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From Curiosity to Connection: The Role of Bon Odori in Deepening Cultural Engagement between Japan and Malaysia

Shuhaida Md Noor^{1*}, Kayathre Marimuthu²

¹School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.

²Monroe Consulting Group, Kuala Lumpur Sentral, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: shuhaida@usm.my; ORCID iD: 0000-0002-7159-9394

ABSTRACT

This study explores how cultural festivals held in a foreign country may create conditions for soft power beyond formal diplomatic frameworks. Focusing on the annual Bon Odori festival in Malaysia, the study examines how initial cultural curiosity evolves into meaningful cultural engagement and intercultural connection. Using qualitative approaches—including visitor journey mapping and focus group discussions—this paper explores how Malaysian and Japanese participants navigate expectations shaped by prior assumptions and identity negotiations between self and others. Findings indicate that the Bon Odori festivals held in Malaysia function as a dynamic contact zone where participants, both Malaysians and Japanese, actively compare cultural values and identity, thus fostering empathetic understanding. The study contributes to bridging knowledge on the intercultural dimensions of soft power by examining how such dynamics unfold in cultural festivals held outside their country of origin. It offers insights into how these festivals create a conducive environment for soft power to operate through interpersonal connections, emotional engagement and intercultural reflections among both local visitors and members of the originating community. Recommendations for enhancing authenticity, inclusivity, and educational depth are discussed to support long-term cultural engagement and sustained intercultural relationships.

Keywords: soft power, intercultural communication, identity negotiation, Bon Odori, Malaysia, Japan

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1.0 Introduction

Festivals play a vital role in facilitating cultural encounters and fostering intercultural understanding in an increasingly globalised world (Wheatley, 2024; Quinn, 2021; Richards and King, 2022). They serve as experiential spaces where cultural practices are shared, negotiated, and internalised, moving beyond passive observation to active engagement (Wood & Homolja, 2021; Wood et al., 2024). Among these cultural practices, Japan's Bon Odori stands out for its adaptability and resonance across the world, with strong presence in Malaysia (Jamaludin & Hasan, 2023; Widiyanto & Atikah, 2023). Originally a festival held in Japan as a gesture to honour ancestors, Bon Odori has evolved into a joyous celebration of life and community, often reinterpreted in foreign contexts as an event that not only brings the Japanese community together but also serves as a platform for sharing their cultural heritage with the host society. This study will examine the Bon Odori as a contact zone that provides an opportunity for cultural exchanges between Japanese and Malaysians.

Sharing one's cultural heritage in international settings allows individuals to reflect on their cultural roots, strengthen self-beliefs, and adapt their identities in relation to others (Naddaf, Marie, & Mitchell, 2020). Heritage diplomacy frames these processes as opportunities for people-to-people connectivity, mutual trust, and dialogue, which are essential for identity negotiation and the cultivation of national pride (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022; Winter, 2023). For host country residents, sharing can develop a sense of appreciation, understanding and acceptance towards the sharers' culture. Being open to the diversity culture beyond the shores of one's own can foster relationships, enhance understanding, and cultivate appreciation of the culture of others (Stoermer, Davies & Froese, 2021; Wang, 2023). From the perspective of the Bon Odori festival held beyond the shores of Japan, the engagement among Japanese and non-Japanese participants can help build mutual respect, appreciation, and compromise that may help foster acceptance of the culture of others. For the Japanese, the engagement of the participants at the Bon Odori festival can therefore contribute towards bilateral relationships, enhance the country's brand image, and strengthen the country's soft power with the host country.

Notwithstanding, the differences in norms, beliefs and traditions remain as the biggest challenge in ensuring the interests and participation of people from the host country. Surprisingly, participation of Malaysians in the Bon Odori festival continues to rise from year to year despite controversies due to religious sensitivities (Jamaludin & Hassan, 2023). The strong participation indicates that Malaysians are deeply curious and, in general, receptive and appreciative of the culture of others. As such, this study aims to explore how the Bon Odori could turn one's initial curiosity into a meaningful cultural connection between Malaysians and the Japanese. The study explores participants' expectations, experiences, and meaning-making processes. Additionally, the study also aims to identify critical success factors for the Bon Odori festival in Malaysia to serve as a model for leveraging cultural festivals to enhance bilateral ties between two countries.

2.0 Literature Review

The Bon Odori festival held in foreign countries has long intrigued researchers primarily from the aspects of the dance itself as a significant form of religious or artistic expressions for the Japanese communities in the foreign land (Sweeting et al., 2012; Wishkoski, 2014). Past studies focus on analysing how Japanese in the foreign country view themselves as bearers and custodians of their cultural heritage and what the Bon Odori celebration means for them individually and collectively. The present study on the other hand offers a new perspective by shifting the focus to the meaning-making of the Bon Odori celebration from the perspective of non-Japanese in the context of Malaysia. This study takes into consideration the evolution of the Bon Odori festival from a celebration serving a tight community to a celebration that is shared with foreigners, thus departing from its original communal or religious functions to become a widely celebrated annual event embraced by non-Japanese in a foreign land.

2.1 Bon Odori in Malaysia

The Bon Odori held in Malaysia has emerged as the largest celebration outside Japan, with participation of tens of thousands each year, particularly for the ones in Selangor and Penang. In Shah Alam, Selangor, about 40,000 people attended the Bon Odori in 2023, and more than 55,000 attended the festival in Penang. Widiyanto and Atikah (2023) have identified the Bon Odori festival as one of the strongest expressions of Japanese culture in Penang. Malaysians actively participate, derive enjoyment, and in many cases, incorporate Bon Odori into their broader cultural calendar, reflecting a unique process of cultural adaptation and appropriation.

Rather than centring on controversies or perceived incompatibilities with Islamic beliefs — a theme highlighted in past Malaysian studies (Jamaludin & Hassan, 2023) — this research foregrounds the positive dimensions of the festival. Specifically, it investigates how Bon Odori serves as a successful cultural resource that Japan leverages to strengthen people-to-people connections and foster a favourable image among Malaysian participants. By focusing on participant experiences and perceptions, this study seeks to uncover the meanings Malaysians attach to Bon Odori and explore how these experiences shape their views of Japan, Japanese people, and Japanese culture more broadly.

2.2 Cultural Festivals as Contact Zones

Festivals are increasingly recognised as important spaces for intercultural interaction, where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together, negotiate identities, and engage in cultural exchange. The concept of the "contact zone," as introduced by Pratt (1991), provides a useful framework for understanding how festivals can serve as dynamic arenas for these encounters, often involving asymmetrical power relations and processes of transculturation. Pratt's "contact zone" refers to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts marked by unequal power dynamics. In festival settings, this framework highlights how participants navigate and negotiate cultural meanings, identities, and practices, sometimes leading to hybrid forms and new understandings. In these zones, cultural meanings are negotiated, reinterpreted, and shared, creating opportunities for empathy and mutual understanding.

Malaysians are accustomed to celebrating festivals from diverse cultural traditions. Deepavali, Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, and Gawai are celebrated across ethnic lines, providing opportunities for different communities to engage with each other's traditions. Deepavali, for example, not only reinforces Indian identity but also promotes shared values and multicultural integration through public celebrations and government support, encouraging tolerance and cross-cultural socialisation (Zihua & Aviandy, 2025). Similarly, Chinese New Year and Hari Raya are marked by open houses and festive advertisements that use shared cultural symbols to bridge ethnic divides and foster a sense of togetherness (Fikriyudin et al., 2020). These festivals encourage cross-cultural interactions, reflecting Malaysia's complex pluralistic society. The opening of private cultural spaces to public participation has contributed towards national unity and social cohesion. This deep-rooted familiarity with engaging in multicultural festivities enables Malaysians to approach Bon Odori—despite its foreign origins—without hesitation or discomfort. Rather than perceiving it as an alien practice, they view participation as a natural extension of their intercultural openness and as an opportunity to further enrich Malaysia's pluralistic social fabric.

2.3 Japanese Culture Curiosity in Malaysia

Cultural curiosity, often ignited by media exposure, is a key driver for deeper cultural engagement in Malaysia's multicultural context. The journey from curiosity to meaningful participation is shaped by opportunities for authentic experiences and the broader sociocultural environment. Japanese cuisine is a major draw, with Malaysians expressing strong interest in authentic Japanese street food and culinary experiences (Maknu, 2020). Gastronomy knowledge and motivation are significant predictors of repeated engagement with Japanese food culture (Maknu, 2020). Additionally, Japanese anime, manga, and related subcultures such as VTubers are among the most popular forms of Japanese culture in Malaysia, particularly among young people and university students (Mamat et al., 2022). Exposure to

these media often sparks initial curiosity, which can lead to deeper engagement, such as joining Japanese cultural clubs or learning the language (Mamat et al., 2022).

Interest in Japanese culture also extends to language learning and workplace practices. Many Malaysians are motivated to learn Japanese to improve job prospects with Japanese companies or to facilitate intercultural communication (Mori et al., 2019). Studies show that Malaysians are impressed by Japanese work culture and seek to emulate its values, further deepening their curiosity and engagement (Idrus et al., 2023).

Moreover, Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy has successfully enhanced its image in Malaysia, with positive perceptions of Japanese brands, icons, and lifestyle (Paidi, 2023). Paidi (2023) explained that this cultural diplomacy strategy has strengthened Malaysians' curiosity and appreciation for Japanese culture, contributing to Japan's soft power in the region. By examining Google's consumer sentiment analysis towards familiar Japanese brands, images, icons, and products in the Malaysian market, Paidi (2023) found that the success of Japanese cultural diplomacy efforts has primarily influenced Japan's positive image and perception among the Malaysian public.

It can be concluded that Malaysians' curiosity about Japanese culture is multifaceted, rooted in culinary exploration, media exposure, cultural affinity and language learning. This curiosity often evolves into deeper cultural engagement, facilitated by both individual interests and broader cultural diplomacy efforts.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study draws on the Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004) as its primary theoretical foundation to examine the role of Bon Odori as a soft power. It is further informed by the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Identity Negotiation Theory (Kim, 2001) to explain how cultural festivals such as Bon Odori can foster deeper cultural engagement and processes of identity reflection within multicultural societies like Malaysia. These theories help explain how initial cultural curiosity evolves into cultural connection through embodied participation and reflection.

Soft power, as articulated by Nye (2004), refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. Culture, political values, and foreign policies that are seen as legitimate or admirable form the basis of this influence. Cultural festivals, while seemingly apolitical, are strategic channels through which soft power is expressed. They allow for informal diplomacy where positive associations with a culture or country are built through lived, emotional experiences rather than formal government interaction.

In the context of Bon Odori in Malaysia, Japan's cultural soft power is operationalised through the aesthetics, practices, and symbolism embedded in the festival—traditional dance, costumes, food, and communal values. These serve as cultural signifiers that attract participants and shape perceptions of Japanese society. More importantly, Bon Odori creates an informal space or contact zones for the Japanese and Malaysians that offers an opportunity for interpersonal connections and cultural appreciation.

However, soft power theory alone cannot explain the micro-level experiences of participants or how cultural connection is internalised. As such, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is used to provide insights into how group identities shape perception and behaviour. As individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, their sense of self becomes tied to group affiliation. Participating in Bon Odori, Malaysians are temporarily stepping into the symbolic domain of Japanese culture. In doing so, they engage in comparison between the in-group (Malaysian identity) and the out-group (Japanese cultural identity), potentially challenging or reinforcing their existing social identities.

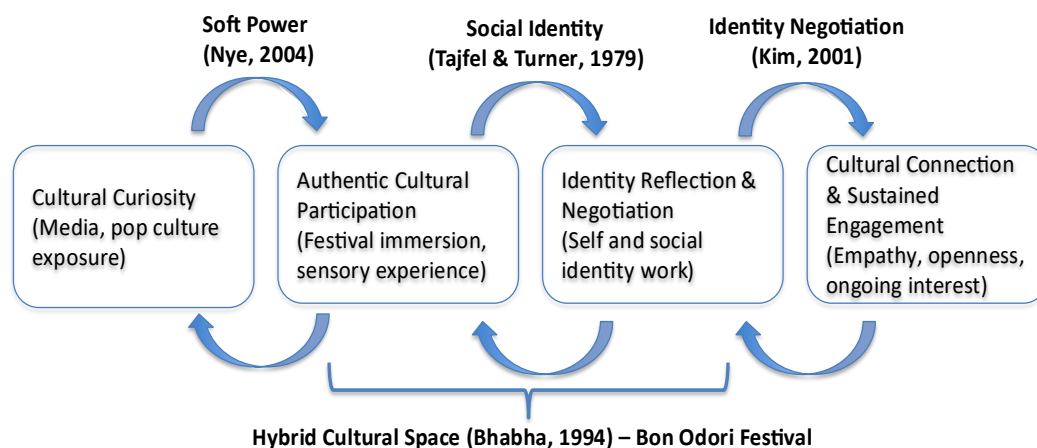
While Social Identity Theory explains categorisation and comparison, Identity Negotiation Theory (Kim, 2001) accounts for the dynamic, communicative process of adapting and constructing identity in intercultural settings. Kim argues that identity is not a fixed set of traits but an emergent product of interactions. Individuals manage cultural tensions and ambiguities by negotiating meanings, often leading to a more flexible and inclusive self-concept. Applied to Bon Odori, this theory helps us

understand how participants navigate religious concerns, aesthetic appreciation, and political perceptions while forming meaning around the festival. For instance, a participant who initially feels uncertain due to religious concerns may renegotiate their stance after attending and finding the experience celebratory rather than ritualistic. Likewise, Japanese participants witnessing their culture being respectfully engaged with may renegotiate their own cultural pride in response.

Bringing these theories together, we conceptualise the Bon Odori festival as a contact zone where soft power is projected through aesthetic and affective appeal, where individuals categorise and compare cultural identities, and where they negotiate their own sense of self through direct participation. This progression can be understood in four interlinked stages. Figure 1 illustrates the progression from initial cultural curiosity, often sparked by Japanese media and aesthetics, to authentic participation through immersive festival experiences. This participation prompts identity reflection and negotiation, allowing participants to compare and reinterpret cultural values. Ultimately, this process fosters cultural connection and sustained engagement marked by empathy and openness. The entire journey is underpinned by soft power dynamics (Nye, 2004), shaped by social identity processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and involves dynamic identity negotiation (Kim, 2001), all occurring within a hybrid cultural space as conceptualised by Bhabha (1994) in the Malaysian context. These stages are not strictly linear but iterative and context dependent. For instance, a participant may loop back from connection to curiosity, deepening their engagement through further exploration, such as language learning, travel, or intercultural friendships.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: From Curiosity to Connection



3.0 Methodology

A qualitative, exploratory design was employed to capture rich, contextualised insights into participants' experiences and reflections. Forty participants attended the Bon Odori festival in Penang (20 participants: 10 Malaysians and 10 Japanese) and Selangor (20 participants: 10 Malaysians and 10 Japanese). Participants were between 20 to 35 years old and came from diverse religious backgrounds, including Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Participants were between 20 to 35 years old and came from diverse religious backgrounds including Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. The participants had prior exposure to Japanese culture through anime, manga, cuisines, music or television. This cultural experience shaped initial expectations and allowed for more nuanced reflections. This background informed how they interpreted and engaged with the Bon Odori experience.

Each of the participants created three visitor journey maps to capture their thoughts and experience before the visit, during the visit and after the visit to document in detail their expectations, experiences, and the meaning-making of the festival. The maps were used as reflection tools in the focus group discussions that were held after they had attended the Bon Odori festival. In the focus group discussion,

the participants presented their journey maps and discussed their expectations and experiences before, during and after attending the festivals. Journey maps are often used by marketers to capture customers' experiences and brand contact points. This method is advantageous in this study as it captured in detail the participants' thinking, feeling, behaviours and the contact points. It also ensured participants did not forget or leave out important details during the focus group discussion. Additionally, participant observation was used to offer insights into participants' immersion in the festival and observe their interactions, behaviours and practices. This method was important to capture subjective elements that may not be documented in the visitor journey map or revealed during the focus group discussion.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. Coding was conducted manually by two coders. The coding process was iterative and inductive, with coders comparing and refining themes through consensus. Themes were also refined through cross-case comparisons and validation sessions with participants. As the researchers are Malaysians and have not in the past been immersed in Bon Odori celebration, the research was approached as outsiders, shaped by their Malaysian background and cultural perspective. The interest in this research was guided by cultural appreciation and cross-cultural understanding that may carry assumptions about Japanese culture that differ from insider perspectives and influenced the way data were interpreted. To mitigate biases, the researchers relied on triangulating multiple sources, sought clarifications from Japanese participants, and remained reflexive throughout the research process. The researchers' interpretations were shaped by their cultural positioning and engagement with the Malaysian context. The researchers, Malaysian academics working in cultural communication and heritage interpretations, approached Bon Odori with sensitivity to multicultural dynamics and religious considerations, while remaining reflexively aware of potential interpretive bias. Reflexive discussions were conducted throughout the analysis to critically examine assumptions and enhance interpretive transparency, particularly given the culturally sensitive nature of the festival.

4.0 Results and Discussion

This study extends current understandings of cultural diplomacy by shifting focus from top-down, state-driven narratives to lived, grassroots experiences of intercultural and interpersonal engagement. Situated in a culturally sensitive context due to past religious contentions, the Bon Odori festival in Malaysia provides a unique setting to examine how soft power can operate through interpersonal encounters. The findings presented here explore how identity negotiation and meaning making among both local and Japanese participants may serve as relational platforms for diplomacy. Table 1 presents a summary of the final themes along with illustrative participant quotes.

4.1 Curiosity as an Entry Point

For many participants, their initial motivation to attend Bon Odori was rooted in cultural curiosity, largely shaped by Japanese media, cuisine, and aesthetic appeal. Many participants mentioned anime, manga, traditional arts, and Japanese cuisine as initial points of fascination. One participant articulated this vividly: "I came because I love anime and Japanese food. I wanted to see what the real culture feels like beyond the screen" (Local participant, Female, 22).

This curiosity represented a desire to move from mediated and idealised representations of Japan to embodied, firsthand experiences. For some, this curiosity was longstanding, nurtured by personal interests in Japanese martial arts, language learning, and student exchange experiences.

Table 1

Summary of Key Themes

Key themes	Description	Illustrative quotes
Curiosity as Entry Point	Participants were initially drawn to Bon Odori due to interests in Japanese food, music, anime, or a general fascination with Japan, indicating soft power attraction at a surface level.	“I came because I love anime and Japanese food. I wanted to see what the real culture feels like beyond the screen.” (Local participant, Female, 22)
Authenticity and Immersive Experiences	Authentic interactions, such as wearing the yukata, joining the dance, or interacting with Japanese participants, enabled deeper cultural resonance beyond superficial consumption.	“As soon as I walked into the stadium and saw the big stage and decorations, I felt like I was really in Japan.” (Local participant, Male, 22) “When I wore the yukata and danced, I felt like I was truly part of something. It wasn’t just watching; I felt part of it.” (Local participant, Female, 23)
Identity Negotiation and Reflection	Participants reflected on personal, religious, and cultural identity as they negotiated what it meant to take part in a Japanese festival in a multicultural and sometimes contested space.	“It made me reflect on how we celebrate our festivals and what it means to us. I realised we have more in common than I thought.” (Local participant, Female, 25) “I had to think twice because of the religious issue, but I realised I can appreciate culture while staying true to my faith.” (Local participant, Male, 25) “Being Japanese here makes me more aware of how people see my culture. It’s different from how we do it in Japan.” (Japanese participant, Female, 27)
Transforming Curiosity into Engagement	Through embodied participation and emotional connection, many moved from passive observers to active cultural participants, fostering shared understanding and lasting impressions.	“I thought I’d just take some pictures, but I ended up dancing and learning so much. It changed how I see Japanese people.” (Local participant, Female, 24) “The moment we all danced together, it felt like we shared something special.” (Japanese participant, Male, 25)
Festivals as Soft Power Instruments	The festival served as a grassroots platform for soft power—building mutual understanding, empathy, and positive national perception beyond government initiatives.	“Sharing culture is not just about enjoying anime or sushi. It’s this feeling of mutual respect and connection.” (Local participant, Female, 24) “We may not speak the same language, but dancing together makes us feel connected.” (Japanese participant, Female, 25)

4.2 Authenticity and Immersive Experiences

The authenticity of the Bon Odori experience played a pivotal role in shaping participant satisfaction. In Selangor, participants overwhelmingly described the event as authentic, noting the strong Japanese community presence and traditional performances. The festival atmosphere, which was enhanced by large stages, culturally specific decorations, and the presence of many Japanese families, created a multisensory immersion that participants found compelling. "As soon as I walked into the stadium and saw the big stage and decorations, I felt like I was really in Japan," remarked one local participant (Male, 22).

Participants attending the Penang festival reported a different, and in some cases less immersive experience, which they attributed to the event's stronger emphasis on tourism-oriented showcases. From the participants' perspectives, the event felt more commercial in nature, with booths and performances focusing primarily on transactional or entertainment elements rather than cultural engagement. Some felt that the inclusion of Malaysian popular songs, such as 'Rasa Sayang,' contributed to the more localised and hybrid atmosphere, which, for them, reduced the sense of immersion in Japanese cultural practices.

These perceptions do not necessarily indicate a lack of cultural value but rather reflect differing organisational objectives and audience orientations. While participants associated Selangor's festival with a stronger emphasis on cultural immersion and exchange, the Penang event appeared to align more closely with tourism promotion and local entertainment goals. The notion of authenticity in this context is therefore understood as participant-perceived and shaped by expectations, rather than as an objective measure of cultural legitimacy.

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closely with tourism promotion and local entertainment goals. The notion of authenticity in this context is therefore understood as participant-perceived and shaped by expectations, rather than as an objective measure of cultural legitimacy.

4.5 Identity Negotiation and Reflection

Engagement with Bon Odori prompted participants to reflect critically on their cultural identities and values. Malaysians identified shared values such as communal harmony, respect for elders, and aesthetic appreciation, drawing parallels with Japanese practices. One local participant expressed: "It made me reflect on how we celebrate our festivals and what it means to us. I realised we have more in common than I thought" (Local participant, Female, 25).

For Japanese participants, seeing their cultural traditions celebrated abroad fostered feelings of pride and emotional connection. Some noted that witnessing Malaysians' enthusiasm challenged their assumptions about how their culture is perceived internationally. "Being Japanese here makes me more aware of how people see my culture. It's different from how we do it in Japan," remarked a Japanese participant (Female, 27).

This reflective process aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Identity Negotiation Theory (Kim, 2001), where intercultural contact stimulates re-examination and potential reconfiguration of both self and group identities. The festival acted as a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), allowing individuals to navigate between cultural boundaries and co-create hybrid meanings.

Beyond direct participation, the festival also offered symbolic meanings and emotional touchpoints. Participants described the event as a "living bridge" between the present and past, embodying traditions in a contemporary context. Many engaged in drawing similarities and differences between Japanese and Malaysian cultures, which helped them construct narratives of cross-cultural friendship and global citizenship.

Despite the overall positive responses, concerns about religious compatibility remained a barrier for some Malaysian participants. While some navigated these by opting not to participate in the dance or consulting religious advisors beforehand, the initial uncertainty shaped their experiences. "I was hesitant at first because of religious concerns, but after coming here, I felt it was more about culture than religion," one local participant noted (Female, 25). Another local participant remarked, "I had to think twice because of the religious issue, but I realised I can appreciate culture while staying true to my faith," (Local participant, Male, 25).

Bon Odori functioned as a hybrid cultural space, allowing participants to explore and renegotiate cultural boundaries. This identity work involved comparing cultural practices, questioning existing beliefs, and integrating new cultural elements into the self-concept.

4.6 Transforming Curiosity into Engagement

The findings illustrate a transformative progression from initial curiosity to deepened engagement. Authentic, immersive experiences acted as catalysts for moving beyond passive cultural consumption towards active participation and connection. These observations align with Wood and Homolja's (2021) argument that experiential encounters facilitate intercultural understanding and build emotional investment in cultural learning. A local participant remarked, "I thought I'd just take some pictures, but I ended up dancing and learning so much. It changed how I see Japanese people" (Local participant, Female, 24).

Several participants expressed renewed enthusiasm for Japanese culture post-event, with some indicating a desire to visit Japan or pursue further cultural activities. One participant shared: "After attending, I felt more comfortable showing my fascination for Japanese culture. It reignited my passion that I had since young" (Local participant, Female, 26).

For Japanese participants, sharing cultural practices abroad deepened their understanding of Malaysia's diverse society and highlighted the importance of cultural openness. Some expressed surprise at how much Malaysians already knew about Japanese culture, largely shaped by anime and pop media, and

felt motivated to share more nuanced cultural elements beyond popular representations. Some Japanese participants grappled with difficulties in explaining cultural nuances to Malaysian attendees, sometimes hindered by language barriers and differences in understanding concepts like ancestor veneration.

Participants' post-event behaviours, including sharing experiences on social media, inviting friends to future festivals, and expressing interest in further Japanese cultural activities, demonstrate the festival's power in fostering sustained cultural engagement and extending intercultural relationships beyond the event itself.

4.7 Festivals as Soft Power Instruments

Although Bon Odori is not formally framed as a soft power tool, the study indicated that its role aligns closely with soft power dynamics as defined by Nye (2004). By facilitating positive, affective experiences, the festival helps towards shaping favourable perceptions of Japan, enhances its cultural brand, and fosters interpersonal connections that underpin relational diplomacy. This sentiment was reflected by a local participant, "Sharing culture is not just about enjoying anime or sushi. It's this feeling of mutual respect and connection," (Local participant, Female, 24). A Japanese participant remarked, "We may not speak the same language, but dancing together makes us feel connected" (Japanese participant, Female, 25).

The organic, people-driven approach appears to complement formal diplomatic efforts by offering additional layers of interpersonal engagement that may support longer-term intercultural understanding. Participants' expressions of shared humanity and mutual respect suggest that festivals such as Bon Odori hold potential as informal reference points for cultural and public diplomacy initiatives, rather than as direct diplomatic instruments.

The study further highlights the relevance of interpersonal and community-level interactions in shaping perceptions within bilateral contexts. As suggested by Lee and Ayhan (2015), direct intercultural encounters can foster affective connections that operate alongside, rather than replace, state-level diplomatic frameworks.

Participants' calls for continued engagement, such as language classes, student exchanges, and collaborative cultural projects, reflect a readiness to deepen ties beyond symbolic participation. These grassroots efforts, anchored in shared experiences and emotional connections, have the potential to cultivate long-term intercultural partnerships and enhance mutual understanding.

To fully realise Bon Odori's potential as a site for cultural engagement and diplomacy, several challenges need to be addressed. Future iterations should include dedicated educational booths that provide clear explanations of the festival's history, symbolism, and cultural significance. More emphasis on interactive, co-creative activities can further enhance participant experiences. Additionally, providing language support and cultural mediation can help Japanese participants articulate complex cultural concepts, fostering more meaningful dialogues with Malaysian attendees.

5.0 Conclusion

As an exploratory study, this study adds insights to the expanding discourse on cultural diplomacy by providing indications on how cultural festivals in diasporic or host country contexts can facilitate meaningful intercultural connection and identity reflection beyond formal diplomatic channels. Unlike dominant narratives that conceptualise soft-power as state-led and mediated through universally appealing cultural exports such as tourism, pop music or cuisine (e.g. Claro et al., 2023; Khasanah et al., 2023; Kim 2022), this study foregrounds the emotional, interpersonal and context-sensitive dimensions of soft power as experienced by festival participants on the ground. Bon Odori exemplifies a people-centred cultural initiative through which non-state actors contribute to grassroots diplomacy in fostering bilateral relationships (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). The festival not only helps to enhance Japan's soft power by shaping favourable perceptions and fostering emotional connections but also contributes to Malaysia's multicultural narrative, reinforcing values of openness, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

By examining the Bon Odori festival in Malaysia, which has provoked debates over its religious and cultural appropriateness, this study highlights how cultural festivals can become sites of both connection and contention. The study reveals that soft power does not always operate in universally accepted or unproblematic spaces. The Bon Odori festival's religious sensitivity in the Malaysian context presents a layered and sometimes divisive cultural landscape, offering insights into how cultural diplomacy unfolds amidst social complexity.

The study adds a more nuanced understanding of soft power as a dynamic, negotiated process shaped by local interpretations, affective experiences and negotiated meanings. In the context of Malaysia, the festival transcends its original religious and communal boundaries, transforming into a vibrant contact zone (Pratt, 1991) where participants actively negotiate meanings, perform identity work, and cultivate shared narratives of global citizenship. Drawing on Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004), this study suggests that participation in festivals may contribute to the development of intercultural competence and empathy, and may to some extent, support processes associated with relational diplomacy.

The findings suggest that authentic and immersive experiences can play an important role in moving participants from passive fascination into active cultural engagement, echoing prior discussions on experiential learning and intercultural understanding (Wood & Homolja, 2021; Wood et al., 2024). Participants' accounts of reinterpreting cultural symbols and engaging with hybrid identities resonate with Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," indicating that festivals may offer dynamic environments for ongoing identity negotiation and the co-creation of meanings.

To fully harness the transformative potential of such festivals, organisers should emphasise authenticity, inclusivity, and educational depth, ensuring that participants can move beyond surface-level consumption towards meaningful cultural exchange. Addressing practical challenges—such as food inclusivity and the provision of culturally informative materials—will further enhance the festival's accessibility and impact.

Future research could explore the longitudinal effects of festival participation on identity development and intercultural competence, as well as examine comparative cases in other multicultural contexts to broaden theoretical and practical insights. By continuing to investigate how festivals like Bon Odori facilitate intercultural connections, scholars and practitioners can better understand the interplay of soft power, identity, and shared cultural spaces in an increasingly interconnected world. It is also acknowledged that this research with 40 participants is exploratory in approach, intended to provide rich insights while recognising its limitations in terms of generalisability.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

SMN: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Collection and Analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation and Editing. KM: Data Curation, Collection and Analysis.

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Ethics Statement

This research did not require IRB approval because it involved a retrospective analysis of fully anonymised data previously collected.

Data Access Statement:

Research data supporting this publication are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Author Biography

Shuhaida Md Noor is a lecturer at the School of Communication at Universiti Sains Malaysia in the field of persuasive communication. Her research focuses on consumer psychology, marketing communication, intercultural communication, and heritage communication. Apart from research and writing in these fields, she is also often involved in community capacity-building projects and consultancy projects, particularly related to cultural and natural heritage, tourism, and branding.

Kayathre Muthu is a graduate of the School of Communication at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), specialising in public relations and persuasive communication. She develops digital content and explores branding, engagement, and persuasive strategies to help audiences connect with meaningful, credible messages.

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