

## WHY DO HONG KONG YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE TO VISIT JAPAN? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

Few researchers have examined Japan's inbound tourism and the youth market. This study examines factors that drive travelling youths from Hong Kong to Japan. Focus group interviews is the methodology used and the findings indicate that Hong Kong young people are motivated to travel to Japan mainly because of some pull factors (Japan's "natural wonders, man-made attractions and events," "traditional culture" and "the hospitality and shopping opportunities") and some trip-related features and push factors. These findings pave the way for more effective marketing strategies that Japan can use to target Hong Kong's youth market for its tourism industry.

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### INTRODUCTION

Japan was highlighted as one of the top destinations in Asia and the Pacific in terms of international tourist arrivals (Export.gov, 2014). Hong Kong is an important market for Japan (7.2% in 2013), having a constant growth rate over the past 10 years (Manabe, 2015). Many young people are attracted by the Japanese culture and are keen to visit the country.

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Within the academia, few research attempts have been made to study the country's inbound tourism and motivation to travel to Japan. Crompton (1979) disentangled tourist motivation to that of 'push' (intrinsic desires) and 'pull' factors (destination attributes). Romao, Neuts, Nijkamp and Shikada (2014) demonstrated in an eco-tourism context the pull motivation when traveling to Japan as landscape, weather, wildlife, and boat/kayak activity. Hsu and Song (2012) found that the natural and cultural resources of Japan included cuisine, temples, Sake and hot springs. Kasai and Hsu (2012) supplemented this by cartoons which also highlight the uniqueness of Japan. Meanwhile Funck (2012) explored the inbound tourism in Hida Takayama. The findings found that local Japanese and different foreign groups of tourists had different motivations and behaviors in traveling in this place. It manifested that inbound tourism contributes to "market stabilization and rejuvenation" in Japan. Youth tourists are very powerful in terms of dynamic behavior and interests (Gallarza & Saura 2006; Richards & Wilson, 2005). Young people travel for the discovery and cultural aspects of a holiday experience, spending quality time with friends, and relaxing in a different environment (Bicikova, 2014). However, it is important to note that place-of-origin/residence has significant impacts over these findings. For example, Bicikova (2014) sampled British university students while Gallarza and Saura (2006) did not discuss full details in this regard when focusing on this market. Thus, the young generation of Hong Kong may be also unique in terms of their travel motivations.

Further, extant literature does not provide the academic or practical implications for the travel industry in Japan regarding youth inbound tourism. Kozak (2002) insisted that the context-specific results should be associated with the motivation findings. Destinations must be unique and interesting in the eyes of potential visitors, i.e. features that can help them differentiate among destinations. Being an important source market for young travelers, Hong Kong awaits more academic attention. Thus, the current study was conducted to fill the knowledge gaps. It aims at exploring the travel motivations (push and pull factors) of Hong Kong's young people to Japan.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used focus group interviews for the investigation. University students and recent graduates who represent young educated people and "the most significant single market segment of the youth tourism sector"

(Bicikova, 2014), were selected as the sample. Invitation messages to participate were posted on university students' personal Facebook pages by the researchers and other helpful faculty members. Gallarza and Saura (2006) summarized that first of all, university students have been a relatively unattended segment in attracting academic attention; second, university students have summer and winter breaks which imply more travel potentiality which results in a more lucrative segment of the pleasure travel market; third, travel by students possibly results in a richer tourism experience through more in-depth social interactions. As a result of sampling, the interview respondents were aged between 19 and 24; and they are students or graduates pursuing or having obtained undergraduate degrees.

Focus group discussions were conducted, each of which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed for content analysis on the written transcripts, whereby key words/phrases emerged from the data (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). Participant samples were interviewed until no further information resulted to enrich the analysis. From the total of 20 participants, six respondents were male and 14 were female. They belong to five separate focus groups, formed either by themselves or assigned by the investigators based on their available timeslots (Table 1). Those assigned into one group may not know each other. Eleven respondents had traveled to Japan but nine had never been there before. A broad question was adopted to guide the interview process: "Why would you like to visit/revisit Japan?" During the process of content analysis, both researchers joined and compared the analysis results before reaching consensus. This joint effort ensured better credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Table 1. Profile of Participants of Focus Group Interviews

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Total
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	0	4	0	0	2	6
Female	6	0	5	2	1	14
<i>Travel experience to Japan</i>						
Yes	1	4	3	2	1	11
No	5	0	2	0	2	9

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Trip-related features and push factors**

Many focus group participants mentioned Japanese currency depreciation as their motive to travel to Japan (Figure 1). One respondent stated that “the currency exchange is relatively lower than before, so it encourages the chance of revisit intention” (female, new visitor). Meanwhile, the regular price promotion from the Hong Kong Express, a Hong Kong-based low-cost airline, strengthens their motivation. Hong Kong residents also have the privilege of visa-free travel to Japan. It is convenient to make an ad-hoc trip to Japan. Some participants also linked their (potential) trips to gatherings with family and friends. “Escapism” appeared as another motivational factor to encourage them to travel to Japan. Participants would like to seek new experience and participate in any activities that they have never done before. The JR railways, Shinkansen and Peach Airline are viewed as factors that can ease travel journeys within the country. In contrast, some participants said they had experienced the inconvenience of public bus transportation. Other quoted pull motivations that relate to the trips were “cleanliness” and “safety.” These findings are similar to the study by Jang and Cai (2002). “If you ask me about the motivation why I like to travel to Japan, one word comes to my mind quickly, that is, clean. Japan is very clean, everywhere, restaurants, washrooms, much better than here Hong Kong.....,” one participant seemed to place strong emphasis on this (female, repeat visitor).

### **Natural wonders, man-made attractions and events**

One participant mentioned, “In November, if you visit Hokkaido, you can see snow fall; at Kyoto, you can see red autumn leaves; and... if you visit Okinawa, you can play in the sunshine and on the beach.....” (female, repeat visitor). One quotation from a participant was, “I may visit Beppu next year to mainly experience the hot spring there” (male, new visitor). One female participant highlighted that her motivation to visit Japan in the near future will be related to a few charming hot springs at Osaka where one can face the Pacific Ocean in great comfort. A male participant pointed out the uniqueness of hot springs that can hardly be experienced elsewhere, partially due to the mixed gender inside. One participant who had visited Disneyland more than once said, “Disneyland in Japan upgrade their features regularly, so you would never get bored” (female,

new visitor). Other man-made tourism attractions cited by the participants included “Fuji-Q Highland,” “Universal Studios,” “Tokyo Tower,” “noodle museum” and “ghost house.” A few participants thought that their motivation to travel also included the opportunities of event participation. For example, one participant, who had been to Japan twice, is a horse-racing and football lover. “For me, if I go to Japan individually or go with friends, football and horse-racing are my biggest motivations ... they breed the horse very intelligent and powerful...the horses are so good and the organization is so good....” (male, repeat visitor).

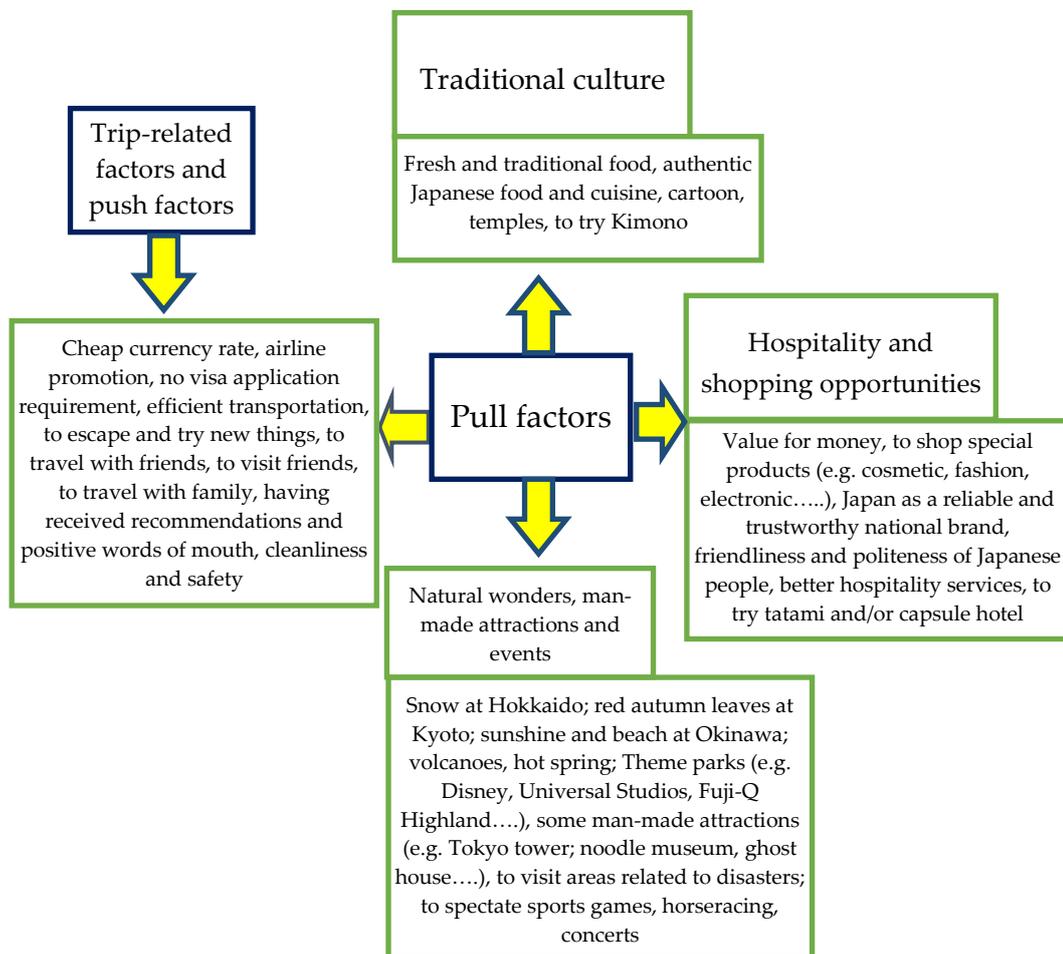


Figure 1. *Hong Kong Youth's Motivations to Travel Japan*

### Traditional culture

Many aspects of Japanese culture are long reflected in the daily lives of young Hong Kong people. For example, food was a term frequently mentioned during the discussions. Hall and Sharples (2011) summarized

that food can be regarded as a “serious leisure.” In fact, many Japanese style food products and cuisine can be found quite easily in Hong Kong. One participant referred to Kaiseki, a traditional multi-course Japanese dinner, “dishes are tiny and you can taste different courses, cold or hot...” (male, repeat visitor) Japanese desserts are also what Hong Kong people love; one participant highlighted that “in Kyoto, there are many green tea types of Okashi and I would like to try as it looks good” (female, repeat visitor). Unquestionably, participants showed a high interest in experiencing the “reality” and “authenticity” of Japanese food and cuisine culture which demonstrates evidence of “existential authenticity” (Wang, 1999). They prefer “not only tak[ing] photos, but ask[ing] questions” while observing the whole process of Japanese food preparation and production. One more supporting quote reads, “we would experience what we have observed in Hong Kong, but here it is real” (female, new visitor). This successfully exemplifies the close association with authenticity which the “second-order” tourists (Redfoot, 1984) feel ought to be experienced. One participant argued that some special cooking skills and techniques make Japanese food (in Japan) unique which is different from Japanese food available in Hong Kong. Other cultural experiences also found to be the interests related to cartoons, temples and the kimono. The Japanese cartoon characters, e.g. Kumamon and Doraemon, have been long rooted in the hearts of young Hong Kong people.

### **Hospitality and shopping opportunities**

It was found that shopping items were diverse and of high quality in Japan. One participant commented that “fashionable things in Japan are of good quality, such as sports shoes and handbags. I think the Japanese edition is better than that of Hong Kong” (female, repeat visitor). Some male participants stressed the importance of label “Made-in Japan” and the perceived reliability and the deep trust consumers tend to have in products with such a label. “Japan is a national brand already” as summarized by the participants involved, “but it takes a long time for build-up of a national brand” (male, new visitor). Conceptually, “country-of-origin” has been regarded as an extrinsic informational cue to indicate the dependability of associated products (Ahmed, Johnson, Chew, Tan, & Hui, 2002; Inch & McBride, 2004). The role of country-of-origin has been proved to affect formation of the beliefs about objects and consumer behavior. Participants also attached importance to the hospitality given by Japanese people and business staff. One participant said “It seems that

Japanese people welcome tourists from other countries....as you can feel they are more educated and civilized..." (male, repeat visitor). Another participant seemed to conclude that "Japanese people simply want to do their best, deliver the best service regardless of number of customers, and concern of the costs....." (male, repeat visitor). One respondent mentioned that "hospitality services in Japan are much better than in Hong Kong" (female, repeat visitor).

## CONCLUSION

Young Hong Kong tourists visit Japan by various push and pull factors whereas pull factors seemed more prevalent than push factors. Japanese foods, hot springs, infrastructure, the Fuji Mountain, are well-known and unique, which mirrored the findings of Romao et al., (2014) and Hsu and Song (2012). Culture has been highlighted in the current study, similar as Hsu and Song's (2012) viewpoint. However, the current study produced the importance and influence of Japanese reputation in products and hospitality services as perceived by Hong Kong young travelers. With the superior Japanese products and hospitality, destination marketers can enhance the attractiveness of these factors. By doing so, they can encourage travel intention and strengthen their competitive advantages. Young tourists can visit different regions of Japan all-year round because of its geographical characteristics. Moreover, these tourists can make ad-hoc travel plans more frequently, such as semester breaks or long holidays. Particularly at this time, Japanese currency is reasonable, therefore the chance of visiting Japan is high. Through the promotion of tourist awareness, the Japanese government and travel agencies could encourage higher number of tourists for increasing tourism revenues. More information about Japan's unique culture could help the decision making of young Hong Kong travelers, parallel to past studies (Bicikova, 2014; Boukas, 2013). Classmates and friends could be targeted in the promotion of group travels that serve similar travel purposes. Their repeat visit experiences and more well-established Japan's destination image can help stimulate new travels for youths. Their pull motivations can be utilized to strengthen those of potential visitors.

This study is limited because of its way that Hong Kong young people were approached. Most of the respondents had somewhat connections with the researchers. The sample also showed unequal distribution of male and female which may partially bias the research findings. The size of two groups (four and five) is found relatively small

for a focus group discussion which also limited the study. Future research could recruit both youth travelers and other market segments for comparison studies. Developing a young traveler's motivation scale to Japan can help future research as well.

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