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〈Research Article〉

Familiarity of tourist attractions in Japan among Vietnamese and Chinese nationals

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Abstract

Despite the rapid growth of inbound tourism to Japan in recent years, foreign visitors remain largely unaware of, and unfamiliar with, many of the country's key tourism assets (Andonian, Kuwabara, Yamakawa, and Ishida, 2016). As Japan attempts to encourage tourism to its less-visited regions through the policy of *kankourikkoku*, understanding tourism asset awareness and familiarity has taken on added importance. Studies show that in addition to previous visits, the role of host/guest cultural similarity, destination knowledge and host language proficiency, or "cultural acquaintance" (Lee and Tussyadiah, 2012), all play a part in determining a visitor's degree of awareness and familiarity with a country's tourism assets. By examining a cohort of Chinese and Vietnamese nationals the current research shows that not only does awareness and familiarity of Japan's tourism assets remain low, but activities linked to new technologies may be stimulating tourism asset awareness and familiarity.

Keywords: familiarity, awareness, Japanese inbound tourism, cultural acquaintance

1. INTRODUCTION

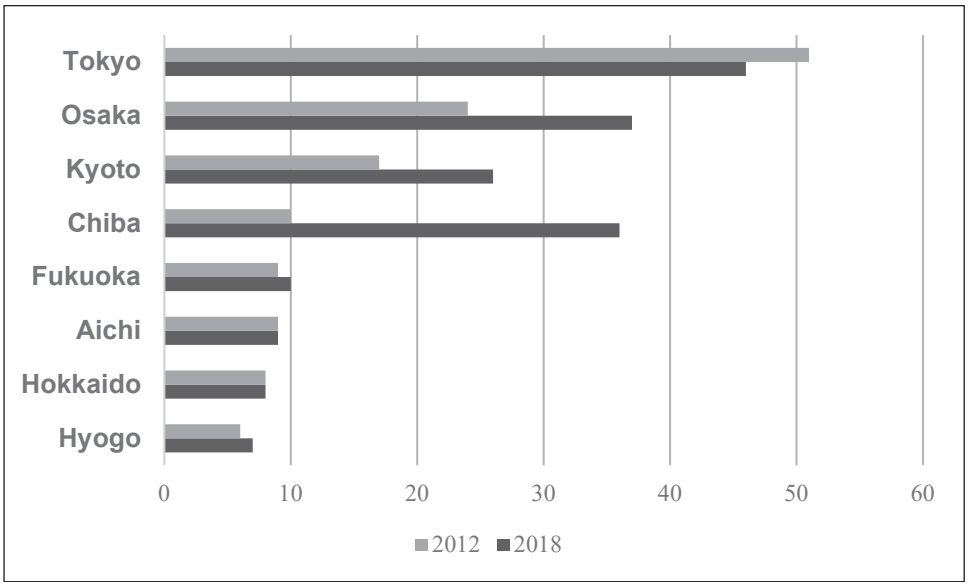
In the years since the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011) the profile of Japanese inbound tourism has changed significantly. Although once stagnant, inbound tourist numbers have now grown more than four-fold since 2011 to stand at 31.2 million in 2018 (JNTO, 2019) and 86% of all international visits to Japan now originate in Asia. This has enabled Japan to become the world's number one inbound growth destination and its 11th most visited country. Of particular note are inbound visitor numbers from China and Vietnam which have grown eight and ten-fold respectively since the decade began with nationals of these two countries now highly visible at Japan's key visitor assets. As a result of these dramatic changes, Japanese inbound tourism is facing new challenges including, the consequences of destination crowding or "over-tourism" (Ito & Miyano, 2019; Sugiura, 2019; Palmqvist, 2017), the need for better, strategic tourism planning (Kobayashi, 2018; Russell, 2017), and greater diversity in the promotion of tourism assets to potential international visitors (Andonian,

Kuwabara, Yamakawa, and Ishida, 2016).

Broadly speaking, the rapid expansion of inbound tourism to Japan in recent years can be attributed to three factors: the economic development of China - Japan's largest single source of visitors - and its designation of "approved destination status" for Japan-bound Chinese nationals (Dichter, Chen, Saxon, Yu, & Suo, 2018); more liberal intra-Asia visa regulations (Mori & Yabuta, 2017), simplifying visits to Japan from countries such as Vietnam; and contemporary Japanese government policy. The lattermost of these factors is underpinned by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism's (MLIT) 2016 tourism policy known as the "New Tourism Strategy to Invigorate the Japanese Economy" (hereafter, NTS) which aims to redefine the scope and influence of the tourism industry within the Japanese economy as a whole.

While Japan utilized tourism to offset its international balance of payments by promoting *outbound* tourism in the 1980s and 1990s, the NTS has sought a new strategic direction for tourism such that *inbound* tourism is employed to rejuvenate the country's stagnant regional economies. In concrete terms, the policy aims to encourage international visitors to new hinterland destinations where it is expected tourism - and its socioeconomic benefits - can help tackle the negative consequences of Japan's aging society and rural depopulation. In this sense tourism is no longer seen as a peripheral economic activity but as one that is central to development, innovation and strategy. This use of tourism as a new focus for Japan's social and economic well-being is known as *kankourikkoku* (tourism-oriented country). With numerical targets of some 60 million visitors and a three-fold increase in regional bed-nights by 2030, it is anticipated that in enabling travel to "every corner of Japan" (MLIT, 2016), *kankourikkoku* will produce a new spatial distribution of international visits, and bring some relief to Japan's over-visited destinations. Evidence however suggests the effort to redistribute visitors has met with mixed results (SMBC, 2019). In the six years to 2018, while it is true Metropolitan Tokyo's share of international visitors fell 5% from 51% to 46%, and locations including Chiba (+26%), Osaka (+13%), and Kyoto (+9%) all increased their respective share of visitors, internationally less well-known prefectures such as Hyogo (+1% share increase), Fukuoka (+1%), and Aichi (0%) were more representative of most of Japan in that they have struggled to attract a larger share of the burgeoning number of international visitors (figure 1). On a countrywide basis decentralization of visits has thus been limited in nature.

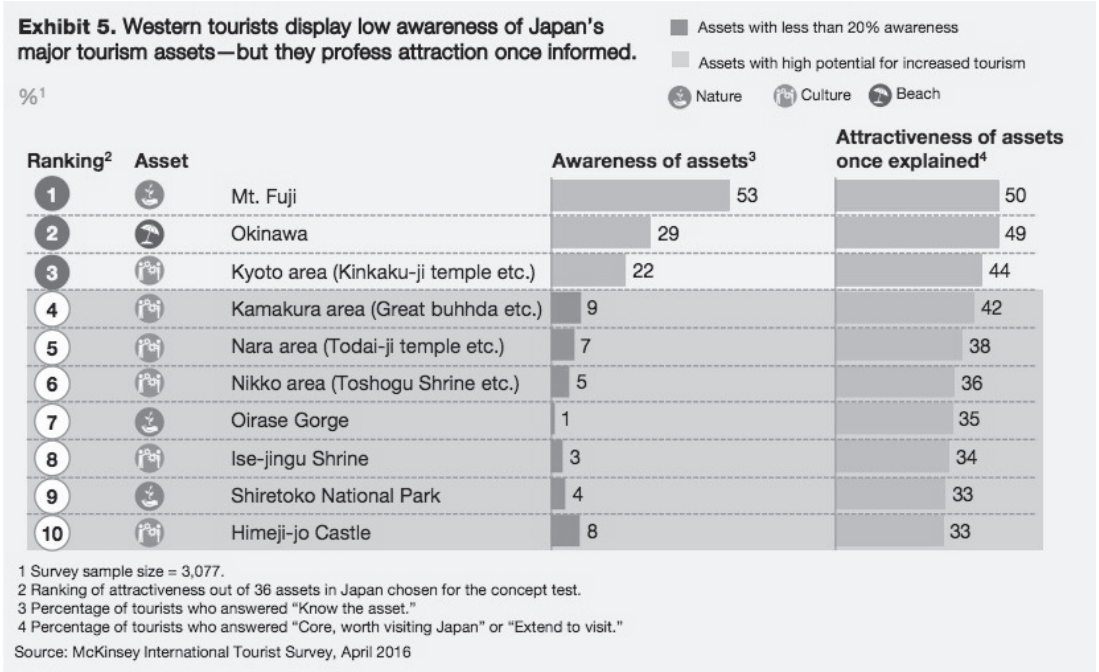
Figure 1: Prefectures visited by foreign nationals 2012 and 2018



Source: *Activities of overseas visitors to Japan*. SMBC, Corporate Advisory Service (2019).
Note: multiple responses possible.

The success of prefectures such as Chiba in building a larger share of international visitors can be seen as a result of the efforts of promotional campaigns by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) and – in Chiba's case – proximity to a major international gateway, Narita Airport. However, as slow regional airport growth in Fukuoka and Aichi shows having an international gateway is not always the key to enable more international visits (Williams, 2019). Instead, poor regional tourism growth may be a function of a general lack of awareness of, and familiarity with, Japan's regional tourism assets among foreign visitors. Supporting this assertion the McKinsey Group (Andonian, Kuwabara, Yamakawa, and Ishida, 2016) found that foreign tourists ascribed destination awareness values of over 20% or more to just *three* of Japan's top 36 tourism assets (Mt. Fuji (53%), Okinawa (29%), Kyoto (23%)) while other domestically-acclaimed assets were found to be almost completely unknown among potential international visitors. Thus, key tourism assets including Nara Park, Himeji Castle, and Ise-Jingu Shrine were cognized by fewer than 10% of individuals surveyed (figure 2). Although a desire to visit a given asset was triggered among potential visitors when a relevant image and explanation were provided, the McKinsey research shows a significant paucity in initial asset name recognition exists.

Figure 2: Awareness of major tourism assets among foreign tourists



Source: *The future of Japan's tourism: Path for sustainable growth towards 2020*. McKinsey Japan and Travel, Transport and Logistics Practice.

Together with the socioeconomic aims of the Japanese government's NTS policy, the work of Andonian et al (2016) is the inspiration for the current research. If Japan is to redistribute visitors away from its heavily visited core areas and realize the aims of the NTS, a better understanding of the poorly developed sense of Japan's key visitor attractions among international visitors is vital. By examining destination awareness and familiarity, the current research aims to shed light on this.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The role of awareness and familiarity in developing destination image selecting a destination, and encouraging a propensity to visit a destination has been examined in a number of studies over several decades (Baloglu, 2001; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Lee & Tussyadiah, 2012; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Prentice, 2004; Toyama & Yamada, 2012). While destination familiarity was described in early tourism research in terms of its polar opposition to destination novelty (Cohen, 1972), the process leading to greater visitor familiarity was found later to be a linear function of previous visit experience and the preexistence of destination awareness (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Other studies have supported this more multidimensional approach to understanding destination familiarity and in doing so indicate

that geographical distance and preexisting destination knowledge may also play a part (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). As a proxy of geographical distance, cultural similarity between a destination country and a host country may also have a bearing on familiarity (Baloglu, 2001). Prentice (2004) summarized this into 7 different types of destination familiarity including “informational”, “experiential”, “proximate” and “educational” familiarity, and other more conceptually complex forms including “self-described”, “self-assured” and “expected” familiarity. In response to this complexity, Toyama & Yamada (2012) propose the study of destination familiarity be made independently of other concepts (including awareness), but at the same time acknowledge that all 7 familiarity attributes are indispensable for an understanding of destination awareness and familiarity across different cultures (Baloglu, 2001; Cohen & Cooper, 1986).

The “informational”, “experiential” and “educational” elements described by Prentice (2004) were fine-tuned further by Lee and Tussyadiah (2012) who proposed that host country “language proficiency” and visitor “cultural acquaintance” played a key role as independent variables in Korean visitors’ familiarity with Japan. This latter study found that those individuals with greater Japanese language knowledge and deeper cultural associations to Japan (e.g. previous visits, personal friends or acquaintances) were more familiar with the country’s tourism assets. The two researchers also noted that cultural similarities between Japan and Korea i.e. “proximate” familiarity may also have played a part in this process. However, as the study was undertaken in 2009 it was unable to consider the contemporary circumstances of inbound tourism to Japan, which find Korean visitors less numerically dominant and less commercially attractive to Japan than Chinese travelers, and less buoyant than visits by Vietnamese and other nationals (MLIT, 2019).

Against this background of academic work, the current research undertook an investigation of Japanese destination (asset) familiarity among visitors to Japan from two new source markets, namely China and Vietnam: China as Japan’s largest single source market, and Vietnam as its fastest growing one. In complementing Lee and Tussyadiah’s (2012) study it is hoped the current research can offer new perspectives on destination awareness and familiarity in the Japanese context, and in doing so provide new insights and directions salient to both tourism practitioners and future academic studies.

3. METHOD

To explore destination familiarity, the method adopted in the current research is informed by the merits of a multidimensional (Baloglu, 2001) and hybrid (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003) approach that incorporates “cultural acquaintance” considerations (Lee & Tussyadiah, 2012) and factor analysis (Toyama & Yamada, 2012). Respondents were 30 Chinese and 20 Vietnamese hospitality studies students at a private university in Japan. The research incorporated a visual questionnaire instrument

translated into the respondents' mother tongue.

To measure awareness respondents were shown a powerpoint presentation of a stratified sample of 20 images (photos) of popular international tourist assets in Japan generated from the Trip Advisor (TA) 2018 and International Travelers (IT) 2018 platforms. To reflect the range of assets in Japan, images of urban, rural, ancient and contemporary locations were selected for inclusion in the sample (Table 1). In addition to more popular locations such as Fushimi Inari (TA, rank 1) and Mount Fuji (IT, rank 1), well-known but less-acclaimed assets such as Jigokudani (IT, rank 29) and Tokyo Edo Museum (TA, rank 20) were also included in the 20-site sample. An example (destination 1) of the format in which each of the 20 assets was presented to respondents is shown in figure 3.

The use of photos as a research tool was informed by the "intimate" link between tourism and photography (Urry, 1990, p.140), the successful use of photos in previous tourism research (Garrod, 2008; Kaewnopparat, 2017) in calibrating destination recognition and awareness, and the understanding that destination image recognition has long been understood to be indicative of destination knowledge (WTO, 1979), i.e. destination cultural acquaintance.

Table 1: List of 20 Sample Destinations (with platform and ranking)

Destination/ Attraction name	Platform (Ranking)	Destination/ Attraction name	Platform (Ranking)
Hiroshima Dome	Trip Advisor (3)	Shibuya Crossing	Trip Advisor (5)
Fushimi Inari	Trip Advisor (1)	Himeji Castle	Int'l Travelers (10)
Shinjuku Gyoen	Int'l Travelers (5)	Todaiji	Int'l Travelers (4)
Tokyo Sky Tree	Int'l Travelers (9)	Churaumi	Trip Advisor (18)
Samurai Museum	Int'l Travelers (14)	Shinjuku Metro Bldg	Int'l Travelers (22)
Jigokudani	Int'l Travelers (29)	Sensoji	Int'l Travelers (16)
Golden Pavilion	Trip Advisor (9)	Kyoto Station	Int'l Travelers (25)
Tokyo Edo Museum	Trip Advisor (20)	Owl Café	Trip Advisor (2)
Kenrokuen	Trip Advisor (14)	Mt Fuji	Int'l Travelers (1)
Itsukushima Shrine	Int'l Travelers (3)	Nara Park	Trip Advisor (12)

To explore the notion of destination (asset) awareness, respondents were asked to look at each of 20 photos depicting a tourism asset in Japan and, (i) name each asset, and (ii) name the city/prefecture where the asset is located. To elicit familiarity with each asset, responses to six 7-point Likert items (Table 2) were presented, and any previous visits elicited – only those items relating to familiarity are

reported here. Elicitation of both the asset name and the asset city/prefecture name was deemed important to distinguish respondents with *no* asset awareness (knowing neither asset name nor location) from those with *some* awareness (either asset name or location), or others with *full* awareness (both name and location). The term 'destination' was used throughout the questionnaire since it is better understood by a non-academic cohort than the term 'asset' used in this paper.

Table 2. Items to measure destination (asset) familiarity

"This destination offers an unusual experience."	*Items emphasizing destination novelty*
"This destination offers new experiences."	
"This destination is new for me."	
"I know a lot about this destination."	*Items emphasizing destination familiarity*
"I know more about this destination than others."	
"This destination feels familiar to me."	

Note: Adapted from Toyama and Yamada (2012)

Respondents were also presented with a questionnaire instrument which gathered socio-demographic data on gender, age, visit experiences to Japan, and Japanese language competence, the lattermost based on the internationally acknowledged Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests to identify relationships and differences between awareness, familiarity, and cultural acquaintance (i.e. language competence) within and between the two national groups.

Figure 3: Destination recognition sample (destination 1)

Destination 1

Name of destination:_____

City or prefecture:_____

Visit experience: No, never ☐
Yes, once ☐
Yes, more than once ☐

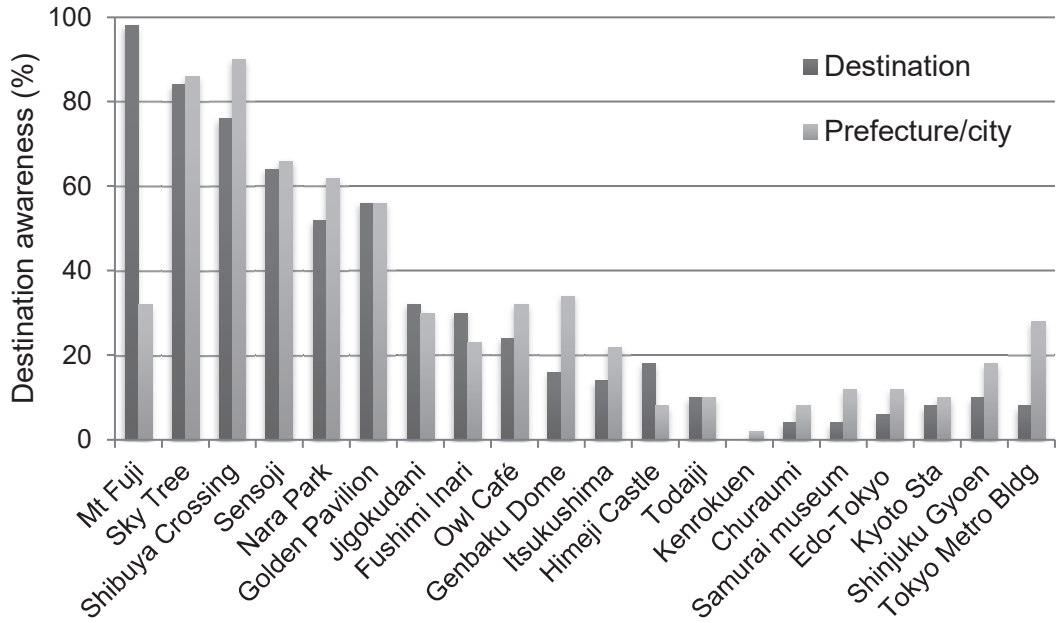
	Totally Disagree 1	2	3	Neutral 4	5	6	Totally Agree 7
i) This destination offers an unusual experience.							
ii) This destination offers new experiences.							
iii) This destination is new for me.							
iv) I know a lot about this destination.							
v) I know more than others about this destination.							
vi) This destination feels familiar to me.							

4. RESULTS

4. 1 Asset awareness

Awareness of the 20 tourism assets among the 50 respondents is described in figure 4. Respondents expressed awareness of the 20 assets a total of 639 times (awareness by asset name and/or by city/prefecture location) for an awareness rate of 32%. Three assets were recognized by *both* their name and city/prefecture designation by 60% or more of respondents (Tokyo Sky Tree, 78%; Shibuya Crossing, 74%; Sensoji, 60%), three further assets (Nara Park, Golden Pavilion and Mt. Fuji) by 46%, 42% and 32% of respondents respectively, and in the remaining 14 assets "full awareness" was expressed by fewer than 25% of respondents. "No awareness" (i.e. neither asset name nor city/prefecture) was expressed by 60% or more of respondents for 9 assets; a further three assets were unknown to 80% or more.

Figure 4: Awareness of destinations (destination name & city/prefecture)



Based on asset name recognition, the highest awareness was attributed to Mt. Fuji, (98% awareness), Tokyo Sky Tree (84%), and Shibuya Crossing (76%). Similar city/prefecture name awareness was given to Shibuya Crossing (90% awareness); Tokyo Sky Tree (86%), and Sensoji (66%). As figure 4 shows assets with high name awareness tended to have similarly high levels of prefecture/city awareness, and those assets with low name awareness tended to have low city/prefecture awareness. From figure 4 we can suggest four distinct bands of awareness: those assets with 80% or more awareness (Tokyo Sky Tree and Shibuya Crossing); assets with around 60% awareness (Sensoji, Nara Park, and Golden Pavillion); assets with approximately 30% awareness (Jigokudani, Fushimi Inari, Owl Café, and *Genbaku Dome*); and assets with awareness generally below 20%. These findings mirror those of Andonian et al (2016) and emphasize the low level of tourism asset awareness among international visitors to Japan.

Exceptions to this general pattern of similar asset name awareness and asset city/prefecture awareness include *Genbaku Dome* (Hiroshima) for which the city/prefecture awareness (34%) was much higher than awareness of the asset name itself (16%), and the Tokyo Metropolitan Building which was named by just 8% of respondents though 28% knew its location (Shinjuku, Tokyo). The converse, i.e. knowledge of the asset name rather than the city/prefecture, was also apparent. Thus although 18% of respondents could name Himeji Castle from its image, only 8% were aware it is in the city of Himeji. Mt. Fuji showed an even clearer manifestation of this with 98% naming the asset but just 32% naming either one of the landmark's home prefectures.

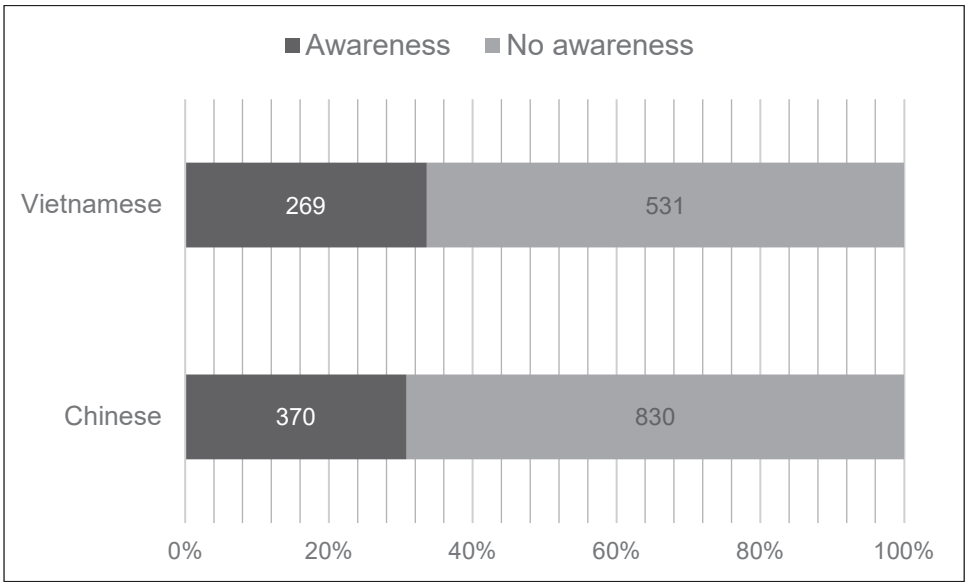
4. 2 Total asset awareness

As described in 4.1 the 'total asset awareness' for the 20 destinations across the sample of 50 respondents was 32%. In order to explore any mediating role played by nationality and/or host country language proficiency, Chi^2 categorical frequency tests with nationality and Japanese language proficiency as independent variables were carried out.

a) Nationality

There was little difference in the frequency of total asset awareness between the two nationalities (figure 5a). Thus while 31% (370 destination recognitions) of Chinese respondents expressed asset awareness, the corresponding figure for Vietnamese was 34% (269 recognitions). The Chi^2 categorical frequency test result ($X^2 = 1.721$; $p = 0.19$) was not significant even when controlling for differences in Japanese language ability and length of stay in Japan between the two groups (figure 5a).

Figure 5a: Destination (asset) Awareness (by nationality) N=50



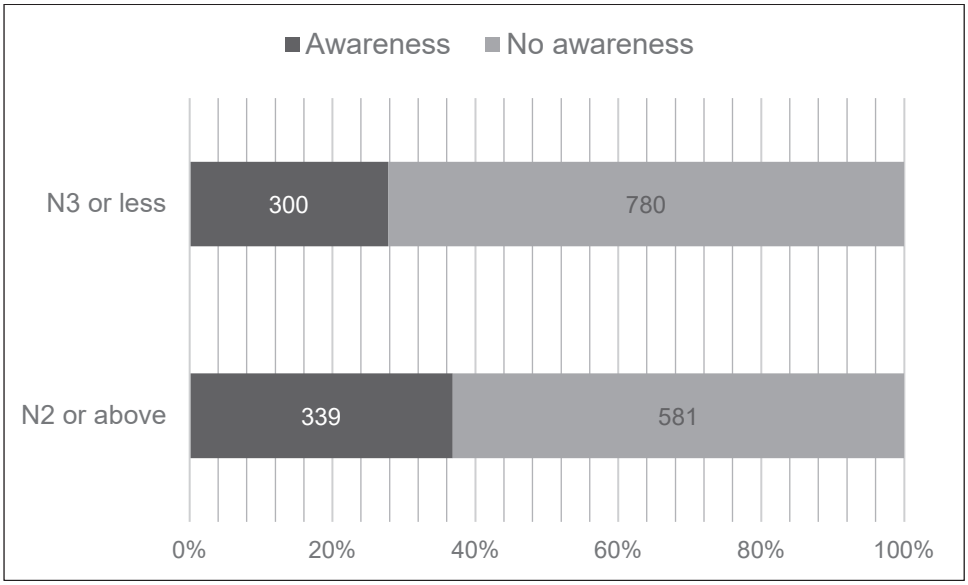
Note: Chinese = 30 respondents; Vietnamese = 20 respondents

b) Language ability

In contrast to nationality, significant differences were found in asset awareness as a function of Japanese language ability. As figure 5b shows respondents with JLPT N2 or above generated an awareness rate of 37% (339 recognitions), the corresponding figure for those with JLPT N3 or lower was 25% (300 recognitions). This difference was found to be significant at $p = 0.000015$ ($X^2 = 18.79$). As there was no significant difference in Japanese language ability ($X^2 = 1.1$, $p = 0.3$), or

in the length of stay ($X^2 = 0.15$, $p = 0.697$) between the two nationalities, the result lends support to the notion that host country language ability may be associated with asset awareness (Lee and Tussyadiah, 2012).

Figure 5b: Destination (asset) Awareness (by Japanese language ability) N=50



Note: N2 or above = 22 respondents; N3 or less = 28 respondents

4. 3 Individual destination (asset) awareness

In addition to "overall asset awareness" differences in awareness between assets was also considered. To do so independence Chi^2 values (for $p < 0.05$) were calculated for the categorical variable of 'awareness' across all 20 assets for both nationality and language ability. The results for those assets where independence of the variables could not be shown are indicated in Tables 3 and 4. In cases where the sample size was fewer than six respondents the Fisher Exact test was adopted.

a) Nationality

Nationality could be rejected as being independent to awareness for 5 individual assets (Table 3). This association was particularly strong for Jigokudani ($X^2 = 21.887$, $p = 0.000003$) and Nara Park ($X^2 = 19.83$, $p = 0.000008$). For the remaining 15 assets nationality was not shown to be statistically significant.

Table 3: Assets for which nationality was rejected as independent

Destination	Chi^2 (Fisher) value	(exact) *p* value
Tokyo Sky Tree	Fisher	0.024
Samurai Museum	Fisher	0.003
Jigokudani	21.887	0.000003
Owl Café	6.953	0.008
Nara Park	19.83	0.000008

Note: Fisher Exact values were calculated for assets with frequencies smaller than 6.

b) Language ability

Taking Japanese language ability as the independent variable (Table 4) the null hypothesis that asset awareness is independent of language ability could be rejected at $p < 0.05$ for 4 assets. More proficient Japanese language skills were thus positively correlated to the awareness of Nara Park ($X^2 = 9.942$, $p = 0.002$), Fushimi Inari ($X^2 = 5.207$, $p = 0.0225$), Todaiji (exact $p = 0.005$) and Tokyo Sky Tree (exact $p = 0.047$).

Table 4: Assets for which language ability was rejected as independent

Destination	Chi^2 (Fisher) value	(exact) *p* value
Fushimi Inari	5.207	0.0225
Tokyo Sky Tree	Fisher	0.047
Todaiji	Fisher	0.005
Nara Park	9.942	0.002

Note: Kyoto Station Building, Jigokudani and Himeji Castle were significant at p <0.1

4. 4 Familiarity of destinations (assets)

In addition to asset awareness, asset familiarity was also considered. This was facilitated by three 7-point Likert items (statements) previously adopted by Toyama and Yamada (2012). These items “I know a lot about this destination” [KNOW], “This destination feels familiar to me” [FAMILIAR] and, “I know more than others about this destination” [OTHERS] formed the basis of a three-part composite familiarity factor. The Pearson r product moment value between the items [KNOW] and [OTHERS] was r = 0.96 (n = 20, $p = 0.00001$); between [KNOW] and [FAMILIAR] r = 0.906 (n = 20, $p = 0.00001$); and between [OTHERS] and [FAMILIAR] r = 0.929 (n = 20, $p = 0.00001$). The resultant cross-item correlation (r > 0.906) is similar to that of Toyama and Yamada (r = 0.88). From

the composite familiarity factor, asset familiarity was classified as “low” (Likert scale 1, 2, 3), “neutral” (Likert scale 4), or “high” (Likert scale 5, 6, 7). The results were analyzed with nationality and Japanese language ability as independent variables. Chi^2 significance tests were carried out for each individual asset.

a) Nationality

Figure 6: Familiarity of destinations among Chinese and Vietnamese respondents

Figure 6a: (Chinese)

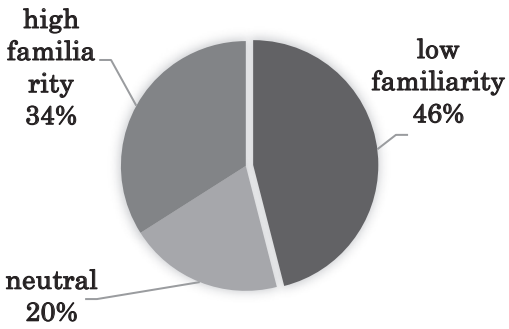
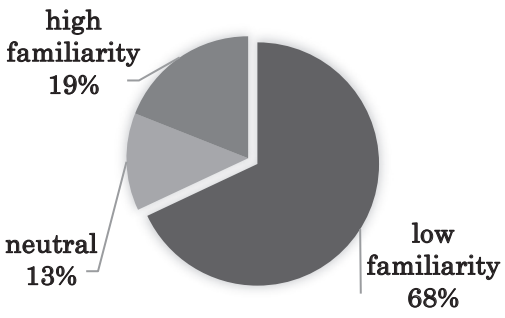


Figure 6b: (Vietnamese)



Figures 6a and 6b illustrate the frequency distribution of asset familiarity among Chinese (Figure 6a) and Vietnamese (Figure 6b) respondents. As shown, reported familiarity is higher among the Chinese respondents than it is among Vietnamese. Thus while only 19% of Vietnamese responses indicated assets as being “highly familiar”, the corresponding figure for the Chinese cohort was 34%. Similarly, 68% of Vietnamese and 46% of Chinese responses indicated “low familiarity” suggesting a difference in asset familiarity between the two nationalities. Non-parametric testing for independence of the individual assets indicated that familiarity is independent of visitor nationality for 9 of the 20 assets (Table 5).

Table 5: Familiarity of destinations by nationality (independence rejected)

Destination	Chi^2 (Fisher) value	(exact) *p* value
Samurai Museum	Fisher	0.037
Golden Pavilion	Fisher	0.0002
Itsukushima Shrine	7.766	0.021
Himeji Castle	21.069	0.0000027

Destination	Chi^2 (Fisher) value	(exact) *p* value
Todaiji	Fisher	0.0027
Churaumi	Fisher	0.034
Kyoto station	Fisher	0.0068
Owl Café	Fisher	0.0093
Nara Park	11.856	0.0026

Note: Fisher Exact values were calculated for assets with frequencies smaller than 6.

b) Language ability

As we have already seen language ability appears to be associated to asset awareness such that better host country language skills promote greater asset awareness. Results from the asset composite factor regarding *familiarity* however are less conclusive (Table 6). Thus, while "high familiarity" was indicated 28% of the time by those with higher order Japanese language skills, the corresponding figure for those with lower order skills was only two percentage points lower (26%) – a statistically insignificant difference. Similarly, 54% of responses by those with higher order JLPT scores indicated "low" asset familiarity a figure that rose to just 59% among those with lower order language skills – again statistically insignificant. Consequent to this finding, only two individual assets - Fushimi Inari ($p = 0.0036$) and Golden Pavilion ($p = 0.028$) - derived results that could be rejected at the 0.05 confidence level. Thus language ability does not seem to be associated to familiarity as clearly as it is to awareness. This hints at a more complex relationship between host country language ability, asset awareness and asset familiarity than Milman and Pizam's (1995) linear model implies.

Table 6: Asset familiarity (by language ability)

Asset Familiarity	Japanese language ability	
	N2 or higher (%)	N3 or lower (%)
High	28%	26%
Mid	18%	15%
Low	54%	59%

4. 5 Within sample asset familiarity

In order to compare asset familiarity of the 20 assets between the Chinese and Vietnamese respondents, the mean Likert scores *(f)* of the three familiarity items [KNOW], [OTHERS] and [FAMILIAR] for each asset across both nationalities were calculated. The five highest ranking assets for the two nations are shown in Tables 7a (Vietnamese) and 7b (Chinese). Comparison of the two tables shows that both nationalities independently highlighted four of the same assets in their respective top five's (Mt Fuji, Nara Park, Shibuya Crossing, and Tokyo Sky Tree). It also indicates the primacy of Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing as the most familiar asset for both nationalities with the central Tokyo landmark assigned considerably higher familiarity Likert scores than the second ranked asset. Hence, while Shibuya Crossing recorded an (*f*) value of 4.6 and 4.5 for Vietnamese and Chinese visitors respectively, second ranked Mt Fuji (Vietnamese) and Himeji Castle (Chinese) in turn produced *f* values of = 3.6 and 4.1.

Table 7a: The 5 most familiar destinations (Vietnamese) *n = 19*

Destination	"KNOW" Mean (rank)	"OTHERS" Mean(rank)	"FAMILIAR" Mean (rank)	Mean FAMILIARITY Score (*f*)	Combined Rank
Shibuya Crossing	4.58 (1)	4 (1)	5.32 (1)	4.6	**1**
Mt Fuji	3.42 (2)	2.89 (2)	4.63 (2)	3.6	**2**
Sensoji	2.84 (5)	2.84 (3)	3.79 (3)	3.2	**3**
Nara Park	3 (4)	2.56 (4)	3.61 (4)	3.1	**4**
Tokyo Sky Tree	3.16 (3)	2.47 (5)	4.6 (5)	**3.1**	**5**

In similar fashion at the opposite end of the familiarity spectrum (not shown) respondents of both nations nominated four of the same assets in their respective lists of the 5 *least* familiar assets (Churaumi, Hiroshima Genbaku Dome, Kenrokuen, and the Tokyo Edo Museum), and for the most familiar assets Chinese respondents ascribed higher *f* values to an equally ranked asset than the Vietnamese did. Hence while both nationalities ranked the Edo Tokyo Museum as the least familiar asset, the *f* value for Chinese respondents was 2.17 and for the Vietnamese was 1.75. The consistently higher Likert scores among Chinese respondents may indicate greater familiarity with a given asset,

but may also be indicative of a greater *belief* of familiarity, or to the research methodology (Lee, Jones, Mineyama & Zhang, 2002) – see discussion.

Table 7b: The 5 most familiar destinations (Chinese) *n = 26*

Destination	"KNOW" Mean (rank)	"OTHERS" Mean(rank)	"FAMILIAR" Mean (rank)	Mean "FAMILIARITY" Score (*f*)	Combined Rank
Shibuya Crossing	4.45 (1)	4.2 (1)	4.95 (=2)	4.5	**1**
Himeji Castle	3.7 (2)	3.7 (2)	4.95 (=2)	4.1	**2**
Nara Park	3.4 (4)	3.5 (=4)	5.1 (1)	4	**3**
Mt Fuji	3.55 (3)	3.55 (3)	4.9 (5)	4	**4**
Tokyo Sky Tree	3.35 (5)	3.5 (=4)	4.7 (6)	3.9	**5**

5. DISCUSSION

The "high potential" of Japan's tourism assets to attract foreign tourists has a "major obstacle" to overcome: the lack of asset awareness among potential visitors (Andonian et al, 2016, p. 20). The current research was an attempt to examine asset awareness and familiarity among Chinese and Vietnamese nationals and consider how nationality and host language ability might influence such awareness and familiarity.

First, the findings presented here indicate considerable differences in the awareness of leading assets in Japan. Although awareness of some tourism assets such as Tokyo Sky Tree, Shibuya Crossing and Sensoji was high (as much as 90%), more typically asset awareness was 20% or less. Given the profile of the respondents in the current study – tourism studies students living in Japan – the values obtained here may be somewhat higher than for first time visitors. The challenge for practitioners keen to develop awareness of Japan's tourism assets and boost visitation rates thus seems to be considerable.

Contrary to expectations, nationality does not appear to be a strong indicator of asset awareness. Prior to the research it was presumed tourism asset awareness would manifest itself more clearly in Chinese nationals than in the Vietnamese due to the former's "informational familiarity" (Prentice, 2004) with *kanji* characters used in Japanese place names and writing. Although there were one or two notable exceptions (see below) the overall evidence here does not support this presumption. Instead it confirms the findings of Lee and Tussyadiah (2012) that it is host language competence rather than

nationality that appears to be positively correlated with asset awareness. In this sense attempts to harness any apparent innate linguistic advantage Chinese visitors may have over other nationalities may not be successful.

The cases where nationality was significantly correlated with awareness (Jigokudani and Nara Park) seem to have been borne from the way in which Japan promotes itself abroad rather than any specific issue related to visitor nationality *per se*. Jigokudani for example, is featured strongly on the Vietnamese language webpage of the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), and Nara Park, a must-visit destination for Chinese visitors taking the so-called "Golden Route", is prominent in the online presence of the same organization's Chinese language webpages (JNTO, 2019).

Regarding familiarity, the current research found that overall Chinese visitors indicate greater familiarity with Japan's tourism assets than Vietnamese nationals. While 34% of Chinese nationals indicated "high" familiarity, the corresponding figure for Vietnamese was just 19%. The process behind this relatively large share of high Chinese nationals indicating "familiarity" is unclear, but since overall visitation rates were low for both nationalities (22% for Vietnamese and 20% for Chinese) visit experience is an unlikely cause. Instead it may be that both nationalities express familiarity as a proxy to awareness, or that the use of Likert items was not well-suited to the cultural sensibilities of the respondents. On this latter point, research has noted that Likert questions are not always well-cognized by Chinese research subjects (Lee, Jones, Mineyama & Zhang, 2002) and can promote "acquiescence bias" – the tendency for respondents to provide answers they believe the researcher may be seeking (Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005). Whether such bias is found in Vietnamese respondents or not requires further investigation.

Concerning asset familiarity as a function of host language ability no significant difference was found between those respondents with higher order language skills and those with lower order ones. This is in contrast to the association found between language ability and destination *awareness*. Overall this suggests that language may be a stronger mediator in asset awareness than it is in asset familiarity. At the same time however for three *individual* assets (Itsukushima Shrine, Himeji Castle, and Nara Park) nationality was found to be associated with familiarity. Chinese nationals for example ascribed high familiarity to Himeji Castle despite relatively low awareness. This apparent discrepancy in awareness/familiarity may be explained by non-tourist stimuli in the form of a popular on-line game called "Himeji Castle" which uses the landmark's image extensively. Based on informal exchanges with respondents it is through the online image – rather than any image generated by the tourist industry – that destination familiarity had been nurtured among Chinese respondents. Thus in the same way film locations can be stimuli for awareness among potential visitors (Connell, 2015) on-line gaming experience might offer new clues as to how asset awareness and familiarity might be better understood in the contemporary era (Huang, 2016).

6. LIMITATIONS

The value of findings presented here should be balanced against the limitations inherent in the research. First, due to the relatively small sample size of 50 respondents the current study should be seen as being exploratory rather than definitive; the use of students as respondents in place of tourists may have amplified this somewhat and further weakened the relevancy of some of the findings. Secondly, the sample of 20 tourist assets was established with the intention of presenting as broad a *range* of destinations as possible rather than focusing on the most visited ones. In this sense the sample, though representative of Japan's tourist assets, can be said to be somewhat arbitrary. Choosing more age-specific, or culturally familiar assets such as destinations familiar to *anime* tourism might have produced more sound results.

The use of photos to elicit familiarity was also trialed here. As much as possible easily understandable, iconic images of each asset were selected for the questionnaire instrument, although in some cases due to copyright or identifying marks (such as words written in Japanese) it was necessary to choose other less-iconic images of some assets. This may have had some bearing on asset recognition and consequently any conclusions about awareness and familiarity.

Finally, the current research only considers asset familiarity in two nationalities visiting Japan. As a country with broad global appeal and a rapidly developing tourism industry, in future more country pairings are highly desirable to enable wider understanding of Japan's asset awareness and familiarity among visitors.

7. IMPLICATIONS

A better understanding of the source nations making up Japan's new inbound tourism profile - including countries such as Vietnam and China - is essential if the country is to maximize tourism's benefits and respond to new tourism-related challenges such as overtourism. By offering new insights into Japanese destination familiarity in two nationality groups, the current research can contribute to the body of similar studies previously undertaken (Lee & Tussyadiah, 2012; Prentice, 2004; Toyama & Yamada, 2012). Issues of "informational familiarity" (Baloglu, 2001), in particular those associated with host language aptitude, can also be advanced. The findings made here can also be of value to local and national promotional bodies in Japan and help direct tourism promotion in a more strategic manner, while helping to improve visitors' *in situ* destination experience and satisfaction.

By highlighting the lack of awareness and familiarity of Japan's tourist assets in two of Japan's contemporary source nations, the current research illustrates one of the key challenges Japan faces as it attempts to make tourism a focal point of its economic policy: making Japan's tourism assets better

known outside Japan. Visits are driven by familiarity (Milman and Pizam, 1995), and with greater attention to elements of "cultural acquaintance" such as Japanese language ability among visitors, awareness of, and familiarity in, Japan's natural and cultural tourism assets can be raised. It is only once such familiarity is raised and a new spatial distribution of visitors is established that Japan will be able to begin to realize the goals of its ambitious *kankourikkoku* tourism policy.

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