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Dimensions of Escapism as Mediators of the Association between Consumption of Anime-Related Content and Desire to Learn about Japan

Dimensiones del escapismo como mediadoras de la asociación entre el consumo de contenido relacionado con el anime y el deseo de aprender sobre Japón

Stephen Reysen¹ , Courtney N. Plante² , Sharon E. Roberts³ , Kathleen C. Gerbasi⁴

¹ East Texas A&M University, Commerce, Texas, USA. <https://ror.org/01red3556> ² Bishop's University, Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada. <https://ror.org/051prj435> ³ Renison University College, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canadá. <https://ror.org/01aff2v68> ⁴ SUNY Niagara, Sanborn, New York, USA. <https://ror.org/00637yt37>

Abstract

In the present paper we examine the relationship between three variables: frequency of consuming anime-related content, using anime for escapism, and the desire to learn more about Japan. Self-identified anime fans completed measures of these three variables, with the results revealing that greater anime-related content consumption was associated with greater escapism and a greater desire to learn about Japan. We then tested, and found support for, a mediation model wherein two forms of escapism (self-expansion and self-suppression) mediated the association between consumption and desire to learn about Japan. These findings both highlight the utility of differentiating between self-expansion and self-suppression as distinct ways of escaping while also showing that escapism, which is often discussed in the context of its negative consequences, is also associated with learning about another culture and fan tourism. The findings support the notion that anime is a Japanese export which provides soft power to a country that is seeking to encourage cultural engagement.

Keywords: Anime, Escapism, Fan Tourism, Soft Power, Cool Japan.

Resumen

En el presente trabajo examinamos la relación entre tres variables: la frecuencia de consumo de contenido relacionado con el anime, el uso del anime como vía de escape y el deseo de aprender más sobre Japón. Personas que se identifican como aficionadas al anime completaron mediciones de estas tres variables; los resultados revelaron que un mayor consumo de contenido relacionado con el anime se asociaba con un mayor nivel de evasión y un mayor deseo de aprender sobre Japón. Posteriormente, pusimos a prueba —y hallamos evidencia que respalda— un modelo de mediación en el que dos formas de evasión (la autoexpansión y la autosupresión) mediaban la asociación entre el consumo y el deseo de aprender sobre Japón. Estos hallazgos subrayan la utilidad de distinguir entre la autoexpansión y la autosupresión como formas diferentes de evasión, al tiempo que demuestran que la evasión —a menudo abordada en términos de sus consecuencias negativas— también se asocia con el aprendizaje sobre otra cultura y con el turismo de aficionados. Los resultados respaldan la idea de que el anime es un producto de exportación japonés que aporta «poder blando» a un país que busca fomentar el acercamiento cultural.

Palabras clave: Anime, escapismo, turismo de fans, poder blando, Cool Japan.

Correspondence: Stephen Reysen (Stephen.Reysen@etamu.edu).

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Introducción

It is easy to trivialize cartoons, and indeed most recreational activities, as trite and insignificant. Despite this characterization, anime (Japanese animation) represents a global phenomenon, one worth \$10.89 billion internationally and \$10.41 billion in Japan in 2020 (Pineda, 2021; Valente Ferreira et al., 2023). Given the potential for media to influence the way people think, feel, and behave (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Green & Brock, 2000; Vorderer et al., 2020), and given Japan's desire to commodify and export its culture worldwide (Matsui, 2014; Otmazgin, 2008), it is worth asking whether the consumption of anime-related content impacts consumers' feelings about Japan and the mechanisms which may drive this association. To this end, we first briefly review the concept of soft power and Japan's policy initiative to export cultural products, like anime, to other nations with the goal of increasing Japan's international appeal and bolstering its tourism industry. Next, we review the literature on escapism and how people seek to escape day-to-day life in both adaptive and maladaptive ways. We then report the results of a study at the interface of these two lines of research which examines escapism as a mediator of a predicted association between anime-related consumption and consumers' desire to learn about Japan. We discuss the results of this study, its implications, and its limitations.

Soft Power and Cool Japan

Nye (1990) coined the term "soft power" and described it as occurring "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants" (p. 166). Amidst the myriad ways in which a country can achieve soft power is through its cultural exports, which represent an ever-growing industry in an increasingly interdependent world with continually-advancing communication technology. For example, the export of U.S. media helps to spread American values (e.g., individualism), making the U.S. and its values more attractive to people in other countries and, by extension, shaping their values to be more in-line with those of the U.S. This increased attractiveness may yield greater tourism which, in turn, furthers cultural understanding and internalization of American values

through first-hand experience with the culture itself. And, while media is only one means of projecting soft power (Gallarotti, 2011; Heng, 2014), it is a highly effective one.

While American cultural products are among the most-consumed worldwide, they are by no means the only ones who project soft power through media content. Japan is one of the other world leaders in terms of soft power, ranking 8th overall globally and 1st in Asia (McClory, 2019). As an illustrative example of Japan's soft power, Froese and Kishi (2013) surveyed college students in South Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines regarding their desire to work at a company that was domestically owned, from Japan, or from a Western nation. The results showed that the more Japanese media students consumed, the greater their desire to work at a Japanese company. In effect, the image of Japan that Japan has promoted through its media exports has had a tangible influence on people's desire to work and live there.

Of its various cultural exports, anime and manga are among the most distinct and iconic means through which Japan has grown its soft power in the early 2000s, alongside Japanese cuisine, music, and video games, as a way of growing its worker base and bolstering its tourism industry (Akbaş, 2018). Calls for Japan to support and assist in growing its creative cultural industries to this end grew in 2003-2004, with an emphasis on promoting an image of Japan as "cool" (Matsui, 2014; Otmazgin, 2008). In 2005, coinciding with such calls, the Japanese aimed to enhance its national image, proposing that anime characters such as Doraemon and Hello Kitty could be cultural ambassadors, representing anime and tourism, respectively (Otmazgin, 2012; Pyun, 2022). Part of the official "Cool Japan" campaign included promoting the spread of Japanese cultural products to other countries (Otmazgin, 2020). While the government officially takes a hands-off approach toward the cultural products themselves, they do fund cultural fairs with the aim of spreading these products internationally (George, 2016).

The effectiveness of this campaign can be illustrated through changes in what people know about Japan

and how they feel about the country. For example, in a 2022 study in Thailand, Lopattananont found that Thai anime fans were knowledgeable about Japanese culture (despite no formal education), showed a preference for Japanese food, had a generally positive view of Japan, were taking an increasing number of tourism trips, and spread positive views about Japan through word of mouth. A similar study of young adults in China found that many of those who viewed anime as a child and held favorable views of Japan (Wu, 2021).

In addition to improving attitudes toward Japan, cultural exports such as anime have also encouraged a greater interest in visiting Japan as a tourist. Tourist packages that cater specifically to anime and manga fans have proven popular, with their emphasis on visiting famous shopping districts (e.g., Akihabara), anime-related museums (e.g., Studio Ghibli Art Museum), and theme parks (Denison, 2010; Okamoto, 2015). The impact has been so great that Hernández-Pérez (2019) was able to create a typology of tourists to Japan, which included those motivated for other cultural reasons (little focus on anime), those with a casual interest in anime (e.g., going to museums), those motivated to finding places that were referenced or portrayed in anime, and those on a pilgrimage to worship places found in anime. In a sample of college students in Taiwan, Kasai and Hsu (2012) found that being involved in anime as a leisure activity was positively associated with Japanese tourism motivation, a finding consistent with other research tying Japanese tourism to feeling attached to a particular character from an anime series (Ono et al., 2021). Researchers also found that past anime consumption was associated with a desire to visit Japan among fans in India (Pathak, 2022). In fact, a 2019 study from Hong Kong found that anime was the number one reason why tourists had visited Japan, scoring higher than other leisure activities, food, and shopping (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019).

Taken together, a growing body of research supports the notion that consuming anime is associated with a desire to learn more about Japan, positive attitudes toward Japan, and a desire to visit Japan.

Motivation and Escapism

A common refrain from fan and leisure researchers is that fans engage in their interest or leisure activities to escape from daily life (Plante et al., 2021). Daniel Wann (1995), a prominent researcher of sport fan psychology, proposed eight motivations for sport spectatorship. One of the proposed motivations was escapism—the desire to escape the hassles of daily life. In Wann’s work, ratings showed that escapism was fairly low (6th) among the list of fan motives—far from the strongest motive, but also not the weakest motive. In other, non-sport fan groups, escapism has proven to be a more prominent motivator of fan interest. For example, Schroy et al. (2016) administered measures of Wann’s eight motivations, along with two additional motives, to anime fans, furries, and fantasy sport fans. The results showed that, across the three fan groups, escape was the second highest rated motivation, behind only entertainment.

In other research, it has been suggested that escape, as a motivator for fans, is actually comprised of at least two distinct components. Wann et al. (2004), for example, suggests that escape may involve both providing excitement outside of one’s daily life and providing fans with a way to relax while avoiding stress and anxiety. Put another way, escapism may involve a desire to avoid under-stimulation or to avoid over-stimulation, respectively, and their work suggests that sport fans use sports as a means to attain both forms of escapism. More recently, Stenseng et al. (2012) proposed another dichotomous conceptualization of escapism, one that emphasizes positive and negative motivations for escapism.

Regardless of how, precisely one conceptualizes escapism—as a single construct or as comprised of two constructs, there has been a general tendency among researchers to believe that using media as a means of escape is associated with unfavorable outcomes such as gaming disorder (e.g., Bäcklund et al., 2022; Melodia et al., 2022; Plante et al., 2019). However, such research tends to view escapism as a strategy to avoid dealing with problems in one’s life (Giardina et al., 2021), a tendency associated with negative outcomes (e.g., Littleton et al., 2007).

Stenseng et al. (2012) suggest that escapism should not always be associated with detrimental outcomes, however, making their own distinction between two forms of escapism: *self-expansion* (promotion focused, positive, self-development) and *self-suppression* (prevention focus, negative, avoid negative events in one's life). In their research examining leisure activities, self-expansion was found to be positively associated with positive affect and flow, while self-suppression was associated with emotion suppression and lower self-control and life satisfaction. In a later study of sport enthusiasts, Stenseng and Phelps (2016) again found that self-expansion was associated with harmonious passion, but not with the more maladaptive obsessive passion, while self-suppression was associated with both. Self-expansion was also more strongly associated with positive affective outcomes than was self-suppression, a finding later replicated in a sample of gamers (Stenseng et al., 2021).

With research suggesting both that anime fans are highly motivated by escapism (e.g., Schroy et al., 2016) and that escapism can include both beneficial and detrimental components (e.g., Stenseng et al., 2012), it seems prudent to ask whether anime fans have been shown to engage in both types of escapism. With respect to self-suppression, anime fans may use anime (and related products) as a way to avoid thinking about their mundane life or the stresses of daily life. Indeed, research with Japanese women who use kawaii products (e.g., cute stationary often associated with anime fandom) has found that having these items can provide users with a brief escape from the hassles of life (Lieber-Milo, 2022). In another study, interviews with Norwegian anime fans found that one reason why they travel to Japan is to escape everyday routines (Steine, 2019), a finding which has been replicated in other samples (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; Xu & Tavitiyaman, 2016). Finally, in interviews with young Chinese adults, watching anime was commonly described as a means of escape, specifically to relax (Wu, 2021). In short, the available evidence suggests that anime fans may engage in a self-suppression type of escapism.

Anime fans may also engage in self-expansion escapism, including using anime as a means of self-

improvement. In interviews with French tourists, Sabre (2016) notes that a typical trajectory for anime fans begins with watching anime and then develops into interest in other aspects of Japanese culture. In fact, surveys and interviews with U.S. participants have shown that anime fans seek to learn more about Japanese culture and language (Manion, 2005), something which could be construed as a form of self-improvement and an opportunity for personal growth. Self-development and a desire to learn more about Japan has also been observed as a driver of anime fans visiting Japan in at least two different studies (Kirillova et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2021).

Taken together, research suggests not only that watching anime is associated with a desire for escapism among fans, but that this escapism is not a simple, unitary construct. Rather, it is comprised of at least two components—one positive and associated with growth and one negative and associated with stress and addiction.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine associations between anime-related consumption, escapism motivation, and the desire to learn about Japan. We assessed each of these constructs in a cross-sectional survey of anime fans. Based on prior research (e.g., Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Kasai & Hsu, 2012; Pathak, 2022) we predict that greater consumption of anime-related content will be positively associated with the belief that anime encourages one to learn about Japan. Given that self-expansion escape is associated with positive, self-development outcomes (Stenseng et al., 2012; Stenseng et al., 2016; Stenseng et al., 2021), we also predict that self-expansion will be positively related to a desire to learn about Japan. Finally, we hypothesize that self-expansion will mediate the association between consumption and desire to learn.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Participants included 4,770 self-identified anime fans with the majority being White (63.2%), cis-men (73.9%), from the United States (55.6%) with an average age of 24.82 ($SD = 6.77$). Participants were

recruited from AnimeFest in Dallas, TX ($n = 314$) and from online sources ($n = 4,456$) such as a volunteer email list, social media, and anime-related subreddits (e.g., *r/anime*, *r/hentai*, *r/headpats*, *r/eightysix*, *r/wholesomeanimemes*). As part of a larger study regarding the anime fandom, participants completed measures regarding anime consumption, escapism, and desire to learn more about Japan (Table 1 for means, standard deviation, and scale reliability). Unless noted otherwise, items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Materials

Anime-Related Consumption

To assess the frequency of consumption of anime-related content we included three items (“Consuming official anime-related media (e.g., films, books, art, games),” “Consuming fan-made media (e.g., fanfiction, fan films, art),” “Consuming theorycrafting / review videos / articles”) from prior research (Reysen et al., 2021). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *never* to 7 = *often*.

Escapism

To assess the two dimensions of escapism we selected two items to tap the constructs of self-expansion and self-suppression from prior research (Stenseng et al., 2021). Following the prompt “I watch anime to...” participants rated two items assessing self-expansion (“open up for experiences that enrich my life,” “try to get to know myself better”) and self-suppression (“forget difficult things in my life,” “escape from reality”).

Learn about Japan

To assess the extent that participants believed that anime encouraged them to learn more about Japan, we constructed three items (“My interest in anime encourages me to learn Japanese,” “My interest in anime encourages me to learn more about Japanese culture,” “My interest in anime encourages me to visit Japan”).

Results

We first conducted zero-order correlations between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 1,

consumption of anime-related content was positively associated with self-expansion, self-suppression, and a desire to learn about Japan, consistent with our hypotheses. Moreover, both self-expansion and self-suppression were also associated with desire to learn about Japan, the former of which is also consistent with our hypotheses. It should also be noted that the association between self-suppression and desire to learn about Japan was relatively modest.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviation, Reliability, and Correlations between Assessed variables.

Variable	Consume	Expansion	Suppression	Learn
Consumption	--	--	--	--
Expansion	.24**	--	--	--
Suppression	.15**	.21**	--	--
Learn	.28**	.25**	.04**	--
Mean	4.67	4.36	4.86	3.81
SD	1.32	1.60	1.77	1.38
α	.58	.73	.81	.83

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Next, we tested a mediation model with consumption of anime-related content as the independent variable, escapism dimensions as mediators, and desire to learn about Japan as the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 1, self-expansion and self-suppression were found to significantly mediate the association between anime consumption and a desire to learn about Japan (also see Table 2).

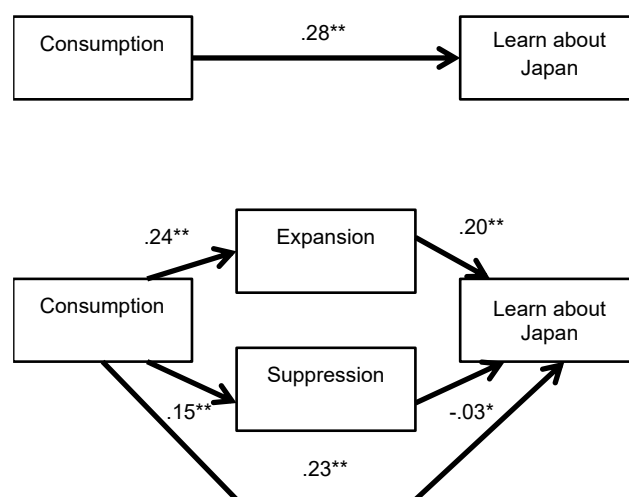


Figure 1. Self-expansion and self-suppression as mediators of the relationship between anime-related consumption and belief that anime encourages one to learn about Japan. Standardized betas presented, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Of note, the indirect pathways for self-expansion and self-suppression were significant in opposite directions, with self-expansion's path coefficient being

positive and self-suppression's path coefficient being negative.

Table 2. Mediation analysis.

Path	Effect (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	CI _L	CI _U	<i>Z</i>
Consume → Expand	.29 (.02)	17.15	< .001	.258	.324	--
Consume → Suppress	.19 (.02)	10.13	< .001	.156	.231	--
Expand → Learn	.17 (.01)	13.77	< .001	.146	.194	--
Suppress → Learn	-.02 (.01)	-2.16	.031	-.045	-.002	--
Total Effect	.29 (.01)	19.82	< .001	.259	.316	--
Direct Effect	.24 (.01)	16.46	< .001	.214	.272	--
Indirect: Expand	.05 (.005)	--	< .001	.041	.059	10.73
Indirect: Suppress	-.005 (.002)	--	.036	-.009	-.0003	-2.10

Note. Effects are unstandardized betas with 95% confidence intervals, generated using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations (Hayes, 2018).

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test a mediation model in which escapism—both positive and negative—mediates the association between anime-related consumption and desire to learn about Japan. We predicted, and found, that consumption of anime-related content was positively associated with the belief that anime encourages learning about Japan. The results also supported our predictions that self-expansion would be positively related desire to learn and would mediate the association between consumption and desire to learn. Although not hypothesized, the results also showed that self-suppression escape was a negative predictor, and mediator, of desire to learn. Together, the results both replicate prior research showing that anime consumption is associated with a greater desire to learn more about Japan and extend prior work by showing, for the first time, that escapism—especially escapism of the self-expansion, positive variety—mediates this association.

Anime and manga have been part of Japan's "Cool Japan" initiative to increase the country's soft power (Otmazgin, 2008, 2012, 2020). A growing body of research has shown that consuming Japanese media is related to a positive image of the country (Lopattananont, 2022; Wu, 2021) and desire to visit (Agyeiwaah et al., 2019; Kasai & Hsu, 2012). The results of the present study support this research.

Consumption of anime-related content was positively associated with the belief that anime encourages oneself to learn about Japan (a composite measure including learning Japanese, learning about the culture, and desire to visit Japan). As such, consistent with prior findings, the present study shows that Japanese government's efforts have been fruitful in promoting an increased interest in Japan by promoting the exportation of anime and manga to other countries.

Prior research has also shown that escape is a significant motivator for anime fans (Schroy et al., 2016). However, this prior research did not distinguish between different dimensions of escapism, instead treating it as a unitary construct. Researchers have traditionally viewed escapism as negative, a precursor to, or symptom of, dysfunction (Bäcklund et al., 2022; Melodia et al., 2022). Others have taken a more nuanced look at escapism, recognizing both a positive and negative component to escapism which, in the present research, was examined as anime fans' tendency toward self-expansion and self-suppression (Stenseng et al., 2012). As self-expansion reflects a way of escaping that is promotion-focused and which emphasizes self-development, we reasoned that this variable would be associated with a desire to learn more about Japan. The results showed exactly that: self-expansion was a positive mediator, and self-suppression a negative mediator, of the association

between consumption and a desire to learn more about Japan. The self-suppression results suggest that fans motivated to escape from the hassles of life watch anime primarily for entertainment purposes and, as such, this form of consumption does not promote further learning.

The present research is not without its share of limitations and weaknesses, providing an important caveat for the above findings. First, we note that the study is cross-sectional in nature. Given that the study was correlational in design, we are unable to make causal claims about the role of anime in creating an interest in learning more about Japan. At present, we can only point out that these two variables are associated and cannot rule out the possibility that people who are already motivated to learn more about Japan are more likely to be drawn to anime. Future researchers could more directly discern the causal direction of this association by attempting to manipulate participants' current motivation (e.g., creating escapist motivation or interest in anime) and examine the effect of this manipulation on participants' desire to learn more about Japan. A longitudinal study design could also be employed and might allow for the testing of bidirectionality of the observed associations.

A second important limitation of the present study is that the measure for anime consumption had low internal reliability. This stems from the fact that it was designed to prioritize conciseness, face validity, and the ability to capture a wide range of types of consumption. As such, it is hardly surprising to observe low internal reliability under these circumstances, and it may well be the case that anime consumption is not a homogeneous concept—fans who spend a great deal of time on forums may not be the same fans who spend a great deal of time consuming primary material. We also note that this problem would only make it more difficult to find an association, meaning that the observed significant mediation pathways were obtained despite the limitations of this measure, not as a direct result of this measure. Nevertheless, future studies might do well to use a more sophisticated and nuanced measure of anime consumption, allowing researchers to test whether particular types of anime consumption yield different results.

To conclude: In the present research we examined self-expansion and self-suppression dimensions of escapism as mediators of the relationship between consumption of anime-related content and desire to learn about Japan. The results showed that self-expansion was a positive mediator and that self-suppression was a negative mediator of the relationship. The results highlight the importance of differentiating between different forms of escapism in models of fan motivation and behavior. More practically, they also speak to the effectiveness of anime and manga as impactful cultural products which have been successfully promoted by Japan to engender interest and tourism. Far from being trivial or insignificant, it would seem that media and the fan cultures which arise around them can prove to be powerful commercial and political forces.

Author contributions

Stephen Reysen: Conceptualization, Analysis, Writing

Courtney N. Plante: Review & Editing

Sharon E. Roberts: Review & Editing

Kathleen C. Gerbasi: Review & Editing

Data availability statement

Data is available upon request from corresponding author.

Peer review comments

This article underwent an anonymous peer-review process in accordance with the journal's editorial transparency policy. The reviewers, who participated anonymously in this process, consented to the publication of the comments issued during the review.

Reviewer Comment 1: It is recommended that the article be accepted for publication without further revisions.

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