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Japanese pop culture events in Portugal: Bridging cultures and enhancing regional tourism

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Abstract: Japanese pop culture events in Portugal have emerged as an important platform for fostering intercultural exchange, enhancing cultural appreciation, and supporting regional tourism. This study investigates their perceived impacts on local tourism dynamics and economic development through the perspectives of organizers, participants, and other stakeholders. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the study is based on 22 in-depth interviews, which reveal that these events are perceived to improve regional attractiveness for tourists, support local economic activity through visitor flows reported by interviewees, and help mitigate tourism seasonality. The findings underscore their perceived effectiveness in promoting cultural authenticity, strengthening community engagement, and attracting younger audiences. They also suggest perceived economic benefits associated with expenditure on local goods and services, thereby potentially supporting local businesses. By focusing on the Portuguese context, which remains relatively underexplored, this study provides new insights into the role of Japanese pop culture events in cultural tourism and community development. The study offers theoretical contributions to cultural event management and practical recommendations for stakeholders seeking to maximise the cultural and economic potential of these events.

Keywords: Japanese pop culture; Cultural tourism; Events; Impacts; Portugal

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1 Introduction

Events dedicated to specific cultural phenomena, such as Japanese pop culture, have become increasingly prominent platforms for intercultural exchange and economic development worldwide (Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2019; Kawamata et al., 2017). These themed events promote Japan abroad, enhance its image as a tourist destination, and generate significant social and economic impacts for both host countries and Japan (Close, 2018; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Severino & Silva, 2023; Yamamura, 2015). Their appeal rests on innovative, experiential formats that combine diverse attractions, captivate fans, stimulate curiosity, and provide immersive encounters with Japanese culture, as reflected in rising attendance and the worldwide diffusion of similar events (Freedman & Slade, 2018; Galbraith, 2019; Lamerichs, 2013; Tajima et al., 2018).

In an increasingly competitive tourism marketplace, such events exemplify how creativity and immersive cultural experiences can differentiate destinations and attract international audiences (Berger, 2010; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2013). By combining entertainment, services, and participatory experiences, Japanese pop culture events diversify tourism products and offer experiences that distinguish them from more conventional event formats (Galbraith, 2019; Kawamata et al., 2017; Severino et al., 2024; Tajima et al., 2018). When hosted outside Japan, these events leverage both local cultural assets and transnational cultural flows. Supported by media coverage and strategic marketing, they generate substantial consumption of goods and services, as well as new opportunities for destination stakeholders and brands (Craig, 2020; Popescu & Corbos, 2012; Sabre, 2013; Severino et al., 2024).

Building on this global context, the present study examines the specific impacts of Japanese pop culture events in Portugal, where such initiatives are gaining visibility

but remain relatively under-researched. While previous studies have predominantly examined Japanese popular culture and related tourism practices in Japan, the United States, and established European contexts such as France (Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2019; Sabre, 2013; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015), comparatively little attention has been paid to smaller Southern European event contexts. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews with event organisers, stakeholders (including businesses and cultural institutions), and participants, this research explores the opportunities and challenges associated with such events. It also examines their contribution to local tourism, their impact on public perceptions, and their intersection with wider cultural and economic dynamics.

Accordingly, the main aim of this study is to examine how Japanese pop culture events in Portugal are perceived to influence cultural exchange, tourism, and local development from the perspectives of event organisers, participants, and other stakeholders. More specifically, the study seeks to identify their perceived cultural, social, tourism, and economic impacts, examine the main opportunities and organisational challenges associated with their development, and compare the perspectives of the different stakeholder groups. The study is guided by the following research question: How do event organisers, participants, and other stakeholders perceive the cultural, tourism, and economic impacts, opportunities, and challenges associated with Japanese pop culture events in Portugal? By analysing the perspectives of actors directly involved in these events, the study extends the literature on cultural tourism and event studies by showing how transnational popular culture events operate within a relatively small and emerging Japanese pop culture event market.

2 Literature review

This study is informed by three complementary conceptual perspectives: event tourism impacts, soft power and cultural diplomacy, and fan-community dynamics. Research on event tourism provides a foundation for investigating the economic, social, cultural and tourism effects of organised events on host destinations and communities (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2020). Soft power and cultural diplomacy inform the analysis of how Japanese popular culture contributes to Japan's international projection, nation branding, and cultural images abroad (Close, 2018; Iwabuchi, 2015; Valaskivi, 2013). Finally, research on fandom, participatory culture, and tribalism explains the sense of belonging, collective identity,

interaction and co-creation associated with anime, manga, and cosplay communities. It also highlights the tensions that can arise between fan communities and professional event management (Brown, 1997; Greenacre et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2004; Lamerichs, 2013).

2.1 Positive impacts of Japanese pop culture events

The international popularity of Japanese pop culture has expanded substantially in recent decades, attracting a growing global consumer base and motivating fans to visit Japan and attend related events abroad (Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Severino et al., 2024). These events offer a variety of activities to suit different participant profiles and have become important for cultural and tourism promotion.

Japanese pop culture events deepen interest in Japan and contribute to its appeal as a tourist destination by immersing participants in both traditional practices and contemporary cultural trends (Freedman & Slade, 2018; Tajima et al., 2018). They function as promotional tools for Japan and for host locations, which often experience increased visitor flows and associated economic activity (Close, 2018; Craig, 2020; Rich, 2011; Sabre, 2013; Seaton et al., 2017). Strategic marketing and media coverage strengthen the association between the locality and Japanese pop culture, generating memorable experiences that extend the event's impact beyond its duration (Craig, 2020; Severino & Silva, 2023). The resulting positive images and emotional connections encourage repeat visitation, stimulate future tourism demand, and help diversify the local tourism offer (Blain et al., 2005; Galbraith, 2019; Getz, 2008; Jenkins, 2004; Popescu & Corbos, 2012; Severino, 2024; Tajima et al., 2018).

Economic and social impacts are equally relevant. Japanese pop culture events stimulate consumption of themed products, including collectables and exclusive merchandise that is otherwise difficult to obtain, benefiting local businesses and the broader event-related economy (Bento & Moreira, 2018; Lamerichs, 2013; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015). Participants also use tourism services such as accommodation, food and beverage outlets and transport services, thereby contributing to local economic growth (Getz & Page, 2020; Kaneko, 2013; Severino et al., 2024). By offering distinctive experiences that attract both regular and occasional visitors, these events can help destinations differentiate themselves competitively and partially mitigate seasonality effects (Kawamata et al., 2017).

At the social level, Japanese pop culture events promote community engagement and create convivial spaces that facilitate interaction between fans and the broader public (Tajima et al., 2018). These encounters foster acceptance of cultural practices previously perceived as “different” and contribute to wider recognition of Japanese pop culture (Brazo & Filho, 2018; Brown, 1997; Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2019; Yamato, 2016). The events also create entrepreneurial and educational opportunities through temporary jobs, volunteering roles and learning activities within the creative industries. Networking with established professionals and prominent guests can also open up career pathways and reinforce the appeal of the host destinations (Gunawan & Anshori, 2019; Kelts, 2006; Lamerichs, 2013; Taylor, 2005).

Taken together, previous studies indicate that the benefits of Japanese pop culture events extend beyond visitor spending and direct economic impacts. They strengthen destination attractiveness, stimulate tourism demand, support local businesses, foster community engagement, and encourage interest in Japan as a tourist destination (Getz & Page, 2020; Kawamata et al., 2017; Seaton & Yamamura, 2015; Severino et al., 2024; Tajima et al., 2018). However, these benefits depend on effective stakeholder coordination, accessibility, cultural credibility, programme diversification, and integration with the host destination (Gunawan & Anshori, 2019; Lockstone-Binney et al., 2013; Popescu & Corbos, 2012).

2.2 Negative impacts and challenges of Japanese pop culture events

Alongside their substantial benefits, Japanese pop culture events entail a range of negative impacts and management challenges. Many are characteristic of large-scale gatherings and include rising prices, overloaded services, pressure on local infrastructure and environmental stress (Fredline et al., 2003; Getz & Page, 2020; Preuss, 2005; Raj & Musgrave, 2009; Ritchie & Adair, 2004). These events can cause tension between visitors and residents, lead to overcrowding, generate waste, and put pressure on local transport and hospitality services (Gursoy et al., 2020).

Cultural challenges also emerge when the local community poorly understands participants’ practices and aesthetics. In contexts where residents are unfamiliar with Japanese pop culture, events may be associated with misunderstandings or negative stereotypes (Severino, 2022). Participants can become socially isolated from local residents and economically detached from nearby businesses when they remain within the enclosed event

environment, rather than engaging with the surrounding urban spaces (Taylor, 2005). Stereotypes persist, especially regarding cosplay, with cosplayers sometimes perceived as eccentric or childish and anime and manga associated with children’s animation, which can hinder broader social acceptance of fans and of Japanese pop culture more generally (Galbraith, 2019; Lamerichs, 2013; Rahman et al., 2012; Reysen et al., 2016; Yusof et al., 2023).

A further issue arises in the Japanese context, where scholars have questioned the implications of promoting Japanese pop culture as a central symbol of national identity. The prominence of anime, manga and cosplay in branding initiatives such as Cool Japan may overshadow the country’s historical and cultural diversity, promoting an oversimplified image of Japan abroad and eclipsing other dimensions of its heritage (Iwabuchi, 2015; Kirsch, 2016; Valaskivi, 2013). Responding to audience demand, event organisers may privilege the most popular elements of Japanese pop culture at the expense of more comprehensive representations. From a soft-power perspective, this creates a fundamental tension. Japanese popular culture can increase international visibility, stimulate curiosity, and promote cultural engagement, but its use as a promotional resource may also reduce Japan to a limited set of commercially successful images (Close, 2018; Iwabuchi, 2015; Valaskivi, 2013). The effectiveness of these events as instruments of cultural diplomacy depends on balancing popular and traditional cultural references and avoiding an excessively fictionalised or simplified image of Japan (Iwabuchi, 2015; Kirsch, 2016).

Logistical and organisational challenges intensify these problems as events grow in scale. Large crowds can overwhelm public transport and result in long queues for key services, such as access to exclusive merchandise or autograph sessions, while inconsistent management, insufficient volunteer training and failures in organisational communication can compromise the visitor experience (Bassolas et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024; Severino, 2022; Taylor, 2005). These shortcomings are sometimes linked to forms of “tribalism”, understood as decision-making driven by intense, shared passion within fan communities, in which enthusiasm and group identity may be prioritised over professional standards and external expectations (Greenacre et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2004). At the same time, strong fan identification can foster commitment, volunteering, creativity, social interaction, and the co-creation of event experiences (Jenkins, 2004; Lamerichs, 2013; Yamato, 2016). The challenge is to balance these community-driven strengths with professional standards, accessibility, organisational consistency, and programme

diversity to meet the expectations of broader audiences (Greenacre et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2024; Taylor, 2005).

Economic accessibility is another critical concern. Higher ticket prices and premiums on merchandise or exclusive experiences can restrict participation, especially for lower-income groups (Davies et al., 2023; Laing & Mair, 2015; National Endowment for the Arts, 2020). Escalating costs risk alienating participants and weakening the inclusive ethos of these events, reinforcing the need for efficient and culturally sensitive management.

Overall, the literature shows that Japanese pop culture events are shaped by four interconnected tensions: economic growth versus accessibility, cultural promotion versus representational simplification, community belonging versus social exclusivity, and fan-driven participation versus professional event management (Davies et al., 2023; Greenacre et al., 2013; Iwabuchi, 2015; Laing & Mair, 2015; Valaskivi, 2013). These tensions reinforce the conceptual framework adopted to interpret the Portuguese case.

3 Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Given the limited research on Japanese pop culture events in Portugal, this approach enabled a thorough examination of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of event organisers, participants, and other stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews ensured both rich accounts and sufficient thematic consistency to compare participant groups (Kallio et al., 2016). The aim was to obtain detailed insights from the main actors involved in planning, implementing and experiencing these events, and thus to develop a holistic understanding of their cultural and tourism-related implications. The final sample comprised twenty-two participants distributed across three groups: event organisers, other stakeholders and active participants, with confidentiality protected throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. A summary of the sample composition is presented in Table 1. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in or knowledge of Japanese pop culture events in Portugal. The sample comprised event organisers with direct responsibility for planning and delivering well-established events. Other stakeholders were drawn from the institutional, commercial, creative and community sectors within the Japanese pop culture event ecosystem. Event participants were selected for

their sustained engagement with these events, including cosplay and other forms of broader fan participation.

The sample was designed to capture a wide range of perspectives across the event ecosystem. It included organisers with direct responsibilities for planning and delivery, stakeholders representing institutional, commercial, and community sectors, and active participants with different levels of engagement in Japanese pop culture. This diversity allowed for an in-depth examination of the roles, motivations, and perceptions shaping these events in Portugal. The individual stakeholder categories were not intended to constitute separately saturated subsamples. Instead, participants from different institutional, commercial, creative, and community sectors were included to maximise the diversity of perspectives. The findings should therefore be interpreted as an exploratory comparison across the three participant groups, rather than as generalisable conclusions about specific stakeholder categories. The sample was considered adequate for the exploratory purpose of the study because it covered the three principal actor groups and incorporated organisational, institutional, commercial, creative, community, and participant perspectives relevant to the research question. Its adequacy was therefore assessed in terms of the breadth and informational relevance of the perspectives represented, rather than through a claim of formal saturation within each stakeholder subgroup.

Interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2020. The data therefore reflect Japanese pop culture events before the major disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, a context considered when interpreting the findings and discussed as a study limitation. Of the 22 participants included in this study, 13 took part in interviews conducted via videoconferencing platforms, while nine provided written responses. The oral interviews lasted approximately 52 minutes on average, ranging from approximately 21 to 161 minutes. The interviews and written responses were conducted in Portuguese. Quotations included in the manuscript were translated into English by the authors, with attention to preserving their original meaning. The semi-structured format ensured comparability across interviews while allowing flexibility to probe issues emerging in each conversation. The video-conference interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and subsequently transcribed in full. Written responses were prepared for analysis together with the interview transcripts.

The interview guide comprised forty-five questions, organised into three tailored versions corresponding to the three groups in the sample. Across these versions, questions addressed identification and role in the events,

Table 1: Summary of interview participants

Group	N	Description
Event organisers	3	Organisers of three major Japanese pop culture events in Portugal (<i>Iberanime</i> , <i>Umi Fest</i> , <i>Anisama</i>).
Other event stakeholders	7	Professionals from sectors linked to Japanese pop culture, including publishing, retail, media, content creation, artisan production, the Portuguese Cosplay Association, and the Embassy of Japan.
Active participants	12	Cosplayers (6) and general participants (6), categorised as enthusiastic, core fans, and casual fans.

responsibilities and objectives, promotional strategies, logistical challenges, audience and community engagement, and perceived cultural and tourism impacts. For cosplayers, additional questions focused on their experiences of competitions at national and international events.

Following full transcription of the video-conference interviews and preparation of the written responses for analysis, the material was examined using a deductive thematic content analysis approach. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently checked against the audio to verify the accuracy and completeness of the transcripts. The material was then imported into NVivo 14 and coded by the lead researcher. An initial coding framework was developed from the research objectives and the predefined analytical dimensions concerning event tourism, Japanese pop culture, cultural representation, community engagement, organisational challenges, and participant motivations. The coding framework was reviewed throughout the analytical process by comparing the predefined categories with the empirical material. Where necessary, closely related codes were grouped, category definitions were clarified, and the boundaries between overlapping themes were refined. During the analytical process, the coded material was systematically organised into thematic categories, and connections between themes and participant perspectives were examined. The material was subsequently compared across event organisers, other stakeholders, and active participants to identify recurring patterns, convergent perspectives, and differences between groups. The resulting thematic structure informed both the narrative presentation of the findings and the comparative synthesis presented in the tables.

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. Formal ethical approval was not required under the institutional regulations applicable at the time of data collection. Before participation, all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, the intended use of the data, confidentiality procedures, and their right to decline questions or withdraw from the study. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. The video-conference

interviews were audio- and video-recorded with the participants' explicit permission for transcription and analysis purposes. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription and reporting, and access to the data was restricted to the research team. All study participants were adults.

4 Results

4.1 Event organisers

Event organisers emphasise the marked global expansion and recognition of Japanese pop culture over the past two decades, particularly since around 2010, when iconic anime series such as *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto* brought this cultural universe into the mainstream and fuelled steady growth in related events. According to organisers of *Iberanime*, *Anisama* and *Umi Fest*, fans perceive Japanese pop culture as distinctive because of the “purity”, influence and positive messages embedded in complex narratives, the creative freedom associated with anime and manga, and the way these forms combine tradition and modernity. This combination of innovative, contemporary content with references to traditional Japan is seen as a key factor in attracting a broad spectrum of participants, from casual visitors to highly engaged fans.

The events are described as immersive spaces where the essence of Japanese pop culture is showcased through active participation. Organisers underline the centrality of cosplay, workshops, panels and other interactive activities that turn audiences into co-creators of the event experience, fostering a strong sense of community. These events also provide important platforms for the commercialisation of Japanese pop culture through exclusive merchandise and collectables. Organisers characterised the broader event audience as diverse in terms of gender and age, while perceiving young adults aged between 18 and 34 as a particularly prominent group. Attendance is primarily domestic, consisting mainly of locals and day

visitors. Although the international fan base has been growing steadily, the presence of international tourists at smaller events such as Anisama and Umi Fest remains residual, and these events continue to focus predominantly on local and national audiences.

Nevertheless, one event organiser highlighted the emerging tourism potential of these events: “In recent years, we have noticed young people coming from other countries, often because of international cosplay competitions. Every year, some of them also use the event as an ‘excuse’ to visit Portugal.”

Organisers perceived these events as contributing to local economic activity and enhancing the reputation of host regions. Iberanime, for example, has recorded annual participant growth of up to 30% and attracted increasing numbers of sponsors and partners. As one event organiser explained: “For local businesses, the event is important because hotels, restaurants and bars in the surrounding area become fully occupied.” Looking ahead, organisers are optimistic about future development, noting the strong emotional connection participants maintain with Japanese pop culture and the need for ongoing innovation, collaboration and greater inclusion of traditional cultural elements to sustain and broaden appeal. Closer relationships with institutions such as the Embassy of Japan are seen as crucial for offering more nuanced and accurate representations of Japan, beyond purely fictional portrayals. Overall, organisers view Japanese pop culture events as effective tools for promoting Japanese culture globally while generating benefits for both Japan and host destinations. They consistently emphasised the events’ cultural and economic value, with differences mainly reflecting event scale, available resources, and the capacity to attract international audiences. Table 2 summarises these findings, including organisers’ perceptions of audience profiles.

4.2 Other event stakeholders

The Embassy of Japan in Portugal provides an institutional perspective on Japanese pop culture events. It regards these events as key soft-power tools for promoting Japanese culture abroad, strengthening understanding of Japan’s traditions, society and values while reinforcing its image as a tourist destination. As one representative explained: “Japanese pop culture is associated with soft power. However, sometimes only the pop aspect is emphasised, and images from anime and manga become ‘the image’ of Japan”. Pop culture is deliberately used to generate curiosity and engagement, particularly in cul-

tural contexts distinct from Japan, such as Portugal, with social media playing a central role in reaching younger audiences. At the same time, the Embassy warns that an exclusive focus on anime, manga and related content may overshadow Japan’s traditional heritage, emphasising the need to balance popular culture with more traditional cultural references to provide a more holistic representation of the country. As summarised in Table 3, these events are therefore framed as strategic tools of public diplomacy and cultural engagement. These findings suggest that Japanese pop culture events are perceived as instruments of soft power, while also revealing concerns about the possible simplification of Japan’s cultural image when popular culture is not balanced with traditional cultural references.

Beyond the Embassy’s view, other stakeholders, including publishers, retailers, media platforms, content creators, artisans and the cosplay association, offer complementary insights into the evolution and impacts of Japanese pop culture events in Portugal. They note that Japanese pop culture developed more slowly in Portugal than in countries such as France or Spain. Early interest was fuelled by iconic anime series such as *Heidi* and *Dragon Ball*, and a significant “boom” emerged around 2010. This boom coincided with the rise of larger, more commercially oriented events and the growing difficulty of sustaining smaller, fan-driven gatherings with limited resources. As the event landscape shifted, the participant base broadened, and the number of businesses involved increased, which stakeholders associated with economic opportunities for local commerce and cultural institutions. Stakeholders emphasise that these events foster a highly engaged, technologically savvy community in which cosplay is a central attraction, drawing both domestic and international participants. One stakeholder highlighted the participatory and social dimension of these events: “These activities attract fans and make them active participants. They also bring the community together, allowing people to meet friends, make new ones, try Japanese food, and have fun.”

From a business perspective, stakeholders underline that these events enhance the visibility of Portuguese companies operating within Japanese pop culture and create valuable promotional and commercial opportunities. Nevertheless, they express concern about the high costs of participation for firms and ticket prices that may limit accessibility and inclusiveness. As one stakeholder observed: “Greater diversification of the activities and easier access would be beneficial, since tickets are generally expensive for most young participants”. Looking ahead, stakeholders advocate greater diversification

Table 2: Summary of key themes from event organisers' interviews

Category	<i>Iberanime</i>	<i>Anisama</i>	<i>Umi Fest</i>
Japanese pop culture boom	Growth after 2010, driven by Dragon Ball.	Naruto marked the rise of Japanese pop culture.	Growth post-2010, following European trends.
What makes it special	Inspiring stories, positive messages, cultural complexity.	Creative freedom, diverse themes for all audiences.	Mix of tradition, modernity, and novelty.
Distinctive features	Immersive experience in exotic and distinct culture.	Focus on active participation and fan connection.	Cosplay as a unique element, connecting fans to the culture.
Tourist attraction	Growing international tourism, driven by cosplay and artists.	Mostly local tourism, gathering national community.	Mainly national tourism, with increasing international interest.
Participant motivations	Interaction with Japanese culture, cosplay, and panels.	Socialising and interactive anime activities.	Fan community, activities like cosplay.
Reasons to organise	Growth of Japanese pop culture in Portugal.	Decentralise events, create alternatives outside the capital.	Bring Japanese culture to Aveiro, diversifying event offerings.
Goals and experiences	Promote Japanese culture, cosplay, anime, and contests.	Foster fan community with participatory and dynamic events.	Provide unique cultural experiences in Aveiro, focus on cosplay.
Promotion methods	Social media, media coverage, and word of mouth.	Social media, universities, and direct marketing.	Social media, direct outreach in schools and universities.
Participant growth	30% annual growth, expanded to Lisbon and Porto.	Steady growth, four editions held by 2019.	Gradual growth since 2017, loyal fan base.
Perceived impact on destinations	Local economic impact, hotels and restaurants filled.	Creates cultural and economic opportunities for the community.	Boosts tourism in Aveiro, attracting new visitors.
Perceived event audience profile	Youth aged 18-34, connected to Japanese pop culture.	Young adult, national audience, mostly anime fans.	Youth aged 13-34, many engaged in cosplay.
Future outlook	Continuous growth with innovation and shared best practices.	Possible growth with new attractions and innovations.	Expansion possible with rising national and international interest.
Limitations	Difficulty attracting Japanese artists; costs.	Financial and space limitations; need for more support.	Limited budget, difficulty attracting major sponsors.
Suggestions for Japan relationship	Partnerships with Embassy and cultural exchanges with Japanese artists.	Build relations with Japanese entities and Embassy for exchanges.	Cultural partnerships with Embassy and travel agencies.
Event effectiveness	Essential for expanding and promoting Japanese culture.	Events are powerful tools to expand awareness of the culture.	Events effectively promote Japanese culture.
Japan image	Positive but limited to Japanese pop culture.	Partial, but sparks curiosity about Japan.	Positive mix of pop and tradition; positive introduction to Japan.

Table 3: Summary of key themes from Embassy of Japan interview

Category	Embassy of Japan
Promotion of Japanese pop culture in Portugal	Key tool for fostering cultural ties and diplomacy.
Japan's strategy for promoting its culture	Soft power through pop culture to engage foreign audiences.
Effectiveness of events to promote Japan	Highly effective for public diplomacy and cultural engagement.
Main promotional policies	Focus on social media, targeting younger audiences.
Potential of Japanese pop culture abroad	High potential due to the appeal of cultural differences.
Future outlook for these events	Optimistic, with growing interest and potential in Europe.
Strengthening Japan-Portugal ties	Events help deepen cultural ties and promote tourism to Japan.
Impact on Japan's image	Risk of overemphasising pop culture; balance with traditional aspects needed.

and innovation in programming, closer partnerships with Japanese media and event organisers and the systematic integration of participant feedback. Maintaining close collaboration with the Embassy of Japan and cultivating long-term relationships with Japanese partners are viewed as key strategies for reinforcing cultural authenticity, strengthening credibility and sustaining the future growth of these events. Stakeholders converge in recognising the promotional and economic value of the events, but their accounts reveal a recurring tension between cultural authenticity, commercial expansion, and accessibility. These findings are synthesised in Table 4.

4.3 Japanese pop culture event participants

Among participants in Japanese pop culture events, cosplayers emerge as a particularly significant group in both casual and competitive contexts. Their elaborate costumes and character performances are central to the theatrical identity of these events and constitute a major visual attraction. The cosplayers interviewed come from diverse professional backgrounds and have, on average, around ten years of experience, with some beginning in the early 2000s. Their engagement extends beyond cosplay to include anime, manga, music and video games, indicating

Table 4: Summary of key themes from other event stakeholders' interviews

Category	Publisher	Retailer	Media platform	Online content creator	Artisan	Cosplay association
Effectiveness of events for promoting Japan	Effective for cultural promotion	Engages niche markets	Events drive global cultural interest	Helps spread Japan's culture globally	Effective for promoting pop culture	Engages youth and spreads culture globally
Main promotional channels	Social media, traditional media	Social media, store-based marketing	Social media, digital platforms	Social media, blogs, and websites	Social media, direct engagement	Social media, cosplay networks
Key elements attracting audiences	Creativity, stories in anime	Cosplay, gaming, merchandise	Anime and gaming across generations	Nostalgia for classic and modern anime	Visual and creative appeal	Strong visual appeal through cosplay
Characteristics of audience	Young, mixed-gender, diverse	Tech-savvy, gamers, cosplayers	Young, tech-savvy anime fans	Youth, participatory, curious about Japan	Creative, social, tech-savvy	Young, social, participatory
Potential for travel to Japan	Fans interested in Japan's culture	Travel interest driven by pop culture	Pop culture sparks interest in visiting Japan	Fans motivated by anime to visit Japan	High travel interest through fan culture	High travel interest due to pop culture
Main attractions at events	Anime narratives, iconography	Cosplay, merchandise, gaming	Cosplay, interactive experiences	Fan engagement, interactive activities	Cosplay, workshops, fan activities	Cosplay and creative engagement
Type of tourism	Primarily domestic, growing global interest	Mostly domestic, some international	Primarily local/national attendees	Primarily domestic, limited international	National tourists, rising international interest	Mostly domestic, but international interest increasing
Motivations to attend events	Social interaction, creative storytelling	Socialising, cosplay, gaming	Fandom engagement and interaction	Socialising and immersion in fandom	Cosplay, interactive workshops	Cosplay and social engagement
Key experiences offered	Cosplay, creative storytelling	Merchandise, gaming, cosplay	Interactive activities, fan engagement	Panels, cosplay, workshops	Cosplay, interactive experiences	Cosplay, fan-driven activities

[Continued]

Table 4: Continued

Category	Publisher	Retailer	Media platform	Online content creator	Artisan	Cosplay association
Perceived impact on the host economy	Increases local business visibility	Boosts sales and brand recognition	Boosts local economic activity	Boost to tourism and local businesses	Economic benefits, increased tourism	Boosts local economy and tourism
Future growth of events	Gradual growth through diversification	More investment needed for event content	Innovation needed for future growth	Gradual growth, more opportunities ahead	Growth through innovation and diversification	Support for smaller events needed
Do events promote a fictional or real image?	Fictional, but resonates with audiences	Mix of real and fictional aspects	Pop culture creates a fictionalised image	Mostly fictional, but authentic aspects exist	Mix of real and fictional Japan	Fictional but some authentic elements

deep immersion in Japanese pop culture and strong involvement in the fan community. One active participant illustrated the expansion of the Portuguese cosplay community: “When I joined the community around 2007 or 2008, there were perhaps only twenty people involved in events. Later, cosplay competition grew from around ten to forty participants.”

Alongside cosplayers, the study included fans with different levels of engagement, including casual fans, core fans, and enthusiastic fans. This group includes professionals from sectors such as tourism, arts, accounting, IT and multimedia, reflecting the diversity of the fan base. For many, anime is the primary reason for attending these events, followed closely by manga, and most have been involved in this cultural scene for more than a decade. Cosplayers are more likely to travel to international conventions, whereas casual and core fans generally restrict their participation to events held in Portugal, particularly Iberanime and Comic Con.

Motivations to attend, shared by cosplayers and non-cosplayers, centre on passion for Japanese pop culture, opportunities to socialise with like-minded fans and the welcoming, inclusive atmosphere of the events. Cosplay competitions and the breadth of activities offered (workshops, panels, interactive experiences) are identified as major attractions. Although the broader event audience was perceived as predominantly domestic, interviewees reported a noticeable increase in international attendees, especially at larger or competition-focused events. Event promotion relies predominantly on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, complemented by word-of-mouth circulation among fans and, in large events, traditional media. These accounts reveal strong fan-community dynamics characterised by shared iden-

tity, social interaction, creative participation, and a sense of belonging.

Participants perceived economic benefits for host destinations, particularly through expenditure on travel, accommodation, and merchandise, as well as increased visibility for Portuguese companies operating in the Japanese pop culture sector. At the same time, several challenges are identified, notably overcrowding at popular events and high-ticket prices, which participants perceived as limiting accessibility, particularly for younger attendees and those with constrained financial resources. Even so, participants express optimism about the future, advocating diversification of event content, greater integration of traditional Japanese cultural elements and improved accessibility through more competitive pricing strategies. Overall, participants regard these events as effective platforms for promoting Japanese culture internationally. Although the image of Japan presented is heavily shaped by fictional pop culture, they consider that these events can stimulate curiosity and encourage interest in visiting Japan to explore both its popular culture and broader cultural heritage. An active participant explained: “These events allow people to experience a little of what Japan is and decide whether they like it and want to know more. [...] They give participants a taste of what they enjoy and create an even stronger desire to visit Japan.” Participants consistently associate attendance with community belonging and cultural immersion, although their experiences differ in terms of mobility, frequency of attendance, and level of engagement. Table 5 synthesises these findings, including participants’ perceptions of audience profiles.

Table 5: Summary of key themes from event participants' interviews

Category	Cosplayers	Enthusiastic fans	Core fans	Casual fans
Frequency of Event Participation	Attend major events; some participate internationally.	2-5 events/year; some with Japan experience.	2 events/year; focus on <i>Iber-anime</i> and <i>Comic Con</i> .	1-2 events/year; mainly <i>Iber-anime</i> and <i>Comic Con</i> .
Motivations for Participation	Cosplay, competition, socialising, creative self-expression.	Anime, manga, cosplay, and workshops.	Socialising, discovering new anime/manga, community bonding.	Curiosity, new cultural experiences, anime-related shopping.
Motivation to Travel to Japan	Strong desire to visit, some already have.	Interested in visiting or returning to Japan.	Strong interest due to anime/manga.	Interested in Japan for culture and exploration.
Evolution of Japanese Pop Culture in Portugal	Boom post-2010; cosplay grew significantly after 2010.	Growth driven by internet, social media, and events.	Significant growth post-2010 with broader acceptance.	Slow start, but growth surged post-2010.
Elements Making Japanese Pop Culture Special	Cosplay, anime, manga, creative community.	Unique art style, deep narratives, variety of themes.	Depth and variety in anime/manga attract broad audience.	Anime/manga's unique, exotic appeal.
Interviewees' Perceptions of the Event Audience	Young, creative, passionate, involved in cosplay.	Enthusiastic, tech-savvy, deeply invested in pop culture.	Diverse group, mainly aged 13-25, strong community bonds.	Younger, casual fans exploring with curiosity.
Differentiation from Other Event Types	Highly interactive, encourages active participation and creativity.	Interactive workshops, cosplay, unique experiences.	Strong fan interaction and community engagement.	Diverse activities, merchandise, cosplay interactions.
Type of Tourism	Primarily national, but international visitors for competitions.	Mostly national, growing international attendance.	Primarily national, with limited international visitors.	Predominantly national, limited international presence.
Main Motivations of Participants	Passion for cosplay, competition, and Japanese culture.	Anime, manga, cosplay, community engagement.	Socialising, discovering new content, community bonding.	Curiosity, exploring unique cultural experiences.
Promotion and Marketing Channels	Social media, fan networks, event promotions.	Social media, niche online communities.	Social media, TV, radio, outdoor ads for large events.	Social media, word-of-mouth, limited TV promotion.
Potential Impacts on Host Destinations	Boosts local economy, promotes Japan-related businesses.	Positive social, economic, and cultural exchange impact.	Economic benefits for local businesses and tourism traffic.	Economic boost, increased exposure, slight concern about overcrowding.
Perceived Profile of Event Attendees	Predominantly young, creative, balanced gender representation.	Varied, from young students to professionals.	Mostly young, increasing presence of older attendees and families.	Younger, casual fans interested in Japanese culture.
Future Perspectives on Japanese Pop Culture Events	Positive, with hopes for traditional Japanese culture integration.	Optimistic, room for growth by diversifying content.	Hopeful but concerned about commercialisation and authenticity.	Hopeful for continued expansion and variety.

[Continued]

Table 5: Continued

Category	Cosplayers	Enthusiastic fans	Core fans	Casual fans
Effectiveness of Events in Promoting Japanese Culture	Highly effective for promoting pop culture and tourism.	Effective but needs more traditional culture integration.	Good promotion tool but needs authentic representation.	Effective for raising interest in Japan, especially among youth.
Do Events Promote a Real or Fictional Image of Japan?	Mostly fictional, focused on anime, manga, cosplay.	Blend of real and fictional, balanced portrayal.	Blend of real and exaggerated elements; pop culture focus overshadows tradition.	Mostly fictional but creates curiosity for authentic culture exploration.

5 Discussion

This study examined the perceived impacts of Japanese pop culture events in Portugal, where their role in tourism, cultural perception and local development remains under-researched. Using interviews with organisers, stakeholders and participants, it analysed how these events are perceived to shape individual experiences and wider regional processes.

Across the three groups, there is clear convergence around a small set of core elements. Organisers point to people, Japan and anime as defining both the content and the audiences of the events. Stakeholders similarly emphasise anime, Japan and the Portuguese market, underlining the need to respond to local demand while remaining aligned with Japanese cultural themes. Participants most frequently mention anime, cosplay and people, signalling strong personal engagement with these elements and with the social dimension of the gatherings.

The Portuguese fan base is predominantly composed of core fans, who usually attend two to three events per year, and a substantial segment of casual fans who participate once annually. According to the interviewees' perceptions, the broader event audience in Portugal is relatively young, with some interviewees reporting a substantial presence of attendees under the age of 18. This perceived audience profile contrasts with the older and more reserved fan culture described in the Japanese context. Portuguese fans are also less inclined to attend international events (Severino, 2022), although cosplayers regularly compete and support peers abroad.

Event promotion relies mainly on social media and other online platforms, complemented by word-of-mouth and, in larger events, traditional media. This pattern reflects the community's digital orientation but does not offset concerns about the high costs of attendance, which participants consider higher than at comparable events abroad. Stakeholders recognise the events as important promotional and business opportunities but also

acknowledge that the smaller scale of Portuguese events, relative to major international conventions, limits both the diversity of activities and international visibility.

Despite these constraints, interviewees described the events as offering diverse and engaging experiences. Cosplay competitions and other interactive activities were identified as central attractions that can foster a marked sense of community among participants and stakeholders. The involvement of the Embassy of Japan was perceived as contributing to cultural authenticity and supporting the articulation of popular and more traditional facets of Japanese culture. These findings can be interpreted through soft power and cultural diplomacy. The Embassy's involvement, the promotion of Japanese culture, and participants' reported curiosity about visiting Japan indicate that these events may contribute to the country's international projection through cultural attraction rather than direct political or economic influence (Close, 2018; Iwabuchi, 2015). At the same time, the frequent distinction made by interviewees between a fictionalised image of Japan and its broader cultural reality reflects the tension identified in critiques of Cool Japan. While anime, manga, and cosplay can increase visibility and stimulate tourism interest, an excessive emphasis on commercially successful pop-cultural images may oversimplify Japan's cultural diversity (Iwabuchi, 2015; Valaskivi, 2013). These findings suggest that the soft-power potential of such events depends on balancing popular and traditional cultural representations. They also indicate that, from an event tourism perspective, these events may contribute to enhancing regional appeal, mitigating seasonality, stimulating visitor flows, and strengthening destination image (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2020). The coordinated involvement of key actors, including local councils and cultural bodies, together with innovative and culturally authentic programming, may further reinforce these potential contributions (Getz, 2008; Getz & Page, 2020; Gursoy et al., 2020).

Table 6: Summary of benefits, opportunities, and corresponding strategies

Perceived benefits and opportunities	Corresponding strategies and actions
Promotion of Japanese culture and tourism	Strengthen Embassy involvement, feature Japanese artists and representatives.
Stimulus for entrepreneurship	Support new businesses, encourage smaller-scale events, reduce participation costs.
Business opportunities	Affordable participation for small businesses, diversified merchandise offerings.
Enhanced local cultural offering	Diversify event activities, emphasise traditional cultural content.
Educational and social value	Expand intercultural workshops and seminars, balance entertainment and education.
Potential visitor flows and economic contribution	Plan events during off-peak tourism seasons, geographically spread events.
Stakeholder promotional differentiation	Use exclusive content, media partnerships, leverage influencers.
Contribution to mitigating seasonality	Spread events across different times of year, regional distribution.
Encouragement of consumption	Feature limited-edition merchandise, unique collectables.
Participant involvement	Increase participant interaction, maintain community-organisier connections.

The main benefits and opportunities identified in the interviews are summarised in Table 6.

As organisers and the Embassy of Japan noted, promoting Japanese culture through pop events may serve cultural diplomacy and tourism simultaneously, offering representations that go beyond entertainment. Embassy participation was perceived as important for ensuring more accurate portrayals of Japanese culture, while a stronger presence of Japanese artists could further enhance cultural value and deepen participants' understanding of Japan.

Stakeholders highlighted the perceived commercial benefits of these events, particularly opportunities for product sales and direct contact with specific consumer segments. Supporting small businesses through affordable participation fees and a wider variety of merchandise may therefore help broaden their participation in these events. The reported interest in exclusive items, such as collectables, supports the importance of maintaining a diverse merchandise offer.

At the same time, events in Portugal continue to face challenges related to scale. Stakeholders and participants stress the need to diversify event content, combining traditional and popular Japanese cultural activities. Such diversification can broaden educational value, reinforce positive social perceptions and provide deeper insight into Japanese traditions.

Perceived economic impacts associated with visitor flows were frequently mentioned by interviewees. Stakeholders suggested that scheduling events during

low-tourism periods and differentiating promotion, for example through unique content and media partnerships, could support local economic activity and strengthen competitive positioning. Seasonality is another critical dimension: participants perceived that spreading events across the year and ensuring their geographical dispersion could help distribute visitor numbers, reduce overcrowding, and promote more balanced regional development.

Participant involvement emerged as a cross-cutting theme. Interviewees expressed a desire for greater opportunities for interaction, with cosplayers in particular emphasising the importance of strong connections between the community and organisers. Increasing opportunities for interaction and incorporating community feedback into planning were seen as essential strategies for fostering inclusion and belonging. These findings can also be interpreted through fan-community dynamics and tribalism. The strong emphasis on shared identity, socialisation, cosplay, community-organisier relationships, and participant involvement illustrates how strong fan identification can foster creativity, co-creation, commitment, and belonging (Brown, 1997; Jenkins, 2004; Lamerichs, 2013). However, the findings also suggest a managerial tension between responding to the expectations of highly engaged core fans and ensuring accessibility, programme diversity, and relevance for broader audiences. Rather than being inherently negative, tribalism should be understood as an ambivalent community dynamic whose benefits depend on professional event management and inclusive decision-making (Greenacre et al., 2013).

The temporal context of the data should also be considered. The COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted the events sector and accelerated experimentation with virtual and hybrid formats, technological innovation, crisis management, and organisational resilience (Dragin-Jensen et al., 2022; Hooshmand et al., 2023; Liu-Lastres & Cahyanto, 2023). Some operational aspects identified in the interviews, including event delivery, audience interaction, and digital engagement, may therefore have evolved since data collection. Nevertheless, the principal findings of this study concern enduring cultural and social dynamics, particularly fan-community belonging, cultural authenticity, accessibility, stakeholder collaboration, destination promotion, and the balance between popular and traditional representations of Japan. These dimensions remain relevant beyond the pre-pandemic context, although further empirical research is needed to examine how they have evolved.

Overall, the findings suggest that Japanese pop culture events may contribute to cultural understanding, perceived economic opportunities, and stronger social ties within fan communities. Implementing the strategies identified in Table 6 could strengthen these potential contributions and support the role of such events in cultural tourism and local and regional development in Portugal.

6 Conclusion

This study examined how event organisers, other stakeholders, and active participants perceive the cultural, tourism, economic, and social impacts of Japanese pop culture events in Portugal. The findings indicate broad agreement that these events may contribute to cultural exchange, visitor flows, local consumption, fan-community engagement, and increased interest in Japan. However, these potential benefits depend on event scale, accessibility, programme diversity, cultural authenticity, stakeholder coordination, and the capacity to reach audiences beyond established fan communities.

Theoretically, the study shows that Japanese pop culture events operate through three interconnected dynamics. First, they function as event tourism resources with the potential to enhance destination visibility, stimulate visitor flows, and support local economic activity. Second, they act as instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy, while potentially simplifying Japan through commercially dominant representations of

anime, manga, and cosplay. Third, they depend on fan-community dynamics that foster belonging, creativity, and co-creation, but may also generate tensions between community-centred participation, accessibility, and professional event management. From a practical perspective, organisers should balance popular and traditional cultural content, diversify programmes, incorporate participant feedback, and address accessibility concerns such as high-ticket prices. Tourism marketers should leverage fan communities' strong digital presence and link events to wider destination experiences. Policymakers and institutional partners can support regional dispersal, off-peak scheduling, the participation of smaller businesses, and stronger cooperation with Japanese cultural organisations.

Limitations include the exclusive focus on Portugal, the use of qualitative methods, and the temporal context of the data collection. As interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2020, the findings primarily reflect the pre-pandemic configuration of Japanese pop culture events and do not capture later developments in event delivery, digital engagement, audience expectations, and organisational resilience. Although the findings remain relevant for understanding the underlying cultural, social, tourism, and fan-community dynamics of these events, their operational implications should be interpreted cautiously in the post-COVID context. Future research should update this evidence through post-pandemic interviews, event observations, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs examining changes in participation, management practices, technological use, and economic impacts. Overall, the findings suggest that Japanese pop culture events may contribute to cultural tourism and local development in Portugal, although these potential contributions remain context-dependent and contingent on accessibility, cultural credibility, professional management, and effective stakeholder collaboration.

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