

FELLOW FOLLOW UP:

Dr. Jasmine Yeap Ai Leen, USM

**Recipient of The Japan Foundation
Japanese Studies Fellowship, FY2024**



Introduction & Background

Can you share a little about your academic background and current role in USM?

I hold a Ph.D. in Technology Management from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), focusing on online retailing. I am currently a Senior Lecturer at the School of Management, where I teach marketing courses such as consumer behaviour and marketing analytics.

How did you discover The Japan Foundation's Japanese Studies Fellowship Program and what drew your interest to apply? Speaking of this, how was the applying process like?

I first learned about The Japan Foundation through their annual Japanese Film Festival. I visited their website and discovered that they offer many programs.

I was already interested in pursuing a topic related to Japanese studies, and with my sabbatical approaching, I began looking for funding opportunities. When I came across this fellowship program, it felt both timely

and appropriate to my research interests, so I decided to apply.

I found the application process very clear-cut. The grant details, required documents, and recommendation letters were all clearly listed. I appreciated that the forms were simple and concise, not lengthy or complicated, making the process simple yet impactful because they asked only for what was necessary.

As per Japan Foundation's application process, you have decided to nominate Hitotsubashi University as your host institution and supervisor. How did this collaboration take place?

I first came across Professor Takeshi Matsui through the Association for Consumer Research website, where I found his award-winning research videography.

I was very interested in his work, so I reached out to him via email, mentioning my upcoming sabbatical and asking if he would be willing to host me. I was grateful that he said yes.



A picture with Professor Takeshi Matsui

What inspired you to research on Japanese pop culture?

The topic I chose comes from my personal passion. Many young consumers actively engage with Japanese pop culture, and I see that they are benefiting from it. My mission is to embark and uncover the

narratives that focus more on the positive aspects of engaging in Japanese pop culture.



Dr. Jasmine sharing her fellowship experience

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while developing your research project before applying for the grant, during your fellowship period and after returning to Malaysia?

Before going to Japan, the main challenge was planning a research design that could be completed within my nine-month sabbatical. During fieldwork, language was also an obstacle, as I am not fluent in Japanese and had to rely on an interpreter. After returning from Japan, the challenge shifted to finding time to continue pursuing this research while balancing my other professional responsibilities.

Looking back, how has this fellowship experience contributed to who you are today as a researcher, educator and individual?

As a researcher, I now have a deeper understanding of Japanese consumers, which motivates me to explore other areas of Japanese studies. As an educator, I can share these insights with my students, giving them a clearer picture of consumer behaviour and conditions in Japan. On a personal level, experiencing how hard and meticulous people in Japan work has inspired me to work harder myself, striving to do my best in everything I do.

Fieldwork Experience

Considering your research centres around pop culture, are you a fan of Japanese pop culture?

I wouldn't call myself a hardcore fan since I'm not into all aspects of Japanese pop culture. I'd consider myself a modest fan who appreciates anime. However, when it comes to kawaii characters, I'd say I'm a huge fan.

What was it like navigating between being a researcher and a potential fan during fieldwork?

Having an interest in topics like kawaii culture helped me better understand my research and build rapport with respondents during interviews. However, I made sure to maintain a scholarly stance so that the responses I recorded remained objective and not influenced by my own perceptions.



A glance at Hitotsubashi University

Can you describe what it was like conducting fieldwork in Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur? Were there any surprising contrasts between the two?

In terms of the research process, I found it quite similar in Kuala Lumpur and Tokyo. You need to plan the research design, the recruitment process, and follow interview protocols. As for findings, one example is the perception of kawaii merchandise. In Japan, kawaii culture is deeply embedded in daily life. Small plushies or characters are often seen as companions' people can carry with them. In Malaysia, however,

kawaii items are more of a personal expression of individuality.



Small character plushies as on-the-go-companions

Do you think physically being in Japan was essential for gaining a deeper understanding of your research topic, compared to studying it from afar?

I believe it is essential because being there allows you to see first-hand how people interact with pop culture and the systems that support it. Experiencing it directly is very different from only reading about it, you get to truly observe what is happening there.

Did you receive institutional or local support while in Japan, and how did that shape your field experience?

At Hitotsubashi University, I was given a proper working space that was quiet, clean, and conducive for work. During my fieldwork, I also received valuable assistance from two local interpreters. These forms of support were crucial in enabling me to carry out my research smoothly.

What was the most memorable experience you had during your fellowship in Japan?

One memory that stands out is from a 7-Eleven near where I lived. I often stopped by after returning from university to get a few essentials. Once, during checkout, the staff asked me something I couldn't understand. When I asked again, he also couldn't understand me. We both just laughed, and somehow, even without understanding each other's words, we understood each other. It was one of those light-hearted moments that I'll always remember.

Is there a particular project, publication, or initiative that was directly or indirectly inspired by your Japan experience?

During my time there, I spoke with a professor at Keio University who introduced me to the concept of 'Oshikatsu' that means the activities that support a favourite idol and more recently, even characters like kawaii characters. He recommended a Japanese book on the subject, which sparked my interest.

What are the findings of your research under the Fellowship?

I found that many young people connect deeply with anime, manga, gaming and kawaii characters, especially with the characters' narratives and struggles. They see reflections of their own challenges and feel inspired by how these characters overcome them.

Are these emotional connections to pop culture the same across countries, or do cultural differences play a role?

Pop culture serves as a source of entertainment, escapism, family bonding, nostalgia, and self-expression for both Japanese and Malaysian youth. The main difference lies in cultural nuances, for instance in how kawaii characters are perceived. Japanese respondents described these characters as providing

emotional support, while Malaysian respondents saw them more as a form of self-expression.



Chiikawa-small, critter-like characters offering comfort through relatable daily joys and struggles

What can we learn about youth today by looking at how they interact with pop culture?

Looking at the Malaysian scene, we now see many ACG (Anime, Comics, and Games) events, exhibitions, and even themed cafés. I think this shows how youths here are increasingly “hungry” for such content and merchandise inspired by Japanese pop culture. This growing demand has also created opportunities for vendors and marketers to bring more of these merchandise into Malaysia.

Do you think society underestimates how meaningful pop culture is to people’s mental and emotional well-being?

I believe society recognizes the commercial value of pop culture, as seen through paid events and merchandise sales. However, its potential as an intervention for mental well-being is less acknowledged.

Do you think that institutions (schools, universities, even workplaces) should acknowledge and support pop culture as part of emotional well-being strategies?

Many respondents shared that watching anime or reading manga helps them maintain their sense of well-being. This suggests that Japanese pop culture could serve as a self-regulation tool for youth. At the university level, I have observed that some institutions have anime clubs. However, there are no fully established anime clubs or societies that consistently provide a space for young people to gather, interact, and share their interests.

What are the implications of your research for mental health advocacy especially among youth in Japan & Malaysia? What do you hope is the long-term impact of this study?

I hope that pop culture should not only be seen as a form of entertainment but also as a meaningful tool for mental health interventions. It can serve as a bridge for practitioners, therapists, counsellors, or mental well-being specialists, when working with young clients. Japanese pop culture could be leveraged more intentionally, such as by using anime as discussion prompts in therapy.

Experience with JF grant

Did the fellowship open doors to academic or cultural networks in Japan that enriched your research or professional development?

JF gave me the opportunity to learn about other fellows’ work where some were exploring pop culture from very different perspectives, which broadened my understanding of the field. During my stay I also had the chance to interact with lecturers from other universities as well as industry professionals, thanks to recommendations and connections facilitated by my host.

How has the Fellowship continued to impact your research/work even after the project ended?

This fellowship has strengthened my interest in exploring other dimensions of Japanese studies. There are many other fascinating areas, such as Japanese brands, or even philosophies like *Kintsugi*. My time in Japan gave me the inspiration to think about these broader research possibilities.

What would you say distinguishes JF's support from other academic or cultural grants and fellowship?

JF places strong emphasis on culture. Their mission is clearly rooted in cultivating friendship and promoting Japanese culture. Because of that, I believe they are more receptive to cultural-focused research like mine. So I am genuinely thankful to the JF for giving me the opportunity to explore this area.

What elements of the grant do you think could have been improved for interested future candidates?

I think it would be very helpful if JF could provide some guidance on practical matters. For example, it can be quite challenging to identify which real estate companies are trustworthy in Japan. If JF could provide a list of suggested real estate agencies or resources for fellows, that would be a great support. I also think it would be very reassuring if JF could provide some basic orientation or resources on disaster preparedness for fellows upon arrival. This would really help us feel more confident and safer in adapting to life in Japan.

If you were to recommend this grant, what would you highlight as its greatest strength?

I would say that one of the strengths of JF is its wide range of grant programs and the benefits they offer. The grant allowed me to focus on my research without having to constantly worry about finances. JF has created a meaningful avenue and

opportunity for scholars, and I am grateful for that.

Beyond the structural support, what really touched me was the kindness of the JF officers. I would like to especially thank Ms. Tomomi Kurosaki, who was the officer in charge of me at the time. She was always very friendly and checked in on how I was doing, which I greatly appreciated. So, thank you very much to JF for this wonderful opportunity and experience.



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