

# Reinterpreting Tradition in Contemporary Japanese Tourism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Japanese tourism as a dynamic cultural discourse in which tradition and modernity are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted. Adopting a qualitative case study approach grounded in cultural anthropology and heritage studies, the research explores how historical rituals, aesthetic principles, culinary traditions, and contemporary creative industries collectively shape Japan's tourism experience and national identity. Data were collected through ethnographic observations at major tourist destinations such as Kyoto, Tokyo, and Kanazawa, complemented by semi-structured interviews with international tourists, local guides, and cultural practitioners, as well as auto-ethnographic participation in rituals, hospitality services, and culinary tourism. Thematic analysis reveals that Japanese tourism is sustained by ritual continuity, harmony with nature, and refined aesthetics, while simultaneously embracing innovation through contents tourism, pop culture, and advanced infrastructure. The findings show that Japanese tourism sustains a form of flexible authenticity, treating heritage as a living and adaptive practice rather than a fixed commodity. By linking traditions such as *washoku*, pilgrimage, and *omotenashi* with anime tourism and creative industries, the study contributes to debates on authenticity and cultural sustainability. Overall, it argues that Japanese tourism operates as a resilient cultural arena that supports cross-cultural understanding while responding creatively to globalization and mass tourism.

**Keywords:** Japanese tourism, cultural heritage, tradition and modernity, anime culture

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Japan extends beyond its conventional function as an economic sector and operates as a deeply embedded cultural practice through which national values, aesthetics, and social ethics are expressed. For international visitors, Japan is often encountered not merely as a destination, but as a carefully curated cultural landscape where everyday practices such as seasonal rituals, hospitality norms, and mobility systems become meaningful sites of cultural learning. This distinctive characteristic positions Japanese tourism as a productive lens through which the interaction between culture, identity, and globalization can be examined.

In an era of intensified global mobility and experience-driven travel, tourism has increasingly been conceptualized as a cultural arena where identities are performed, negotiated, and consumed. Japan represents a particularly compelling case within this context. Rather than exhibiting a linear transition from tradition to modernity, Japanese tourism demonstrates a patterned coexistence in which centuries-old rituals, aesthetic philosophies, and spiritual practices continue to function alongside advanced technologies and contemporary popular culture. Seasonal events such as *hanami* and *momijigari*, ritualized encounters in tea ceremonies and shrine visits, and the embodied practices of *omotenashi* hospitality coexist seamlessly with high-speed rail networks, digital infrastructures, and global anime-driven travel narratives.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on Japanese tourism, much of the existing literature tends to treat traditional heritage and contemporary innovation as separate analytical domains. Studies often focus either on historical travel culture and pilgrimage practices or on modern phenomena such as contents tourism, creative industries, and technological mobility. As a result, there remains limited integrative analysis that examines how these elements function together as a unified cultural system, particularly from the perspective of the international visitor's experiential learning. Moreover, the recent surge in inbound tourism has further intensified

questions surrounding authenticity, commodification, and ethical governance, underscoring the need for a more nuanced cultural interpretation of tourism practices.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating how Japanese tourism operates as a strategic cultural space where tradition and modernity converge and mutually reinforce one another. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in ethnographic observation, interviews, and auto-ethnographic participation, the study examines a range of tourism practices, including seasonal nature-based rituals, formalized cultural performances, aesthetic principles in hospitality, culinary heritage, and contemporary pop-cultural mobilities. Rather than viewing tourism as a passive consumption of attractions, this research conceptualizes it as an active process of cultural communication and learning.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How are key cultural values and aesthetic principles articulated through Japanese tourism practices?
- (2) How do international visitors interpret and learn from the convergence of tradition and modernity during their travel experiences in Japan?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to broader debates in cultural tourism and heritage studies, positioning Japanese tourism not merely as an economic engine, but as a dynamic cultural discourse through which national identity is continuously negotiated in a globalized context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To situate this study within existing academic discourse, it is necessary to examine how Japanese tourism has been conceptualized and analyzed in prior scholarship. The following literature review synthesizes key streams of research on Japanese travel culture, cultural tourism, and heritage governance, with particular attention to debates surrounding authenticity, ritual continuity, and the integration of contemporary creative industries. By reviewing both foundational anthropological studies and recent analyses of contents tourism and over tourism management, this section establishes the conceptual frameworks that inform the present research and clarifies the theoretical gaps that the study seeks to address.

Tourism in Japan has evolved into a profound cultural phenomenon that transcends mere economic activity, serving as a living showcase where tradition and modernity converge. The scale of this sector is evidenced by recent record-breaking figures; Japan welcomed over 42 million international visitors in 2025, significantly surpassing the 2024 record of 36.9 million (Tourist Japan, 2026). This surge is driven by a combination of macroeconomic factors, such as a favorable exchange rate, and a burgeoning global fascination with Japanese aesthetics and social values. Government strategic frameworks, notably the *2024 White Paper on Tourism*, further institutionalize this role by positioning tourism as a primary vehicle for regional revitalization, cultural diplomacy, and the global projection of national identity under the *Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Law*.

Academic discourse traces the continuity of Japan's travel culture to historical foundations. Watkins (2010) illustrates how ancient pilgrimage and seasonal journeys remain deeply embedded in contemporary tourism practices. This ritual continuity is expressed through values of harmony with nature, aesthetic refinement, and culinary artistry. A cornerstone of this appeal is *Washoku* (traditional dietary culture), which, since its 2013 UNESCO inscription, has been analyzed as a form of "gastrodiplomacy" - a strategic effort to reclaim proprietary rights over Japanese traditions and project national identity through social practice rather than just cuisine. Complementing this is the philosophy of *Omotenashi* (hospitality), characterized by an "anticipatory intuition" that creates deep emotional loyalty and a "transcendent experience" for visitors, distinguishing Japanese service from Western transactional models.

Globally, scholars such as Richards (2006) argue that cultural tourism serves as a medium of communication where destinations must constantly negotiate the tension between authenticity and commodification. Japan provides a distinctive case of flexible authenticity, where historical preservation in cities like Kyoto and Kanazawa is seamlessly integrated with modern innovation (Yagasaki, 2024). This perspective is supported by

Eguchi (2010), who situates Japanese tourism within an anthropological discourse of identity formation and cross-cultural exchange. In this context, Japan's success lies in treating cultural heritage not as a static artifact, but as a living asset capable of evolution.

The evolution of Japanese cultural heritage is increasingly defined by Contents Tourism (*kontentsu tsurizumu*), where travel is motivated by narratives from anime, manga, and video games. This phenomenon, particularly *Seichi Junrei* (anime pilgrimage), represents a form of symbolic consumption for "Generation Z" tourists, transforming physical locations into sacred spaces where the boundary between reality and fiction blurs. By integrating these contemporary "Cool Japan" exports with traditional heritage, the nation facilitates a "virtual-to-physical" transition. Ultimately, the synthesis of high-speed rail, advanced technology, and pop culture with traditional rituals demonstrates how Japan's tourism landscape functions as a dynamic arena for sustaining cultural values while meeting the expectations of a globalized audience.

The synthesis of existing literature underscores that Japanese tourism is a complex cultural discourse where the preservation of the past and the exigencies of the future are in constant dialogue. While scholars have extensively documented the historical roots of pilgrimage (Watkins, 2010) and the strategic importance of soft power through gastro-diplomacy and pop culture (Yagasaki, 2024), there remains a need to further explore how these disparate elements from ancient *Washoku* traditions to high-tech *Contents Tourism* form a unified national identity. This research, therefore, builds upon the aforementioned frameworks to address its core research questions: specifically, how the interplay between traditional aesthetics and modern innovation serves as a catalyst for cross-cultural understanding, and to what extent the commodification of heritage in the 2025-2026 tourism boom affects the perceived authenticity of the Japanese experience. By analyzing these intersections, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of Japan not just as a destination, but as a resilient cultural arena capable of continuous self-reinvention.

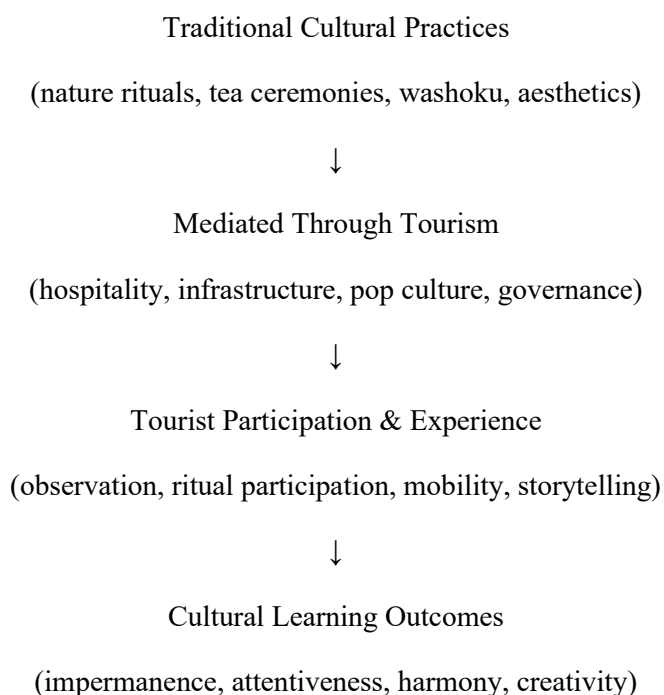
## Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how tradition and modernity are experienced and interpreted within Japanese tourism. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences. Data were collected from 3 main participant groups, including 18 international tourists from Asia, Europe, Australia, and North America; 8 local tourism practitioners, including licensed guides, *ryokan* staff, and culinary professionals; 6 cultural practitioners, including tea ceremony instructors, *washoku* chefs, and shrine staff. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who had direct experience with cultural tourism practices. International tourists were approached at major cultural destinations in Kyoto, Tokyo, and Kanazawa, while local practitioners were selected based on their professional involvement in heritage-related tourism. This sampling method ensured that participants were information-rich and able to reflect on the interaction between traditional practices and contemporary tourism demands.

The researcher conducted on-site observations at cultural events, ritual spaces, hospitality settings, and pop-culture districts (e.g. *hanami*, tea ceremonies, shrines, *ryokan*, Akihabara). Observations focused on tourist behavior, host-guest interactions, spatial design, and the integration of tradition with modern systems. Interviews lasted between 20 - 45 minutes and followed a flexible guide covering: Perceptions of authenticity; Experiences of tradition and modernity; Cultural learning and emotional responses

Interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed.

This study employs a synthesized conceptual model that frames Japanese tourism as a cultural discourse. Drawing on theories of cultural tourism (Richards, 2006), existential authenticity (Wang, 1999), ritual continuity (Watkins, 2008), and anthropological approaches to tourism in Japan (Eguchi, 2010), the model illustrates how traditional cultural practices are mediated through tourism systems and experienced by visitors, resulting in cultural learning outcomes.

**Conceptual Model: Japanese Tourism as Cultural Discourse**

Traditional Japanese practices do not remain isolated from modern tourism. Instead, they are mediated through tourism experiences, supported by infrastructure, creative industries, and hospitality systems. When tourists actively participate in these experiences, they engage in cultural learning that shapes how Japan is understood and remembered. This framework helps explain how heritage and innovation work together, rather than in opposition, within Japanese tourism.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between tradition and modernity in Japanese tourism, this study utilizes a multi-methodological approach to data collection. Primary data were gathered through direct ethnographic observations at major tourist hubs, including Kyoto, Tokyo, and Kanazawa, with a specific focus on high-engagement cultural practices such as seasonal events (*hanami* and *momijigari*), ritual experiences (tea ceremonies and Shinto shrine visits), and the socio-spatial dynamics of pop culture districts like Akihabara. These observations aimed to document the behavioral patterns of tourists and the physical integration of heritage within modern urban environments. Furthermore, this was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with international visitors and cultural practitioners, alongside participant-observer experiences in *ryokan* stays and culinary tours, to capture nuanced perspectives on cultural authenticity and innovation.

Primary qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a diverse cohort of stakeholders to elicit nuanced perspectives on the intersection of cultural authenticity and modern innovation. The participant pool included international and domestic tourists, licensed local guides, and various cultural practitioners, such as tea masters, *washoku* chefs, and Shinto shrine officials. These dialogues were specifically designed to explore how different actors perceive the tension between preserving traditional integrity and adapting to contemporary global expectations within the Japanese tourism landscape.

Complementing these interviews, experiential insights were derived from active participation in a range of tourism activities, employing an auto-ethnographic approach. By adopting the role of the "participant-observer," the researcher engaged in immersive experiences such as formal tea ceremonies, traditional *ryokan* stays, and guided culinary tours. This method allowed for the capture of visceral and sensory dimensions of the Japanese tourism experience qualities that are frequently overlooked in purely distal or detached observations thereby providing a deeper understanding of the lived reality of cultural heritage.

The analytical phase of this research involves a rigorous process of thematic analysis, where qualitative data derived from interviews and field observations are systematically coded into core themes, such as harmony with

nature, ritual continuity, aesthetic principles, culinary heritage, and modern innovation. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, a triangulation strategy is employed, involving the cross-verification of primary data against secondary sources, including national statistics, academic literature, and government policy documents. These integrated data sets are then examined through an interpretive framework rooted in cultural anthropology and heritage studies. This approach allows the study to interpret tourism not merely as a set of activities, but as a dynamic cultural discourse through which national identity and heritage are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted in a globalized context.

To ensure the highest standards of academic integrity and the protection of participants, this study strictly adheres to several key ethical guidelines. Prior to any data collection, informed consent is obtained from all interview participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their absolute right to withdraw at any time. During fieldwork, the researcher maintains a deep respect for cultural practices by employing non-intrusive observation techniques that do not disrupt local traditions or sacred rituals. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality are rigorously maintained; all personal identifiers are removed and replaced with pseudonyms or aggregate data in final reports to ensure that individual responses cannot be traced back to specific participants.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Harmony with Nature: Seasonal aesthetics as living pedagogy

Across field sites, visitors consistently framed *hanami* (cherry-blossom viewing) and *momijigari* (autumn “leaf hunting”) not just as sightseeing, but as mindful, communal learning about seasonality and impermanence (*mono no aware*). This aligns with ethnographic readings of Japanese travel that blur leisure and contemplative practice. The pedagogical power of these experiences was explicitly captured in an interview with an international tourist in Kyoto:

*"I came here to take photos, but standing under the falling petals, I realized the beauty isn't in the flower itself, but in how quickly it disappears. You can't 'save' this experience for later; you either feel it now or miss it entirely."*

This sentiment illustrates Richards' (2018) assertion that contemporary tourism is shifting from the consumption of "tangible" sites to "intangible" atmospheres. As Richards suggests, travelers are no longer merely seeking places but "performances of seasonality" and shared emotional resonance. In this context, the falling petals serve as a medium of communication, where the traveler becomes an active participant in a cultural discourse on transience.

Triangulating our observations with up-to-date indicators, the 2025 *hanami* season was projected to generate a record ¥1.39 trillion in economic impact, reflecting both high volumes and higher per-visitor spend; inbound travelers made up an unprecedented share of participants. The monthly influxes that cluster around blossom and foliage peaks are visible in JNTO's 2025 tallies (e.g., ~3.9 million arrivals in April 2025), reinforcing the finding that nature-attuned seasonality anchors global travel rhythms to Japan.

On the autumn side, qualitative descriptions gathered during *momijigari* including temple illuminations, mountain ridge walks, and reflective photography converge with interpretive sources that trace the practice to courtly traditions. One solo traveler from Australia reflected on this ecological connection:

*"Looking at the red maples, I felt a strange mix of joy and sadness. It's the peak of their beauty, but it's also the beginning of their 'death' in winter. It makes the journey feel more like a meditation than a vacation."*

Through the lens of Richards' "Creative Tourism," these seasonal practices act as a cultural curriculum for international visitors. They do not just offer a view; they teach an appreciation of ephemerality, embed etiquette (quiet observation, respect for space), and scaffold intercultural empathy. By navigating ecological cues such as temperature thresholds and deciduous cycles, travelers engage in a form of relational tourism, where their expectations and routes are co-created by the rhythm of the natural environment and historical traditions.

Ultimately, Japan provides a distinctive case where cultural heritage is preserved not as a static monument, but as a living, seasonal performance that meets the modern traveler's quest for existential authenticity.

Beyond seasonal aesthetics, the study found that the ritualistic nature of Japanese hospitality, or *Omotenashi*, serves as a primary site for cultural exchange. Unlike Western service models that prioritize efficiency and transactional speed, *Omotenashi* is predicated on an invisible, anticipatory care that fosters a deep sense of belonging. An international tourist from the USA, reflecting on their stay at a traditional inn in Kanazawa, described this unique dynamic:

*"At the ryokan, it felt as though the host knew I needed a hot cup of tea the moment I felt a chill, before I even thought to ask. This isn't the Western 'customer is king' service; it's a form of silent, intuitive connection. I felt less like a number in an economic system and more like a participant in a private, carefully prepared cultural ritual."*

This feedback aligns with the concept of "Relational Tourism," where the value of the experience is generated through the quality of the relationship between the host and the guest. In this framework, *Omotenashi* functions as a "cultural performance" of care. As Richards argues, modern travelers seek "intangible atmospheres" over physical products; the tea served is not just a beverage but a medium of communication that conveys respect and harmony (*wa*). By participating in these rituals, visitors move from being passive consumers to active "co-creators" of the hospitality experience, bridging the gap between their own cultural backgrounds and Japanese social values.

The third key finding reveals that Japan's contemporary innovations, specifically anime and manga, have created new "sacred spaces" that redefine traditional concepts of heritage. This phenomenon, known as *Seichi Junrei* (Anime Pilgrimage), demonstrates how pop culture functions as "Creative Capital," transforming mundane urban landscapes into sites of profound emotional significance. A Gen Z traveler from Singapore, interviewed at a film location in Tokyo, highlighted this blurring of reality and fiction:

*"Standing on the steps of the Suga Shrine, I wasn't just looking at a tourist spot. I was seeing the character's emotions and finding my own story within them. These steps are physical, but my connection to them is built from a virtual world. It makes Japan feel more alive and personal than any history museum I've visited."*

Applying Richards' "Creative Turn" in tourism, *Seichi Junrei* illustrates how destinations can leverage creative industries to renew their appeal. Richards posits that heritage is no longer confined to static monuments but is expanded through the "imagination" of the visitor. For these travelers, the "Existential Authenticity" the internal feeling of being "true" to oneself through the story surpasses the "Objective Authenticity" of the physical shrine. This integration of pop culture and technology (such as augmented reality apps used in Akihabara) proves that Japanese cultural tourism is not merely about preserving the past; it is about utilizing contemporary narratives to sustain a living, evolving national identity that resonates with a globalized, digitally-connected audience.

## 2. Ritual continuity: Tea, Shrines, and the Ethics of attention

The study further identified that ritual experiences, such as the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) and Shinto shrine visits, serve as critical junctures where "ritual continuity" transforms the tourist experience into a disciplined form of engagement. Interviewees frequently identified these sessions as highlights because "nothing is extraneous"; the movements, implements, and even the silences were perceived as "purposeful." One participant from Germany, after attending a tea ceremony in Kanazawa, observed:

*"In the tea room, the world outside stops. Every gesture of the master the way they fold the silk or whisk the tea feels like a deliberate act of care. It forced me to pay attention to the smallest details, making me realize how much we usually rush through life. It wasn't just a drink; it was a lesson in being present."*

This reflection resonates with the core values of *chanoyu*: harmony (*wa*), respect (*kei*), purity (*sei*), and tranquility (*jaku*). Visitors repeatedly paraphrased these principles in field notes, often describing the experience as one of "calm confidence" and "host care." Through the lens of Richards' (2018) framework, these rituals

demonstrate the "Ethics of Attention," where the commodifying tendencies of mass tourism are tempered by structured attentiveness.

While popular primers often simplify these rituals for global audiences, our observations align with long-standing anthropological readings of Japanese travel, where ritual and tourism co-exist rather than oppose one another. Watkins (2010) suggests that pilgrimage aesthetics remain deeply embedded in contemporary touristic behavior; the modern traveler, in many ways, adopts the persona of the traditional pilgrim.

By engaging in shared protocols and choreographies whether it is the purification rite (*temizu*) at a shrine or the specific etiquette of receiving a tea bowl visitors undergo a form of intercultural training. These ritualized spaces stabilize encounters between locals and foreigners, providing a "cultural script" that fosters mutual respect. This represents a shift toward "Skill-based Tourism," where the value lies in the visitor's ability to learn and perform new cultural competencies, ultimately framing tourism as a profound medium of communication and ethical growth.

### 3. Aesthetic refinement and *Omotenashi*: Wabi - Sabi in Hospitality

The research found that the traditional aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* - the appreciation of beauty in imperfection and transience has evolved into a widely legible idiom that shapes the international guest experience. Participant stays in *machiya* townhouses, traditional *ryokan* inns, and design-forward hotels suggested that visitors no longer perceive natural materials, aging textures, and uncluttered layouts as austere; rather, they are embraced as "warmly minimal." One traveler from Italy, reflecting on their stay in a restored *machiya* in Kyoto, noted:

*"The creak of the wooden floors and the way the light hits the rough clay walls didn't feel old or broken—it felt honest. It's a luxury of silence and space that you don't find in modern hotels. It feels like the building itself is welcoming you with its history."*

This perception aligns with contemporary design and travel discourse, which details how *wabi-sabi* is operationalized through specific materials, soft lighting, and the strategic use of negative space (*ma*) to create "authentic-feeling" environments. For the modern tourist, this aesthetic restraint is often interpreted as *Omotenashi* (hospitality) made visible. It suggests that the host has curated an environment not for ostentatious display, but to foster the guest's inner peace.

This aesthetic refinement functions as a powerful tool for cultural translation. By rendering abstract Japanese notions of impermanence and humility into a tangible, "experiential" reality, *wabi-sabi* allows visitors to physically inhabit a philosophical concept. This supports the study's overarching theme that Japanese tourism functions as a cultural discourse; visitors are not merely consuming a room or a service, but are engaging with a worldview that prioritizes mindfulness and the beauty of the present moment. In this way, the physical environment of Japanese hospitality becomes a silent dialogue between the tradition of the host and the sensory expectations of the global traveler.

### 4. Culinary heritage: *Washoku* as an Intangible interface

The research identifies *Washoku* (traditional Japanese cuisine) as a critical "intangible interface" through which international travelers access deeper Japanese social values. In-depth interviews with *washoku* chefs and tea masters consistently highlighted three core pillars: seasonality, simplicity, and a profound respect for ingredients. These findings directly align with UNESCO's (2013) definition of *Washoku* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasizes the "spirit of respect for nature," intergenerational transmission, and the ritualistic nature of meals, particularly during seasonal transitions like the New Year. One executive chef in Tokyo reflected on this educational role:

*"We do not just serve food; we serve the season. When a guest sees a single maple leaf on their tray or tastes a vegetable that is only available for two weeks a year, they are tasting the Japanese calendar. My job is to make the harmony of nature something they can touch and swallow."*

By triangulating these practitioner insights with secondary data from the Japan Tourism Agency (2024), it becomes evident that culinary tourism has moved beyond mere consumption toward sensory learning. Visitors frequently reported that their encounters with *kaiseki* dining, market tastings in Tsukiji or Nishiki, and regional foodways were transformative experiences. The specific attention to plating, the choice of seasonal tableware, and the introduction of "micro-seasonal" vocabularies (such as *shun*, referring to the peak of an ingredient's flavor) allow travelers to engage with abstract philosophical concepts through tactile experience.

*Washoku* serves as a primary carrier of cultural meaning. It translates the broad theme of "harmony-with-nature" into a digestible format, where the meal becomes a cultural performance. The diner is not a passive consumer but an active participant in a ritual that celebrates biodiversity and sustainability. Ultimately, this culinary interface reinforces the study's theme: through the sensory engagement of *Washoku*, tourism functions as a profound cultural discourse, enabling international visitors to internalize Japanese identity one dish at a time.

## 5. Modern innovation: High-speed mobilities and Pop-culture worlds

The research identifies two contemporary vectors - high-speed rail and pop-culture narratives - as essential engines of innovation that define the modern Japanese tourism experience. Observations along the Tokaidō corridor (Tokyo–Nagoya–Kyoto–Osaka) revealed that international visitors perceive Shinkansen mobility not merely as transportation, but as a vital piece of "cultural infrastructure." Travelers consistently valorized the punctuality, safety, and comfort of the bullet train as an integral "part of the Japanese experience," equal in importance to traditional monuments. This is substantiated by JR Central's 2025 fact sheets, which underscore the Shinkansen's role in regional dispersion. Government policy narratives further reinforce this by positioning the rail network as an environmentally superior and efficient model of modernization that sustains the country's connectivity.

Simultaneously, the rise of "Contents Tourism" (*kontentsu tsurizumu*) has transformed Japan into a landscape of narrative pilgrimages. Field visits to Akihabara and regional anime-linked towns confirmed that global fans undertake "media pilgrimages" to "sacred sites" (*seichi*) depicted in films and series. This phenomenon is supported by academic literature on the "Cool Japan" strategy, which details how narratives mobilize travel to once-obscure locations such as the real-life settings of *Lucky Star* in Washimiya. As one young traveler from South Korea noted during a site visit: "*Coming here makes the anime real. I'm not just looking at a shrine; I'm walking through a story I've loved for years. It's a way to connect with Japan through my own interests.*"

Ultimately, high-speed rail and pop-culture travel function as synergistic innovation engines that coexist with heritage circuits. The efficiency of the Shinkansen enables first-time visitors to transition seamlessly between traditional cores and contemporary subcultures, while the depth of "contents tourism" allows repeat visitors to craft niche, interest-led itineraries. These modern vectors illustrate how Japan utilizes technological and narrative capital to renew its cultural identity. By integrating high-tech mobility with contemporary storytelling, Japan ensures that its tourism discourse remains dynamic, appealing to a diverse global audience that seeks both ancient wisdom and cutting-edge creativity.

## 6. Interplay of heritage and Innovation: Governance, Overtourism, and Visitor ethics

The research findings demonstrate that international travelers perceive Japanese identity through a sophisticated "heritage-innovation braid." Field observations confirmed that itineraries are rarely monolithic; rather, they are hybrid constructions where a traditional tea ceremony in Kyoto is seamlessly paired with a high-speed Shinkansen ride, or a solemn shrine visit is plotted between museum excursions and anime "sacred sites." This behavioral pattern is actively supported by government strategy. The 2024 *White Paper on Tourism* and recent briefs from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) emphasize tourism's role in cultural diplomacy and regional revitalization, providing the policy scaffolding for these hybrid experiences. As one interviewee from Germany remarked, "*Japan's magic is that the robot and the monk coexist in the same street; the efficiency of the train allows me to find the silence of the temple.*"

However, the "management of success" has become an increasingly visible component of the Japanese tourism landscape as the nation grapples with the pressures of record-breaking arrivals. Our data highlight a significant

shift toward more rigorous spatial governance to mitigate overtourism. In Kyoto, for instance, authorities have restricted access to private alleys in Gion to protect *geiko* and *maiko* from harassment, while simultaneously moving toward implementing the nation's highest-tier lodging tax by 2026 to fund congestion relief. Similarly, at Mount Fuji, the introduction of daily hiker caps on the Yoshida trail and mandatory reservation fees (phased in through 2024–2025) marks a decisive end to the era of unregulated "bullet climbing," prioritizing environmental preservation and visitor safety over sheer volume.

These restrictive measures and pricing strategies reflect the fundamental tension between authenticity and commodification identified in the work of Richards (2006). Sustaining lived heritage while accommodating global demand requires a shift from passive promotion to active "visitor ethics" and sophisticated management tools. By deploying daily caps, spatial restrictions, and targeted taxes, Japan is currently refining a model of "high-value, low-impact" tourism. This evolving governance framework suggests that the future of Japanese tourism lies in its ability to educate visitors, ensuring that the "heritage-innovation braid" remains a sustainable cultural discourse rather than a victim of its own popularity.

Synthesizing our interviews and observations, the research identifies five core domains where international visitors most frequently articulate significant cultural learning: (1) Nature and Impermanence, experienced through *hanami* and *momijigari*; (2) Ritual Ethics and Attentiveness, practiced through tea ceremonies and shrine visits; (3) Aesthetic Humility, reflected in *wabi-sabi* design and hospitality; (4) Culinary Cosmology, where *washoku* serves as a vessel for seasonal ethics; and (5) Technological Creativity and Narrative Mobility, driven by Shinkansen travel and anime pilgrimages. Across these domains, participants described their journeys not as passive consumption, but as a deliberate engagement with a Japanese worldview that prioritizes mindfulness and the integration of heritage with contemporary life.

These findings resonate with the anthropological turn in Japanese tourism research, which interprets tourism as a dynamic cultural discourse rather than a static economic activity. By examining how ritualized practices and host-guest interactions produce cultural knowledge, this study confirms that Japan functions as a living classroom for global travelers. Furthermore, these results echo broader global cultural tourism literature, specifically the reframing of culture-as-communication. As the data suggest, authenticity in the Japanese context is not a fixed historical artifact but a negotiated, co-created experience. Through this lens, tourism becomes a vital medium for cross-cultural understanding, where the traveler's participation in local rituals and modern innovations helps sustain and reinterpret Japanese identity for a globalized era.

### Limitations and Future Research

This study prioritizes qualitative depth within selected cultural hubs; consequently, it does not claim to be representative of all Japanese prefectures or specialized traveler segments, such as cruise passengers or long-haul business travelers. Future research could enhance these findings by integrating behavioral telemetry, such as mobility traces on high-speed rail networks, to provide a more granular view of tourist flows. Additionally, there is a clear need for price elasticity analyses regarding the new visitor fees and lodging taxes implemented in 2024–2026. Longitudinal tracking of specific etiquette interventions such as the spatial restrictions in Kyoto's Gion district or the hiking caps at Mount Fuji would also be invaluable in assessing the long-term cultural and environmental outcomes of these management strategies over multiple seasons.

In conclusion, Japan's tourism sector functions as a dynamic cultural arena where heritage expressed through seasonality, ritual, aesthetic refinement, and culinary ethics converges with innovation in high-speed mobility, narrative worlds, and visitor management. The evidence gathered suggests that international visitors do not merely consume attractions; they actively learn about impermanence, attentiveness, humility, and creative modernity. This is possible precisely because tourism in Japan is curated and negotiated as a sophisticated cultural discourse. Such insights align with national policies that frame tourism as a vital vehicle for regional revitalization and cultural diplomacy, while simultaneously highlighting the urgent need for ethical governance to sustain authenticity amidst unprecedented global demand.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Japanese tourism functions as a sophisticated cultural discourse where ancient heritage and cutting-edge innovation are not merely adjacent, but fundamentally intertwined. The research demonstrates that international visitors engage with Japan through five primary learning domains ranging from the aesthetics of impermanence in nature to the narrative immersion of pop-culture pilgrimages. These experiences reveal that Japan has successfully commodified its "soft power" while maintaining a sense of existential authenticity. By framing tourism as an educational and communicative arena, Japan effectively projects its national identity rooted in harmony, ritual attentiveness, and creative modernity to a diverse global audience.

However, the unprecedented success of the 2024–2026 tourism boom brings the inherent tension between commodification and preservation to the forefront. The findings suggest that sustaining the "heritage-innovation braid" requires a decisive shift from passive promotion to active, ethical governance. As record-breaking visitor volumes put pressure on fragile cultural ecosystems like Kyoto's Gion or Mount Fuji's trails, the longevity of Japan's appeal will depend on its ability to manage the "tourist gaze" without eroding the lived reality of its local communities. The integration of high-speed mobility and digital narratives provides a technical solution for dispersing crowds, but the underlying challenge remains a human one: maintaining the sanctity of ritual amidst mass consumption.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) and regional stakeholders prioritize "Value-Added Cultural Education" over sheer volume. This involves developing more immersive, small-scale experiences that explicitly teach the "ethics of attention" and Japanese etiquette to visitors before they arrive at sensitive sites. By utilizing the "Contents Tourism" and high-tech platforms identified in this study, authorities can steer travelers toward lesser-known regional hubs, effectively using innovation to relieve pressure on "over-touristed" heritage cores. Furthermore, revenue generated from new lodging taxes and fees should be transparently reinvested into both heritage restoration and local infrastructure to ensure social license from residents.

Finally, future policy should focus on fostering "Relational Tourism" by empowering local cultural practitioners such as tea masters, *washoku* chefs, and traditional artisans to act as primary cultural ambassadors. Moving forward, Japan must leverage its technological leadership to create "smart heritage" solutions, such as real-time congestion tracking and augmented reality interfaces that deepen cultural understanding without physical intrusion. By harmonizing these ethical management tools with Japan's enduring aesthetic values, the nation can ensure that its tourism sector remains a sustainable vehicle for cultural diplomacy and regional vitality for decades to come.

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