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### An Overview of Opportunities and Challenges of Branding Japan as a Tourist Destination

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#### ABSTRACT

Japan National Tourism Organization is promoting tourism (inbound) to national and international markets because the Japanese government is strongly interested in increasing the number of local and international tourists in the county. One of the biggest challenges for the Japan brand is the lack of international and domestic marketing and advertising compare with other countries. Japanese National Tourism Organization is aware of the situation, but yet do not provide enough information for tourists in English at the train stations, roads, airports in Japan, as well as pamphlets and booklets of the local communities to help international tourists, access easily local communities. As a result many international tourists are lost in Japan talking to train stations' staff that can barely communicate in English; it becomes a frustrating experience for the international tourist and reduces the opportunity of repeat visits to Japan. Therefore, there is a need for advertising about places and local communities that tourists have not visited before, but how is the government going to brand Japan with proper advertising and marketing about the country? This paper will present an overview of the opportunities and challenges of promoting the brand Japan, especially local communities in Japan because domestic and international tourists do not have much information about. Japan will continue to attract and increase domestic and international tourists as long as proper advertising and information about local communities is provided.

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#### INTRODUCTION

A large number of tourist areas in Japan were completely damaged during The Great East Japan Earthquake and many domestic and international tourists refrained from traveling to Japan due to the concerns related to the environmental safety in the country.

The Japanese government has set up goals of bringing Japan under the new growth strategy approved by the cabinet on June 18, 2010, this strategy includes the "Becoming a tourism nation" as one of the seven strategies to boost Japanese economy as a result of the falling population because the decrease birth rate and increasing aging population in the country. Japan would like to increase the demand of inbound tourism in the country and attract domestic and international tourism. The Japanese government realized that the tourism industry plays a strategic role to boost economic growth

This paper will discuss the challenges and opportunities of branding Japan as a tourist destination. Japan is facing some challenges and opportunities to promote local tourists destinations

because the lack of advertising and marketing targeting domestic and international tourists.

##### Literature review:

##### Background:

"Tourism comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purpose [WTO, 1992: subsequently ratified by the UN Statistical Commission in 1994]" (Middleton *et al*, 2009).

##### The target market can be defined as:

1. "International visitors, who are residents of countries other than that being visited and travelling for tourism purposes. Also known as inbound tourism.
2. International visitors, who are residents of a country visiting other countries and travelling for tourism purposes. Also known as outbound tourism.
3. Residents visiting destinations within their own country's boundaries and travelling for tourism purposes. Also known as domestic tourism" (Middleton *et al*, 2009).

The Japanese tourism industry has had a small contribution to the national economy compared to foreign countries and continues to be behind compared to other Asian countries.

Developing all types of tourism can be incompatible with the environment and local communities' capacity building; finding the ideal tourism products and services for each community will allow the expansion of tourism. Therefore, developing and promoting specialized tourist products and services in the local communities will increase the opportunity of having more tourists visiting Japan with the appropriate promotion of tourism.

"Our analysis of tourism in Japan has shown that it has a long and varied history, with several lines of continuity that define its nature even today. For example, the fundamental contours of present-day domestic tourism are found in the earlier patterns of religious pilgrimage and *onsen* (hot springs) visits during the Edo period, even though the duration of the latter has been significantly shortened due to the changes in the world of paid work, and former metamorphosed into local festivals (*matsuri*) and way from religion" (Funk and Cooper, 2013).

#### **Destination Branding:**

"Recently, several authors have proposed a model of destination brand equity that describes the dynamic process of destination brand creation, development and assessment (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Moreover, as Konecnik and Go (2008) emphasize, most tourism analyses the success of specific tourist destinations from a demand-side perspective, while the supply-side perspective has remained largely unexamined. On the contrary, it could be argued that, for destination brand planning and positioning to be effective, it is necessary to adopt a perspective that evaluates brand identity and brand image at the same time (Cai, 2002). Indeed, as research carried out in fields other than tourism has found, it can be argued that tourist operators not only represent an important and significant stakeholder group but are also original source of brand equity (Burmam, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009). Therefore, it becomes necessary to study how a destination brand is perceived by both local stakeholders and tourists". (Del Chiappa & Bregoli, 2012)

#### **Challenges:**

Japan National Tourism Organization is strongly promoting tourism (inbound) to national and international markets. Meanwhile, in general Japan does not provide enough international advertising and signs in English at the train stations, roads, airports in Japan, as well as pamphlets and booklets of the local communities to help international tourists, access local communities easily. As a result many international tourists are lost in Japan talking to train stations' staff that can barely communicate in

English; it becomes a frustrating experience for the international tourist and reduces the opportunity of repeat visits to Japan.

On the other hand, when the international tourists arrive to the destinations it finds that the local communities that they wish to visit face the same challenges and people at the local communities cannot communicate in English with the international tourists and cannot understand the diverse intercultural communication of several visitors.

Some other challenges is ageing infrastructure in Japan. Properties like hotels, Japanese ryokan, and hot springs in several communities in Japan are rapidly ageing. For example, in communities at Atami and Beppu many hotels and hot springs are very old and need to be renovated and/or rebuild.

Other challenge is: Japan is perceived as a very expensive country to travel.

#### **Opportunities:**

Local communities have the opportunity to brand, market and advertise the local tourism attractions among these tourist attractions are hot springs, temples and shrines, ecotourism or nature travel, cultural tourism, national parks, staying at Japanese hotels: *Ryokan* and animation in Japan.

The number of tourists visiting Japan has been increasing in recent years. "According to the JNTO, the estimated number of international visitors to Japan in November 2015 reached over 1.6 million (41.0% increase from the previous year), recording the highest figure in November".

(Retrieved from: <http://www.tourism.jp/en/statistics/>)

#### **Hot springs:**

There are large number of hot springs in the country and local communities can benefit of promoting the hot springs to domestic and international tourists.

There are many prefectures which have a lot of hot springs, among these are: Nagano, Hiroshima, Yamanashi, Kanagawa and Gunma. There are many other prefectures in Japan that have the opportunity to market their hot springs as well.

#### **Temple and Shines:**

"Japan has a wealth of religious architecture - Kyoto alone is estimated to have well over 2,000 temples and shrines. But it is not just in the large cities where the visitor will find Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines - nearly every village in Japan will have a local shrine or temple. Many temples and shrines in Japan are set in well-tended garden spaces and are often connected with local festivals and other events." (Retrieved from: <http://www.japanvisitor.com/japan-temples-shrines>).

#### **Ecotourism or nature tourism:**

There is also a huge potential to develop ecotourism or nature tourism in Japan. Access to

nature, mountains, rivers and ocean makes of Japan an ideal ecotourist destination. "Ecotourism aims to activate local economies by providing tourists with opportunities to experience local attractions accompanied by competent interpreters while preserving local resources such as natural environment, the culture and historical heritages. The concept of Ecotourism is based on Conservation and Preservation of unique local resources. The keywords are environmental conservation, originality of the locals, and excitement." (Retrieved from: <http://www.ecotourism.gr.jp/index.php/english/>)

#### **Cultural tourism:**

Japan has 15 world cultural heritage sites which represents a lot of opportunities to market cultural tourism in Japan and invite domestic and international tourists to discover the beauty and the essence of these world heritage sites and many other cultural attractions that Japan has to offer.

#### **National Parks:**

Japan has 4 world natural heritage sites and a number of national parks and hiking sites, during the spring, summer and fall tourists can go hiking and walking alone these parks, and enjoy the environment and nature of Japan and in the winter many of these natural attractions become ski resorts and tourists can enjoy skiing and snowboarding.

#### **Niche markets:**

There are opportunities to increase the demand of inbound tourism in Japan by promoting local communities' tourist services to specific niche markets. For example, the elderly population in Japan has the income and time to explore different rural communities in the country. Another important market is the number of foreign visitors to Japan: "When the Visit Japan Campaign started in 2003 in order to increase the number of foreign visitors to Japan, promotion projects overseas focused on the five prioritized markets. In 2011, they cover 15 prioritized markets. By carrying out promotions targeted at markets where the number of travellers to Japan is large at present and markets where the number of travellers to Japan is expected to grow in the future, the number of foreign visitors to Japan increased to 8.61 million in 2010". (Retrieved from: <http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/000234920.pdf>)

Recently, Tochigi Prefecture started a program to welcome foreigners to the house of Japanese residents of rural communities. Therefore, they have the opportunity of experiencing Japanese rural life style, cultural aspect of the region and try delicious Japanese homemade food prepared by the host of the family. (Retrieved from: <http://authentic-visit.jp/topic/detail/9>)

#### **Japan's unique accommodation. Ryokan:**

"What are Ryokan? Ryokan are Japanese-style inns, complete with a wide variety of facilities. In most cases, guests are served dinner in the evening of the day they arrive and breakfast the next morning. Rooms are usually Japanese-style, with straw *tatami* mats used for flooring. Guests sleep on *futons* (thin mattresses that are spread on the *tatami* mats at night and stored folded in a closet during the day). *Ryokan* are characterized by the high quality service that they offer and their diligence in maintaining a purely Japanese atmosphere and Japanese-style service". (Retrieved from: <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/cultural/experience/cc.html>)

#### **Animation Tourism:**

Another growing segment of tourism in Japan is the animation, a large number of tourists are interested in visiting museum and art galleries with the history and exhibitions of Japanese anime. Japan National Tourism Organization as well is promoting a couple of museums and galleries to promote the exposure of anime tourism in the country, these are: Toei Tourism Gallery and Suginami Animation Museum.

#### **Toei Animation:**

"Toei Animation, famous for its numerous hits including "Dragon Ball", "Sailor Moon", and "Precure", is the leading anime production company in Japan, having launched many popular works over the 50 years since its foundation. A gallery is set up in the Oizumi Studio where you can see the entire history of this company (only in Japanese). Among the valuable items displayed are anime scenarios, storyboards, configuration data, original drawings, celluloid pictures, and advertising posters. (Retrieved from: [http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/d3\\_muse.html](http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/d3_muse.html))

#### **Suginami Animation Museum:**

"Suginami ward, Tokyo, the location for many companies related to animation production, is known as an 'anime town'. The Suginami Animation Museum, which opened in March 2005, is a center that provides a fun and systemized way to learn, experience, and understand anime. In addition to diverse exhibits on the history of Japanese anime, an anime production workplace, and the latest digital production technology, the museum also invites professional creators to give talks, and organizes workshops where you can actually experience producing anime. Moreover, in the library filled with a rich collection of anime-related materials, you can browse through books and watch DVDs". (Retrieved from: [http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/d3\\_muse.html](http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/d3_muse.html))

**Conclusion:**

Japan has several challenges that need to be taken care of before it can move forward towards achieving its goal of becoming a tourism nation. The tourism industry still a very new industry in the country, meanwhile, Japan has a lot of opportunities to continue to growth its own tourism industry.

First off, Japan needs to create a niche market for rapidly ageing communities and promote tourism in those local communities. The tourism product can be natural and/or cultural. Once the tourist product(s) and service(s) has been developed, Japan will be responsible of promoting the new tourist product(s) and service(s). Information about the new tourists products and services need to be available in English is the form of pamphlets, websites, and magazines, also more information should be available at train stations, roads, airports, and frequent places visited by tourists.

Second, Japan needs to modernize its rapid ageing infrastructure, hotels, and Japanese hotels known as *ryokan*.

Third, Japan as a country will be able to create a tourism nation as long as it listens to the feedback received from domestic and international travelers and continues to implement the tourists' products and services according to the visitors' changing needs.

There are opportunities to increase the demand of inbound tourism in Japan by promoting local communities' tourist services to specific niche markets. For example, to the increasing number of foreign visitors and the elderly population in Japan who has the income and time to explore different rural communities in the country.

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