

Doctoral Thesis

Shinto Shrine Visit: Expectations and Perceptions of Locals and
Tourists in Japan

(Abstract)

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Abstract

Sacred sites are part of the living culture and traditions of many cultures around the world. Many of these sites are part of the cultural heritage of the specific region and nation or are even inscribed as World Heritage Sites and, as such, attract many visitors. These visitors come for various reasons ranging from religious to historical ones. Yet, many sacred sites are also part of the community who live around them and are used for practising their belief. Studies around these sites focus on the perceptions of residents about tourism and also look into tourists' motivations and perceptions for visiting these sites. This study primarily aims to explore residents' and tourists' expectations and perceptions towards visits of sacred sites. A comparative case study is built around two Japanese shrines that are World Heritage Sites: Itsukushima Jinja in Hiroshima Prefecture and Munakata Taisha in Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan. The study applies mixed-method research involving travel information sources from Japanese and international sources to gain a deeper understanding of the representation of these sites in the first phase of the study. These findings inform the creation of a questionnaire survey that will be undertaken during the study's second phase with locals and tourists at both sites. The survey explores locals' place attachment to their respective shrines and its influence on how they wish the shrine to be represented for tourism, as well as changes in the perception of the World Heritage Site inscription and effects through tourism. Last, the survey investigates locals' and tourists' expectations and perceptions towards the shrine visit.

Findings show that representations among different travel information sources vary between the two shrines but by their source of origin. Japanese sources provide more information about shrine-related topics regarding enshrined deities or sacred rituals than international sources that emphasise nature or architecture. Another strong focus of the Japanese sources was history. By including various travel information sources, it became possible to gain a wide range of data that could be used to create a survey and especially to form statements about expectations and perceptions that locals and tourists hold towards the shrine visit. It, therefore, showed that most locals favour a representation of the shrine as a historical site, which mirrors findings from travel information sources. However, although not significantly overall, those who showed the strongest place attachment favour a representation as a religious or Shinto site. Exploring changes after the World Heritage Site inscription showed that locals from Munakata had mostly positive perceptions, while the inscription of Itsukushima Jinja was maybe too far in the past, and some respondents did not live or work before on Miyajima. Regarding tourism issues, the difference between both sites regarding the number of visitors became clear. Locals from Miyajima mentioned more nuisances

through crowding, bad manners, and littering, while in the case of locals from Munakata, many found one of the main issues to be the transport and recreation infrastructure. It also showed that locals and tourists perceive Itsukushima Jinja more as a place for tourists, in contrast to those respondents from Munakata, where the majority regard Munakata Taisha as a sacred place. The construction of the framework to measure the expectations and perceptions underwent exploratory factor analysis to establish those expectation and perception statements that contribute the most to the construct. The result was a three-dimensional construct addressing Knowledge, Appeal and Manner. Generally, it showed that expectations did not differ between locals from Itsukushima Jinja and Munakata Taisha. However, the expectations between the tourists differed across all three dimensions. It showed that tourists from Munakata Taisha had higher expectations of visiting any shrine for the Knowledge and Manner dimensions than those from Itsukushima Jinja, while the Appeal dimension was higher for tourists from Itsukushima Jinja. Even so, the expectations were measuring the general expectations towards any shrine, which raises the question about the differences in visitors that both shrines attract. In terms of the perceptions, a significant difference could be explored in the Manner dimension between locals and tourists. Tourists at both sites perceived their manners to be higher than the locals perceived the tourists' manners. This can have direct implications as tourists perceive their behaviour as acceptable, but actually, in the eyes of the locals, it might cause problems, like tourism issues identified regarding littering or crowding on Miyajima.

Theoretically, this study applies a concept of structuring the various definitions of Shinto from the religious studies field to analyse Shinto representations within travel information sources in the field of tourism studies. It further adapts a framework that originated in marketing and consumer studies for measuring expectations and perceptions across different stakeholders in the service industries. This framework is transformed to fit the context of expectations and perceptions of locals and tourists about visiting Shinto shrines and, through this, enhancing the field of cultural and religious tourism studies. Furthermore, previous studies of Shinto shrines focussed on history and folklore; therefore, this study also enhances previous studies by investigating shrines within the field of tourism. Practically, it provides tourism authorities and those in charge of the promotion of sacred sites for tourism a tool to assess a method for gaining a deeper understanding of locals' and tourists' expectations and perceptions regarding the knowledge, appeal and manner when visiting a shrine that highlights areas of improvement for developing a tourism product that fits the varying needs of those involved with the shrine on a more regular base and those visiting.