

Exploring the Travel Experience of Western Otaku Tourists: A Model-Based Approach

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Abstract: Although Japanese pop culture was regarded as a niche market in the West, its popularity, especially anime and manga, has significantly increased in recent years. This has led to a parallel growth in tourism to Japan, particularly to locations linked with this subculture. Despite this trend, Otaku Tourism remains an under-explored topic for travel companies and an under-researched topic academically in the West, which results in the lack of tourism products and tailored information to this emerging niche market. This article aims to understand the travel experience of Western Otaku Tourists in Japan, proposing a tourism model based on established theoretical frameworks. This research adopts a qualitative methodology focused on two complementary studies in order to obtain results. Firstly, was used a travel autoethnography, in which the author explores their two Otaku travels to Japan with previous literature. Secondly, using a snowball sampling method, 12 Portuguese Otaku who had previously visited Japan were interviewed through a semi-structured model. This approach provided insight into the experience through a personal approach, understanding their motivations and behaviors. Findings reveal that Otaku primarily obtain information about the trip through peers and social media. Their key behaviors include photographing places related to Otaku culture and purchasing merchandise of their favorite content. The must-see places are those featured in beloved anime, known as anime sacred places, or associated with Otaku culture, such as shops, themed cafés, Otaku-centric neighborhoods, and temporary exhibitions. Overall, the Portuguese Otaku experience can be characterized as a profoundly personal pilgrimage, with a sense of immersion in their preferred media while visiting Japan, particularly through travel to locations directly associated with those works. Thus, this study develops academic groundwork that can be used by tourism promoters and tour operators in the marketing of this niche, supporting Portuguese travel companies in developing tailored-made packages that address their preferences.

Keywords: Tourism Experience; Portuguese Otaku Tourist, Induced Tourism, Anime Tourism; Japan.

1. Introduction

In Europe, Otaku Culture was perceived as a niche phenomenon, often associated with stigma towards Otaku culture fans. In recent years, however, this subculture has gained increasing international recognition. Initially, through fans sharing anime and manga geographically restricted online (Gonçalves et al., 2021), and more recently with the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix, with over 50% of their subscribers now watching anime content. Portugal has seen the Otaku phenomenon also gaining popularity, as evidenced by the most popular anime convention Iberanime, which grew from 500 attendees in 2010 to 34000 attendees in 2025 (Iberanime, 2025).

Since the launch of “Cool Japan” initiative in 2010, international tourism to Japan has increased significantly, including the number of tourists motivated by the desire of exploring the Otaku culture and visiting anime sacred sites (JNTO, 2025).

As noted by Sabre (2017), Western Otaku tend to have a distinct perception of Japanese pop culture, influenced by the most prominent media in their local context. Additionally, although Japan and Japanese pop culture have experienced a recent “Boom” in popularity, Otaku tourism undertaken by Western fans is yet an underexplored field both academically and among tourism stakeholders.

Thus, this research, which represents a summary of the previously published master’s dissertation, seeks to expand knowledge about the Otaku tourists, aiming to explore the Western Otaku’s travel experience while visiting Japan. Its main objective is to contribute to the scope of Otaku tourism by conceptualizing an exploratory framework representative of the Western Otaku’s travel experience, through their motivations, behaviors and visited physical locations.

The paper begins with a succinct literature review essential in order to understand the background on tourism experiences, Otaku culture, Japanese tourism, content tourism and Otaku tourism. This is followed by the methodology section, where two complementary qualitative studies were used through a travel autoethnography, in which the author reflects on their travels to Japan, leading into in-depth interviews to

Portuguese Otaku who had previously visited Japan. Finally, the results are presented through a travel experience model, followed by a brief conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Although in recent years the anime industry has gained some visibility in Portugal, Otaku concepts, particularly those associated with tourism, remain widely not understood. This makes it pertinent to first clarify concisely the key concepts related to the Otaku community.

2.1 Otaku Culture

The Japanese word Otaku originally carried a bad connotation, however, nowadays is commonly used to refer to a Japanese pop culture nerd (Adhitama, 2021), particularly hardcore anime, manga and videogames fans (Castanho, 2021). These fans are typically young adults with genre parity who consume Japanese pop culture and participate in local anime conventions (Gonçalves et al., 2021; Severino et al., 2025). Otaku fans also tend to develop preferences for specific content and character, which leads to a necessity of collecting merchandising from their favorite shows (Adhitama, 2021).

Severino (2024) describes Japanese pop culture as the epitome of Japanese contemporary culture, embedded in everyday Japanese life that encompasses anime, manga, videogames, music, and even fashion.

The word manga is usually associated with the concept of Japanese comics (Mathews, 2016) whereas the Japanese loanword anime is an abbreviation of animeshon, which is usually used in the West as Japanese produced animations (Pellitteri, 2021). Noh (2024) refers to how anime is generally adaptations of popular manga, which are traditionally produced by productions committees.

2.2 Tourist Experience

The Tourist experience can be understood as a subjective holistic construct that correlates behaviors to reveal tourists' interactions with the destination. Although this concept has been widely studied through various models, these approaches remain fragmented, being the most widely known the Tourist Gaze and the Experience Economy (Chen, 2025).

The Tourist Gaze theory refers to the way tourists understand and relate to places during their travels. It is constructed through signals perceived by the tourist, even though often distorted by the individual interpretation of what is observed (Samarathunga and Cheng, 2021).

Pine and Gilmore (2001) theorized the Experience Economy with two dimensions: the participation of the consumer as active or passive; and the relation with the ambient: absorption and immersion.

There are four perspectives of studying experiences, which are: definition approach; motivations approach; nature of on-site real-time experiences; and business focused through consumer theory (Cutler et al., 2010).

Tussyadiah (2013) conceptualizes that the tourist experience englobes all the phases of the trip, from pre-travel, during and post-travel. However, Cutler et al. (2010) refers that the tourist experience involves five distinct phases: anticipation, travel to site, on-site activity, return travel and recollection.

The experience may also be divided into central and peripheral experiences, with experience design focusing on the quality of the user's experience, being essential to identify their thoughts, values, priorities and internal conflicts to understand the tourist's experience (Tussyadiah, 2013).

2.3 Japanese Tourism

Although Japan has a mature tourism, its geographic distance from other major industrialized economies has led it to focus mainly on domestic tourism. In 2012, inbound tourism accounted only for 5.7% of total tourism, which was the lowest among countries with a tourism satellite account (Funck, 2016).

In 2008, Japan established its first tourism agency (Funck, 2016), and throughout the 2010s, it launched the "Cool Japan" initiative, a tourism strategy aimed to promote products, services and human resources that represent Japanese popular culture abroad, such as anime, manga, games and food. Japanese inbound strategies helped increase the number of international tourists arriving to Japan every year after the 2011 earthquake, reaching a new peak in 2024 (JNTO, 2025).

The main market for Japanese tourism in 2023 were Asian countries, particularly South Korea, Taiwan and China (MLIT, 2024). The majority are repeat tourists who prefer to travel with their families to Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, staying between four and thirteen days (JNTO, 2025; MLIT, 2024).

2.4 Otaku Tourism

Beeton (2016) highlights the importance of literary association to tourism development since the 19th century; however, this concept has evolved to aggregate recent media like movies and shows, under what is known as Induced tourism. The author divides this tourism into two groups: on-location, which refers to the locations where the movies were recorded; and off-location, which is related to studio tours, museums and amusement parks (Beeton, 2016).

During the 1990s, the term Contents Tourism emerged in Japan (Beeton, 2016; Seaton et al., 2015). The Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism refers to it as “the addition of a narrative quality or theme to a region – namely an atmosphere or image particular to the region generated by the contents – and the use of that narrative quality as a tourism resource” (Beeton, 2016, p. 31). In other hands, Seaton et al. (2015) refers to it as a concept that seeks to not focus on a single medium, but on the narrative itself, the characters and the location, since the same narrative can be explored across multiple multimedia formats.

Yamamura (2015) and Seaton et al. (2020) refer to the strong relationship between the three main stakeholders, which are the fans, the intellectual property owners and the local community. Yamamura (2015) studied the city of Washimiya following an unexpected increase in tourist numbers after the launch of the popular anime *Lucky Star*, set in the city.

Within this context, Otaku Tourism emerges as a subcategory of Contents Tourism. It is characterized by visiting places that celebrate the Japanese pop culture, such as stores, game centers, thematic cafés, museums and pop culture neighborhoods (Sabre, 2017; Severino, 2024).

Otaku tourism can be further explored through Anime Tourism, which focuses specifically on places associated with anime media subculture (Severino, 2024).

Although Otaku culture englobes anime and may involve overlapping places, Anime Tourism is characterized by the concept of anime sacred sites, which refers to locations that fans associate with or recognize from anime scenes, making them symbolically sacred to the community (Liu et al., 2021; Yamamura, 2015). Subsequently, fans named the act of voluntary visiting the sacred places of their favorite anime as “Pilgrimage to sacred places” (Seaton et al., 2017). Seaton et al. (2017) trace the ancient roots of this practice to religious pilgrimage, which continues to hold strong significance in modern Japanese tourism through rituals, pilgrimages and visits to religious sites.

When visiting sacred sites, fans’ behavior is often associated with taking pictures, leaving offerings at the sites, sharing their experiences on social media, participating in cosplay and interacting with the local community (Liu et al., 2021). Hernandez-Pérez (2019) further highlights the practice of “scene hunting”, which consists in taking pictures that replicate precisely scenes from an anime adaptation. These photos are also used by fans as proof of their pilgrimage to the sacred site.

Anime pilgrims can be categorized into two types: Location Seekers, who attempt to identify new locations depicted in their favorite anime for online sharing; and Followers, who travel to sites that have already been identified (Ono et al., 2020).

The desire to participate in an anime pilgrimage starts with watching anime, which motivates fans to visit places that appear in that anime (Okamoto, 2015).

Castanho (2021) studied the travel habits of Portuguese Otaku travel habits by using a questionnaire methodology. Of the 149 participants, only 6% had previously traveled to Japan before, highlighting a discrepancy between intention to travel and actual travel behavior. The Portuguese Otaku are primarily motivated to travel by their interest in anime related subculture and express a strong preference for visiting the Tokyo’s pop culture neighborhood, Akihabara, and the old capital, Kyoto.

3. Methodology

Sabre (2017), who worked as a tour guide in Japan, refers how French fans picture Japan through the contents they were exposed during their childhood in France, which does not align with the official “Cool Japan”

government promotion. This suggests that Otaku conceptualize and experience Otaku tourism in distinct ways, shaped by the specific Japanese media texts that circulate most prominently within their local cultural context.

The majority of existing studies focus on Asian tourists, primarily examining their motivations (Okamoto, 2015) and behavioral patterns (Liu et al., 2021), yet lacks to conceptualize the Otaku tourist experience holistically or to situate it within a comprehensive theoretical framework.

Thus, this study, through an illustrative example of Western Otaku focused on Portuguese Otaku, seeks to contribute to the understudied theme of Western Otaku's travel experience when visiting Japan. Its primary objective is to develop an exploratory model that represents Otaku travel experience, considering their motivations, behaviors and visited locations.

To reach the proposed goals and deeply understand the Portuguese Otaku's travel experience, this research adopts a qualitative methodology through two complementary studies. Firstly, an autoethnography was used followed by an in-depth interview, based on the first study results, to 12 Portuguese Otaku who had previously visited Japan. Afterwards, data was analyzed and compared, enabling the conceptualization of a framework representative of the Otaku's travel experience in Japan.

3.1 Autoethnography

It was decided that analytic autoethnography was the most suitable method to gather preliminary data since the author is deeply related to the Portuguese Otaku community and worked in projects with the biggest Portuguese Otaku website.

Autoethnographic methodology approaches are used to describe and analyze personal experiences and understand cultural experiences, which makes cultural characteristics more accessible (Ellis et al., 2011). Even though this method is underused in tourism research, some authors used it to better understand Induced Tourism (Beeton, 2016) and Otaku tourism (Okamoto, 2015; Steine, 2019).

The Otaku community and its associated tourism practices remain underexplored within academic literature, partly due to their reliance on specific terminology that may not be readily accessible to broader audiences. Employing an analytic autoethnographic approach enables the researcher to examine Otaku tourism from a firsthand perspective, generating preliminary insights into its travel experiences characteristics, particularly tourist motivations, behavioral patterns, and the categorization of frequently visited locations.

The researcher has visited Japan twice for two weeks, in 2023 and 2024, with the goal of understanding the Otaku's tourist travel experience. Before these travels, the author searched and collected information about Otaku tourism easily available to the Portuguese fans. Firstly, the author reflected on his childhood and the influence of Otaku culture on his travels. Then, he recounted how information and travel agency packages available were almost inexistent, which led to design a tailor-made itinerary with the help of information available in English, particularly from Youtubers and forums. For data collection and analysis about Otaku Tourism, during these travels, the author took notes on his own experiences, which were later divided into categories based on previous literature review, inspired by the concepts of on-location and off-location (Beeton, 2016), with subcategories based on Sabre (2017) and Severino (2024).

3.2 Interviews

Although Otaku culture has been rapidly expanding in Europe, including Portugal, to the author's knowledge, no prior studies have been conducted with Portuguese Otaku regarding their travel experiences. Castanho (2021) studied Portuguese Otaku through a questionnaire, however, most respondents expressed a desire to visit Japan but had not yet visited it.

The interviews follow a semi structured model with 11 questions, vastly inspired by Thelen et al. (2023), where the interviewees were asked to review their pictures gallery beforehand so they could remember better their experiences during the interview. The questions were categorized into four thematic groups, which derived from topics found during the autoethnography: Me as an Otaku; Influence of Anime in Visiting Japan; Otaku Tourism; Travel Agencies and Information Sources. The questions associated with the first theme were inspired by Jorge and Navio (2013), the second by Castanho (2021), the third by Liu et al. (2021), Sabre (2017) and Okamoto (2015), and the fourth by Ono et al. (2020).

The interviews enriched the autoethnography by broadening the thematic groups through additional insights from Otaku participants, enhancing depth, introducing diverse perspectives and increasing the credibility of the findings, complementing the researcher's own observations.

For illustrative proposes, the target participants for this study were Portuguese citizens who are active members of the Portuguese Otaku community and who have traveled to Japan motivated by their consumption of Japanese media. As noted by Castanho (2021), the number of Portuguese Otaku who traveled before to Japan is low, which limited the pool of participants available for interview. With the help of *Shikkuretto Team* members, a Portuguese content creators group focused on Otaku culture, an Instagram story was published and shared, inquiring for potential participants for this study.

In April 2025, the pilot interview was conducted and, after some adjustments, was applied to 11 more participants during the month of May. The interviews, with a mean of 33 minutes, took place on the online platform Discord and were recorded with the permission of the participants to be analyzed after.

The participants had a mean age of 30 years, with gender parity, and traveled with friends for approximately two weeks.

Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed to text with the help of Microsoft Word, and a thematic analysis method was applied, identifying and interpreting thematic patterns in qualitative data through the creation of themes (Clarke and Braun, 2017) that are relevant to answer the research question. The thematic codes were found in an inductive way and grouped into the four interview groups.

4. Findings and Discussion

Otaku tourism is a niche concept under-researched and unexplored in Portugal by travel agencies. This paper explores the Otaku's tourist experience through ethnography and interviews to clarify this underexplored concept into something easily understood. This led to a framework based on Tussyadiah (2013) that can be used by travel agencies to promote this type of tourism.

Firstly, the author employed ethnographic methods to explore Otaku culture in Japan, visiting several well-known locations and participating in popular activities associated with this subculture. Below, in Figure 1, is a model that summarizes the main visited locations based on the concept of on-location and off-location (Beeton, 2016).

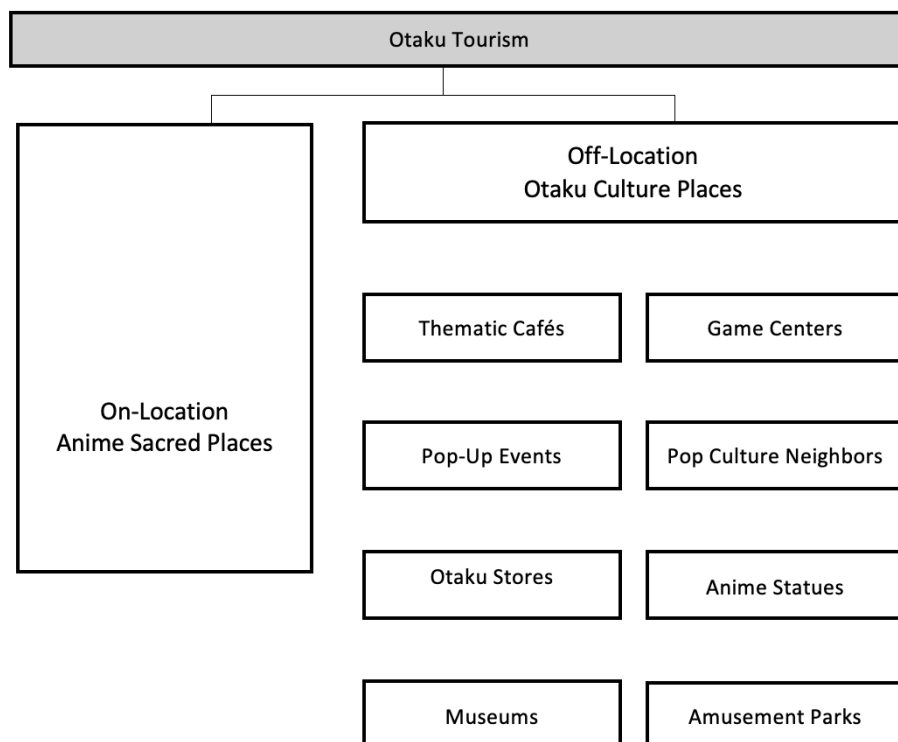


Figure 1: Otaku tourism characterized by on and off Location

By conducting semi-structured interviews with Otaku tourists, the author was able to expand the knowledge acquired from the ethnographic study about the tourists' experiences, motivations and behavior, which led to the framework based on Tussyadiah (2013) experience concept.

From childhood, Portuguese Otaku consumed Japanese pop media, mainly anime and videogames, shaping both their motivation to learn about the Japanese culture and their desire to visit Japan. This finding is in accordance with Okamoto (2015) who refers that the pilgrimage desire starts with watching anime.

During adulthood, once financially able, the Otaku starts to plan their trip mainly with the help of friends and other Otaku from the community who traveled to Japan before. All the participants chose to book their trip by themselves without the assistance of travel agencies or other Portuguese tour operators. The Portuguese fan travels for two weeks with their partners or friends mainly to the more popular cities: Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto.

The tourist experience should be structured around a coherent theme conveyed through storytelling (Tussyadiah, 2013), which is presented mainly as Japanese pop culture. Although the Otaku subculture is their primary motivation, they also show interest in other aspects of Japanese culture such as gastronomy, sometimes triggered by curiosity from watching anime content.

When classifying the experiences into central and peripheral, visiting Anime Sacred Places and Otaku Culture Neighborhoods are classified as central due to their high interest by the Otaku tourist.

The Anime Sacred Places are associated with locations that recall scenes from Otaku content, where the fans travel to relive scenes from their favorite episodes and take photographs, edited with collages comparing them with the original show, a behavior also found in Okamoto (2015) and Liu et al. (2021). The fans highlighted the importance of visiting sacred places, reporting strong emotional connections and a sense of immersion with the location through a narrative process that integrates fiction and reality.

Although anime pilgrimage is typically associated with visiting locations featured in favorite shows, the opposite is also observed. Some interviewees reported that visiting certain places inspired them to watch anime set in those locations.

Otaku culture neighborhoods such as Akihabara in Tokyo and Den-den Town in Osaka, are highly referenced destinations in Otaku culture. These hubs are considered a mandatory place to visit or even a "Disneyland for Otaku" with a comprehensive selection of merchandising, which goes in accordance with Sabre (2017) and Severino (2024). In addition, many peripheral experiences are offered within them, which enhances the overall experience.

Figure 2 illustrates all the sites highlighted by the interviewees during the ethnographic study, followed by a detailed discussion of the primary experiences.

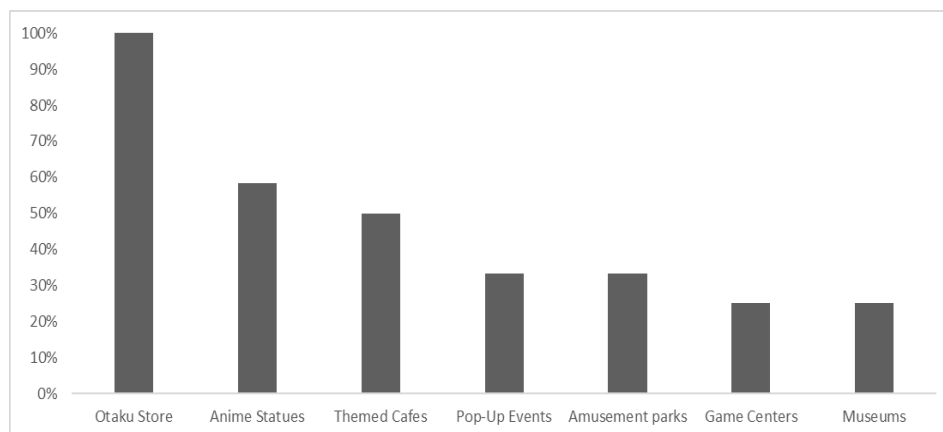


Figure 2: Percentage of experiences reported by each participant.

Otaku stores are retail establishments where fans can purchase merchandise related to their preferred media franchises. This behavior is also identified by Adhitama (2021), who highlights the perceived necessity among Otaku consumers to acquire merchandise associated with their favorite shows.

The Portuguese Otaku also refers to visiting statues related to their favorite media content, which facilitates the translation of fiction into reality, particularly in narratives set in fictional worlds, such as *One Piece* and *Gundam*.

Themed cafés, a café or restaurant based on media content, and temporary exhibitions, focused on a particular content, were also popular experiences. These were associated with technical challenges, such as the difficulty making reservations and, for many of them, being available for only a short period of time.

Alongside these difficulties, the Otaku reported a lack of knowledge about which locations to visit, often losing time trying to find, for example, the best stores to purchase merchandise. These complications lead participants to express interest in potential tourist packages for Otaku, which would include not only anime pilgrimage sites and Otaku culture districts but also traditional and cultural attractions.

The tourist experience also extends to the post-trip phase (Tussyadiah, 2013), during which tourists bring back memories and newly acquired merchandise. Additionally, when watching new content that is based on the locations they visited, the Otaku recalls the journey and gains a better understanding of the content.

Subsequently, a summary figure illustrating the experience of the Portuguese Otaku tourist when visiting Japan is presented in Figure 3, based on the model proposed by Tussyadiah (2013).

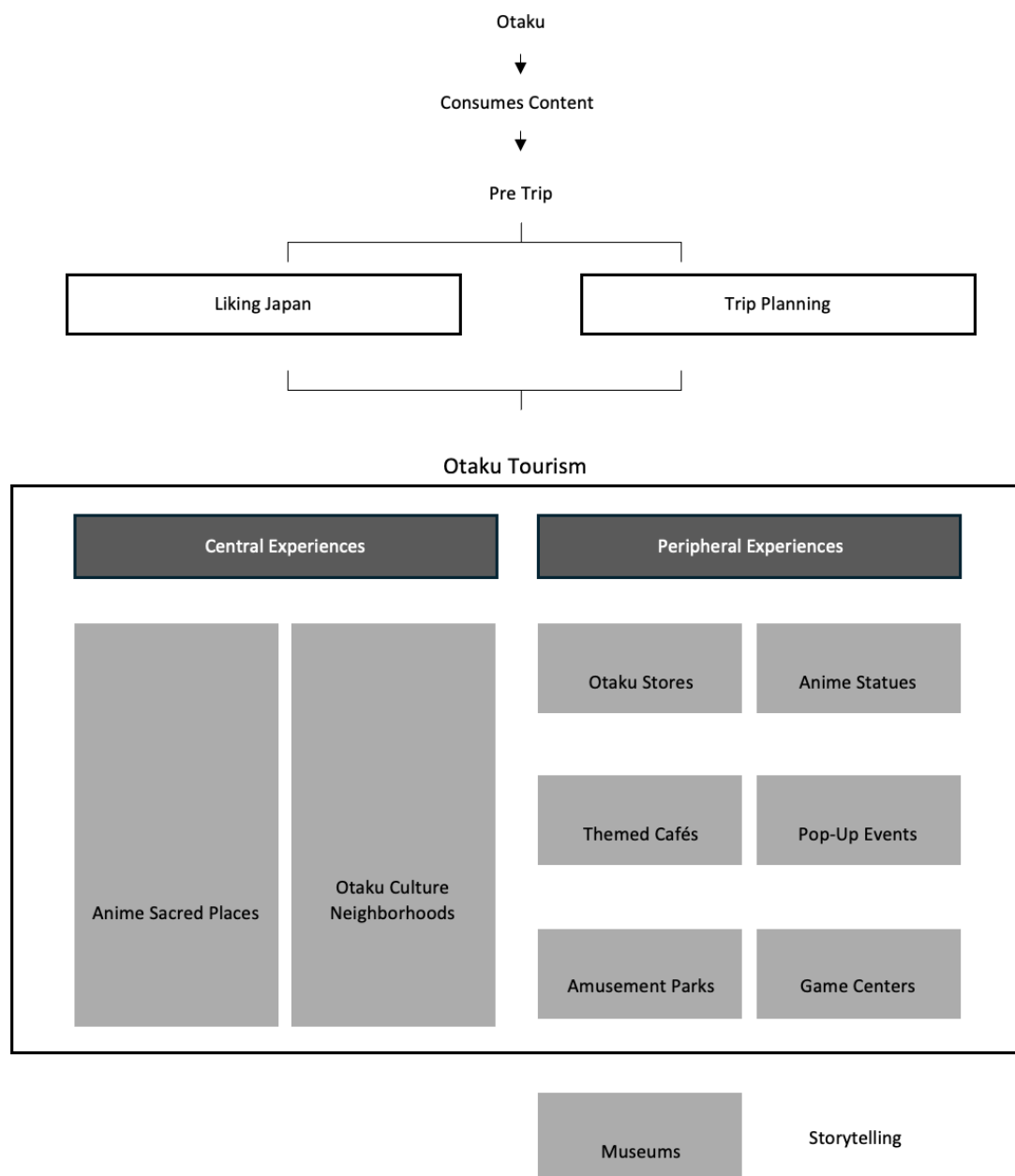


Figure 3: Portuguese Otaku travel experience in Japan model.

5. Conclusion

While Japanese pop culture was previously regarded as a niche interest in the West, it has since gained widespread popularity and become increasingly mainstream. Despite this growth, this topic remains relatively underexplored at both the academic and commercial levels. Nevertheless, Otaku Tourism has been increasing in recent years, with a substantial number of anime fans visiting Japan and exploring the locations that inspired their favorite Japanese contents.

Through a qualitative methodology study with an ethnography and interviews to members of the Portuguese Otaku community, this paper aims to understand and expand the scopes of the Portuguese Otaku travel experience in Japan. Overall, the Portuguese Otaku experience can be characterized as a profoundly personal pilgrimage, with a sense of immersion in Otaku culture while visiting Japan, particularly through travel to locations directly associated with this subculture and their favorite works.

The experience can be characterized into two groups: central and peripheral. Regarding the central experiences, the Otaku has a clear interest in visiting anime pilgrimage sites and Otaku culture districts. The trip is enhanced by peripheral experiences which are directly related to Otaku content.

Thus, this study develops academic groundwork about the experience and behaviors that can be used by tourism promoters and tour operators in the marketing of this niche, supporting Portuguese travel companies in developing tailored-made packages that address their preferences.

Traveling to Japan to practice Otaku tourism is still a niche in Portugal, as mentioned by Castanho (2021), which highly limits the number of participants available for this study and a possible future quantitative approach.

For future works, this model could be applied to other countries with a rising pop culture, like South Korea and China.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for this research. Consent was obtained from all interview participants for research and publication purposes.

AI Declaration

No AI was used during the making of this study.

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