

Impact of the Pandemic on Event Tourism: The Resilience of Japanese Pop Culture Events

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Abstract: Using a theoretical framework that recognises the pervasive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism and events, this study examines the unique complexities of Japanese pop culture events. These events, characterised by their ability to attract large audiences, especially enthusiastic youth, have traditionally flourished through interpersonal interactions. This discrepancy between the interactive nature of events and pandemic-induced measures has necessitated fundamental changes in event management strategies. However, pandemic responses and restrictions contrasted sharply with the nature of these events, posing significant challenges for event organisers. This study analyses qualitative data from seven semi-structured interviews with Japanese theme researchers, journalists, and representatives of the main events on the theme in four countries. The pandemic crisis clearly affected Japanese pop culture events, which were among the most frequently suspended. The interviewees believe that it is easy to return to the normalcy of face-to-face events because the audience for these events is predominantly young and enthusiastic, but this requires adaptations and the care that each country demands. This research sheds light on both the difficulties and setbacks that Japanese pop culture events face, as well as their ability to endure and adjust in response to difficult circumstances. By shedding insight into the complex dynamics and demographic characteristics of these events, it also enables event organisers and policymakers to develop strategies to facilitate the safe and successful recovery of similar events in the future. In addition to connecting with other studies in the event sector, this research contributes to the body of knowledge needed to develop effective responses to unforeseen obstacles by shedding light on exceptional events and their potential resilience pathways.

Keywords – COVID-19; Events; Impacts; Japanese Pop Culture; Technology; Tourism.

1. Introduction

Tourism and leisure were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al, 2023). The pandemic affected both the supply side and tourist demand, creating global spatial and temporal inequalities, and disrupting tourism worldwide (Allan et al, 2022; Sigala, 2020). These effects had a negative impact on tourism, both economically and socially, as well as in terms of policy structuring (Abbas et al, 2021).

Interconnected with tourism and a critical component of its system, the events sector was equally impacted by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies, 2021). As these were convenient times for large concentrations of people, events had to be limited and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, practically cancelled, as these events could easily increase the number of cases of infection (Liu et al, 2022). These consequences were felt by all types of events, whether due to travel restrictions, the need to implement security measures or participant limitations (Mohanty et al., 2020).

One category of events that was relatively restricted in scope due to the inherent socialisation criteria for attendees, were the Japanese pop culture events (Severino, 2022; Woo et al, 2022). These events, with a culture valued by the West for its exoticism and cultural differentiation (Kawamata et al, 2017), were also canceled or postponed, with only a few taking place in 2020 with various restrictions and adaptations (Alberto and Tringali, 2022).

Despite the return to normalcy, it is advantageous to contemplate the most effective strategies to facilitate the full resumption of activities in the event of a future pandemic. It is also essential to understand the preferred formats that participants adhere to in events, particularly in terms of valued factors, such as technology or virtual experiences. This understanding will help to minimise the future impact of counterproductive events, such as pandemics.

The present research aims to understand the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist entertainment events and to identify the most effective approaches for managing such circumstances, using Japanese pop culture events as a case study. Consequently, an assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Japanese pop culture phenomena is sought, including an examination of the optimal course of action, the likelihood of a return of typical Japanese pop culture events, and the viability of technological solutions as an

alternative.

Japanese pop culture events are fan meetings within a cultural event, like festivals or conventions (Severino & Silva, 2023). Nevertheless, the findings derived from these events have the potential to be extrapolated to other domains encompassing community participation, celebration of a particular occasion, and active involvement in the festivities. Using Japanese pop culture events as a case study, the conclusions can be applied to other active participation events like festivals, fairs, conventions, and even sport or musical events. This is because these moments are characterised by a multidisciplinary nature, where a variety of activities take place for the benefit of the community present at these events.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Events, Japanese Pop Culture and the Technology Solution

An unprecedented array of technological advancements has expanded the possibilities for enhancing event offerings, including the use of digital platforms (Ton and Do, 2022). Furthermore, to expand their reach, these virtual tools have become of interest for supporting events to expand their reach (Johnson, 2022). Events that involve active participant participation are difficult to implement with the currently available technology. New or more sophisticated digital tools are very interesting and enhance the innovation and quality of events, especially MICE, scientific, and certain cultural events (Estanyol, 2022; Valenti et al, 2021; Yao et al, 2021).

The events associated to Japanese pop culture can be highlighted within the context of a specific area of interest, as they exhibit a comprehensive mastery of cultural themes and content (Simeon, 2006). These events include Japanese versions of television series and movies ("anime"), comics and books ("manga"), music, fashion, character dressing ("cosplay"), video games, traditional culture, cinema, workshops, conferences, gastronomy, lectures, and sports (Simeon, 2006; Sabre, 2013).

Japanese popular culture incorporates a diverse array of elements that pertain to nowadays Japan. Although it originated in Japan, this cultural phenomenon has gained international recognition and has amassed a substantial base of followers and fans on a global scale (Tajima et al, 2022). Subsequently, their gatherings began to operate primarily to attract followers of this culture. Over time, however, the audience has become more heterogeneous, encompassing not only enthusiasts (referred to as "otakus") but also individuals with a vested interest in some facet of this culture, whether collectively or individually (Kawamata et al, 2017). For example, events such as the "Anime Expo" in Los Angeles and the "Japan Expo" in Paris have attracted significant participation, with hundreds of thousands of individuals attending (Tung et al, 2019).

Popular culture events in Japan are characterised by a unique thematic element and active participation from individual attendees (Severino and Silva, 2023). Furthermore, these occasions serve as ideal settings for their admirers to manifest their passion by participating in contests, attending workshops, "cosplaying", and casual admiring the recreated environment, among numerous other activities (Kawamata et al, 2017). Since international travel to Japan can be quite costly for non-Westerners, these events provide the ideal opportunity to cater to the sophisticated tastes of culture enthusiasts (Severino, 2022).

Japanese popular culture events, like events of all other kinds, have undoubtedly encountered numerous obstacles in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alberto and Tringali, 2022). As a result of cancellations, restrictions, and postponements, the event organisers were compelled to develop temporary solutions. Additionally, precautions were taken regarding food and beverages, social distancing, and the venue's constant disinfection; safety measures were heightened; and technological advances were used primarily to develop new event services (JNTO, 2020). Live event streaming can be applied to business meetings, but it can also be used as a temporary solution, with virtual technology having the potential to be useful due to its capacity to supplement live events and overcome geographical barriers (Scrivani, 2021). The audience of Japanese pop culture events is predominantly comprised of young adults who are accustomed to using the Internet and are therefore accustomed to digital environments and interaction (Severino, 2022). Consequentially, the live interaction emphasised at these events can serve as a supplement or a temporary solution during lockdown periods to sustain the interest of the fans (Alberto and Tringali, 2022).

The prospect of technology assuming a crucial role in Japanese popular culture events and demonstrating its indispensability in the face of future pandemics is intellectually stimulating. The Internet and digital media are undoubtedly beneficial resources in our increasingly globalised society, primarily because they enable individuals who cannot afford to travel to attend events (Puccinelli et al, 2022).

3. Methodology

After understanding the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on events and defining Japanese pop culture events, this research used a deductive process (qualitative method) to conduct semi-directive interviews with event organisers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

The interviewees were selected using non-probabilistic diversity (maximum variation, with different specialties for different opinions) and casuistry (who cooperated and facilitated access to information). A total of seven interviews were conducted. Four with event organisers were evaluated through interviews with representatives of the largest Japanese pop culture events in each country: "Comiket" in Japan; "Japan Weekend" in Spain; "J-Popcon" in Denmark; and "Iberanime" in Portugal. A Japanese international researcher and a Portuguese-based Japanese pop culture researcher were also consulted. Finally, one Japanese pop culture interview was conducted with a North American journalist who covers American popular culture. The interviews were conducted online between August and December 2020, the first year in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected global events.

Semi-directive and open-ended questions were used in the interviews. After introducing the interviewee, the first section examined how the COVID-19 pandemic affected Japanese pop culture events, particularly the event under consideration if the interviewee was the event organiser. The second section examined the best response to Japanese pop culture events, considering the respondent's opinion on their fit with the typologies. The third section examined respondents' views on a return to normalcy or Japanese pop culture events and their future implications. The literature review suggests that the Internet and technological solutions are constantly being used during the pandemic, so the fourth section asked if they could be useful for Japanese pop culture events. The fifth and final section focused on the Japanese pop culture event organisers, especially those who organised events in 2020 despite constraints. The challenges of organising and implementing these pandemic-related events, as well as their impact and public adherence, were examined in detail.

After careful transcription, the interviews were analysed using the program "Nvivo". Thematic content analysis was used to identify and categorise subjects, resulting in an accurate analysis of the speeches. Furthermore, word cloud processing was used to highlight and display the most emphasised terms in each question to reflect the responses of the sample interviewee (DePaolo and Wilkinson, 2014). Therefore, the data was organised, and subject-respondent connections were verified.

4. Findings and Discussion

There is a prevailing consensus regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on events within Japanese pop culture. Attendees typically participate in an immersive experience involving an unfamiliar culture, while simultaneously engaging in social interactions with individuals who share similar interests and passions. COVID-19's pandemic precautions have required the enforcement of a number of regulations that are inconsistent with the core principles of personal freedom resulting in numerous challenges.

Japanese popular culture events were canceled, and it was not feasible to hold them even with a reduced number of participants due to the continued socialisation of practices associated with dance activities, "cosplay", and other related phenomena. Respondents believed that this condition would persist for a significant period, as they expected full recovery by 2023. Physical and in-person events were considered impracticable due to their large scale, constant congestion during activities, and problematic public administration. These events engendered community engagement and social integration, alongside the interchange of knowledge and cultures, with economic and social impacts.

Except for a temporary online edition with a small in-person component, the physical edition of the "Japan Weekend" in Madrid, Spain, was abruptly postponed until 2021. In the same year, the regional editions of this event were canceled. The structure was identical for the "J-Popcon" in Denmark and the two editions of "Comiket" in Japan (May and December). All of these events required adjustments to the plan, resulting in significant financial consequences for the organisation. The preeminent Japanese pop culture event in Portugal, "Iberanime", was postponed from its original dates in Lisbon and Porto to 2021.

As illustrated in Figure 1, an examination of the concepts and vocabulary used by the interviewees in relation to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that "tourism" and "people" were the most frequently mentioned terms. Specifically, "people" attending such events were found to be the most impacted, with numerous direct influences on "tourism".



Figure 2: Word cloud on the best response of Japanese pop culture events.

It was generally acknowledged that Japanese popular culture events would eventually return to normal or evolve. Respondents were optimistic about the eventual restoration of these events to their full capacity. Considering the travel restrictions and the prioritisation of quality, these events proved to be critical junctures for those seeking a more practical means of immersing themselves in Japanese culture without undertaking a physical trip to Japan.

Future attendees will develop a deep sense of longing and exhibit heightened fan loyalty in response to these events. Frequent travel to a distant country such as Japan can be challenging, and the event may provide an opportunity to experience authenticity, that may be difficult to achieve. Additionally, future developments may see the emergence of hybrid events that combine in-person and virtual participation, which may increase attendance. Event flow management, as used in certain museums and exhibitions, may become ubiquitous to prevent overcrowding. Open areas will continue to be advantageous for security purposes while allowing for the expansion of event space.

Limiting the availability of tickets for rare events runs counter to the core value of social inclusion that underpins the culture. In contrast, live broadcasting can function as a tactic to ensure the participation of those who cannot physically attend the event through a virtual presence. It has the potential to maintain attendance, cultivate a feeling of inclusion, provide alternative choices, and ultimately foster loyalty to the event.

As can be seen in Figure 3, respondents emphasised the word "people", which represents the essence of the events. This was followed by the words "return" and "tourism", which underscore their optimism that the events will return in force in a post-pandemic future.



Figure 3: Word cloud on the possibility of returning to normality and the implications for the future.

Again, opinions were divided on the Internet and technological alternatives for Japanese pop culture events. Half of the respondents felt these tools were ineffective and undermined the events' goals of promoting fan interaction and celebration. The other half defended its continuation, highlighting both the adaptability of Japanese culture to digital formats, and the advantage of offering a future alternative for those who cannot attend in person and when the event capacity is limited.

According to these respondents, technology is crucial for communicating this trend to the public and providing experiences during severe limitations. While it is widely agreed that full exploitation of this digital platform is

The online "J-Popcon", which took place on August 8 and 9, 2020, attracted 400 attendees per day for a program that was remarkably short and designed solely to maintain their interest. Evidently, like the "Japan Weekend", the number of participants was significantly reduced compared to the 2900 that attendees in 2019 (a 72.41% decrease in attendance).

Finally, the online viewership of "Iberanime" for the event reached 5700 people on May 30. This represents a significant decrease of 82.79% in comparison to the 33 125 participants that attended the Lisbon edition in 2019 over the course of two days.

The most worrisome statistic is that of "Japan Weekend", which attracted only 0.44% of its usual attendees compared to the previous year's physical edition. In contrast, "J-Popcon" exhibited a more promising result, as 27.59% of its attendees were in attendance via its online edition, in contrast to the attendance rate of its in-person edition.

Following the concept "event", "people" (or participants) emerge as the most significant element and concern of the interviewees, as shown by a general analysis of the interviews (Figure 5). It is noteworthy that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on "tourism", which is a direct consequence of the execution of these events. Despite the implementation of numerous "measures" of concern that function as a "solution", it is believed that digital tools accessible "online" can be more beneficial to the events, with an unwavering faith in their "future" "return". While "smaller" events may still necessitate "adaptation", all respondents are confident that "community" fans of Japanese pop culture events will maintain "interest" due to their familiarity with the "virtual" environment and the "Internet", through which they frequently access a significant portion of the pre-existing Japanese pop culture content. "Face-to-face" interaction is undoubtedly "vital" for event attendees; however, "digital" may serve as a temporary "solution" or even become an integral part of subsequent "editions" of Japanese pop culture events.



Figure 5: Word cloud about the general concepts of the interviews carried out

5. Conclusion

When public movement is restricted, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, arrangements for tourist entertainment must be modified accordingly. To be adequately prepared for the challenges ahead, it is imperative to assess recent experiences, understand the most effective strategies, and incorporate new concepts. By scrutinising a classification of tourist entertainment events that experienced a surge in popularity prior to the pandemic, primarily due to its heavy reliance on physical interaction, one can gain insight into future trends when conducting a case study analysis.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on all events, and those of Japanese pop culture, were no exception. Even in a wholly virtual world, the number of devotees had nothing to do with the numbers before 2020, and the offered panel could not be compared. The most effective strategies for future pandemics or similar consist primarily of adhering to health and government regulations. Additionally, the possibility of smaller events focused on a single topic, rather than addressing a wide range of concerns is being considered.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has demonstrated that hybrid events are a viable alternative for expanding event offerings and engaging a broader audience. While it is clear that investment should be made in the platforms preferred by the target audiences, this could be an interesting way for some participants to overcome distance

and movement restrictions. Complete technological or digital replacement is not considered, but it is viewed favorably in mixed-use scenarios. Profitable ventures are possible with virtual reality, holographic visits, and augmented reality, but this depends on the further development of the technologies.

In sum, understanding the uniqueness and subtleties of experiences is essential for effective solutions. Maintaining socialisation is therefore key to the success of these events, especially under challenging conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, considering the specific participation requirements of different events and analysing the origins of each type of event is also crucial to ensure positive outcomes even in difficult and restrictive situations.

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