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HyeonCheol KIM 

Tohoku University

kimhc@tohoku.ac.jp

Jeongbae OH 

Shokei Gakuin University

oh_jeongbae@shokei.ac.jp

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW-BASED STUDY ON THE FEATURES OF KOREAN CULTURE THAT ATTRACT AND REPEL JAPANESE YOUTH

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to analyze the changing attitude of the Japanese youth towards Korean culture. This study conducted in-depth interviews with 18 men and women in their 20s living in the Tohoku region of Japan to examine aspects of Korean culture that attracted and repelled them. The analysis results indicated that the interview respondents were attracted to the Korean cultural facets of ‘emotional intimacy,’ ‘practical convenience,’ and ‘fast pace,’ and were put off by the ‘insincere service,’ ‘unease with traffic-related safety,’ and ‘dirty restrooms.’ These perceptions were strongly influenced by expectation-related differences: unexpected positive experiences resulted in high levels of satisfaction and negative experiences caused acute disappointment. Thus, interactions with Korean culture are both appealing and displeasing to Japanese youth. Rather than perceiving this contrary response as a problem, the interview respondents independently accepted it as a characteristic of Korean culture. Future research initiatives should explore the generalizability of these findings by expanding the span of their surveys.

Keywords: Japan, Korea, psychological conflicts, attraction, aversion, Korean culture

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that began in 2020 caused a significant increase in the time people spent at home, which resulted in a corresponding rise in the consumption of Korean entertainment via online platforms. This phenomenon was not limited to any particular country; thus, it included Japan.² The popularity of the Korean Wave remains strong as of 2024, evincing a notable expansion in diverse domains. The Korean wave has evolved beyond a mere fad in Japanese society and has become a pervasive cultural phenomenon.³

This study conducted in-depth interviews with young Japanese individuals professing an interest in Korean culture, aiming to investigate their positive as well as negative perceptions of Korean culture. The years 2019 and 2020 were the most challenging in the history of Japan–Korea relations; nevertheless, interest in and popularity of Korean pop culture remained high among Japanese youth. It was unusual that Japanese youth were so enthusiastic about Korean culture despite the confrontational intergovernmental relationship between South Korea and Japan.⁴ This study began with a simple question: are young people who are enthusiastic about the Korean wave experiencing any psychological conflicts, and if they are, how are they resolving their difficulties?

The present study scrutinized the consumption of Korean wave content by youth residing in the Tohoku region of Japan, focusing particularly on the aspects of Korean culture that they found attractive or off-putting. The study participants comprised Japanese youth experienced in learning the Korean language and professing an interest in Korean culture. This study aimed to attain insights into the reasons informing their rejection of Korean culture.

¹ The transliteration used here follows the Revised Romanization of Korean system (2000), officially introduced by the National Academy of the Korean Language (NAKL) and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. For Japanese language the Hepburn romanization used here follows. In exceptional cases, the spelling adopted by the Korean authors themselves has been used. Korean names are presented following Western convention, with the given name preceding the family name.

² According to the research by Joon-Kuk Kim and Dohee Kim, there has been an increase in the viewing time of Korean video content among the MZ generation in Japan following the outbreak of COVID-19 (Joon-Kuk Kim, Dohee Kim, “The Effects of Changes in K-Video Content Consumption after COVID-19 on Attitudes toward K-Video Content, Product Purchase, Intentions to Visit Korea, and Recommendation Intentions: MZ Generation in China and Japan,” *Korean Journal of Business Administration*, vol. 36, no. 9 (2023), pp. 1441-1443).

³ Since April 2020, Korean dramas have consistently achieved remarkable popularity in Japan, regularly securing three to four spots within the top ten rankings on Netflix Japan (Min-jung Kim, “Japanese Communications – Netflix and the Hallyu Wave in the COVID-19 Era,” *Midas*, no. 8 (2020), pp. 56-57).

⁴ In 2019, relations between Japan and South Korea reached a new nadir as the political and economic dispute intensified. South Korea responded with considerable vehemence to the Japanese government’s tightening of export controls on three types of semiconductors in July, which had a detrimental impact on all areas of diplomacy, the economy, and security. Of the 1,000 Japanese respondents to the survey, 63.5 percent rated the current state of Japan-South Korea relations negatively (Kwang-Ki Kim et al., “The 7th Japan-Korea Joint Public Opinion Survey,” *Media NPO and East Asia Institute*, Press Release, 12 VI 2019).

2. PRIOR RESEARCH AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

This section presents a selection of notable research projects conducted in Japan on the Korean wave, perceptions of Korea, and the mutual state of Japanese–Korean understanding.

Hye-won Kim (2011)⁵ found that the Korean wave ushered positive changes in perceptions of Korea, created social interest, and fostered intergenerational exchange. In particular, women over 40 have become interested in Korean culture, which has expanded their social relationships and increased their interest in social issues. Thus, the Korean wave has facilitated social interactions and cultural exchange beyond mere entertainment consumption.

Young-ran Jung (2017)⁶ examined the impact of cultural exchanges between Japan and South Korea on the mutual perceptions of the citizens of the two countries. Cultural interchanges have become a significant means of promoting mutual understanding despite political tensions between Japan and South Korea. Even though cultural exchanges in art, science, and education are crucial, Young-ran argues that transactions relating to popular culture function significantly in intensifying the values and sentiments of people. She underscores the pivotal role played by the interest in Korean pop culture and its consumption in fostering positive transformations in the associations between Japan and Korea.

Naoki Ogoshi (2019)⁷ surveyed Japanese university students in 2003 and 2018 to identify factors influencing their perceptions of Korea. The results of that study demonstrated that Korean pop culture exerted the most significant influence on the perceptions of the participants. Notably, the survey conducted in 2018 indicated that pop culture continued to function pivotally in shaping a positive image of Korea despite the existing tensions between Japan and South Korea. A clear gender difference was also noted: women were more influenced by pop culture than men.

⁵ Kin Kei-en, “Kanryū juyō to Kankoku ninshiki no tayōka” *Yamaguchi Kenritsu Daigaku gakujuutsu jōhō* 4, Yamaguchi Kenritsu Daigaku 2011 (金恵媛, 「韓流受容と韓国認識の多様化」『山口県立大学学術情報』4, 山口県立大学, 2011: Kim Hye-won, “The Acceptance of the Korean Wave and the Diversification of Perceptions of Korea,” *Yamaguchi Prefectural University Academic Information*, vol. 4 (2011)).

⁶ Tei Ei-ran, “Seijiteki tairitsu to bunka kōryū ni yoru Nikkan sōgō ninshiki no henshen – Nikkan no bunka juyō (Kanryū – Nichiryū) ga kokumin ninshiki no henka ni ataeru eikyō –,” *Purojekuto kenkyū* 12, Waseda Daigaku Sōgō Kenkyū Kikō 2017 (鄭榮蘭, 「政治的対立と文化交流による日韓相互認識の変遷 – 日韓の文化受容(韓流・日流)が国民意識の変化に与える影響 –」, 『プロジェクト研究』12, 早稲田大学総合研究機構, 2017: Young-Ran Jung, “The Evolution of Mutual Perceptions Between Japan and Korea Through Political Conflict and Cultural Exchange: The Impact of Cultural Acceptance (Hallyu and J-Ryu) on National Consciousness,” *Project Research*, vol. 12 (2017)).

⁷ Ogoshi Naoki, “Kankokugo gakushū to Kankoku ni tai suru imēji keisei no kankei,” *Gengo – jōhō – tekusuto* Vol. 26, Tōkyō Daigakuin Sōgō Bunka Kenkyūka Gengo Jōhō Kagaku Senkō Kiyō 2019 (生越直樹, 「韓国語学習と韓国に対するイメージ形成の関係」, 『言語・情報・テキスト』Vol. 26, 東京大学大学院総合文化研究科言語情報科学専攻紀要, 2019: N. Ogoshi, “The Relationship Between Learning Korean and the Formation of Images of Korea,” *Language, Information, Text*, vol. 26 (2019)).

The existing studies have concentrated on the positive aspects of the Korean wave, particularly attending to the popularity and influence of K-pop and K-dramas. These studies have concluded that the Korean wave has positively impacted Japanese society. Studies have also deduced that the Korean wave has enhanced mutual interest and has, in turn, created a vibrant cultural exchange scenario between the two nations. However, the extant studies have emphasized only the positive aspects of the Korean wave: specifically, negative aspects such as the rejection of Korean culture have rarely been intensively investigated. The present study examined the positive as well as negative aspects of Korean culture, which have not yet been adequately studied. In particular, this study aimed to conduct an in-depth exploration of how young Japanese people perceive Korean culture and how positive and negative aspects coexist within their perceptions.

3. METHODS

This qualitative study⁸ employed the methodology of conducting semi-structured interviews methodology to investigate the acceptance and perceptions of young Japanese individuals vis-à-vis Korean culture. The participants were emailed the interview questions before the interviews were conducted and the date and time of the interview were subsequently arranged. During the interviews, the participants were asked about their experiences of learning Korean and interacting with Koreans and were queried about the positive and negative aspects of Korean culture. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom because the COVID-19 pandemic made in-person meetings difficult.

The Zoom interviews were conducted by three Japanese university students aged in their 20s. We deliberately selected individuals of a similar age group because the respondents were primarily university students. This approach was intended to foster an environment in which the study participants were comfortable with each other and their interviewers and could candidly share their ideas and experiences. We selected the youth representatives conducting the interviews from third- and fourth-year students enrolled in our universities. The selected representatives were Yuka Aoki (third year, Tohoku University), Saya Ono (fourth year, Tohoku Gakuin University), and Yuki Nakasato (fourth year, Shokei Gakuin University). All three individuals were familiar with Korean culture and had garnered extensive experience in interacting with Koreans.

The preparation process before the interviews were conducted included theoretical training, question-and-answer-based discussion, interview practice, and a final check. We began providing the interviewers with theoretical training in August 2020. Initially, we selected 『調査的面接の技法』 (The Art of Investigative Interviewing)⁹ as the basic training textbook for the interviews and asked the representative interviewers to read it. After they had read the book, we conducted in-depth training through

⁸ The survey was conducted in collaboration with researchers from Tohoku University and Shokei Gakuin University, with the support of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Sendai.

⁹ Suzuki Junko, *Chōsateki mensetsu no gihō*, Nakanishiya Shuppan 2005 (鈴木 淳子, 『調査的面接の技法』, ナカニシヤ出版, 2005; J. Suzuki, *Techniques of Investigative Interviewing*, Kyoto 2005).

a question-and-answer-based discussion process. The theoretical training was intended to ensure that the interviewers clearly apprehended the purpose of the interviews and could consistently ask the interview respondents the relevant questions. The course was conducted once a week for four sessions for approximately one month. All three representatives conducted two to three real interviews after the theoretical training to rehearse their interviewing skills. To ameliorate the efficiency of the interviewing process, varied problems that occurred during the practice sessions were shared and discussed after the practice interviews were accomplished. During this discussion, the interviewers were instructed to conduct their interviews under as similar conditions and environments as possible.

The interviews commenced in October 2020. A pre-written questionnaire was initially sent to the respondents via email because the interviews were semi-structured. This method of disseminating the questionnaire also served to prepare the interviewers and enabled us to grasp the characteristics of the interview participants in advance. In addition, the method offered respondents the opportunity to reflect beforehand on their answers.

The pre-written questionnaire encompassed the following topics:

1. Questions about learning Korean: duration, motivation, method, and level.
2. Experience with Korean culture: attractions and dislikes.
3. Direct experience: number of visits to Korea, contact with Koreans.
4. Correlations between Korean language learning, experience of Korean culture, and direct experience.
5. Interviewee characteristics: Gender, age, affiliation/grade/major (students), occupation (professionals), and other details.

‘Zoom Interview Survey Overview’

Survey period: October 3 to November 5, 2020 (around one month)

Target population: Eighteen current students and graduates of Tohoku University, Tohoku Gakuin University, and Shokei Gakuin University (aged 19–24 years).

Time required: Approximately 50–120 minutes per individual

We recruited interviewees with the cooperation of the Korea-Japan Exchange Circle titled SIJAK, a university student organization comprising Japanese and Korean university students who exhibited a deep interest in the Korean language and culture and desired interpersonal exchanges with Koreans. Japanese university students tend to be reticent and do not easily speak their minds; therefore, it was challenging to find respondents willing to participate in our interview study. Given such circumstances, senior student members of SIJAK functioned significantly to ensure that the participants understood the study objectives and grasped the need for this research initiative. They also facilitated the selection of students for participation in the survey.

The problem of gender ratio imbalance emerged because of the recruitment of interviewees in this manner. However, we intentionally did not adjust the gender ratio of the interviewees because women constitute the main consumers of Korean culture in Japan.¹⁰

¹⁰ In 2004, a survey conducted in Japan related to Korean dramas revealed that an outstanding 93% of the respondents were female. This statistic underscores a longstanding trend within the Hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon, where fans are predominantly female, a pattern that continues to persist today (H. Kaori,

Also, female students are much more actively interested in Korean culture in the university environment; hence, we accepted this trend and conducted the interviews as planned.

Ultimately, the interview respondents comprised current students and graduates of Tohoku University, Tohoku Gakuin University, and Shokei Gakuin University. They represented youth with a high level of interest in the Korean language and culture and were actively involved in cultural exchange programs with Korea.

	Gender	Age	Experience of Visiting Korea	Experience With Koreans	Duration of Learning the Korean Language	Proficiency in the Korean Language (out of 20)
A	F	24	Studying overseas, travel	Y	5Y 5M	19
B	F	24	Studying overseas, short-term training, travel	Y	4Y	17
C	F	22	Studying overseas, travel	Y	4Y 6M	19
D	F	21	Studying overseas, short-term training, travel	Y	4Y	16
E	F	21	Studying overseas, travel	Y	4Y 6M	15
F	M	24	Studying overseas, short-term training, travel	Y	4Y 6M	17
G	F	23	Short-term training, travel	Y	8Y	10
H	F	20	Short-term training, travel	Y	2Y 9M	10
I	F	23	Short-term training, travel	Y	2Y	9
J	M	22	Short-term training, travel	Y	3Y 6M	15
K	F	22	Short-term training, travel	Y	1Y	7
L	M	20	Short-term training, travel	Y	5Y	14
M	F	22	Travel	Y	3Y 7M	12
N	F	22	Travel	Y	1Y 6M	8
O	F	21	Travel	Y	4Y	17
P	F	21	Travel	Y	2Y	6
Q	M	22	Travel	Y	1Y 6M	6
R	M	19	Travel	Y	9M	11

Interviewee details.

“Limits of the ‘Korean Wave’ Boom in Japan: The Issue of Female Audiences in the Mass Media System,” *Proceedings of the Academic Conference of the Institute of Asian Women’s Studies* (2006), pp. 79-97).

4. ATTRACTIONS AND AVERSIONS APROPOS KOREAN CULTURE

(1) Attractions of Korean culture

1) Emotional intimacy

The most common appeal cited by the respondents during our in-depth interviews was the ‘emotional intimacy’ of Koreans. Sixteen of the 18 interviewees mentioned this cultural trait as their most memorable experience of interacting with Koreans. These responses indicate attributes valued by Japanese youth: evaluations of other people are often closely connected with the social traits cherished by a community.¹¹ Young Japanese individuals could re-discover the emotional affection they treasured through their interactions with Koreans:

I had a really big suitcase with me, so I had a really hard time going up the stairs, and a guy I didn't know came up to me and said, 'Are you okay?' and helped me, and people would open doors for me. I was really impressed by how friendly the country was to people who were in trouble, and how kind the people were [D, 21-year-old female; four visits to South Korea].

Even when I go to a cafe, people ask me, 'Where are you from?' or 'Are you traveling?' and talk to me in a friendly way. When I'm carrying heavy luggage, a man comes up behind me and says, 'I'll carry it for you,' and helps me. [I, 23-year-old female; 15 visits to Korea]

These excerpts were extracted from interviews conducted with respondents D and I. Eight of the interviewees mentioned the experience of ‘receiving help in a difficult situation,’ which caused them to feel an attachment to Koreans. This phenomenon is connected to the sense of community and the tradition of mutual aid, both of which are important Japanese tenets. The Japanese value the act of helping others highly; thus, the experience of being helped by a stranger in Korea is memorable to Japanese youngsters. In particular, the Japanese people are renowned for their consideration of others, even when offering assistance to strangers. They are careful to avoid appearing unnecessarily intrusive or inconvenient.¹² Conversely, Koreans often transcend Japanese standards and behave even more convivially.

¹¹ A study (D.M. Buss et al., “Human Status Criteria: Sex Differences and Similarities Across 14 Nations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 119, no. 5 (2020), pp. 984-989) examined the impact of behaviors and traits on social status in a sample of 2,751 individuals from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. The results demonstrated that traits such as honesty, hard work, kindness, intelligence, knowledge, diversity, sacrifice for others, and a sense of humor enhance a person's social value. In other words, how we evaluate others is strongly aligned with the social values espoused by our communities.

¹² The Japanese are renowned for their politeness and consideration towards others, yet they are also known for their reticence about being perceived by those around them as overly intrusive or inconvenient. This predilection can be observed even when they extend kindness to strangers. See Fukada Hiromi, “Shinsetsu no tetsugaku to shinrigaku,” *Taijin Komyunikēshon Kenkyū Dai 3 gō*, Taijin Komyunikēshon Kenkyūkai 2015, p. 37 (深田博己, 「親切の哲学と心理学」, 『対人コミュニケーション研究』第3号, 対人コミュニケーション研究会, 2015, p. 37; H. Fukada, “The Philosophy and Psychology of Kindness,” *Interpersonal Communication Studies*, no. 3 (2015), p. 37).

The interviewees expressed admiration for the affable nature of the Korean people, describing them as 'friendly' (mentioned by five individuals), 'warm' (stated by four individuals), and 'soft' (cited by four individuals). In contrast to the Japanese who were perceived as being overly cautious, the Koreans were regarded as being more forthcoming and approachable. Both the Japanese and the Koreans are known to adhere to traditional values that emphasize the magnitude of meeting new people.¹³

When we went to a very famous Samgyetang restaurant, the auntie smiled and came over to us even though she was so busy, and she was so friendly and welcomed us. When we went to another Samgyeopsal restaurant, she said in Korean, 'You're Japanese, please teach me Japanese next time,' and I felt so close and friendly [M, 22-year-old female; two visits to South Korea].

This extract was derived from the interview conducted with respondent M, who received unexpectedly cordial service in a very crowded store. As previously stated, it is customary in Japan to be polite to customers but M did not anticipate such a warm welcome given the time of the day and the number of people present in the shop. Contrary to her expectations, she was extremely impressed by the service she received.

In addition, the interviewees expressed great positivity about the sociability of Koreans. They highlighted the concepts of 'sense of closeness' (stated by three individuals), 'kindness' (mentioned by three individuals), and 'proactive approach' (described by three individuals). Their attraction to Koreans who approached them was driven by the genuine sense that the contact was sincere and was not initiated for any ulterior motive.

Especially Korean idol stars interact with their fans through autograph signing events, so I think the distance is closer. (omitted) Unlike Japanese idols, Korean idols often have events and have a lot of opportunities to interact with their fans [G, 23-year-old female; ten visits to South Korea].

Respondent G articulated this statement during her interview. Explaining how Korean and Japanese idols respond differently to their fans, she described the appeal of Korean idols as a psychological sense of closeness. It is natural for fans to desire greater intimacy with their idols. This aspiration is not fulfilled by Japanese idols but Korean idols make their aficionados feel closer to them than expected. The respondents indicated that they developed a deeper affection for Korea because of this quality.

Moreover, the interviewees described Koreans as more interactive in comparison to the Japanese. Koreans were described as easier to get along with, more emotional, and conveying the feeling of being family members.¹⁴ Respondents also noted that as Japanese people, they sensed an emotional connection with Koreans that they had not

¹³ Two traditional Japanese values are オモテナ (omotenasi) and 一期一会 (ichigoichie). *Omotenashi* is defined as the act of serving a guest without expecting anything in return. Conversely, *ichigoichie* denotes the idea of treating every encounter as if it were the last.

¹⁴ A survey was conducted from December 8 to 12, 2008, involving 230 students at Tohoku University. The results revealed that students who had interactions with Koreans held perceptions that Koreans are 'cheerful,' 'fun,' 'kind,' and 'sociable.' (Jeong-bae Oh, Hyeon-cheol Kim, "Research on the Characteristics of Perceptions of Koreans Among Japanese University Students Studying Korean," *CAHE Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 4 (2009), pp. 66-67).

anticipated. The interviewees expressed a degree of satisfaction with their interactions with Koreans that they had not previously been able to feel. This positive experience left a lasting impression on them.

2) Practical Convenience

The convenience of living in Korea differs from the residential conditions in Japan and the interviewees identified this feature as a key appeal. In particular, they highlighted the value of ‘digitalization’ and ‘delivery culture.’

The Japanese government established the Digital Agency on September 1, 2021, after recognizing the national-level deceleration of digitalization.¹⁵ Thus, digitalization has officially been established as the direction of prospective national development. The convenience of digitalization has become a prominent topic in Japan because of extensive media coverage of this issue and the Japanese youth acknowledged this feature afresh as they traveled to Korea. Specifically, Korea has a higher credit card usage rate than Japan; therefore, many people experience the convenience of being able to pay for every amenity with a single credit card.¹⁶

In Korea, there’s basically almost no food that’s not delivered. You can order from cafes, and I think it’s convenient because everything is delivered. There’s a huge culture of delivery [A, 24-year-old female; eight visits to South Korea].

I felt like it was digitized at a fast pace, and while Japan is also getting into it nowadays, Korea is already used to it by almost everyone, and I felt like it was a comfortable place to live overall [J, 22-year-old male; two visits to South Korea].

Respondents A and J tendered these statements during their interviews. The concepts of ‘delivery culture’ and ‘digitalization’ are already established in Japan but are not yet as prevalent as in Korea. Despite acknowledging the appeals of Korean culture, the interviewees could compare these features because of their previous experiences with them in Japan. Consequently, they could recognize the expediency of these concepts. The domain of digitalization is already at a mature stage in Korea. Thus, the young Japanese respondents were granted the opportunity to reappraise the practicality of this feature in their daily lives. That this convenience appealed to them demonstrates their profound comprehension of the existing culture, rather than the experience of an unfamiliar ethos. This familiarity is especially appealing to the young generation who are less resistant to changes and it accords them the prospect of re-discovering the charms of Korean culture.

3) Fast Pace

The quality of being ‘fast-paced’ has long remained a defining characteristic of Korean culture. It is an attribute that is widely recognized and appreciated across the globe.

¹⁵ K. Kentaro, “Construction and Challenges of a Digital Society: Towards a Digital-First Approach,” *Quarterly of Personal Finance* (2021), pp. 2-11.

¹⁶ In 2023, non-cash payment methods significantly increased to 39.3%. However, cash transactions still account for over 60% of all payments in Japan (“2023 Cashless Payment Ratio,” *Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry*, Press Release, 29 III 2024, at <https://www.meti.go.jp/press/2023/03/20240329006/20240329006.html>, 19 IV 2024).

Koreans are often perceived even in Japan as embodying the ‘culture of speed,’ evincing the tendency to prioritize speed over other considerations.¹⁷ In Japan, this cultural trait is often negatively regarded but the interviews revealed that the sense of speed is also seen by the Japanese youth as a positive factor.

It’s very fast-paced. Trends start quickly and end quickly, especially when it comes to things like food. One minute you think this Korean cuisine is trending in Japan, and the next minute something else is trending. I think Korea itself is very fast-paced [O, 21-year-old female; one visit to South Korea]

This excerpt is extracted from respondent O’s interview. Noteworthy, the ‘fast culture’ of Korea is slowly attaining a positive reputation even in Japan, where careful judgment and safe and sure methods are extremely valued. A keener examination of why rapid change is viewed as a positive and attractive characteristic reveals a connection to the keyword ‘trendy.’ Persons in their 20s who are active consumers of culture are expected to increasingly appreciate Korea’s ‘fast culture’ as an attractive feature that offers annual transformations and continuously delivers novel and exhilarating stimuli.

(2) Aversions to Korean culture

1) Insincere service

The friendliness of Koreans to strangers was one of the most frequently mentioned appealing characteristics. However, this expectation also created a strong sense of dissatisfaction. Before visiting Korea, the interviewees had high expectations of friendly Koreans, particularly because of social media content depicting Koreans as pleasant and hospitable. Contrary to their expectations, nine out of 18 interviewees were shocked to receive unfriendly services. In particular, they encountered service attitudes that were incomprehensible to Japanese citizens at convenience stores and restaurants and in taxis and were extremely disappointed.

After that experience in Korea, I’m impressed by the sincerity of Japanese convenience stores. In Japan, it’s expected in every industry to be sincere with customers [J, 22-year-old male; two visits to South Korea].

People who work part-time are constantly on their cell phones (omitted), and there is no way you can work part-time while using a cell phone in Japan [M, 22-year-old female; two visits to South Korea].

Respondents J and M conveyed these sentiments during their interviews. The sense of distaste evident in J and M’s comments transmits their strong negative reactions to events that could never occur in their home country. They repudiated the attitudes of Korean part-timers, which they found impossible to understand. Such adverse emotions are tantamount to complaints of not receiving the quality of service they deserve

¹⁷ The website MyNavi facilitates connections between foreign talent and Japanese companies and characterizes the Korean way of life as a “culture that emphasizes speed and quickness” in the context of work. In contrast, the Japanese people are described as having a “mindset that thinks long and hard and looks for a sure and safe way to do things” (<https://global-saponet.mgl.mynavi.jp/culture/2900#chapter-7>, 19 IV 2024).

as customers. In particular, the interviewees were almost appalled to experience behaviors that they considered unacceptable, for instance, being ‘greeted without talking’ (cited by four individuals), ‘paying while talking on the phone or eating food’ (mentioned by three individuals), ‘doing things half-heartedly’ (stated by three individuals), ‘cold attitudes’ (described by three individuals), and ‘taxi drivers not helping with luggage’ (expressed by three individuals).

These experiences are hardly unique: rather, they result from differing perceptions. Such behaviors are routine and acceptable for Koreans but they are extraordinary and completely out of bounds for Japanese citizens. No standard for judgment exists apropos service, kindness and unkindness, warmth and coldness, or sincerity and insincerity because there is no absolute measure of what constitutes good or bad service. In other words, the problem arises because Koreans and Japanese have different expectations from service providers. The service expectations from employees working at convenience stores and restaurants are relatively more exacting in Japan than in Korea.¹⁸

While essential standards are expected to be maintained, there is a tendency in Korea to demonstrate some tolerance depending on the situation. This difference in tolerance appears to represent a factor that creates aversion in the Japanese youth. The interviewees mostly comprised young people in their 20s. Therefore, the respondents had actually worked part-time at convenience stores and frequented convenience stores as customers and frequently mentioned the conduct of ‘unfaithful convenience store workers.’ Among the interviewees who had lived in Korea for an extended period also indicated that the cold demeanor of Korean part-time employees evoked in them a negative sentiment of disrespect.

2) Unease with traffic-related safety

The interviews revealed that Japanese youth experienced much frustration and disappointment with the traffic situation in Korea. Seven out of the 18 respondents indicated feeling unsafe. Korea and Japan may appear similar on the surface but their underlying mindsets are often strikingly different. One of the most prominent differences concerns their ‘traffic cultures.’

I just can't get used to the fact that the bus driver is so aggressive. (omitted) The bus starts moving even though I haven't gotten on yet. It's so dangerous. It's hard to accept [C, 22-year-old female; two visits to South Korea].

In Japan, buses and cars stop at crosswalks without signals, but in Korea, a bus came right in front of me and almost hit me. I felt like it was a culture that prioritized cars over people [O, 21-year-old female; two visits to South Korea]

These statements were uttered during interviews with respondents C and O. C highlighted a problem with the ways in which people boarded and disembarked buses in

¹⁸ The definition of Omotenashi is the action based on the notion about Japanese manner to show respects to customers. Japanese customers have high expectation to the service from the beginning. Therefore, staff needs to act carefully in order not to make customers uncomfortable (T. Kyoko, I. Yushi, “The Comparison of Hospitality and Japanese Hospitality “Omotenashi”: Characteristics and Management of Omotenashi,” *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 78 (2014), pp. 85-120).

Korea. Buses in Japan's Tohoku region do not leave until all passengers have boarded and taken their seats. Drivers generally wait until all passengers are seated, ensure their safety, and then drive slowly. Passengers are not permitted to rise from their seats in advance and prepare to disembark even when arriving at bus stops.¹⁹ If passengers stand up and move toward the doorway while the bus is in motion, the driver warns them that this behavior is unsafe. Announcements that passengers must remain seated until the bus stops are common. Seoul's bus boarding and alighting habits are likely to appear as completely dangerous lawlessness for people accustomed to the strict and safety-conscious public transportation culture of Japan. The interviews revealed that the respondents were strongly repelled by Korean traffic conditions, especially the behaviors of bus and taxi drivers who were regarded as prone to reckless driving and speeding.

The interviews disclosed that the respondents generally perceived traffic safety in South Korea as substandard, as evidenced by comments such as 'they drive dangerously' (mentioned by four individuals), 'they drive fast' (stated by four individuals), 'they leave before sitting down on the bus' (asserted by three individuals), 'they don't stop well' (specified by three individuals), and 'they drive in a hurry' (expressed by two individuals). Evidently, the rigorous standards and high expectations of the respondents inclined them increasingly to resistance to such conditions. In the context of public transportation, their opposition was most pronounced vis-à-vis buses and taxis, which evinced the greatest differences from their Japanese counterparts. The experience of riding a bus or taxi in South Korea could be frustrating for Japanese travelers accustomed to stringent standards of traffic safety and compliance with the laws. The relatively lax traffic laws and rough driving habits in South Korea in comparison to Japan contributed to the formation of negative perceptions in Japanese visitors.

3) Dirty restrooms

The interviewees also frequently mentioned the problem of dirty restrooms they encountered when they traveled or lived in South Korea. Seven of the 18 respondents expressed their strong aversion to unclean restrooms, particularly stating the discomfort and unpleasantness they experienced in some public restrooms in Korea.

The first time I went to the restroom, I was pretty freaked out, and after a few experiences, I kind of gave up, so I've been using the hostel bathrooms whenever possible [D, 21-year-old female; four visits to South Korea].

The Kakao Friends Store is a touristy place, so I thought it would be okay, but the restrooms were very dirty, so from then on, I looked it up online. I usually use clean subway

¹⁹ The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism of Japan spearheaded a campaign to prevent accidents within buses. During this campaign, various rules to be observed inside buses were documented. The document highlighted 'standing up before the bus has come to a complete stop' as the first dangerous behavior to be avoided (Committee on the Analysis of Traffic Accident Factors in the Automobile Transportation Business, "Recommendations for Safety Measures to Prevent Accidents Inside Buses," *Automobile Transport Bureau, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Japan*, March 2007, pp. 4-6).

restrooms or restrooms in shopping malls with good facilities [L, 20-year-old male; three visits to South Korea]

Respondents D and L made these statements during their interviews. In D's case, comparing Korea and Japan naturally resulted in a comparison of public restrooms. She specifically mentioned that she could not get habituated to her experiences with dirty toilets over time; instead, such events became increasingly uncomfortable and unbearable. In extreme cases, she used her hostel restroom and avoided using toilets outside her hostel whenever possible. L's experiences were analogous, and he was reluctant to use dirty restrooms. His solution was to conduct online research and find the cleanest restrooms possible.

Four of the seven respondents who complained about the restrooms also indicated that they could not flush the toilet paper down the toilet. Dirty trash cans represented a 'messy and unpleasant experience' for them when they used restrooms in South Korea. Most toilets in Japan are equipped with high-pressure flushing systems that encourage the flushing of toilet paper into the toilet. However, toilet paper is disposed of separately in older buildings in Korea that have weak water pressure. All our study participants were aged in their 20s, and most of them experienced this problem for the first time in Korea, which made it particularly jarring. Unclean restrooms were completely unexpected for them and were thus responsible for their most negative impressions of Korea.

5. ATTRACTIONS AND AVERSIONS BASED ON EXPECTATIONS

We conducted an interview survey for this study, aiming to ascertain which aspects of Korean culture were perceived by Japanese youth as positive and which characteristics were deemed negative. The expectations of young Japanese individuals emerged as a crucial criterion during their discussions of the attractive and aversive facets of Korean culture. Japanese youth perceived their experiences with Korean culture as positive when their expectations were satisfied and sensed negative emotional reactions when their expectations were not met.

(1) Attractions of Korean culture: Exceeding expectations

During the interviews, the respondents most frequently mentioned attractive elements of Korean culture as 'emotional intimacy,' 'practical convenience,' and 'fast pace.' These features essentially represent aspects of Japanese culture that are, nevertheless, not easily encountered in Japan. Therefore, the Japanese youth did not expect to experience these attributes in Korea.

First, Japanese citizens would not find it easy to sense an emotional attachment to Koreans. Emotional bonding requires individuals to belong to the same community and trust is built over a long period. Interpersonal relationships develop and intimacy increases once a certain bond is established. Therefore, the Japanese people would

not anticipate easily forming intimate relationships in Korea, an unfamiliar country for them. Inevitably, their expectations of emotional closeness would remain relatively low. However, the warm words and actions of Koreans produced emotional affection contrary to their expectations, resulting in their positive perceptions of Korea.²⁰

Second, the element of ‘practical convenience’ was cited by the respondents as an attractive factor of Korean culture; however, the appeal of this facet also emanates from low expectations. Japan tends strongly to sustain traditional ways of operation rather than actively embracing novelty or change. For instance, credit card payments and delivery food culture are developing quite gradually in Japan. Put differently, the Japanese youth did not anticipate experiencing the everyday conveniences they encountered in Korea, and these practical expediences became very impressive memories for them. They rediscovered Korea in this process as a country that is changing steadily and advancing to become a society that increasingly offers amenities, unlike Japan. This dimension generated a fresh and attractive perception of Korea among the young Japanese individuals who participated in this study.

Third, the attribute of being a fast-paced nation is also linked to the image of Korea as a country undergoing continual transformations and progression, generating a positive perception of Korean culture in the study’s respondents. New trends are consistently introduced, and integrated into Korean culture leads in conceiving and adopting novel trends and is thus bound to appear attractive to Japanese youth. The dynamic and ever-changing milieu of Korean society are strikingly impressive compared to Japanese society, which does not highly value rapid changes or speed.²¹ However, the Japanese youth rediscovered and became attracted to these attributes in Korea.

The dimensions of emotional connections, practical conveniences, and fast-paced transformations have something in common: the low expectations harbored by the study’s respondents. Their experiences of visiting or living in Korea caused unexpected feelings of joy and satisfaction that they perceived as a powerful appeal of Korean culture. According to the results of the present study, low expectations represent a major factor in reinforcing positive perceptions of Korea. In other words, while the distinctive allure of Korean culture is a significant factor, the low expectations of Japanese individuals were linked to high satisfaction which, in turn, generated in them a more profound positive impression of Korean culture.

²⁰ Jeong (정) is a unique Korean concept of deep emotional connection and warmth toward others, often expressed through acts of kindness and sharing. It’s an affection that extends even to strangers, fostering a sense of community and belonging, where people care for each other like family (Hye-sun Yoo, Eun-jung Park, “A Study on the Meaning Area of Korean Cultural Vocabulary Jeong (정),” *The Korean Language and Literature (Urimalgul)*, vol. 98 (2023), pp. 233-234).

²¹ Joon-man, Kang, previously known for critiquing the “ppallippalli” (hurry-hurry) culture, has offered a more positive interpretation in his analysis. He emphasizes that this cultural trait enhances efficiency and promotes rapid decision-making, which has been crucial to Korea’s economic growth and global competitiveness. Kang argues that “ppallippalli” is not merely about speed but is a form of effective communication and productivity, helping Korea thrive by fostering a highly adaptable and responsive society (Joon-Man Kang, “The Cultural Politics of ‘Ppallippalli’: A Study on the ‘Speed Communication’ in Korea,” *Journal of Media Science Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2010), pp. 70-73).

(2) Aversions to Korean culture: Below expectations

The interviews revealed that Japanese people were extremely dissatisfied with the ‘insincere service,’ ‘unease with traffic-related safety,’ and ‘dirty restrooms’ in Korea. When visiting Korea, Japanese people subconsciously expected a similar level of experience to those of Japan when shopping at convenience stores, riding buses and taxis, and using the restroom.²² However, they felt very disappointed when they encountered a reality that was lower than their expectations.

The experience of insincere service was so intense for the study’s respondents that they found it incomprehensible. Accustomed to Japanese standards of service, the interviewees described the service they received at convenience stores and restaurants in Korea as unthinkable. Employees are expected to provide friendly service to customers as a matter of course; however, the behavior of part-time workers at convenience stores in Korea was unacceptable to the young Japanese respondents, who were shocked by the insupportable levels of service that did not align with their expectations, and thus severely disappointed them.

The respondents also felt uneasy about their traffic-related safety, which similarly stemmed from a traffic culture very different from their experiences in Japan. They were most significantly concerned by the rule-flouting attitude of Korean drivers. Koreans have a somewhat distinct concept of obeying rules from the Japanese. Many Korean drivers interpret traffic rules more flexibly, which sometimes conveys the impression that they disregard the established laws. This attitude made it appear to the young Japanese respondents of this study as if the traffic rules were selectively applied based on personal judgment. As several respondents mentioned during their interviews, it reflected negatively on Korean traffic culture when drivers disregarded the rules and placed themselves in harm’s way, especially when they should have prioritized pedestrian safety.

The respondents also frequently brought up unsanitary toilets as a major problem that made them feel unwelcome in Korea. Clean restrooms are significantly valued across the world; however, the Japanese people are particularly sensitive to hygiene in restrooms, and they apply the same standards when they travel abroad.²³ The results of our in-depth interviews indicate the existence of a notable aversion to Korean

²² Most of the young Japanese people interviewed subconsciously expected a similar level of experience to those of Japan when shopping at convenience stores, riding buses and taxis, and using the restroom during their visit to Korea.

²³ Given the high sensitivity of young Japanese people regarding restroom cleanliness, it is not surprising that most of them expected clean restrooms. A survey of 868 Japanese elementary school students revealed that “dirty” (57.1%) and “smelly” (52.1%) were the two most common reasons for disliking school restrooms. See Murakami Yachiyo, Negayama Kōichi, “Naze shōgakusei wa gakkō no toire de haiben dekinai no ka?” *Gakkō Hoken Kenkyū* 46 (3), Nihon Gakkō Hoken Gakkai 2004, p. 305. 村上八千世, 根ヶ山光一, 「なぜ小学生は学校のトイレで排便できないのか?」『学校保健研究』46 (3), 日本学校保健学会, 2004, p. 305 (Y. Murakami, K. Negayama, *Why Can't Elementary School Students Defecate in School Toilets?*, “Journal of School Health Research,” vol. 46, no. 3 (2004), p. 305).

restrooms. In particular, numerous renovated old buildings with substandard restroom conditions persist in urban centers housing a considerable number of tourists and in trendy areas frequented by young people. Japanese individuals who are exceptionally sensitive to restroom cleanliness experience a heightened sense of disappointment when such toilets do not satisfy their expectations. The greater the expectation, the sharper the disappointment. Most of the respondents in their 20s expressed a strong affinity for Korean culture. Consequently, their expectations of Korean culture were inordinately high. Their disappointments can primarily be attributed to experiences that diverged significantly from their expectations, leading to pervasive disillusionment and negative emotional responses.

6. CONCLUSION

This study employed in-depth interviews with 18 men and women in their 20s in the Tohoku region of Japan to investigate their attractions and aversions vis-à-vis Korean culture. Their opinions of the positive aspects of Korean culture can be summarized as 'emotional intimacy,' 'practical convenience,' and 'fast pace.' Their negative perceptions were particularly evident for 'insincere services,' their 'unease with traffic-related safety,' and 'dirty restrooms.' These sentiments were closely connected to the expectations of the interviewees.

The respondents expressed admiration for their unanticipated encounters with the 'emotional intimacy,' 'practical convenience,' and 'fast pace' of Korea. The disparities between their low expectations and high satisfaction with these aspects evoked profound emotional responses in them. Conversely, the respondents were also vastly disappointed with features for which they harbored high expectations. Thus, their dissatisfaction with 'insincere services,' their 'unease with traffic-related safety,' and their disgust with 'dirty restrooms' were similarly triggered by the discrepancies between their high expectations and low satisfaction in these dimensions.

The in-depth interviews conducted for this study revealed that most Japanese citizens in their 20s are both attracted to and repulsed by certain aspects of Korean culture. Our findings indicated that their attraction and aversive responses to Korean culture evinced simultaneously coexisting opposing sentiments. Before conducting the interviews, we were intrigued by the ways in which young Japanese individuals navigated such conflicting emotions. Initially, we assumed that a solution existed to this quandary. However, the youth we interviewed exhibited ambiguous attitudes that did not perceive the dilemma as inherently problematic.²⁴ The study participants perceived the attractive aspects of Korean culture for themselves and similarly viewed the distasteful aspects as they existed. They did not express a willingness to resolve their aversive reactions to certain facets of Korean culture, indicating that their attractions

²⁴ Kim emphasized the need to understand ambiguity as an important feature of modern society. He posited that uncertainty and confusion should be taken for granted in modern society (Kwang-Ki Kim et al., "Ambivalence, Ambiguity, and Modernity," *Korean Sociology*, vol. 37, no. 6 (2003), p. 3).

and repulsive responses to discrete elements of Korean culture were not in conflict. Further research projects are mandated to determine whether these findings can be generalized through other case studies.

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HyeonCheol KIM – Associate Professor at Tohoku University, Japan. He specializes in the performing arts, particularly the theory formation processes in Japanese and Korean modern theater, as well as in Japan-Korea cultural exchange.

Jeongbae OH – Associate Professor at Shokei Gakuin University, Japan. His main fields of research include Applied Japanese Linguistics and Intercultural Communication.