● Article ●

Perception of Language Barriers or Prior Visit Experience Affect Likelihood of Visiting a Country? Empirical Analysis of Residents in the United States of America about Japan as a Tourism Destination

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Abstract

While some previous reports in Japanese claimed several factors as important and effective to attract foreign visitors to Japan, namely inbound visitors, this study verifies some of popular beliefs through scientific and quantitative data analysis to back up the findings. Data are collected from residents in or around Washington D.C. area and their responses are analyzed statistically. The result verifies that there are clear difference in their likelihood to visit Japan between those who studied the language in the past and those who did not. The study verifies that there are negative perceptions of language barriers when potential guests consider visiting Japan, and such negative perception has been affecting their choice of destinations for their travel.

A perception of language barrier is a serious issue to those who never traveled to the destination or studied the language of destination, and destination marketing campaign using non-English phrase can cut in both ways. With careful statistical analysis, we may decompose people into multiple segments, some of which would show higher likelihood of making a trip. Some demographic data can display characteristics of the groups with higher likelihood of visiting the destination. These finding only emphasizes needs for Japan to conduct quantitative destination marketing to help them realize their goals of tourism nation, or a nation dependent on tourism. Currently, the activities of promoting Japanese language and culture are conducted in the framework of cultural affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the promotion to entice more inbound visitors to Japan are in the realm of Japan Tourism Agency at Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Based on the finding of this study, it is recommended that those two ministries may coordinate to promote Japanese language studies with clearer aim to develop emerging segments of future inbound travelers to Japan as a part of strategic destination marketing campaign.

1. Introduction

Since Japan became the second largest country in terms of GDP in 1967, Japan did not have to feel a serious need to generate revenues from inbound tourists, namely, foreign visitors who come to stay for a short time. Japan was putting more emphasis on outbound travel, Japanese traveling overseas, to offset huge trade surplus in 1970 and 1980's. As its international competitiveness of manufactured products were encroached due to surge of its value of currency and advancement of similar export-driven models adopted by neighboring nations in Asia, Japan revised its stance towards inbound tourists as an alternative source of earning export revenues. Prime Minister Koizumi declared that Japan should become a nation dependent on tourism in 2003, and Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) was established in 2008 within the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT).

At present, Japan has structural deficit in terms of its inbound and outbound visitors, which are Japanese traveling abroad. In other words, the number of Japanese going out of Japan to visit overseas has been much higher than the number of foreigner to come to visit Japan. In 2012, 18,490,657 Japanese went overseas while 8,358,105 inbound visitors came to Japan (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2013) despite its potential as a tourism destination.

Now that 2020 Olympics was awarded to Tokyo, Japan can expect certain momentum to capitalize its potential as a tourism destination. However, there are not too many quantitative research papers on how the potential visitors think about Japan, particularly what the motivations or barriers are in choosing Japan as their travel destination. Local hosts by structure cannot put perception of the hosts among outsiders in perspective, which would leave anxieties and concerns among outsiders unattended. It is challenging for Japanese tourism industry workers to verify concerns of potential guests to their country, therefore outsiders' candid perception of Japan should help Japan plan their tourism-related policies more effectively.

This study collects data from samples in residents in U.S.A. and analyzes

them to see whether there are certain patterns to verify our hypotheses on behaviors of potential guests to Japan. The purpose of this study would be to verify some assumptions by conducting selected inferential statistical analysis by verifying any significant correlations among responded data and their profiles

This study will generate analyses that will facilitate the quantitative evidences on for effective marketing tactics for Japan as a tourism destination.

2．Literature Review

The idea of challenges in cross cultural communication was explored more than 30 years ago in the Western Mexican resort community, where a special role played by bilingual culture brokers and the presence of both seasonal and resident foreigners were analyzed. Spatial, temporal, linguistic and cultural factors were identified in the exchange of cultures between local hosts and visitors（Evans, 1976）. Another study focused on role of sociolinguistic study of verbal encounters in touristic situation in Thailand. The study showed that accommodation by locals was common to all touristic situations, while the degree of proficiency of locals in the tourists' language varied considerably and hence also the extent to which tourists were forced to accommodate linguistically.（Cohen, Cooper 1986）. There was a study which investigated deep into one specific segment of tourists, a backpacker in Australia（Loker-Murphy, Peace 1995）.

There are several preceding research on cultural differences. Pizam and Sussmann made a research to answer whether all tourists perceived to be alike regardless of nationality, or does nationality make a difference. To answer this question, a group of British tour-guides were administered a questionnaire soliciting their opinions on behavioral characteristics of Japanese, French, Italian, and American tourists on guided tours. The results indicated that in 18 out of 20 behavioral characteristics there was a significant perceived difference between the four nationalities. Tour guides perceived the Japanese to be the most unique among the four, and the Italians as the most similar to others. A pair-comparison found the Italians and French to be perceived as the most similar to each other.（Pizam, Sussmann 1995）. Pizam and Jeong followed up

with similar study on cross cultural behavior of tourists in which 86 Korean tour-guides were administered a questionnaire soliciting their opinions on 20 behavioral characteristics of Japanese, American and Korean tourists on guided tours. The results indicated that in 18 out of the 20 behavioral characteristics there was a significant perceived difference between the three nationalities. In general, Korean tour-guides perceived the Americans to be the most distinct among the three. The Japanese were perceived to be the most similar to others. A pair-comparison found the Koreans and Japanese to be perceived as the most similar to each other, followed by Japanese-Americans. The least similar were perceived to be the Korean-Americans pair.（Pizam, Jeong, 1996）.

As for Japanese specific research, more studies are found on their outbound travel behaviors, particularly when Japanese tourists were relatively more dominant in 1980 and 1990s. In early 1980s, one researcher analyzed how the travel brochures in Japanese were made with different emphases. Moeran concluded that many of concepts and themes were the same as those important to tourism in the Western world, but there were certain cultural themes or ways of treating tourist attractions which were peculiar to Japanese tourists.（Moeran, 1983）. One case study made by Ziff-Levine identified a cultural logic gap between Americans and Japanese. In tourism and travel marketing, this gap dictates a global marketing approach modified by localized elements embraching cultural values inherent in the target populations. The case study showed the requirement for both global and multinational frameworks as the path to marketing success.（Ziff-Levine, 1990）.

When Japanese outbound travelers were considered as significant and growing segments to the United States, researchers made a specific study on their travel behavior. According to Ahmed and Krohn, "Japan has registered the highest growth in the world in the development of its outbound international tourism during the 1980's and is expected to continue its rapid growth in the foreseeable future". Their study examined the unique characteristics of the consumer behavior of Japanese tourist who are or will be vacationing in the U.S. Recommendations have been offered to marketers of tourism firms who can benefit by understanding the unique characteristics of a Japanese tourist's consumer behavior and by changing their marketing strategies accordingly.

（Ahmed, Krohn, 1993）. Recently, Watkins and Gnoth evaluated the research method of means end in a cross-cultural research context in order to understand Japanese tourists' values that drive travel choices in New Zealand. It contributed an extensive critique of means end analysis and its advantages over quantitative research methods in cross-cultural research. Its theoretical contribution came in the form of a set of values or travel motivators, including a number of culturally motivated values that reveal unique insights into Japanese travel experiences.（Watkins, Gnoth, 2010）.

Based on the previous research on perception and travel destination choices, we think we can conduct a research on perception of residents in U.S.A. about Japan as a travel destination in our attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge in this specific area.

3．Methodology and Data

3. 1． Survey Creation and Approval Processes for Safety of Data

For the purpose of this study, we have developed an online questionnaires based on three sources – our previous surveys, some of the published documents about Japan and Japan branding and feedback from those whose profiles are similar to our target respondents.

Since any kind of surveys that include human subjects require prior-written approval from the Institutional Review Board （IRB）, we sent the final draft questionnaires together with all the requires specifications about the survey procedures to the IRB, from which we successfully received "Notice of Exempt Review Status". Due to full compliance with the IRB requirements, our surveys are strictly structured not to collect any personal information and we have been required to present the "Informed Consent" form at the very beginning of the electronic survey.

Survey results are stored at the encrypted secure server at the main campus of the University of Central Florida, located in Orlando, Florida （Orange County）, which is the different location from the researcher's office. Only one researcher has access to the database and the researcher has no access

to the respondents' personal information including I.P address, which were not collected from the beginning. This study will utilize partial data which are only relevant to this study.

Those data are about demographic characteristics of respondents as well as questions on their travel behaviors and perceptions.

Demographic questions include those on gender, race, highest academic degree attained, annual household income, age, maritime status, and employment status. Questions about their travel-related behaviors are asked in the following manners.

- How many times in the last 10 years have you traveled outside the USA for business or pleasure?
- Do you speak any foreign language other than English?
- Have you ever traveled to Japan?
- Howe you ever traveled to Asia other than Japan?
- Have you ever studied Japanese language?
- Have you heard of "Yokoso Japan" (welcome to Japan) campaign?
- Given you have sufficient funds and time to travel overseas, what is the likelihood that you will travel to Japan in the next 12 months?

3. 2. Data Collections

Samples are collected at random on the basis of strict anonymous method from those whose e-mail addresses had been voluntarily given to a non-profit research organization in the Washington D.C. area, and the link to the survey were sent out solely by the non-profit research organization.

While all collected samples are stored in the database, some are unusable due to lack of actual data input. We had to remove two (2) replies because more than 2/3 of the responses were unanswered, as if it was sent as incomplete in the middle of answering the survey. Thus out of total of 194 submissions, 192 were considered as replies with usable data.

3. 3.　Methodology and Research Questions

We will use the responses to the above questions to find out whether there are significant associations among variables of interests. In other words, we are interested in identifying following research questions.

- Q1.　Who are afraid of language barriers in Japan?
- Q2.　How people's perceptions on "Yokoso Japan" campaign varies?
- Q3.　Which segments, if any, would have higher likelihood of visiting Japan?
- Q4.　Whether demographic data such as age and income affect their intention to visit?

In order to answer those questions we will use inferential statistics. We noticed that some of the Japanese government offices, including Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conducted, intensive data gathering and disseminations such as public opinions survey. Those data may be able to generate certain levels of additional information which have to be verified by series of inferential statistics, such as correlations, multivariate regressions, logistic regressions, Analysis of Variance（ANOVA）etc.

4．Analysis

In this section, we will analyze data to answer the four research questions that we presented in the Methodology section.

Q1.　Who are afraid of language barriers?

Japan has to deal with several perception issues, including but not limited to, language barriers. We would verify whether it is a serious problem or more of perceptional issues by grouping the respondents into those who went to Japan and those who have never been to Japan. Using the powerful statistical analytical capability, we put multiple variables to check if any variables would be considered significant to maintain association with those who have perception of language barriers. We used the result to a question（coded as Q8）"I will be afraid of language barriers when I travel to Japan" as a dependent variable, and the model included other variables as independent variables.

Among the variables, knowledge on "Yokoso Japan" campaign (coded Q45), previous trip to Japan or not (coded Q46), frequency of travel abroad (coded Q39), previous trip to Asia (coded Q42) remained as significant, while variables which were considered as insignificant were dropped in the processes of stepwise regression model as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Stepwise Regression: Perception of Language Barriers versus Yokoso Japan, Previous Trip to Japan, Frequency of Traveling Abroad, Previous trip to Asia

Step	1	2	3	4
Constant	1.982	2.496	2.209	2.245
Q45	0.327	0.275	0.235	0.236
T-Value	3.86	3.30	2.75	2.80
P-Value	0.000	0.001	0.007	0.006
Cal 46	-0.62	-0.67	-0.56	
T-Value	-3.29	-3.56	-2.91	
P-Value	0.001	0.001	0.004	
Q39	0.114	0.169		
T-Value	1.88	2.57		
P-Value	0.062	0.011		
Q42	-0.132			
T-Value	-2.07			
P-Value	0.040			

Alpha-to-Enter: 0.15 Alpha-to-Remove: 0.15
Note: Cal 46 was calculated by researchers by converting the answers for Q41 into binary data of 0 and 1, in a way that those who never traveled to Japan are assigned 0 and those who traveled more than once are given 1.

The result would show more detailed profiles of those who are afraid of language barriers, so that Japan can plan better to mitigate their concerns.

Those who are more afraid of language barriers in Japan
- also found "*Yokoso Japan*" campaign more unclear and unfriendly（＋ sign on Q45）
- have never traveled to Japan in the past（－ sign on binary responses

of Q46 which are created by researchers based on answers on Q41）
- have more experiences of travel abroad on business and pleasure（＋ sign on Q39）
- have less experiences of traveling to Asia（− sign on Q42）

Q2.　Perceptions on "*Yokoso Japan*" Campaign

These findings show that those who have never traveled to Japan are more prone to a perceived fear of language barriers, and also the unique campaign of visit Japan called "*Yokoso Japan*" might have indeed fueled such fear in the mind of those who have never visited Japan, an unintended sad consequences of the innocent efforts by Japanese government. At the same time, "*Yokoso Japan*" might have given intended positive effects on those who studies Japanese, the segment which are more likely to visit Japan anyway. This underscores the nature of double-edged sword of using non-English（Japanese）language in the global destination marketing campaign.

We also learned that those who traveled to Asia are less afraid of language barriers in Japan, while it is a bit of surprise that well-travelled respondents（and not visited Japan yet）are more afraid of assumption of language barriers in Japan. Most of the respondents are residents of the East Coast of the United States, and most likely to be more familiar with trips to Europe geographically. Japan should be aware that a marketing strategy of emphasizing exotic, different characteristic of Japan as a tourism destination may work well only when potential visitors are looking for those traits, but the same strategy would not work positively to those who already have some fear of unfamiliar, foreign elements of uncertainty about Japan. We note a possible gap between Japanese and Americans based on the analysis. Japanese may consider themselves as part of the modern developed country like one in North America or Europe, but the data shows that those who have never traveled to Asia or Japan tend to consider Japan as one of the alien Asian country with strange and unfamiliar languages, customs and cultures. It is ironical that the same strategy of emphasizing exotic uniqueness would encourage those who had travelled to either Japan or other Asian destination in the past to consider a trip to Japan.

This underscores the importance of "destination marketing" - communicating to different segments with different solutions to their needs respectively based on analysis of quantitative data, instead of conveying one single message for all the people in the world as a part of unilateral sales efforts.

This recommendation assumes that Japan understands the difference between sales and marketing – sales being the unilateral disposition of the inventory of tourism commodities and marketing being offering solutions to the needs of different visitors preceded by the quantitative research on their needs.

Q3. Segmenting Groups with Imminent Intent to Visit Japan

Thanks to cooperation from respondents, we have multiple variables, which are generally assumed to be independent to each other, namely, they are not interfering with each other. However, it is more prudent to investigate whether there are certain patterns of associations among variables, such as effects of age, gender to their intent to visit Japan. In other words, we will check whether variances among variables and within smaller segments are equal across data or not. This is another quantitative analysis to utilize demographic data, collected anonymously, to deepen our understanding over thoughts and behaviors of different segments of potential American tourists to Japan.

We will pick up the Japan visit intent（Q44）as the variable of our highest interest（as we aim to help Japan promote inbound tourists from USA to Japan）, and see whether some other variables, such as gender（Q31）, age （Q35）and previous learning experience of Japanese language（Q43）would play an role in affecting the visit intent. In other words, we analyze if the significant differences exist with the decomposed segments along the line of gender and age.

Since the visit intent（Q44）is placed on the Y-axis, vertical positions of each lines show the level of their intent to visit Japan, where higher the line, the higher the intent to visit Japan, as shown in Figure 1. Among the three graphs, the top left one shows the effects of previous learning experience of
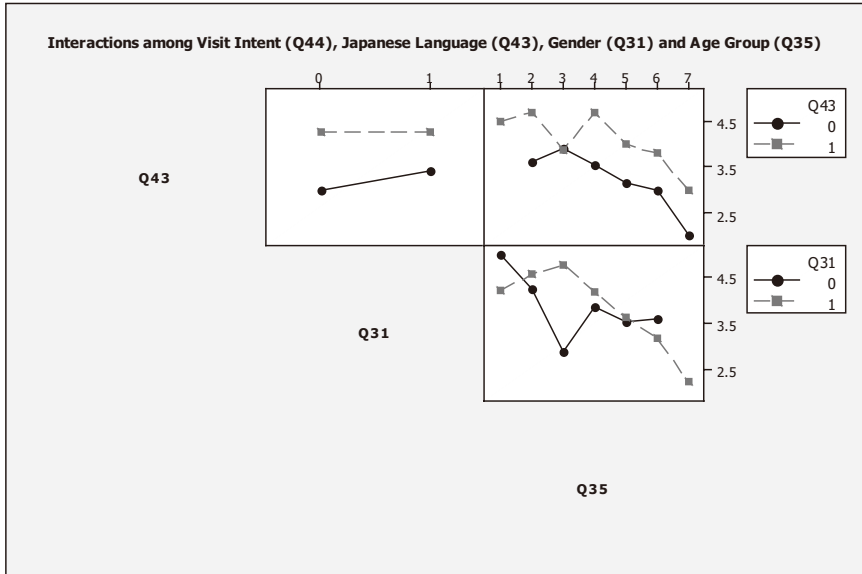
Figure 1: Associations Between Visit Intent and Other Variables – Prior Language Study, Gender and Age Group

Japanese（Nihongo）and the gender. Red（dotted line, with squared terminals）represents those who studied Japanese（Yes = 1）and the Black（solid line with rounded terminals）represents those who did not study Japanese（No = 0）. In the same graph, left dots on each line are placed along the horizontal x-axis under zero（0）, which represents the answer of "female" and right dots on each line under one（1）represents those who answered "male". This graph （upper left）shows that those who study or studied Japanese appear to be more likely to have higher intent to visit Japan irrespective of their gender. This shows a possibility of strategic link between promotion of language study and the destination marketing.

We look at the second graph（upper right）where Q43（Japanese language learning experience）and Q35（age group）interact with Q44（Visit Intent）in Figure 1. Y-axis remains the same to represent the level of their intent to visit Japan, and the X-axis（from left to right）shows the age group from low to high, "2" being the 20～29, "3" being 30～39 etc. Again with

the exception of the 30～39 years group, experience of learning Japanese language clearly increases their intent to visit Japan all across the ages – which is displayed by the observation that red line is higher than black line. One thing to note is the general downward trends for both slopes as the age goes up. Travel distance may become more troublesome as people age and that may explain the negative slope of their travel intent to a distant travel destination such as Japan（from East Coast of U.S.A.）

We look at the third graph（lower right）where Q31（gender）and Q35（age group）interact with Q44（Visit Intent）. Red（dotted line, with squared terminals）represents male（= 1）and the Black（solid line with rounded terminals）represents female（= 0）. A male in his 30s have highest visit intention, but such intent declines as he ages, while a female in her 30s has the lowest visit intention, which becomes steady as she ages. It is noteworthy that those in their teens（18～19）have high visit intention, while their income levels are not very high at that age of their lives. It would be strategically important for Japan to communicate with each age group with different focus and present solutions to their concerns.

Those concerns surely include ones based on perception only and different from reality. Japan surely has great opportunity to speak up effectively to communicate the message to targeted audiences, who can be turned into visitors to Japan. We reiterate the importance of quantitative, data-driven destination marketing on a larger scale, if the Japanese government seriously wishes to achieve their goal of "tourism nation". While the idea of strategic communications to different segments is the core of destination marketing technique, we find few evidences Japanese government, its affiliated tourism organization（such as Japan National Tourist Organization）, or any of the DMO（Destination Marketing Organization: or CVB = Convention and Visitors' Bureau）'s engagement with such scientific marketing efforts towards potential American visitors to Japan.

We demonstrate that even within the United States, there are enough variances of preferences, concerns, tastes and needs. Similar research should be conducted with each and every different feeder markets, including all the target

nations in the world to ensure effectiveness of Japanese global campaign.

Q4. Which segments are more likely to travel to Japan – Any Effects of Income and Age Group?

While this is not purely inferential statistics, we can plot relevant data to make visual presentation of the importance of segmentation. The figure we present is called a contour plot, which is basically the same presentation method as a traditional map with contour. The two-dimensioned map can express three variables, and we put Q35 [age grouping] as X-axis (horizontal), Q34 [annual household income grouping] as Y-axis, and likelihood of visiting Japan as Z (contour – the higher the intent, the higher the contour would be).

If the segmentation either by age or by income has no effect over their intent to visit Japan, the map should look very flat, without any mountains or valleys. If everybody has the similar high interest in visiting Japan, the map would look like a high plateau. If nobody has any interest in visiting Japan, the map would show flat low-land.

The contour plot in Figure 2 below shows that there are obviously some high mountains, which represents segments with high interest in visiting Japan. They are (1) younger age group with lowest annual income group (age: 20's to 40's, income: up to $30,000 annual income), (2) young group with relatively high income (age: 18 to 20's, income $60,000), (3) young professionals (age 20's to 30's, income $40,000), and (4) matured professionals (age: 30's and 40's, income around $60,000). Interestingly enough, group (1) would be logically assumed to be sensitive to price (costs) of traveling to Japan, but they are highly interested in traveling to Japan. If the Japanese government would like to launch affordability campaign, they should particularly aim at this segment, as the price is likely to be the only barrier for them to make a trip.

On the contrary to some people's assertion, the higher income will not increase their interests to travel to Japan. As we demonstrate, there are lots of intricate correlations among different variables, but some variables, such as "prior learning experience of Japanese language" would be more powerful
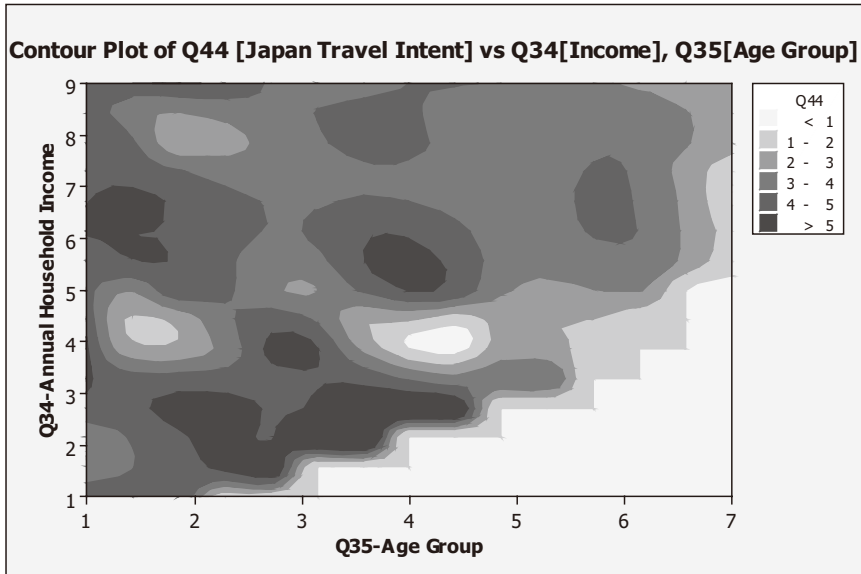
Figure 2: Contour Plot of Travel Intent to Japan, Income, and Age Group

to persuade them to travel to Japan, than such factors as "annual income". It is noteworthy that relatively large numbers of people all across the age and income group show level of 3 and higher as their intent to travel to Japan.

Having identified segments with high intent to visit Japan, we should ask a simple question to ourselves – whether all those segments' needs are identical, or different. It is plausible that segment（1）young, lower income, but high curiosity group may have different interests in Japan from（4）matured professionals, even though they both have strongest interest in visiting Japan.

Therefore, this is another example to underscore the importance of scientific destination marketing, in which Japan has to ask potential visitors' needs to provide them with type of tourism commodities to fulfill their needs.

5．Discussion

We hope this study underscores the importance of collecting primary

data directly from the potential customers – future inbound visitors to Japan. We notice that Japan did not fully embrace the concept of "destination marketing", which is based on the quantitative data analysis of potential visitors whom Japan has to study about their perceptions and preferences about travel destinations.

Japan made it clear to the world that Japan would utilize the economic power of tourism as an industry to re-vitalize the sluggish regional economy of Japan. That declaration was confirmed by the inauguration of Japan Tourism Agency in 2008. With the dwindling and aging population, Japan has to generate more inbound visitors to Japan, which indeed will bring the same effect as an exporting industry. Spectacular successes of Japanese manufacturing exports were based on thorough analysis of its customers' tastes and preferences abroad. If Japan wishes to put tourism as a strategic growth engine for the 21st century, Japan has to do the same with the inbound tourists regarding their taste and preferences which varies by region, demographic profiles etc. It is our humble hope that this study shows a flavor of such data-driven quantitative marketing efforts to learn about Japan's potential customers.

Japan is surely perceived to be unique and attractive, but not many actually decide to travel, at least from USA. The survey confirms an urgent task for Japan to communicate more effectively with potential inbound travelers about the reality of those issues such as fears of language barriers, otherwise their negative and outdated perceptions will remain current with unfounded fears deeply rooted in their minds.

Promotion of inbound tourism brings the same economic effect as an exporting industry due to cash inflow to the nation/region in exchange for providing tourism commodities for tourists' consumption. It was Japan which built a very successful model of export-driven economic growth, and the success of manufacturing sector was attributed to a careful study of tastes and preferences of consumers in different nations and cultures. It would be the same with promotion of inbound tourism in that Japan has to learn carefully tastes and preferences of different segments of visitors from different nations and cultures. Japanese should not assume what foreigners like, but Japanese would

be better off by just asking potential inbound visitors' opinions.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This study verifies that one message would not fit to all the different segments, even with analyses of a couple of hundreds of samples in the same country. A perception of language barrier is a serious issue to those who never traveled to the destination or studied the language of destination, and destination marketing campaign using non-English phrase can cut in both ways. With careful statistical analysis, we may decompose people into multiple segments, some of which would show higher likelihood of making a trip. Some demographic data can display characteristics of the groups with higher likelihood of visiting the destination. These finding only emphasizes needs for Japan to conduct quantitative destination marketing to help them realize their goals of tourism nation, or a nation dependent on tourism. Currently, the activities of promoting Japanese language and culture are conducted in the framework of cultural affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the promotion to entice more inbound visitors to Japan are in the realm of Japan Tourism Agency at Ministry of Land Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Based on the finding of this study, it is recommended that those two ministries may coordinate to promote Japanese language studies with clearer aim to develop emerging segments of future inbound travelers to Japan.

This study has a fair share of limitations. Limitations related to the sample size and selection exists, because the data size of a couple of hundreds would not be sufficient to represent the whole U.S. population of 313 million in 2012. Samples are collected mainly from residents of Virginia, Maryland and Washington DC area, which may not be accurate representation of the rest of the populations in the United States of America. Due to the size of samples and sampling methods, careful consideration would be required to extrapolate our findings to general population in the U.S.A. or to other countries. What we verified and may be universal would be that even among the people in the same nation, there would be very different segments based on various demographic factors such as age, gender, education, income to name a few, which could influence various behaviors of tourists. In this study, we verify that those who

studied languages or those who visited the nation, show higher likelihood of traveling to the particular destination.

We sincerely recommend that similar research be conducted with samples in different nations to ensure the effectiveness of Japanese destination marketing efforts. Unless the similar research would be conducted with all other strategic feeder nations, such as Korea, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Russia, U.K. France, Germany, Australia etc, it is not advisable to simply apply findings of this study to those different feeder markets due to differences in culture, preferences, and inter-variances of other characteristics.

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