millennials revealed to have experience with anime. A participant (M2) explained that anime enabled her to learn about empathy and enhance her imagination. Aside from being a form of entertainment, anime is also acknowledged by Millennials to have helped them learn Japanese language. 6 out of 10 Millennials attested to utilizing anime and Japanese songs as a tool for improving their Japanese proficiency. Apart from that, Millennials' experiences and fondness for Japanese cuisine implied that they have adopted such a lifestyle. This is in line with the increase in importation and localization of Japanese food in Malaysia (Md Nasrudin Md Akhir et al., 2011).

People are attracted to Japanese popular culture as they consider it to be cool, interesting, and attractive (MOFA, 2006) which is compatible with the findings of this study. The way Japanese popular culture is presented reflects the images that Japan aimed to disseminate. With the evident spread of Japanese popular culture in Malaysia, Baby Boomers conveyed accepting views towards Japan, also showering them with praises. They left out any mention of colonialism despite being a generation that is closely related to those who lived during the period. When they encountered Japanese popular culture, it reminded them of Japan's authenticity which is void of foreign influences. Media consumers usually

build their personal judgement as they interpret the meanings from the consumed media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2013), proving that with aright execution, popular culture works as a soft power tool in shaping or branding Japan's image.

As highlighted in the findings of this study, Baby Boomers and Millennials generally hold similar sentiments towards Japan and Japanese people. "Tradition amidst modernization" was the most common attribute shared by Baby Boomers and Millennials towards Japan. This is consistent with the proclamation made by Japanese government about how Japanese popular culture products carry traditional values and its ability to captivate worldwide audience (MOFA as cited in Steven, 2015).

Most Millennials consider Japanese people as 'polite' and 'nice'. On a minor note, despite never experienced Japanese colonialism, M8 remarked that those with such experience might have shaped a negative view, while M3 and M5 conveyed slightly unflattering points about Japan. It is safe to say that the not-so-striking negative views illustrated by Millennials were also due to their wide exposure to Japanese popular culture. Research by Pascarella et al. (2015) proposed that those with diverse experiences tend to develop more intricate thinking. In this case, due to Japanese popular culture becoming a part of their lifestyles, Millennials are bound to discover more about the different sides of Japan. However, that did not affect their interest to keep consuming Japanese popular culture.

Baby Boomers and Millennials showed appreciation towards Japanese popular culture with praises such as "clean country", "discipline people", and "unique culture" instead of harrowing mentions of the past, revealing that soft power worked the way it is planned. In addition, there was no generational gap between Baby Boomers and Millennials. Despite growing up in different periods and having distinct consumption levels of Japanese popular culture, it was not a hindrance for them to express their appreciation and admiration. This resulted in Japan being branded with novel images. As elaborated in the soft power theory, cultural appeal improves a country's image, apart from attracting others. The dissemination of Japanese popular culture such as anime, food, etc as proposed by Cool Japan Policy (METI, 2018) has in turn become the reflection of Japan and its society (Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger, 2005).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings have contributed to the understanding that popular culture is an essential soft power tool. The exertion of soft power through popular culture is found to have favorable outcomes among the participants. Majority of them associated Japan with positive images, apart from admiring the country and

enjoying its popular culture. While the participants of the study are well versed in the history of Japanese occupation, they did not exhibit any signs of disapproval towards the current state of the country. In addition, the non-existence living memory of Japanese militarism also enhanced soft power's potential. As a soft power tool, popular culture fosters pleasing images and disseminates ideas to the advantage of the origin country (Desideri, 2013).

These findings also allow room for future research in which the usage of soft power through popular culture products can also be utilized by Malaysia. Soft power has a greater likelihood in solidifying foreign policy, attracting future investment, and boosting product exportation (Agyeiwaah, Suntikul & Li, 2019) besides elevating tourism (Hanafi Hussin, 2018).

For future research, it is recommended to involve participants on a larger scale to further reflect the effect of soft power. Besides, future research can also focus on detailed experiences among the participants. It is suggested for said study to employ a different research approach such as hermeneutic phenomenology approach to further explore the rich experiences of the participants. Moreover, having participants who are actively experiencing Japanese popular culture can provide a comprehensive study of the effect of soft power. On top of that, changing the instrument to face-to-face interview would boost the findings since follow-up questions with participants would allow them to recall more experiences to be included for the research.

CONCLUSION

The exertion of soft power through popular culture assisted in sculpting a country's image, especially among international audiences. Soft power, however, does not prompt the act of dominance. This study propounded that Malaysian regardless of generation (Baby Boomers or Millennials) showed pleasant responses to Japan and Japanese popular culture. Although there was a difference in the level of consumption of Japanese popular culture between Baby Boomers and Millennials, admiration towards Japan and its popular culture was apparent. The uniqueness of Japanese popular culture propelled the way into shaping Japan's image, similar to the policies of 'Cool Japan'. Having utilized soft power, Japan has now shed its past colonialism image and revamped into a 'cool' nation with various popular culture products to offer.

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