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GPGS Research Grant Report

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Building Tourism Campaigns Through the Power of Yuru Kyara Mascot Marketing

Introduction

I applied for the Graduate School of Global Studies research grant with the goal of conducting interactive on-site research regarding the marketing strategies of Japanese mascots. My academic background in journalism, public relations, marketing, and graphic design led my interest in Japan's prevalent use of character marketing to sprout more awareness and popularity of various prefectures. My research focuses on geographical marketing through the lens of Japanese "Yuru Kyara" PR mascot culture, and how the utility of kawaii pop culture can be strategized as an advantage for promoting business, fostering soft-power politics, and building economic opportunities through character consumerism.

Japanese mascots are usually referred to as yuru kyara, which derives from the Japanese word *yurui* translating to "loose" or "wobbly." Yurui can also be interpreted as soft, relaxed or vulnerable. The term was coined and trademarked by illustrator and Japanese pop culture critic Jun Miura, often regarded as the "original yuru kyara otaku." According to Miura, three main characteristics define yuru kyara: They have a strong excitement for a local region, awkward movements and behavior, and laid-back and lovable personalities. Because of this characterization, you'll often see Japanese mascots walking with a toddler-like wobble or innocently getting into mixups with their handlers or other fellow mascots.

Why are Yuru Kyara So Popular and Effective?

When consumers become hyper-aware of capitalism as cold institutions, mascots can re-personalize the consumer experience by adding a face to a corporation. Yuru kyara have the power to bring empathy to an otherwise corporate identity. And for geographical mascots that represent different areas in Japan that may not be as renowned, yuru kyara create a highly visual and pathos-based association with that prefecture or city that makes them memorable and recognizable for future interactions. These interactions range from tourism to merchandising, identity creation, and local cultural pride. For example, Ehime Prefecture is famous for their mandarin oranges. They use a mascot called Mikyan, a cute citrus-inspired dog character with a flower tail. Mikyan's name, color palette, and design all reinforce associations between Ehime and delicious fruit. You will find Mikyan not only in travel brochures encouraging people to visit Ehime Prefecture, but also in souvenirs and in produce harvested from Ehime. Whenever consumers spot Mikyan in packaging at the supermarket, they will now connect the cute character with Ehime Prefecture and their local specialty. Even if one has not traveled to Ehime before or knew nothing of the region, through mascot interactions, they will at least remember that the prefecture is a lead producer of mandarin oranges.

The Case of Kumamon

Kumamon, the black bear mascot of Kumamoto Prefecture, is one of the most famous yuru kyara success stories and a paragon of the aforementioned marketing strategies. He is largely credited as one of the variables that sprouted a massive surge in Japanese mascots within the last 15 years. It's now estimated that there are over 3,000 yuru kyara nationwide, with creative backstories and cute designs all in an attempt to replicate what Kumamon was able to

achieve for Kumamoto. Kumamon's merchandise sales reached a new record in 2018— over ¥150 billion. Kumamon has over 800,000 followers on X and over 100,000 on Instagram. Kumamon Square, the bear's "head office" and gift shop, greeted over 2.5 million visitors in 2019. During my field work in Kumamoto, I visited both Kumamon Square and Kumamon Village. I interviewed Ikejiri Tsuyoshi, the manager of Kumamon Village inside Sukuramachi department store, and he specified that a large percentage of the store's foot traffic consists of international tourists, such as from Taiwan, who come to Kumamoto Prefecture specifically for the chance to meet the bear in person. Other international tourists include China, Singapore, the United States, Australia, and Brazil. "We have some big fans from Hong Kong and even the United States. Those fans from the United States, [they come] three times a year," said Tsuyoshi.

Before Kumamon, Tsuyoshi mentioned that Kumamoto was not really regarded as a tourist destination. There were some domestic travelers who came to Kumamoto, but the region was largely seen as agricultural land. But the introduction of Kumamon drastically changed outside perceptions of the prefecture; now becoming almost synonymous with Kumamon himself. "Before Kumamon appeared, there [was] only Kumamoto Castle and Mount Aso as sightseeing things here. After he appeared, everyone can see this character everywhere in this prefecture...It's very easy to touch Kumamoto prefecture's *miryoku* (charm) —the good points of Kumamoto prefecture. I think for us, it's very easy to make some souvenirs for the tourists," said Tsuyoshi.

Both gift shops not only have a wide selection of Kumamon goods, but they also host special fan events and daily live performances. Fans were already lined up to watch the live performance even one hour before showtime. When the mascot arrives on stage, it genuinely feels like a celebrity spotting. The suspension of disbelief works and it really feels like

Kumamon is a living entity, a *Totoro*-like spirit that lives in the neighborhood. “When Kumamon appears...it's like they've seen a celebrity,” says Kotaka Eri from Ginza Kumamotokan.

The live shows are an opportunity for fans to see Kumamon in real time, and to interact with the character and “talk” with him through his handler interpreters who try to read his gestures to communicate with the audience. The Kumamon mascot and his performances convey his quirky personality more effectively than just his 2D image. The mascot is a tangible representation of what Kumamon stands for.

Building Community

Through this research grant, I've also had the wonderful opportunity to personally interact with several yuru kyara, their campaign teams, and consumers in Kochi Prefecture at the 9th annual Local Character Festival. Over 75 mascots were present and the festival gave me access to observe how characters behaved individually and with each other, how they were handled by staff, how regional representatives used mascots to promote their communities, how fans interacted, and how merchandise was marketed.

Each mascot had their own booth to introduce the character's backgrounds and more information on the region they represent. But additionally, the mascots often mingled and took photos with other characters to foster connections between different Japanese regions. The festival's stage performances also emphasized the mascots' charm points, the inspirations behind their character, and the local specialties of the regions. The characters act as personifications of geography, but also ambassadors doing community outreach.

