

# Beyond One-Time Visits: Psychological Immersion and Repeated Engagement in *Taiga* Drama Tourism

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## Abstract

*Taiga* drama, an annual year-long historical television series produced by Japan's public broadcaster NHK, portrays famous figures and events from Japanese history and often inspires tourism to related historical sites. This study aims to identify the factors that enable *Taiga* drama tourism to evolve beyond a temporary boom into a sustained experiential practice. Using the 2024 NHK *Taiga* drama *Hikaru Kimi e* as a case study, the research analyzes how viewers and tourists develop emotional connections with the destinations featured in the drama. Through qualitative analysis based on local government reports, news articles, and tourists' narratives, the study adopts the frameworks of Customer-Dominant Logic (CDL) and Pine & Gilmore's 4E model to explore the emotional experiences of tourists across the three stages of travel: pre-visit, during the visit, and post-visit.

At the core of this study is the concept of immersion, which is considered essential to the generation of experiential value. Many *Hikaru Kimi e* tourists had prior exposure to *The Tale of Genji*, the narrative foundation of the drama, and thus experienced a second layer of immersion through the drama and subsequent site visits. The phenomenon of "double immersion"—the reactivation and deepening of emotional engagement through both media and physical travel—plays a pivotal role in sustaining interest and encouraging repeat visits. By elucidating the process through which immersive experiences foster long-term value co-creation between tourists and destinations, this research proposes a new model for content-driven tourism that bridges fictional narrative worlds and real-world locations.

**Keywords:** anime pilgrimage tourism, Customer-Dominant Logic, Pine and Gilmore, narrative immersion, content tourism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Purpose

*Taiga* drama tourism refers to the act of visiting locations featured in NHK's historical drama series known as *Taiga* dramas. These dramas, broadcast annually, often yield significant economic effects, sometimes reaching tens of billions of yen. Since the 2000s, many local governments have actively sought to revitalize their regions by leveraging the popularity of these programs.

Previous studies have often used *Taiga* drama tourism as a comparative framework to better understand the characteristics of anime pilgrimage tourism, that is, the practice of fans traveling to real-world places that are featured or modeled in anime. For example, Okamoto (2018) suggests that while anime pilgrims tend to exhibit active and autonomous behavior from the stages of motivation formation and information gathering, *Taiga* drama tourists tend to be more passive in these early phases (Okamoto, 2018, pp. 121–123). It has also been frequently pointed out that the impact of *Taiga* drama tourism tends to be short-lived, often limited to the broadcast year.

However, the 2024 *Taiga* drama *Hikaru Kimi e* targeted a new demographic—female fans—which generated a novel pattern of tourism behavior. Women who had already encountered *The Tale of Genji* through manga or literature and emotionally identified with its world and characters found in the drama a renewed impetus to travel. Even if their initial stance toward tourism was passive, the experience during their visit could foster long-lasting emotional value.

This study seeks to explore the nature of such emotional engagement: What kinds of feelings do those tourists who are moved by *Hikaru Kimi e* experience? Is it possible to observe similar patterns in other cases of *Taiga* drama tourism? And under what conditions might such engagement lead to long-term, repeat visitation?

To answer these questions, this research focuses on the emotional trajectory of tourists before, during, and after their visit, particularly emphasizing the role of “immersion.” Through this lens, the study aims to identify new dimensions of experiential value that distinguish *Taiga* drama tourism from anime pilgrimage tourism.

### 1.2 Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, with a primary emphasis on a literature review.

It draws on documents and reports produced by local governments that hosted *Taiga* drama filming locations and organized promotional campaigns—especially the reports from Kochi City, Okazaki and Shizuoka Cities, and those from Otsu and Uji Cities. In addition, the study analyzes newspaper articles, relevant scholarly essays, and testimonies of tourists.

The emotional process through which tourists develop deep affective ties to destinations is examined using the frameworks of Customer-Dominant Logic (CDL) and Pine & Gilmore's 4E model. Special attention is given to the concept of immersion, with insights also drawn from psychological approaches.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *Taiga* Drama Tourism

*Taiga* dramas are year-long historical television series broadcast by NHK since 1963. These programs typically depict the life of a well-known historical figure over the span of a year. While a few series have focused on modern or fictional characters, most center around key historical figures who shaped Japanese history—such as Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—and highlight their personal growth and military exploits. Some series also focus on supporting figures like women or siblings, or portray ensembles of people who influenced the era. As flagship programs of Japanese television, *Taiga* dramas consistently attract high viewership and significant public attention.

*Taiga* drama tourism refers to travel behavior that is inspired by watching these dramas. While fans have long visited the actual locations featured in the series, it was only after the 2000s—amid a national trend of tourism-based regional revitalization—that *Taiga* dramas began to be actively promoted as regional content resources. Among the most impactful examples is the 2010 series *Ryōmaden*, set in Kochi Prefecture. According to a report by the Bank of Japan's Kochi Branch following the series' conclusion, the economic ripple effect reached approximately ¥53.5 billion. The table below presents *Taiga* dramas aired since 2000 that generated particularly notable economic effects.

In response to such impacts, local governments across Japan have actively sought to host *Taiga* drama productions as a means of promoting tourism and revitalizing their regions. These promotional efforts typically span several years, with some cases involving repeated efforts over the course of a decade. For example, Kitamura (2016) notes that promotional efforts for the 2002 series *Toshiie and Matsu* began as early as 1998.

Table 1. Estimated economic impacts for major *Taiga* dramas since 2000

Year Title	Main Location(s)	Estimated Economic Impact
2004 <i>Shinsengumi!</i>	Kyoto Prefecture	Approx. ¥20.3 billion
2008 <i>Atsuhime</i>	Kagoshima Prefecture	Approx. ¥26.2 billion
2009 <i>Tenchijin</i>	Niigata Prefecture	Approx. ¥20.4 billion
2010 <i>Ryōmaden</i>	Kochi Prefecture	Approx. ¥53.5 billion
	Nagasaki Prefecture	Approx. ¥18.2 billion
2014 <i>Gunshi Kanbei</i>	Hyogo Prefecture	Approx. ¥24.3 billion
	Fukuoka Prefecture	Approx. ¥28.0 billion
	Yamaguchi Prefecture	Approx. ¥13.8 billion
	Gunma Prefecture	Approx. ¥3.9 billion
2022 <i>The 13 Lords of the Shogun</i>	Kanagawa Prefecture	Approx. ¥30.7 billion
2023 <i>What Will You Do, Ieyasu?</i>	Aichi Prefecture	Approx. ¥39.3 billion
	Nagoya City	Approx. ¥14.0 billion

Once a location is selected and announced—typically two years before the broadcast—a dedicated promotional committee is formed. With NHK’s cooperation, public and private sectors coordinate efforts, allocate multi-year budgets, and sometimes collaborate across prefectural boundaries. Local promotional initiatives include maximizing existing tourism resources, constructing temporary *Taiga* drama museums, developing related merchandise and souvenirs. Related merchandise can amount to “200 to nearly 400 items for a single series” (Kitamura, 2022). Furthermore, “in conjunction with the broadcast, some regions plan local mascot characters based on historical figures associated with the area. These mascots not only serve as icons for *Taiga* drama tourism, but also become the basis for character goods developed by local businesses” (Kitamura, 2022). They also offer “town-walking” experiences, often supported by maps and trained guides aligned with the narrative of the drama.

The next section will examine the key factors contributing to successful tourist engagement in *Taiga* drama tourism.

## 2.2 Key Factors for Attracting Tourists

Based on prior research and reports from local governments, several factors have been identified as contributing to the success of *Taiga* drama tourism in terms of attracting visitors. These factors can be categorized into three main domains: the content itself, the destination,

and the *Taiga* drama exhibition facilities.

### 1) Content-related Factors

- The drama is engaging and entertaining.
- High viewership ratings and media attention generate widespread interest.
- The protagonist is a well-known and well-regarded historical figure.
- The lead actor or actress has strong appeal.

### 2) Destination-related Factors

- The site is easily accessible and travel costs are reasonable.
- The destination has intrinsic tourism appeal (e.g., food culture, enjoyable townscapes).
- The official website is informative and user-friendly, making reservations easy.
- Tour packages offered are attractive and well-curated.
- The destination was featured in the program, sparking viewer interest.
- Promotional materials from travel agencies and transportation companies are appealing and abundant.

### 3) *Taiga* Drama Museum-related Factors

- The scale and content of the *Taiga* drama museum are impressive.
- Events (such as appearances by the main cast) are engaging and well-received.

While *Taiga* dramas themselves serve as triggers for tourism, Tadokoro (2017) points out that these dramas are produced with the intention of sparking viewer interest in the actual historical sites and regions depicted. After each episode, related locations and landmarks are introduced, often in conjunction with beautiful present-day visuals. In addition to the main broadcast, special programs often feature filming locations or historical commentary by actors and experts. This media synergy encourages viewers to develop natural curiosity about the locations featured and motivates them to visit in person. Although the dramas are fictional, they are closely linked to real-world places, creating an immersive bridge between the narrative and reality. Furthermore, brochures from travel agencies and comprehensive information on official websites make it easy for viewers to transition from “watching” to “traveling.”

Traditionally, *Taiga* drama tourists have been predominantly in their 50s and 60s, though this varies by series. Common tourist behaviors include visiting historical locations featured in the series, touring the temporary *Taiga* drama museums, attending related events and ex-

hibitions, enjoying regional cuisine, and purchasing local souvenirs. Events featuring appearances by leading actors are especially popular and often determine the success of a campaign.

### 2.3 Characteristics of *Hikaru Kimi e*

The 2024 NHK *Taiga* drama *Hikaru Kimi e* centers on the life of Murasaki Shikibu, portrayed by actress Yuriko Yoshitaka. The story follows the protagonist as she develops her own unique path in life, guided by keen powers of observation and a vivid imagination. The screenplay was written by Shizuka Oishi, known for her nuanced portrayals of female characters. The drama averaged a viewership rating of 10.7%, and among all NHK dramas distributed through streaming services since April 2020, it recorded the highest number of viewers.

This series specifically targeted female audiences. According to audience ratings, the drama received particularly strong support from women in their 20s to 40s. In general, women are more likely to have previous exposure to *The Tale of Genji* through manga, films, or stage adaptations. Surveys have shown that university-aged women with prior knowledge of the story or of Murasaki Shikibu herself expressed strong support for the program. For younger women, *Hikaru Kimi e* offered a protagonist they could identify with: a woman navigating a male-dominated court society while seeking her own authentic path. This led to self-projection and emotional resonance. For middle-aged and older women, many of whom have long appreciated *The Tale of Genji*, the drama offered a chance to reflect on their own romantic experiences by identifying with its female characters. In both cases, viewers engaged in self-projection—either as a form of empathy or retrospective reflection. As a result, the primary demographic for tourism associated with *Hikaru Kimi e* consists of two key groups: women in their 20s, particularly university students, and women in their 40s and 50s. These women do not simply watch the drama passively; rather, they actively project themselves into the narrative world and form emotional attachments to the characters and settings. This deeper level of engagement contributes to their motivation to visit the locations featured in the drama.

## 3. Previous Research

### 3.1 Anime Pilgrimage Tourism

Anime pilgrimage refers to the act of visiting real-world locations that appear as backgrounds or settings in anime, games, or manga—typically associated with otaku subculture. This phenomenon has received increasing media attention since the 2000s. Okamoto (2018) conducted

extensive research on the practice through content analysis, surveys, and fieldwork. Ōtani, Matsumoto, and Yamamura (2018) further argued that anime pilgrimage can generate “mutual benefit” for three stakeholders: content creators, local communities, and fans.

While much of the existing literature approaches the topic from a sociological perspective, Yukawa (2022) analyzed anime pilgrimage from a marketing standpoint. By employing the framework of Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), he explored how value co-creation occurs through interactions between anime pilgrims and local residents. Nanchi (2020) took a different approach by highlighting the distinctive features of anime pilgrimage tourism in terms of experiential value dimensions.

In contrast, *Taiga* drama tourism has frequently been used as a comparative case in such studies, particularly to highlight differences in the behavior of anime pilgrims. Okamoto (2018), for instance, writes:

“In *Taiga* drama tourism, the information obtained during the motivation formation stage is primarily disseminated by mass media such as television, books, and magazines, that is, the tourism infrastructure necessary to attract visitors is well-developed in the case of *Taiga* dramas. In contrast, anime pilgrimage often begins when fans themselves identify the real-world locations depicted in the content, and share their findings online. Anime pilgrims then compile these sources and create their own unique pilgrimage routes. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, from the stages of motivation formation and information gathering, anime pilgrims tend to exhibit more active and autonomous behavior.” (Okamoto, 2018, pp. 121–123)

### 3.2 Customer-Dominant Logic

While Service-Dominant Logic emphasizes value co-creation between firms and customers through interactive relationships, Heinonen et al. (2010), Heinonen et al. (2013), and Heinonen and Strandvik (2015) proposed a different perspective known as Customer-Dominant Logic (CDL). In this view, value is not necessarily created through intentional or reciprocal interactions, but rather formed within the customer’s own context—shaped by their past experiences and the surrounding ecosystem.

The hallmark of CDL is its customer-centric perspective. It focuses on how customers perceive and derive value within the context of their own lives. Rather than passively receiving services, customers interpret and experience offerings based on personal goals, life situations,

and emotions. According to CDL, a key question in understanding customer value is not merely what is offered, but rather: *What kind of life has the customer led? What brings them joy or frustration? What thoughts, emotions, or routines define their everyday context?* This approach recognizes that meaning is generated through the lived experiences of the customer, and thus emphasizes value-in-context rather than value-in-exchange.

### 3.3 Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy

Pine and Gilmore (1999) conceptualized the progression of economic value from commodities to goods, to services, and ultimately to experiences. They argued that in the emerging “experience economy,” what customers value most is not products or services per se, but meaningful and memorable experiences. They classified customer experiences into four types using a  $2 \times 2$  matrix based on two axes: the level of customer participation (passive to active) and the type of connection (absorption to immersion). Among these, “immersion” refers to a state in which the customer is deeply engaged with or surrounded by the experience. Unlike absorption, where the experience is taken in from an external standpoint (as a spectator), immersion implies that the individual feels physically and emotionally part of the experience.

Immersive experiences are more likely to remain in customers' memory and to elicit strong emotional bonds. In this sense, immersion plays a central role in value creation within the experience economy. It transforms consumption into personal meaning, making it more than a transactional event—it becomes a lived and memorable moment. Therefore, in the context of this study, immersion is considered a critical factor in understanding how emotional relationships between tourists and destinations are formed and sustained.

## 4. Tourists of *Hikaru Kimi e* and the Immersive Experience

### 4.1 Characteristics of *Hikaru Kimi e* Tourism

Following the broadcast of *Hikaru Kimi e*, the number of female visitors in their twenties increased significantly in the related municipalities, particularly in Uji and Ōtsu, where visitation growth outpaced the national average. Among this demographic, experience-based tourism proved especially popular. Many visitors posted photos and reflections from sites related to *The Tale of Genji* on social media platforms like Instagram, often using hashtags.

Unlike anime pilgrimage tourists, these visitors did not necessarily initiate their own re-



search or route planning. However, many exhibited strong personal attachments to the locations they visited. According to survey results, their motivations for travel were not primarily due to admiration for particular actors; rather, many cited the narrative content itself as the most compelling reason for their visit. Groups of women were observed discussing both the drama *Hikaru Kimi e* and *The Tale of Genji* in detail, demonstrating a level of literary and emotional engagement that surpassed casual interest. It implies that they had moved beyond the beginner or introductory level of fandom. These visitors actively constructed emotional engagement with the destination, suggesting a form of co-creative tourism experience that aligns with the principles of Customer-Dominant Logic (CDL).

Based on local government reports, newspaper articles, and interviews, the factors that contributed to relationship-building between tourists and the destination were categorized into three temporal stages—pre-visit, during the visit, and post-visit—according to the CDL framework.

Let us begin with the pre-visit stage. What kind of emotional involvement did visitors have with related content such as *Hikaru Kimi e* or *The Tale of Genji* before their trip? Naturally, many respondents reported becoming deeply engaged with the drama, saying they were “hooked on the series” or “moved by the script.” Others noted that they had long admired *The Tale of Genji*, expressing feelings of fondness or longing, or that they had favorite characters with whom they identified or empathized. Some viewers projected themselves onto Murasaki Shikibu, a woman living true to herself in a male-dominated society, while others reported cheering for characters they related to, indicating experiences of identification and emotional resonance.

As for reasons behind deciding to undertake *Hikaru Kimi e*-related travel, many cited accessibility (e.g., to places like Ōtsu or Uji) and cost-effectiveness (reasonable travel prices and the ability to tour multiple locations). Others emphasized the inherent appeal of the destinations themselves, saying they already had positive impressions of the Ōtsu–Uji area. Some travelers mentioned that they consulted social media posts when deciding on specific places to visit.

In the during-visit stage, sources of satisfaction and emotional impact included remarks such as “I was moved to see the real scenery where the main character stood,” or “The *Taiga* Drama Museum was well-curated and had everything I wanted to see.” Responses also highlighted the success of female-targeted strategies, including “Enjoyed sweets that evoked *The*

*Tale of Genji*,” “Participated in Instagram-worthy events,” and “Found many photogenic spots for social media.” Additional feedback noted the enjoyment of strolling through the area and learning through the experience.

What, then, happens after the visit? Many tourists continued to enjoy their memories by posting photos, writing comments, and interacting on social media. Some even expressed a desire to plan future visits, noting that “the experience changes with the seasons.” In some cases, their deepened interest in *Hikaru Kimi e* or *The Tale of Genji* led them to take further steps, such as enrolling in local culture center lectures.

Referring to the CDL model, we can summarize the characteristics of *Hikaru Kimi e* tourists in the following diagram. In the pre-visit stage, viewers become emotionally immersed in the world of the drama through empathy and identification. Some had already experienced this immersive connection through their prior engagement with *The Tale of Genji*. During the visit, they feel as if they have become the protagonist at the actual filming locations, which deepens their sense of identification. After the visit, by sharing impressions with others who had similar experiences, their emotional connection to the narrative world remains vivid and lasting. In this way, the experience continues and naturally leads to the “next” opportunity.

Figure 1 below illustrates these relationships based on the CDL model, highlighting how tourists’ emotional connections evolve over time.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Visitors to *Hikaru Kimi e*



## 4.2 Immersion into the Narrative World

Returning to the central question posed earlier—what factors enable repeated and emotion-

ally fulfilling visits in *Taiga* drama tourism?—this section explores the role of *immersion* as conceptualized in Pine and Gilmore's 4E model of the experience economy.

In Pine and Gilmore's 4E model of the experience economy, immersion is considered a key factor that drives the overall quality of the experience. Immersion refers to a state in which the participant becomes deeply engaged—both mentally and physically—in the surrounding environment. Pine and Gilmore illustrate this concept using examples such as the feeling of becoming a resident of another world in a theme park or becoming so absorbed in a virtual reality environment that one forgets the real world. Whereas absorption involves taking in an experience as an observer, immersion is characterized by active, embodied participation in the experience itself. Immersive experiences tend to leave a strong impression on the participant's memory and emotions. They are more likely to be remembered not merely as acts of consumption, but as meaningful experiences, which in turn can motivate revisits, sharing, and recommendations.

Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) developed a measurement scale that operationalizes Pine and Gilmore's four experiential dimensions and applied it to the context of tourism. Their study demonstrated that two dimensions related to immersion—Escapism (high immersion and active participation) and Esthetics (high immersion and passive participation)—enhanced tourists' emotional attachment to the destination, and had a strong influence on both satisfaction and revisit intention. The authors emphasize the central role of immersion in shaping the tourism experience. While Entertainment and Education may function as supporting elements, it is the depth of immersion that leads to memorable experiences and drives overall satisfaction.

Similarly, Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) also found through experimental research that immersion-based experiences (i.e., immersive engagement) have a significant impact on tourist satisfaction.

Therefore, in Pine and Gilmore's 4E model, immersion can be regarded as the core of value creation in the experience economy. It also plays a critical role in building relationships between tourists and destinations, which is the central theme of this study.

This raises an important question: how does the immersive experience occur? To explore this, we now turn to psychological perspectives on the phenomenon of immersion.

In psychology, immersion refers to a quasi-experiential state in which readers become deeply absorbed in a story, focusing their attention on the act of reading and mentally enter-

ing the narrative world (Osanai & Kusumi, 2014). The phenomenon of immersion—becoming engrossed or “drawn into” something—has been examined in psychology since the 1960s to 1980s, particularly within the framework of hypnosis. This line of research focused on identifying the factors that contribute to immersion and developing scales to measure it.

The concept of immersiveness as a psychological trait emerged in the mid-1970s, initially discussed in relation to individuals’ responsiveness or susceptibility to hypnosis. Related to this, the concept of reading involvement, or immersion in a narrative world through reading, was introduced and studied experimentally.

Mill and colleagues (Kuiken, Miall et al.; Luiken, Philip, p. 69) explain immersion in narratives using the key concepts of empathy and emotional transportation. These affective responses, which interact with readers’ interest in the author or narrative style, can facilitate changes in self-understanding and self-perception—core components of immersive experience (Osanai, p. 70). During the immersive process, readers may undergo a phenomenon known as identification, in which they take on the perspective of a character and experience the events of the story as if they were their own.

Focusing specifically on narrative immersion, Gerrig’s (1993) transportation hypothesis offers a key psychological explanation. Gerrig conceptualizes the reader not as a passive observer but as an active participant in the narrative. He argues that through the act of reading, the reader becomes like a traveler who temporarily leaves the real world and enters the “narrative world,” experiencing it from within.

This notion is closely related to Reader-Response Theory, a literary framework developed in the 1970s by theorists such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. According to this theory, the meaning of a literary text is not fixed but is co-created by the reader through interpretation, personal experience, and cultural background. Gerrig’s work supports this idea from a psychological standpoint, emphasizing that meaning arises not solely from textual elements but also from the reader’s cognitive and emotional engagement. In the digital age, this “response” extends beyond the act of reading itself to encompass post-experiential behaviors such as social media sharing and real-world travel. In this way, Gerrig’s theory has gained renewed relevance as a means of understanding contemporary phenomena like content tourism and pilgrimage.

### 4.3 Immersion and Pilgrimage Tourism

Gerrig's concept of "transportation"—a psychological state in which readers or viewers feel as though they have entered a narrative world—has significant relevance for understanding pilgrimage tourism. Gerrig describes narrative engagement as a kind of mental journey in which the individual temporarily leaves the real world and participates in the story as if traveling through it. In this light, pilgrimage tourism can be interpreted as the physical enactment of such a narrative journey. When individuals become deeply immersed in a story, the desire to "go there for real" can emerge as a powerful emotional and behavioral motivation. Thus, pilgrimage tourism may be understood as a form of re-experiencing the narrative world in physical space. This explains why visiting the actual setting can evoke strong emotional responses—it is not merely sightseeing, but a continuation of the story in the real world. Furthermore, the social aspect of pilgrimage enhances this immersive experience. Interactions with fellow fans or local residents serve to strengthen the sense of shared meaning and deepen the feeling of presence within the narrative world.

Immersion in this sense occurs during reading, viewing films or television dramas, and becomes even more profound when one visits the physical locations portrayed in those narratives (Osanai and Yoneda, 2018). As noted by Osanai and Yoneda (2018), visiting the actual sites enables individuals to feel a stronger sense of identification and immersion, reinforcing the emotional ties with the narrative.

Kusumi and Yoneda (2018) found that individual psychological traits influence the immersive experience. For example, those who have a strong appreciation for nostalgia and a tendency to form positive emotional connections with the past are more likely to feel a sense of familiarity and warmth when visiting such sites. Similarly, those with vivid imaginative abilities are more likely to feel deeply moved—experiencing thoughts like "I've finally made it to this place." Both nostalgia and emotional arousal contribute directly to deeper immersion into the story world.

### 4.4 Immersive Experience in *Hikaru Kimi e* Tourism

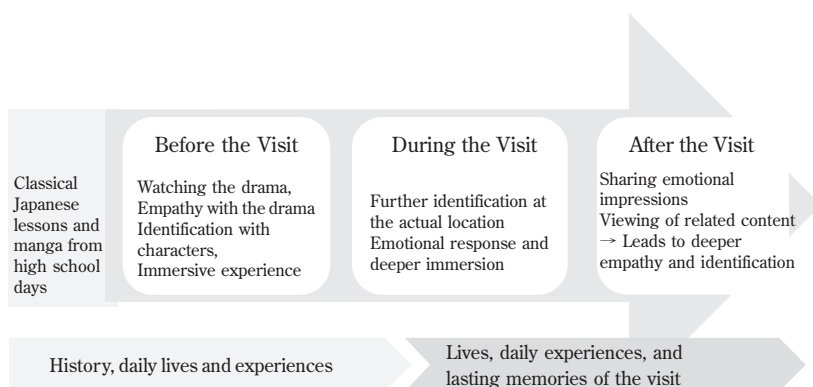
Let us now return to the case of *Hikaru Kimi e*. When tourists visit Ishiyama Temple—believed to be the site where Murasaki Shikibu began writing *The Tale of Genji*—many recall scenes from the drama and feel a strong sense of familiarity. They reflect on Murasaki's inner struggles and creative process and often express emotions such as, "I'm so moved to finally

be here.”

A particularly notable feature of *Hikaru Kimi e* tourism is that the immersive experience tends to occur in two distinct phases. For many visitors, the first phase of immersion began before the drama even aired. Having encountered *The Tale of Genji* in high school Japanese classes or through manga, theater, or film adaptations, they had already experienced forms of identification, empathy, and narrative transportation. When they later watched *Hikaru Kimi e*, these previous emotions were reawakened and deepened, leading them to visit the actual sites depicted in the drama. In other words, many of these tourists had already immersed themselves in the story world well before the drama, making their emotional engagement not only deeper but also more complex. For some, this may also include a personal history of having visited the sites previously—such as during a high school field trip. Upon re-visiting as adults, they experience the place through the lens of accumulated life experiences, allowing them to empathize with different characters or notice new meanings that eluded them in youth.

This layered, recursive immersion transforms a simple visit into a meaningful act of re-experiencing. These fans are often in a highly transported psychological state, resulting in a strong emotional and behavioral drive to visit the location. Figure.2 shows how these tourists experience deepening and recurrence of immersion based on Figure.1.

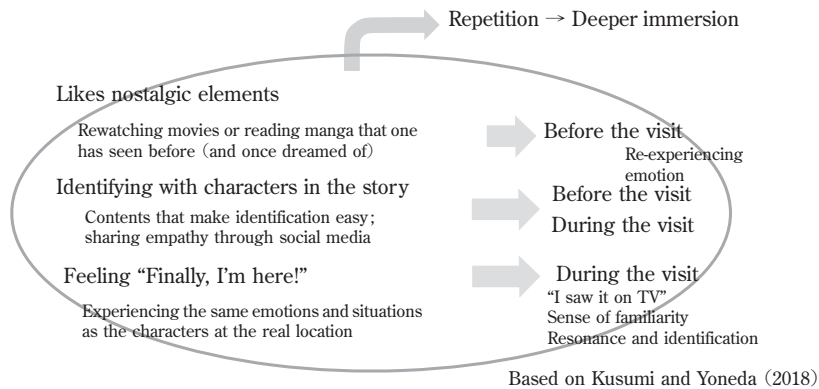
Figure 2. Deepening and Recurrence of Immersion Among Visitors to *Hikaru Kimi e*



Research by Kusumi and Yoneda (2018) supports this trend. They found that individuals who easily identify with fictional characters tend to experience heightened joy and emotional impact when visiting related locations. This aligns closely with the tendencies observed in *Hikaru Kimi e* tourists. Figure.3 shows the discussion above with the findings proposed by

Kusumi and Yoneda (2018).

Figure 3. Factors That Enhance Immersion in Tourism



Several reasons explain why *Hikaru Kimi e* was able to evoke this two-phase immersion:

- 1) **Content Structure**: *The Tale of Genji*, which forms the basis of the drama, features a wide range of female characters with varying circumstances and personalities. Readers can easily project themselves onto one or more of these characters.
- 2) **Educational Exposure**: The early chapters of *The Tale of Genji* are commonly included in Japanese high school curricula, making the story familiar to many from a young age.
- 3) **Frequent Media Representation**: The story is frequently adapted into manga, films, and stage productions, increasing exposure and opportunities for emotional connection.
- 4) **Evolving Identification**: As individuals age, the characters they empathize with may change. Because *The Tale of Genji* spans multiple life stages, readers can continue to find new emotional resonance throughout their lives.

Although immersion is anchored in the narrative, it is always mediated by the individual self—how one feels, what one has experienced, and how those experiences shape one's perception. The ability of tourists to continuously generate new meaning through such immersion is consistent with the principles of CDL, in which value emerges from personal context and lived experience.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Findings and Implications

This study has examined the factors that enable *Taiga* drama tourism to generate long-lasting experiential value, using *Hikaru Kimi e* as a case study. The analysis suggests that visitors who had prior emotional connections to *The Tale of Genji* experienced a two-phase immersion process—first through earlier encounters with the narrative, and then through the drama. When these individuals subsequently visited the associated locations, their emotional engagement was significantly deepened, resulting in heightened satisfaction and impact.

As repeatedly stated by local government officials involved in tourism promotion, a *Taiga* drama merely serves as the initial trigger for tourism. The challenge is ensuring that this trigger does not fade as a short-term boom but instead becomes the basis for long-term destination engagement. To that end, the study highlights three essential stages of the tourism experience:

- **Pre-visit:** Visitors should have opportunities to engage repeatedly with the content. Ideally, the drama should offer characters with whom diverse audiences can identify based on their own life experiences.
- **During the visit:** The site should allow for emotional experiences that mirror those of the characters in the drama. However, if these experiences are superficial or “play-acting” in nature, they may quickly lose novelty. Repeat visitation is more likely when each visit allows for renewed empathy and deeper identification.
- **Post-visit:** Immersive experiences should be sustained and shared. Providing platforms where visitors can reflect on and share their memories enhances continued engagement. Furthermore, if related content—such as novels, manga, plays, TV programs, or films—continues to be released after the drama ends, it enables audiences to re-enter the narrative world, thus motivating return visits.

Sustaining the appeal of content over time is therefore essential. Equally important is the attitude of local residents. If they respect the content and the historical figures portrayed—not merely for economic reasons—and are eager to share the appeal of their town, then emotional and cultural alignment can be fostered. In such cases, close collaboration between the public and private sectors becomes indispensable for the success of long-term tourism development.



## 5.2 Contribution of the Study

This study offers several contributions to the understanding of *Taiga* drama tourism and content-driven destination development.

First, while previous studies have primarily focused on the *Taiga* drama tourism strategies of local governments or promotional campaigns involving private-sector collaboration, this study shifts the focus to the emotional experiences of the tourists themselves. By applying psychological and experiential marketing frameworks, the research provides a new hypothesis: that sustained tourism engagement is driven by emotional immersion, identification, and memory-based value creation.

Second, this study attempts to clarify the experiential value of content tourism by applying the Customer-Dominant Logic (CDL), Pine and Gilmore's 4E model, and a psychological approach. It extends the application of the psychological concept of "immersion" into the field of marketing and tourism studies, emphasizing its relevance not just as a cognitive state, but as a deeply personal and context-driven process. By analyzing how individuals relate to narrative content before, during, and after a trip, the study highlights how content tourism creates value beyond the moment of consumption.

Third, the findings suggest potential solutions to the growing problem of overtourism. It provides a key to understanding how tourists become engaged in responsible tourism practices and form long-term, respectful relationships with the destination.

Although the arguments presented here remain preliminary, the study opens the door for further empirical investigations into *Taiga* drama tourism. In particular, future research should continue to explore how content narratives, psychological immersion, and local contexts intersect to create enduring tourism experiences—as exemplified by *Hikaru Kimi e*.

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