

Sauna culture beyond the boom: An exploration of values-based transformations in Japanese sauna tourism

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INTRODUCTION

Problem statement

Since the 2010s, Japan has been experiencing a second “sauna boom” (Kobayashi, 2018, 2021) that has introduced a radical and inclusive image change regarding sauna-going. Besides its earlier popularity among older businessmen, in recent years, sauna-going has also attracted younger demographics and women who have adopted it as a hobby and a lifestyle. A new phenomenon that has surfaced alongside the sauna boom is *satabi* (サタビ), a form of sauna tourism where visiting a sauna becomes the primary objective for the trip (Goka, 2023; Iwata, 2021). However, how sustainable is the current sauna tourism phenomenon, if the current boom were to end abruptly? The objective of this study is to analyse how it would be possible to construct a long-lasting, truly sustainable culture around saunas that could extend beyond the inevitably transient nature of economic and cultural booms.

Research justification

In this study, the current sauna boom is contextualised among other, related boom-like developments in Japan, particularly the “healing boom” (Matsui, 2008) and the “Finland boom” (Fuse, 2021). Additionally, Japan’s case is reflected against the internationally growing wellness market and its trends, with the “reimagination” of saunas forecasted to be a major theme in the coming year (Global Wellness Summit, 2025). Already, domestic markets have been adjusting to meet the increased demand of saunas. Furthermore, municipalities across Japan have been active in engaging in revitalisation projects that aim to attract human resources to declining rural areas (Qu & Zollet, 2023), with saunas garnering interest as a tool for solving some societal issues regarding population decline. There is also heightened international interest in establishing joint ventures and performing sauna-related market research in Japan, demonstrating the prominence of saunas and their heightened potential in the Japanese market as well as Japanese society.

Purposes of study

The current sauna boom is analysed as both an opportunity and a risk regarding the future and sustainability of sauna tourism in Japan. Ultimately, the study seeks to determine whether the present sauna trend can transition into a stable, enduring practise. This analysis is performed through a variety of angles, such as neoliberalism and its critique, as well as investigating the strengths and weaknesses of diverse tourism frameworks like regenerative tourism, community-based tourism and creative tourism to see if they have the potential to contribute to a truly sustainable and socially embedded sauna culture that could extend beyond the boom phase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical background

Values are identified as central for evaluating the future trajectory of Japanese sauna tourism. Compared to ontological and epistemological issues, axiology, the philosophical study of the nature of value, has received relatively little attention in academia even though it is essentially linked to everyday decision-making (Edelheim, 2014). An extensive analysis of sauna facilities’ value systems is expected to provide insights about how value systems are reflected on the operational and business concept, as well as how these value systems influence the sustainability of the sauna boom. This is particularly important in the Japanese context with a long-established tradition of hot spring bathing and other bathing modes that not only predate sauna-going but also share similarities with it.

Conceptual development

To see how sauna facilities can contribute to a truly sustainable future of saunas and sauna tourism in Japan, two different theoretical approaches are applied to investigate the socio-material and enviro-ethical aspects of saunas. In the socio-material sphere, saunas are viewed as “saunascape” (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2020), places of dynamic social construction where the place, people, meanings and material processes intrinsically intertwine and structure the practises of sauna bathing. The theory of “saunascape” is layered with Kuwako's (2017) theorisation of “planetary philosophy”, linking the enviro-ethical dimension to actual practises through the “triangle of values”: ideas, systems and decision-making. Environmental philosophy and ethics are interlinked to the physicality of spaces and practises in sauna bathing in order to provide a framework that enables the analysis of abstract values through concrete measures and actions. This also enables the creation of practical theory (and theoretical practise) that can become a driving force for real action.

Research model

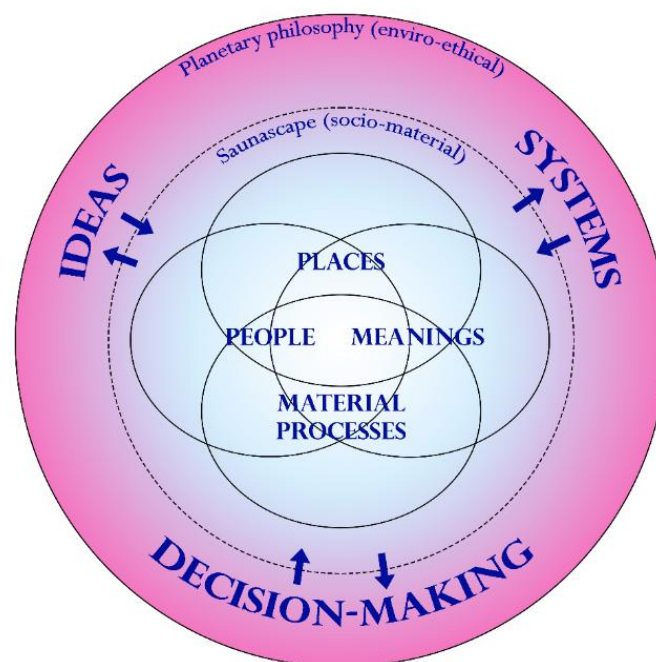


Figure 1. The layering of the socio-material and enviro-ethical spheres based on the understandings of “saunascape” (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2020) and “planetary philosophy” (Kuwako, 2017).

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The primary data for the dissertation will be gathered via fieldwork in three different sites across Japan: Hokkaidō Prefecture, Tottori Prefecture and Ōita Prefecture. The fieldwork structure is modelled after the ethnographic approach of McMorran (2022), rooted in maintenance and management work performed at local sauna facilities as “one of the workers”. Participant observation and field notes will be combined with semi-structured and informal interviews, creating a blending of varied meanings that will allow incisive analysis (Klien, 2020). This necessitates keen and continuous reflection on the position of the researcher as partly an insider (sauna professional with an industry background) and an outsider (foreigner, Caucasian). Besides the bounded fieldwork sites, interviews are also performed with other sauna owners and managerial staff both in Japan and Finland in order to contextualise the fieldwork data and provide insightful cross-cultural comparisons.

For the secondary data, videography will also be utilised. The aim is to make subjective fieldwork videos to argue for the theoretical development of academic short-form content. Besides providing data richness and multisensoriality, the potential of videography is multifaceted, ranging from capturing contextual moments and temporary behaviours (Pera et al., 2022), allowing viewers to develop their

own analysis and interpretation (Masset et al., 2024) to being a “disruptive other” in academia (Haanpää et al., 2021).

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study will be one of the first ones of its kind to specifically analyse about the new, emerging phenomenon of Japanese sauna tourism. However, the theoretical implications are not closely related to just saunas, with the aim being to offer new insights into how socio-material environments and enviro-ethical considerations can shape the longevity of tourism phenomena.

From a practical standpoint, the findings will be relevant to sauna operators, policymakers, and wellness tourism stakeholders seeking to develop long-term strategies for sauna-related businesses. Understanding the interplay between value systems and business models can help guide service design, marketing approaches, and policy interventions that support a more sustainable and resilient sauna culture in Japan.

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