

Perceptions of ASEAN Youth Towards Japan: Impact on the Japanese Economy

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Keywords

ASEAN; soft power; youth; perceptions; Japan; anime; culture; students

Abstract

In exerting soft power to pursue its economic interests in Southeast Asia, Japan has been challenged by its regional rivals. In retaining its position, Japan needs to win the hearts and minds of ASEAN youths, a generation moving toward the middle class with significant purchasing power. Hence, a three-month online survey and a series of focus group discussions were conducted to gather information and perspectives about Japan from 222 youth respondents from the ten ASEAN countries. It was found that ASEAN young generations have a good impression of Japan and Japanese people, even though most of them have never been to Japan or personally interacted with a Japanese person. This perception has been built most effectively by Japanese popular culture, including animation and manga. However, youth development and exchange programs, and interactions with Japanese people are less influential factors, especially for those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, exposures to Japanese products and services to ASEAN young generations have not only contributed to the Japanese economy but also contributed to the positive perception toward the country. Given tighter government budgets, streamlining Japan's soft power strategy will help it win over ASEAN youths for its future economic prosperity.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, Japan has adopted soft power to change and improve the way people of ASEAN perceive the nation that was once an imperialist force that dominated much of the region during World War II. Past studies have been conducted to measure the perceptions of ASEAN people towards Japan. One study was conducted by the Chicago Council on Global

Affairs to measure how ASEAN people perceive the appeal/quality of Japanese products, and Japan's Human Capital Soft Power (Whitney & Shambaugh, 2009). Think-tanks such as the ASEAN Studies Centre recently published a survey report on the ASEAN population, with themes such as Regional Outlook and Development, and Perceptions of Trust (Tang, 2019). These studies, however, do not

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differentiate between youth and the other age groups. ASEAN member states collectively have more than 600 million people and a combined GDP of about USD 2 trillion, which makes it an attractive market for various goods and services. The region has grown at a rate of about 5% annually over the last 20 years and is poised to become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2030, behind the US, China, and the European Union, and with more than 60% of the population forming the middle class (Kwok, 2018).

According to the first ASEAN Youth Development Index, there was about 213 million youth across the 10 ASEAN member states in 2016, with numbers projected to swell to more than 220 million by 2038 (ASEAN, 2017). ASEAN youth will eventually enter the workforce and thus form a large part of the middle class with considerable purchasing power to attain products and services from countries such as Japan and consequently, impact their economy. Hence, an understanding of how ASEAN youth perceive Japan today is crucial in securing economic opportunities of tomorrow. This study could assist current Japanese policymakers in refining their soft power approaches to influence the ASEAN population to favor Japan in their daily economic decisions and national policies.

This study on the 'Perceptions of ASEAN Youth Towards Japan' will meet three aims. The first is to examine the extent to which Japanese soft power has been successful in meeting its interests in Southeast Asia, particularly on the economic front. Trade with ASEAN countries accounted for approximately 15% of Japan's trade figures in 2017, and imports from ASEAN countries to Japan included manufactured products such as electronics, machinery, and textiles (ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade and Tourism, 2017). The second aim is to determine the extent which Japanese soft power, in the form of Foreign Aid, Culture and Youth engagement activities, has shaped ASEAN youth perspectives of Japan and Japanese people.

The third aim is to evaluate how Japanese Soft Power has a direct or indirect effect on

Japan's economic development, which can be in the form of increased consumerism of Japanese services and products, as well as tourism.

The collection of data was carried out in two stages over three months period. The first stage was online surveys targeted at ASEAN youth. A total of 222 respondents from all 10 ASEAN countries took part in the survey. In line with the ASEAN Secretariat's definition of Youth, the online survey was targeted at people who fit the following profile: (1) Citizen of an ASEAN Member State, (2) Age between 18 to 35 years' old, (3) Various backgrounds, and (4)

Able to understand and converse in English, as this study was only conducted in English due to a lack of resources to collect data in the various ASEAN local languages.

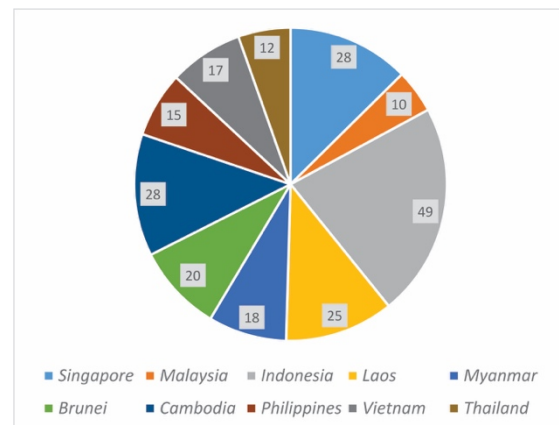


Figure 1. Number of Online Survey Respondents (Source: Author's compilation)

Fig.1 shows that each ASEAN country had at least 10 respondents, the least number of respondents were from Malaysia (10 youth), while most were from Indonesia (49 youth).

The second stage of data collection was group interviews in the form of focus group discussions, where questioning a group of respondents would enable a deeper understanding of the motivations and thoughts behind their survey responses, which may be reflective of the sentiments of their ASEAN peers.

Indonesian youth were selected to participate in the Focus Group Discussions which lasted for around 90 minutes. There were a total of three Focus Group Discussions.

Indonesia was chosen because it is home to the largest youth population in ASEAN. As of 2015, there was about 64 million Indonesian youth aged between 15-29 years old who were better educated and wealthier than past generations. By 2035, the number is projected to increase to 70 million (Adioetomo, Posselt, & Utomo, 2014). As the largest ASEAN member state with the largest economy and youth population, Indonesian youth will come to possess substantial purchasing power owing to their country's potential economic growth and a widening middle class. Hence, analyzing and understanding Indonesian youth perspectives translates to understanding the majority of ASEAN youth, which can be useful to countries seeking to maximize their returns on soft power investment in Southeast Asia.

Japanese Soft Power and Engagement in Southeast Asia

According to Joseph Nye (2004), soft power is *a means for getting others to desire the same outcomes as you, by winning them over rather than forcing them to do what you want*. It is the ability to influence others to mirror your preferences and ideas.

According to Nye, a nation's soft power potentially is dependent on three main attributes: (1) political values – how governments should operate, (2) foreign policy – includes schemes such as foreign aid and grants, and (3) culture – both traditional and contemporary (Nye, 2004).

The effective use of soft power tools can enhance a country's standing with others, achieve its foreign policy objectives, and help it recover from foreign policy missteps that may have eroded trust. In this study, three facets of Japanese Soft Power were examined: (1) Official Development Assistance, (2) culture, and (3) youth development and exchange programs.

These three aspects have been selected as they are the most visible forms of soft power demonstrated by Japan and thus, the general public would be familiar with or have been involved in one or more of these aspects.

Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Japanese ODA funds fall under two categories: (1) Aid Grants, and (2) Yen Loans. Aid grants are funds donated to the recipient countries which do not need to repay the amount, while Yen loans are monies that will need to be repaid to Japan with interest. The Philippines have used ODA funds to pay for massive infrastructure and development projects, such as the construction of power plants, transportation, and telecommunications networks, and also in the construction and rehabilitation of about 12,500 elementary schools and 4,500 secondary schools between 1997 to 2006 as part of the Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP) - aimed at improving access to education for the rural poor and marginalized (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2013). These projects have benefitted the livelihoods of various communities and made the Philippines a more attractive place for foreign investors. Such developments in the Philippines and other poorer countries in Southeast Asia would have been slower, or not started at all, without the Japanese ODA funds.

Technical Cooperation involves the training of locals in the ODA recipient countries in skills that would help them deliver and sustain the project outcomes. Training can take place either in Japan through development scholarships, or locally in the ODA recipient country – the teachers of the TEEP project were trained locally, where its purpose was to improve the quality of math and science teachers in the rural areas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2006). In Cambodia, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) set up the Cambodia-Japan Cooperation Centre, located in the Royal University of Phnom Penh, to teach the Cambodian professionals the Japanese language and way of conducting business (Yabe, 2009).

This center also serves as the nexus in Cambodia for development scholarships sponsored by Japan to pursue higher education,

and scholarship recipients are required to return to Cambodia to aid in its development upon completion of studies.

To support and sustain projects in the ODA recipient countries, JICA would send Japanese volunteers who possess the required expertise and motivation under its Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) program. Since its inception in 1965, there have been more than 40,000 volunteers sent to over 88 developing countries to render technical assistance and for the volunteers to widen their perspectives of the world, as well as promote mutual understanding among foreign countries (Okabe, 2016). In Laos, JOCV have been deployed to assist projects in fields such as Agriculture, Education, Health and Sports (JICA, 2019).

Culture

Japanese popular culture has dispersed countless icons that have been followed by children and adults for decades, and its most prominent exports include Japanese animation (anime) in TV shows and movies, and Comics (Manga). The 2017 Anime industry report stated that the Anime market in 2016 was worth more than USD18 billion, including the United States, Thailand, Canada, China, and New Zealand as some of its top export markets (Association of Japanese Animations, 2018). The large market value corresponds to a large consumer base of fans who religiously follow the progress of various anime and manga series.

Traditional Japanese culture, which includes the tea ceremony, form of literature (haiku), and bonsai, represent 'Japanese heritage rooted in history'. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), through its diplomatic missions and Japanese Associations abroad, organize large scale events in major cities to promote Japanese traditional culture, such as the Summer Festival (Hinamatsuri) organized in Singapore attracting thousands of locals to experience both Japanese traditional and popular culture through music, apparel, and performances (Japan Association, 2019).

Youth Development and Exchange Programs

One of the first Japan-ASEAN youth development and exchange programs is the annual Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP). It is the longest-running, large-scale youth exchange program that Japan has with ASEAN youth and thus, considerable resources have gone into running this programme over the years. Started in 1974 and funded by the Cabinet Office of Japan, the purpose of SSEAYP is to promote friendship and mutual understanding among the youth of ASEAN and Japan and cultivate their leadership skills so that they can contribute to their society.⁶ Annually, about 350 youths go through the program and today, there are thousands in their alumni network. These high performing youths may eventually end up in influential positions in the public and private sectors, both of which may benefit Japanese policymakers and businessmen in their dealings should they have a positive perception of Japan and the Japanese.

Universities and high schools also conduct their student exchanges with their ASEAN counterparts through 'study abroad' programs for Japanese students to study at foreign universities, and ASEAN students to Japanese universities. The University of Tokyo's USTEP program partners with multiple universities across many regions, including ASEAN, to attract exchange students to enroll in some of their courses (University of Tokyo, 2017). These exchange programs offer opportunities for Japanese and ASEAN students to mingle and learn from one another, forming personal relationships and a better understanding of different cultures.

Result and Discussion

The online survey comprised of 19 questions completed by 222 respondents, is presented along with the data from the group interviews and explanations for the survey responses. For

all rating-based questions, 'one' represents the least, while 'ten' represents the most.

Impressions of Japan

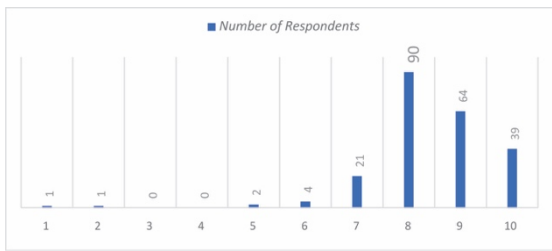


Figure 2. Rate Your Impression of Japan (Source: Author’s compilation)

Figure 2 illustrates the respondent’s impression of Japan. The majority of the respondents (193 out of 222) gave their impression of Japan a rating of '8' and above, which is deemed as positive. Some respondents gave a fair rating of between '5' to '7' (27 respondents), while two respondents gave a rating of '1' and '2'. Fig 3 illustrates a breakdown of the 193 respondents based on their country of origin.

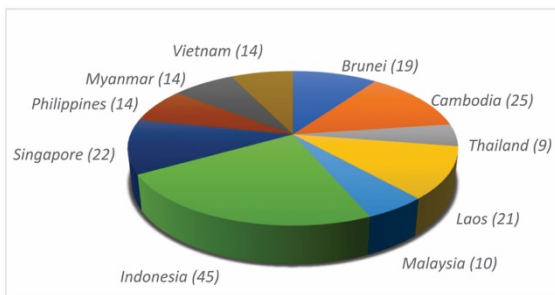


Figure 3. Breakdown by Nationality (Source: Author’s compilation)

Among the 193 respondents, Indonesian youths are the majority with 45 respondents, followed by Cambodia (25), Singapore (22), and Laos (21). It is evident that all ASEAN countries are represented by the 193 respondents with a positive impression of Japan.

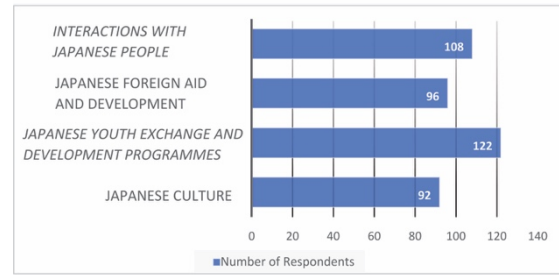


Figure 4. What helped you form your impression?

(Source: Author’s compilation)

Fig. 4 (above) shows the top four factors that shaped the respondent’s impressions of Japan. Respondents were permitted to select more than one option. Fig. 5 indicates that 'Japanese Youth Development and Exchange Programs' is the top-ranked factor with 122 votes, followed by Interactions with 'Japanese People' at 108 votes, 'Japanese Foreign Aid and Development' at 96 votes and finally, 'Japanese Culture' at 92 votes. While 'Japanese Culture' ranks the lowest in this study, it is important to note that exposure to Japanese culture could also transpire when ASEAN youth undertake 'Youth Development and Exchange Programs', and in their interactions with Japanese people.

As respondents could pick more than one factor, some had picked two, three, or all four of the top factors, while others had picked the "Others" to include their own additional factors. This explains why some respondents who indicated 'Japanese Youth Exchange and Development Programs' also indicated 'Japanese Culture' and 'Interactions with Japanese People' in their survey responses. This does not pose a problem with the synthesis of results as the intent of this question was to ascertain the factors that would shape a youth’s impression of a given subject matter, rather than rank the factors according to the particular one youths find the most popular or effective.

Japanese Youth Development and Exchange Programs

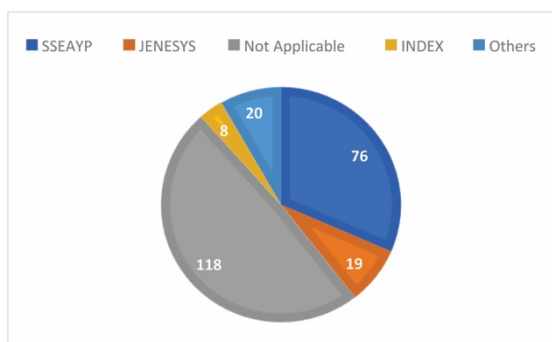


Figure 5. Youth Programs Participated (Source: Author’s compilation)

118 respondents, almost half of the total number, indicated that they had not been part of any Japanese youth exchange program. 76 survey respondents cited *The Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Programme* (SSEAYP) as a ‘Japanese Youth Development and Exchange Program’ that they had participated in. It is noted that youth exchange and development programs inherently facilitate interactions between Japanese youth and foreign participants. As this question also allows multiple options, several respondents who indicated SSEAYP as an exchange programme they had participated in, also indicated other exchange programs such as JENESYS; thus, the numbers are seen in Fig. 6 may have been inflated by the same group of respondents who had undergone multiple Japanese youth development and exchange programs. Furtherly, most of the Indonesian youth in the group interviews were part of the 118 respondents who had not participated in these exchange programs, had not heard of SSEAYP, JENESYS or any other exchange programs. This may indicate that such exchange programs are only known to or accessible to a certain group of youths.

These exchange programs require a good grasp of the English Language for participants

to communicate effectively with their foreign counterparts and learning English is a privilege not many young people in ASEAN have access to. If Japan’s soft power strategy is to influence as many youths as possible, exchange programs such as SSEAYP and JENESYS have very limited reach as they only involve a few hundred youths per year, out of about 213 million ASEAN youths today (ASEAN, 2019).

Interactions with Japanese People

Many respondents who indicated ‘Interactions with Japanese People’ in the survey participated in the youth exchange programs. Among the group interviewees, only a handful of them had personally encountered Japanese people, while some others formed their impressions, positive and negative, based on what they saw Japanese people do and say on social media via their posts and videos. Interacting with Japanese people, while a powerful way to form impressions, is a limited opportunity for many ASEAN youths. Without personal experience, they would have to rely on news and social media reports of Japanese people, and their actions for the local communities.

Japanese Foreign Aid and Development

Japanese Foreign Aid and Development came in third with 96 respondents. Of these 96 respondents: (1) 23 belong to the 18-22 age group, (2) 33 belong to the 23-27 age group, (3) 32 belong to the 28-31 age group, and (4) 8 belong to the 32-35 age group. Collectively, the majority of the respondents – 65 in total – are between the ages of 23 to 31 years old. This age group represents the ASEAN youth who have either recently graduated from tertiary education or have spent a few years in the workforce.² A majority of respondents do not deem the Japanese foreign aid and development initiatives as something that can influence their impression of Japan, since only

² ASEAN youth attend tertiary education between the ages of 18-22 years old and pursue a four-year program. Hence, from 23 years old onwards, they would enter the workforce.

96 respondents out of a total of 222 thought so – about 43%. In the three group interviews with the Indonesian youths, while 23 of them indicated an awareness of such initiatives, only 7 of them stated that it would affect their perception of Japan. The other 31 group interviewees mentioned that even if they were aware, it would not affect how they view Japan. Most of the students were also unaware that the Jakarta MRT, which was recently open for a trial session, was funded with Japanese ODA loans in an agreement signed in November 2006 (JICA, 2019). Their indifference to the Japanese foreign aid and development initiatives could be because the respondents were from the higher socioeconomic class who do not require government assistance, thus would not have benefited from such Japanese aid initiatives. With regards to Japanese ODA loans for high profile infrastructure such as the Jakarta MRT, the youth may view such projects as mainly local endeavors spearheaded by Indonesians themselves and that the ODA loans were just money borrowed to fund the projects, not an altruistic gesture from the Japanese.

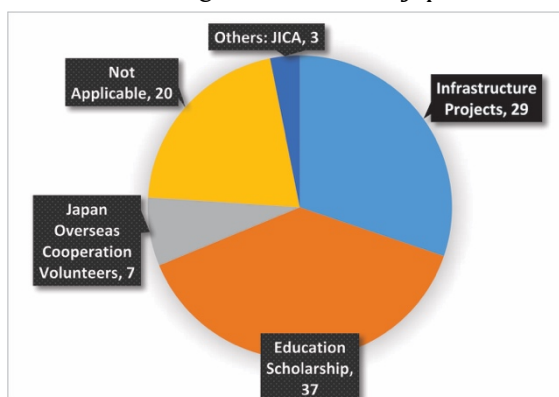


Figure 6. Japanese Foreign Aid initiatives Respondents know of and/or have benefited from.

(Source: Author’s compilation)

Fig. 6 illustrates the breakdown of foreign aid initiatives that the 96 respondents know of or have benefited from. 20 respondents indicated that this question is ‘Not Applicable’ to them, possibly an indicator that they do not understand or may have misread the question. Only seven respondents indicated that they have heard of or benefited from the Japan

Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, as mentioned, the respondents were unlikely to be beneficiaries of government assistance programs that involved these volunteers. Three respondents indicated ‘JICA’ under the Others option, suggesting that they have heard of JICA and its development projects. 29 respondents indicated ‘Infrastructure Projects’. From these respondents, nine of them were in the 18-22 age group, while the other 20 respondents were 23 years old and above.

This may suggest that older working ASEAN youth are more aware of Japanese foreign aid initiatives compared to the younger students, who may lack the interest or time to take note of these things. 37 respondents, the largest number, indicated ‘Education Scholarships’ – referring to fully-funded opportunities to pursue a university education in Japan. Out of the 37 respondents, only four of them were in the 18-22 age group, while the rest were 23 years old and above. Youths above 23 years old who have completed their studies or are in the workforce may be on the lookout for scholarship opportunities to pursue postgraduate education abroad, thus they would have become aware of these Japanese scholarships. It is also likely these youths may already have received the scholarships and completed their studies in Japanese universities. In contrast, the youth in the 18-22 age group are already enrolled and studying, thus they would not be searching for scholarships until they are about to graduate. For the group interviewees, 11 of them had heard of Japanese scholarships being offered to Indonesian youth from their friends who were actively looking for scholarships to further their studies.

Japanese foreign aid and development appear to be invisible to ASEAN youth, who may not even know that essential infrastructure such as MRT systems were funded by ODA loans. Younger youth between the ages of 18-22 appear less knowledgeable about Japanese foreign aid initiatives, while most of the youth regardless of age stated that Japanese foreign aid and development efforts do not affect their

perceptions of Japan. Hence, foreign aid does not appear to play a significant or crucial part in the Japanese soft power strategy.

Japanese Culture

Japanese culture received votes from 92 respondents. This category itself covers a wide range of sub-categories, which fall under either traditional or popular culture. For this study, only the top three sub-categories from both popular and traditional culture shall be elaborated on, which are Japanese cuisine, and Japanese cultural media products.

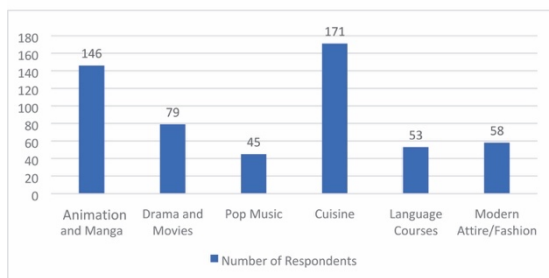


Figure 7. Consumption of Japanese Popular Culture Products
(Source: Author’s compilation)

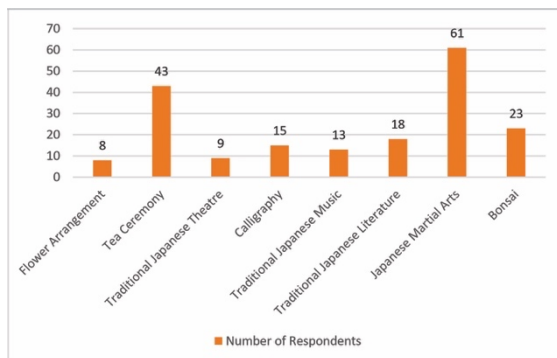


Figure 8. Consumption of Japanese Traditional Products
(Source: Author’s compilation)

Japanese Cuisine

Japanese cuisine is popular across different age groups. The group interviewees noted that most of them have tried Japanese cuisine, and

cited 'HokBen'³ as the Japanese restaurant they most frequently visited, for its savory and affordable meals. They became interested to try Japanese cuisine because they have been featured in many of the animation productions, manga, dramas, and movies. The characters are often seen enjoying Japanese cuisines such as sushi and ramen.

They also mentioned that Japanese foods have an interesting look and that it was easy to find Japanese restaurants in Jakarta as many malls have them. A large number of Japanese restaurants can be attributed to two factors. The first factor is the large Japanese diaspora living in Jakarta, thus these restaurants cater to their dietary preferences for their own national foods, and the second is the high popularity of Japanese cuisine with the general public. A survey conducted in 2014 which involved 500 respondents aged between 10 to 59 years old from Jakarta reported that 50.4% of them chose Japanese as the most favored foreign cuisine (Nippon, 2016).

The high number of votes received for Japanese cuisine cannot be seen on its own, as the group interviews strongly suggest that curiosity and interest to try Japanese foods were triggered by other factors, which are elaborated in subsequent paragraphs.

Japanese Cultural Media Products Animation & Manga

Japanese animation and manga enjoy a large viewership among the younger age group of 18 to 31 years old, with an average of 44 votes between them. The group interviewees shared that they usually watched their favorite *anime* online via streaming websites, and on Japanese channels such as Animax.⁴ The language was not a barrier for them as subtitles in English and Bahasa Indonesia – the national language of Indonesia, are usually included in the animation dramas and movies. In Jakarta, manga is also

³ HokBen is a popular local Indonesian fast-food chain selling Japanese 'Bento' (Packaged Meals) that first started in Jakarta. Its founders and staff are Indonesian nationals, with no Japanese involvement in the formation and running of this company.

⁴ Animax is a Japanese channel that features only Japanese Animation movies and dramas.

translated into Bahasa Indonesia and can be bought at bookstores and on websites such as Tokopedia.

Dramas and Movies

Japanese channels such as '*Waku Waku Japan*⁵ was cited by the group interviewees as their channel of choice, as it features interesting dramas and movies that both have subtitles and are dubbed in Bahasa Indonesia. They also used online streaming websites to watch dramas and movies that were not shown on the channels. Alongside dramas and movies, the interviewees also mentioned that they watched documentaries and travel programs on *Waku Waku Japan*, where various aspects of Japan such as its natural landscapes, culture, and food are shown.

Commonalities in Japanese Cultural Media Products

These two sub-categories facilitate the conveyance of information to a mass audience who, just by watching Japanese animation, drama, movies, and reading manga are able to know details about Japan such as its history, people and culture. In my group interviews, most of the group interviewees had neither been to Japan nor interacted with Japanese people, so they expected these Japanese shows to convey accurate information about Japan and Japanese people. However, they were able to describe in detail the various landmarks and places of interest in Tokyo, the setting of many of these shows. Seeing these places in Japanese shows had also piqued their interest to visit Japan one day to see those places in person.

The shows also greatly impact on how ASEAN youths view Japanese people. A survey question asked respondents to rate their impression of Japanese people, with the results illustrated in Fig. 10 below.

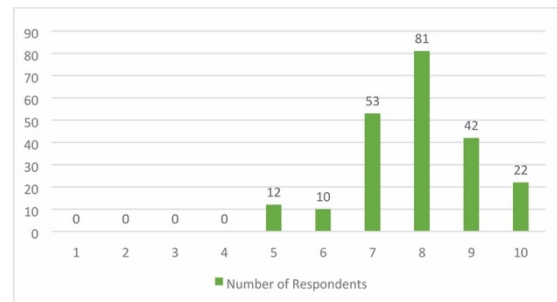


Figure 9. The Impression of Japanese People
(Source: Author's compilation)

The impression of Japanese people is also largely positive, with 145 respondents that gave a rating of '8' or higher. Out of these 145 respondents, 78 of them had never been to Japan before, yet they had a positive impression of Japanese people. The group interviewees stated that while most of them had neither been to Japan nor interacted with Japanese people, they formed their impressions of Japanese people based on how they have been portrayed on the Japanese shows. Group interviewees used words such as hardworking, polite and 'never say quit' when asked to describe Japanese people, based on how protagonists in various animation have overcome seemingly impossible odds through hard work and tenacity, and how they are polite to their elders.

In 2015, the viewership of Animax hit 11.2 million people in Southeast Asia, and this is only for Animation (Media Business Asia, 2016). This figure does not take into account the countless more who watch the Japanese shows online and on other channels. Hence, the actual number of ASEAN youth that watches Japanese shows could easily be millions more. For the majority of ASEAN youth who have not been to Japan and not met a Japanese person, Japanese shows offer them an idea of what Japan and Japanese people could be like, thus shaping their perceptions.

⁵ Waku Waku Japan is an entertainment channel that features Japanese dramas and movies for audiences in Asia.

Other Key Insights from Group Interviews

The group interviews have revealed other key insights on how ASEAN youth have formed perceptions without going to Japan or interacting with Japanese people.

The first factor was 'Peer Influence'. The group interviewees shared that part of their current perceptions of Japan was also shaped by their friends and family members who had been to Japan, as tourists, students or as scholarship holders, who would buy them souvenirs and shared their experiences in Japan.

The second factor was 'Family Influence' – parents/grandparents who provided the opportunity for the youth to interact with Japanese products and services. Japan has been the major producer of consumer electronics such as televisions, radios and electronic components since the 1960s (Takahashi, 2019), and in 1991, Japan's share of consumer electronics production was 41%, in contrast to the USA which only produced 12% of the world's consumer electronics (World Technology Evaluation Center, 1995). Hence, Japanese consumer electronics were commonplace in Southeast Asian households. The generation of youth between the 1960s and the 1990s would have only tried Japanese consumer electronics and developed an impression of those products. Some from that generation became parents of the current generation, which includes the group interviewees who related that they had formed a good impression of Japanese products in general, describing them as 'reliable', 'high quality' and 'good value'. Their parents' purchase of Japanese products meant that they were able to try the products out themselves and then formed their perceptions.

Impact of ASEAN Youth Perceptions on the Japanese Economy

In 2015, the bilateral trade between ASEAN and Japan reached USD238 billion (Wan, 2018). ASEAN is also a valuable source of tourists to

Japan. According to the Japan Tourism Board, the number of tourist arrivals in 2018 from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam added up to 417,001 visitors who came as tourists, business visitors and for other purposes, and they made up about 11% of the total number of tourists from Asia (Japan Tourism Board, 2018). This study has examined how Japanese soft power has influenced ASEAN youth perceptions of Japan, and it now examines how these youth perceptions impact the Japanese economy. The aspects of Japanese economy focused on for this study travel to Japan for reasons including tourism and business, and the purchase of Japanese products and services.

Travel to Japan

120 out of 222 respondents, more than half, had not been to Japan for tourism or business. This does not take into account the youth who had been to Japan for other reasons such as Youth exchange programs and scholarships, as the intent of this question was to see the number of youth who had been on self-funded or work-related trips to Japan. 79 of those 120 respondents were below the age of 27 years old, mostly students, or new to the workforce. The lack of funds to visit Japan was a likely factor, as group interviewees who had been to Japan with their families cited overall travel costs as a significant factor in deciding a travel destination.

According to the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO), the average expenditure in Japanese Yen (JPY) per traveler per stay for 2017 was, in descending order: Vietnam (183,236 JPY), Singapore (164,281 JPY), Malaysia (135,750 JPY), Indonesia (129,394 JPY), Thailand (126,569 JPY), and the Philippines (113,659 JPY) (Japan National Trade Organisation, 2018). Hence, the average expenditure of ASEAN travelers to Japan was about 142,148 JPY, comparable to the average international tourist spending per stay was 153,921 JPY, forming a substantial part of the overall tourism receipts. This suggests a consumption trend that ASEAN youths would

follow once they had graduated and accumulated enough funds to bring themselves to Japan and stimulate the Japanese economy.

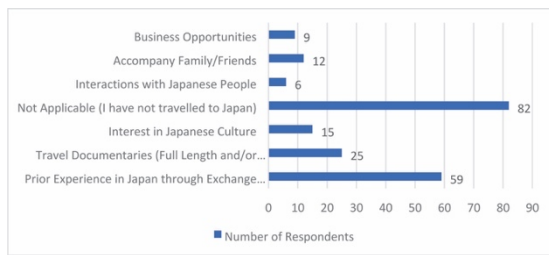


Figure 10. Factors That Influenced Travel to Japan
(Source: Author’s compilation)

Fig.10 shows that the highest factor is *Prior Experience in Japan* through Exchange Programme with 59 votes. This is followed by *Travel Documentaries* (25 votes), *Interest in Japanese Culture* (15 votes), *Accompany Friends/Family* (12 votes), *Business Opportunities* (9 votes), and *Interactions with Japanese People* (6 votes).

The results show that young people who had been to Japan before were motivated to return to visit Japan again because of their positive experiences. For the majority of ASEAN youths who could not travel to Japan, they relied on travel documentaries to help them better understand Japan.

Shorter clips on social media which feature Japan’s history, scenery, culture, and food have proven largely effective in building interest for the group interviewees about eventually visiting Japan. Mostly older working professionals had cited business opportunities as a factor; it was likely because it was required by their current jobs or a consideration of a career switch to work in Japan. Out of the six respondents who picked ‘Interactions with Japanese People’ as a factor, three of them were participants of Japanese Exchange programs while the other three had never participated, which may indicate that they had met Japanese people through other platforms.

The total number of votes for factors other than Exchange Programs is 67, eight more votes than Exchange Programs. From this

comparison, it is indicative that other factors are collective as or more effective in influencing ASEAN youths to visit Japan.

Japanese Products and Services

Locally-based Japanese establishments enable ASEAN people to get their desired Japanese products and services. In 2015, Japan exported about USD 124 billion worth of products and services to ASEAN countries, and they made up about 11.4% of total ASEAN imports (ASEAN, 2015). In 2016, there were more than 11,000 Japanese companies that had expanded their businesses into ASEAN countries (Nikkei Asian Review, 2017). The top six Japanese products and services purchased by ASEAN youth, including the types of stores where they purchased those products from, as indicated by the survey respondents are shown in Fig. 12 below. This question allowed respondents to select multiple options.

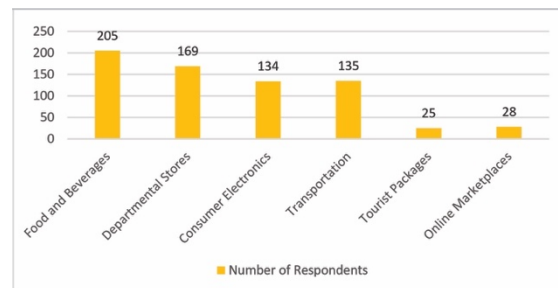


Figure 11. Japanese Products and Services Purchased
(Source: Author’s compilation)

The *Japanese Food and Beverages*, which includes snacks and meals at Japanese restaurants, was ranked highest by the respondents with 205 votes. This was followed by *Departmental Stores, Supermarkets and Shops* – such as Isetan, Muji, DAISO, etc (169 votes), *Consumer Electronics* – including Airon, TV, Game Consoles, Computers, etc (134 votes), *Transportation* – such as Cars and Motorcycles (135 votes), *Tourist Packages* (25 votes), and *Online Marketplaces* – such as Rakuten (28 votes). Fig. 13 illustrates the reasons for purchasing Japanese Products and services and not those from another country.

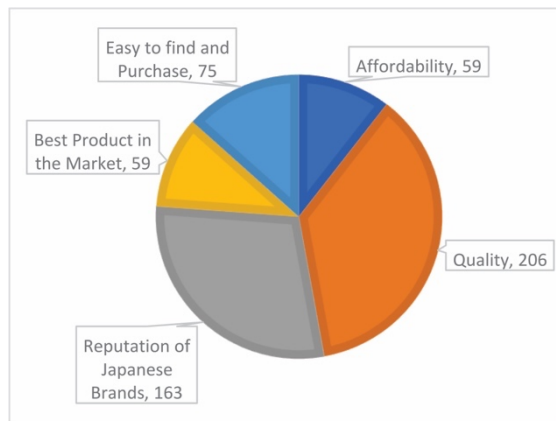


Figure 12. Reasons for Purchasing Japanese Products and Services
(Source: Author's compilation)

The *Quality of the Japanese products* and services received 206 votes, the highest number among the rest. It was followed by 'Reputation of Japanese Brands' (163 votes), 'Easy to find and Purchase' (75 votes), and finally 'Affordability and Best Product in the Market' were tied with the same number of votes (59 votes).

It would seem that ASEAN youth had purchased Japanese products over other brands for their quality because members of their family had purchased Japanese products for use, and they had experienced the quality for themselves. They would also rely on online product reviews by other users for unbiased opinions on the product's quality.

For products that the group interviewees had not tried before, they would rely on the reputation of the Japanese brands for their purchasing decision. Japanese brands, like many other brands, rely on their '*Halo Effect*' to instill confidence in their customers for their new products based on the customer's positive experience with its other products. Hence, Japanese companies that have built a reputation for being the best at making certain products such as air conditioners could lend their credibility for new and different product lines. *Japanese Brand Reputation* is also spread among peers and family members who may

have bought the product and attest to its good qualities.

The ease of finding and purchasing Japanese products was not a major concern for the survey respondents with many physical shops in major shopping malls all over Southeast Asia. Japanese e-commerce platforms such as Rakuten, provide easy browsing of Japanese products and payments online, as well as quick delivery of products to the customer's doorstep. Local delivery companies like Go-Jek⁶ have also stepped in to facilitate the order and delivery of consumer goods, including Japanese products. These conveniences are only limited to cities and larger towns, as small villages and far-flung provinces may not be able to have these products sent to their location. The factors that ASEAN youth deemed least important were affordability and whether the product was the best of its kind in the market. With rising household incomes among the ASEAN countries, there is a higher disposable income per household, thus ASEAN youth and their families would consider other factors besides product cost before making a purchase. A Japanese product can be of high quality and have a reputable brand, but it is not the best product in the market. Yet, consumers may still pick it for reasons like 'Quality and Brand Recognition'.

Japan's Country of Origin Effect on purchasing decisions

Purchasing decisions are not only made based on quantitative factors. There is also an element of subjectivity that consumers consider when deciding to purchase a product. This element is known as the Country of Origin (COO) effect – Influences of the manufacturing country may have an effect on the consumer choice and behavior towards a product (Elliot & Cameron, 1994).

Consumers from different perceptions of different countries, affecting how they perceive

⁶ Go-Jek has a delivery service within their existing mobile app called 'Go-Send', where customers can inform Gojek riders to purchase products on their behalf and send them to any desired

location. Upon receiving the products, customers would reimburse the Go-Jek riders and pay a delivery fee.

the goods made in that country. In a study on mobile phone buying trends in Mauritius, the researchers found that 44.67% of consumers were interested to know the COO of mobile phones before purchase, further stating that consumers tend to perceive products that are made in developed countries are always of superior quality (Sevanandee & Damar-Ladkoo, 2018). This is consistent with the survey and group interview findings that Brands, specifically Japanese Brands, was what the survey respondents and group interviewees look out for.

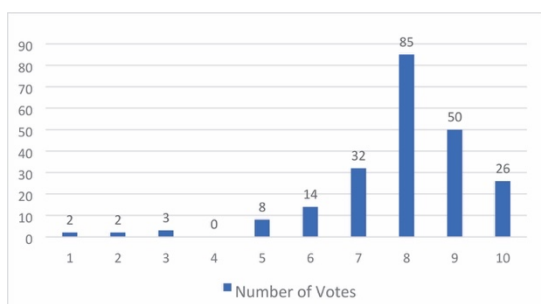


Figure 13. The Extent which impression of Japan affects purchasing decisions for Japanese Products and Services (Source: Author's compilation)

Fig.13. shows that 161 respondents voted '8' and above, which indicates that the majority of respondents think that their impression of Japan affected their purchasing decisions for Japanese products and services. This shows that the 'Country Image of Japan' plays a large role in influencing consumers to select Japanese goods. Country Image refers to the 'image and reputation that consumers attached to a product of a specific country' (Nagashima, 1970). Consumers form their own Country Images of various countries based on what they know, see experience and personal preferences about the country (Apetrei & Petrusca, 2010). Improving the Country Image is one of the main reasons why Japan embarked on its soft power campaign to win the hearts and minds of ASEAN consumers so that they will be more open and amenable to patronizing Japanese businesses through tourism and the purchase of products and services.

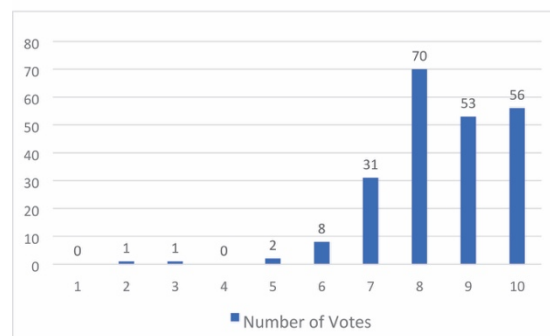


Figure 14. Impressions of products made in Japan, or carries a Japanese brand (Source: Author's compilation)

As seen in Fig. 14, 179 respondents gave a rating of '8' and above, which indicates that they have a good impression of Japanese products and brands. This is consistent with earlier findings that Japanese brands were an important factor that ASEAN youths looked at when purchasing products.

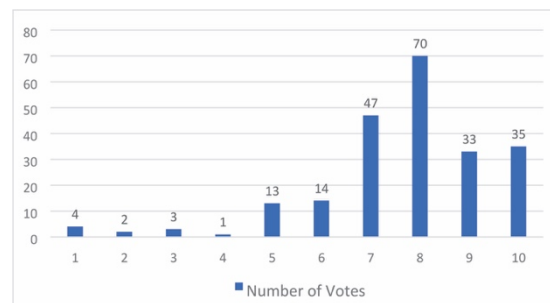


Figure 15. The extent that prior experience with Japanese culture, people or programs affected the impression of Japanese products and services (Source: Author's compilation)

Figure 15 (above) shows that 138 respondents voted '8' and above to indicate that their experiences with Japanese people, culture and programs had affected their impression of Japanese products and services. Seventy-four respondents voted between '5-7', which shows that people, culture, and programs affected their impressions of Japanese products and services to a lesser extent. Hence, this shows that soft power has a significant effect on shaping impressions of Japanese products and services.

Conclusion

Based on this study, the majority of ASEAN youth seem to view Japan favorably, largely due to Japanese Traditional and Popular culture. The internet and social media have enabled the spread of Japanese culture to the masses in urban and rural areas, exposing them to information about Japan and Japanese people. With its dramatic visuals, catchy music and graceful practices, Japanese culture is able to capture the imagination of the masses all over the world, regardless of culture and language by allowing them to experience something distinct from their own cultures. Even without going to Japan or meeting Japanese people, ASEAN youths would form their perceptions based on what they see online about Japanese culture. ASEAN youth perceive what they see on Japanese shows as reliable depictions of Japan and its people. Their limited exposure to Japan and Japanese people in the first place could also have contributed to how they seem to easily accept the narratives and portrayals from Japanese culture to form their perceptions of Japan and Japanese people.

Perceptions are also spread through people, mainly family, and friends who have tried out Japanese products and services or travelled to Japan. Japanese aid such as scholarships, youth development and exchange programs such as SSEAYP, if examined from the perception shaping angle, is much less effective due to its very limited reach, and how it privileges a certain profile of youths over others.

Japan's country image plays an important factor in ASEAN youths' purchasing decisions, as they perceive attributes such as quality to Japanese products and brands. The current impression of Japanese products and services is positive, and this success can be attributed to soft power efforts. An ASEAN youth population that views Japanese products favorably will benefit the Japanese economy in the long run.

This study is an exploratory attempt to assess Japan's soft power effectiveness in shaping ASEAN youth perspectives. Given more

time and resources, this study can be strengthened with more respondents from various socioeconomic backgrounds, online survey in the different national languages of ASEAN countries, and group interviews with youth from each ASEAN country.

At a time when China is spending more on ODA and other forms of soft power, Japan is cutting down on public expenditure to curb its ballooning deficit. Streamlining Japan's soft power strategy by focusing on the aspects which bring the highest impact in terms of shaping perceptions, would enable it to save on expenditure. Japan could look at channeling its limited resources towards the creation and promotion of Japanese cultural products such as anime and music to reach out to a massive audience. These cultural products could convey positive information and portrayals of Japan and Japanese people, which could help shape the viewer's perceptions. Investments can also be made to lower the barriers to access these cultural products, such as by making them available online through platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, which has a youthful user base, and through traditional media platforms such as television channels. Japan could also look into having more cultural events in various parts of ASEAN, especially the rural areas.

Each year, more ASEAN youth move into the working world and into the middle class, and more of the older generation will retire. Purchasing power is shifting to younger people who will have more product and service options to choose from than their parents. Perceptions of ASEAN youth towards foreign countries such as Japan significantly affect their decision to purchase products from that country; thus, competing for the hearts and minds of ASEAN youth is a key strategy to selling in the ASEAN market.

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