

LEISURE FACILITIES' CHANGE AND PROSPECTS IN THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE: THE CASES OF THE “SUPER HERO SHOWS” BASED ON JAPANESE TOKUSATSU AND ANIME MOVIES

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ABSTRACT. This study focused on the Super Hero Shows that have been held for long featuring characters from Japanese tokusatsu and animated films, and it discussed how these events might respond to the spread of COVID-19 infection, documenting the current situation and what appears in the post-pandemic future, and how it might affect leisure activities in Japan. The following hypothesis was established: “After the end of the pandemic, Super Hero Shows will return to the same state as before COVID-19”, and to accomplish this purpose, the author used a field survey and a data survey. As a result, some events are returning to their pre-COVID activities, such as the resumption of handshaking and photo sessions, while others are using the latest technology, such as the introduction of online events, to maintain themselves. It was difficult to support or deny the study hypothesis.

Keywords: Super Hero Shows, Leisure tourism, Leisure facilities, COVID-19

1. **Introduction.** Soon after COVID-19 was identified, the virus causing it spread worldwide. The pandemic struck Japan at the beginning of 2020. Experts appealed to citizens to avoid the three Cs (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings) in March 2020. The government declared a state of emergency for all 47 of Japan’s prefectures in May 2020.

In addition to requesting the public to stay at home, the government suspended many elements of the tourism industry in Japan, such as accommodations and leisure facilities. Places that exemplified the three Cs in their normal functioning, such as leisure facilities, were temporarily closed. However, Tokyo Dome City Attractions [1], one of the largest amusement parks in Japan, was allowed to host its Super Hero Show [2]. Tokyo Dome City Attractions has hosted the Super Hero Shows since 1971 [3]. This event is a tourist attraction in which the performers wear stuffed suits portraying heroes and monsters based on Japanese tokusatsu (special effects) and animated films. This event is one of the most popular attractions in Tokyo. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the facility was temporarily closed, from March to July 2020. After that, Tokyo Dome City Attractions resumed performances, calling on tourists to follow new rules such as using hand sanitization and maintaining social distance.

The most typical feature of interest for a facility is its sustainability. That is, once a show is introduced, can the performance be maintained as a tourist attraction for a long time? While pandemic affected the Tokyo Dome facilities, they resumed shows after introducing and abiding by new rules.

Using a field survey, the author investigated the current state of each facility's Super Hero Shows at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic via a field survey that identified common features, obtained perspectives on the changes from the time before the pandemic to the current time, and predicted prospects for the post-COVID-19 era. The social significance of the research is that in anticipation of the post-COVID era, this report will have documented the response measures used by different leisure facilities during event operations under the extremely rare circumstance of a spread event of COVID-19 infection to better identify the measures to be taken in the event that a similar situation occurs in the future. By examining event management in relation to the COVID-19 infection outbreak, the author produces a systematization of methods for keeping historic events alive while introducing infection control measures, which will have academic significance.

2. Previous Studies. The author has conducted comprehensive research on tokusatsu tourism, or tourism using cinematic special effects to attract visitors. Specifically, this research investigates the historical transitions in tokusatsu tourism and the behavioral patterns observed among tourists in the area. It was found that tokusatsu tourism has a history of about 70 years, and that demonstration shows and exhibitions that utilize stuffed monsters and miniatures used in the filming of tokusatsu movies make up most of the examples of this type [4]. This study also categorized the behavioral characteristics of tourists into 19 types [5]. A distinctive feature of historical research on tokusatsu tourism is the concern with the sustainability of demonstration shows, exhibitions, and other events. Some of the shows and exhibitions featuring tokusatsu hero TV programs that have been held at commercial facilities in various parts of Japan have continued for more than a quarter of a century [6]. The tokusatsu show at the Tokyo Dome City Attractions takes place in a large-scale leisure facility that has been operating in Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo since its opening in 1955. Tokyo Dome City Attractions began to host Super Hero Shows in 1971. The model for the show was the hit special effects hero program Kamen Rider produced by the Toei Company, which began airing in Japan in that year. Kamen Rider began to be held at the facility, with free admission and seven performances a day, attracting more than 4,000 visitors [7]. And since then, it has held shows of the Super Sentai Series (Power Rangers), another Toei-produced tokusatsu hero TV show, with the show content changing every year [8]. The facility continues to present shows, such as the Don Brothers Show [2], with a history of more than 50 years. Furthermore, the Ultraman Festival [9], held at Ikebukuro Sunshine City, which features shows and exhibitions based on the Ultraman series, produced by Tsuburaya Productions has a history of more than 30 years, and the Pretty Cure Series show in Ikebukuro Sunshine City [10], produced by Toei Animation, has a history of more than 13 years. These events, featuring Japanese tokusatsu and animated films, are characterized by long-running performances. Like the Japanese theatrical form of Kabuki, it has taken root in various parts of Japan as a kind of performing art.

The author has conducted comparative study of the history of tourism based in relation to tokusatsu and animated films, as well as investigating the mechanism of its sustainability. However, because COVID-19 is a novel phenomenon that has spread globally since 2020, there are still few studies documenting how leisure facilities have responded to this unprecedented international outbreak of disease and how Super Hero Shows, which were forced to cease due to facility closures, have been able to attract customers or develop cashflow during the pandemic.

In this study, as part of a study of leisure tourism in relation to COVID-19, the author focused on infection prevention and management methods imposed to enable the Super Hero Shows to continue under the new circumstances.

3. Research Hypothesis and Methods. This study examined how facilities’ infection control measures may change. The following hypothesis was established: “After the end of the pandemic, Super Hero Shows will return to the same state as before COVID-19”.

To clarify the above hypotheses, the author used a field survey and a data survey. The field survey was conducted from August 1, 2020 to August 31, 2022, performed by visiting 22 local event venues to document in detail the infection control measures being practiced at each locality. The 22 local events set aside for the survey are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. 22 destinations on field survey (from August 1, 2020 to August 31, 2022)

No.	The event title (English)	Event locations	Date of the event
1	Mashin Sentai Kirameiger Show No.2	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	August 1st to October 4th, 2020
2	Mashin Sentai Kirameiger Show No.3	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	October 31st, 2020 to January 4th, 2021
3	Ultra 6 Brothers THE LIVE in Hakuinkan Theatre -The book of Ultraman-	GINZA Hakuinkan Theatre	November 21st to November 23rd, 2020
4	Ultra Heroes EXPO 2020 in Tokyo Dome City	Tokyo Dome City Attractions Prism Hall	December 26th, 2020 to January 4th, 2021
5	Mashin Sentai Kirameiger Show No.4	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	February 6th to March 21st, 2021
6	Ultra 6 Brothers THE LIVE in Hakuinkan Theatre -The book of Zoffy-	GINZA Hakuinkan Theatre	February 11st to February 14th, 2021
7	Kikai Sentai Zenkaiger Show No.1	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	March 27th to June 27th, 2021
8	TDG THE LIVE in Hakuinkan Theatre -The book of Ultraman tiga-	GINZA Hakuinkan Theatre	June 18th to June 20th, 2021
9	Kikai Sentai Zenkaiger Show No.2	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	July 17th to September 26th, 2021
10	Ultra Heroes EXPO 2021 Summer Festival in Ikebukuro Sunshine City	Sunshine City Bunka Kaikan Bldg. Exhibition Hall B	July 22nd to August 29th, 2021
11	Tropical-Rouge! Precure Make-up tour for thrilling memories!	Sunshine City World Important Mart Bldg. Exhibition Hall	August 6th to August 29th, 2021
12	Kamen Rider × Super Sentai W Hero Summer Festival 2021	Tokyo Dome City Attractions Prism Hall	August 6th to August 19th, 2021
13	Kikai Sentai Zenkaiger Show No.3	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	October 31st, 2021 to January 16th, 2022
14	Ultra 6 Brothers THE LIVE in Hakuinkan Theatre -The book of Ultraman Vol.2-	GINZA Hakuinkan Theatre	November 12th to November 14th, 2021
15	Ultra Heroes EXPO 2021 in Tokyo Dome City	Tokyo Dome City Attractions Prism Hall	December 28th, 2021 to January 4th, 2022
16	Kikai Sentai Zenkaiger Show No.4	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	February 5th to March 21st, 2022
17	Avataro Sentai Don Brothers Show No.1	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	March 27th to May 15th, 2022
18	TDG THE LIVE in Hakuinkan Theatre -The book of Ultraman dyna-	GINZA Hakuinkan Theatre	April 29th to May 1st, 2022
19	Avataro Sentai Don Brothers Show No.2	THEATRE G-ROSSO in Tokyo Dome City Attractions	July 16th to October 2nd, 2022
20	Ultra Heroes EXPO 2021 Summer Festival in Ikebukuro Sunshine City	Sunshine City Bunka Kaikan Bldg. Exhibition Hall B	July 23rd to August 29th, 2022
21	Delicious Party ♡ Precure Deliciousmile ! Full Course	Sunshine City World Important Mart Bldg. Exhibition Hall	August 5th to August 28th, 2022
22	Kamen Rider × Super Sentai W Hero Summer Festival 2022	Tokyo Dome City Attractions Prism Hall	August 5th to August 18th, 2022

The event date of “19. Avataro Sentai Don Brothers Show No.2” is indicated as July 16th to October 2nd, 2022, but this is only the duration of the event; the field survey was conducted on August 9, 2022.

These 22 events were selected for this survey for two reasons. First, each has a long history. For example, the Super Sentai series of shows held at the Tokyo Dome City THEATRE G-ROSSO (1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17, and 19 in Table 1) has a history spanning 50 years, as mentioned earlier. This criterion was selected to ensure comparability to their status before and after the COVID-19. By this means, the author hoped to clarify the characteristics that could not be confirmed at the site before the COVID-19 outbreak and what changes were result of the infection control measures following onset of the COVID pandemic.

Second, each of the chosen events was held in the same facility for much of their history. For example, Ultra 6 Brothers THE LIVE (3, 6, and 14 in Table 1) has been held at the GINZA Hakuinkan Theater for more than 15 years, Ultra Heroes EXPO in Ikebukuro Sunshine City (10 and 20 in Table 1) has been held in Exhibition Hall B of Ikebukuro Sunshine City for about 40 years, and Kamen Rider × Super Sentai W Hero Summer Festival (12 and 22 in Table 1) has been held in Tokyo Dome City Prism Hall for 20 years. These events have a long history in one location. However, it seems likely that the same facility would be utilized differently between the pre-COVID period and during the pandemic. The author examined superficial means of limiting the space of the event venues to prevent the three Cs and what kinds of events were offered to tourists, as these are important considerations that can be used to compare different periods.

A supplemental data survey conducted focused on the events that could not be visited during in the field survey. The data survey was done by gathering relevant information from the literature, websites, and software. The first step in gathering the literature was to access the National Diet Library Online [11] and identify the titles of animated and tokusatsu films that have been the subject of Super Hero Shows in various regions of Japan. Examples of the search results for these materials are given in Table 2.

The number of sources for each work is extremely large. The author used the following two criteria for the materials for use in this study. First, the author reduced the field to

TABLE 2. NDL online search result (Material Type) (accessed on December 21st, 2022)

Keywords	Books	Audio	Periodicals	Video	Articles	Manuscript and images	Electronic resources	Online publications	Doctoral dissertations
Ultraman (ウルトラマン)	1535	767	713	394	148	10	7	3	0
Kamen Rider (仮面ライダー)	2283	698	467	560	60	1	23	0	0
Super Sentai (スーパー戦隊)	494	346	27	494	11	1	1	1	0
Precure (プリキュア)	817	250	1	213	16	13	12	1	1

literature documenting, through photographs and text, events that took place between August 1, 2020, to August 31, 2022, the dates of the field study. From these sources, the author learned about other events, infection control measures, local conditions, etc., which was not available to the author from the field survey.

Second, the author collected literature containing interviews with the creators and actors of Super Hero Shows, along with other related individuals. These documents feature interviews with actors (including suit actors in costume) and show creators whose works have appeared in Super Hero Shows, including how the shows were done and their innovations. For websites, two separate selection criteria were set.

The first was the official website of each video production company that produces Super Hero Shows. These sites regularly provide post-event reports as well as event announcements.

Then, the websites of the facilities where the Super Hero Shows are held were investigated; these include event announcements and ticket sales. In addition, for the sake of research credibility, blogs, SNS accounts, etc. operated by individuals were excluded from the research materials in this study, and only official representations were allowed.

Finally, the video materials used refer to the video recorded media, such as DVD and Blu-ray, that document the Super Hero Shows.

4. Results. In this study, the following questions were raised. First, were infection control measures temporary solutions to continue holding events? Second, if online events could be a more fundamental approach, would local in person events be more useful as tourist resources? Finally, even if COVID-19 were to end, will things always return to how they were?

4.1. Were infection control measures temporary solutions to continue holding events? Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the format of events has changed dramatically, although disinfection and other temporary measures have been implemented to prevent infection. Although the management companies providing the events differ, the following two infection control measures are commonly practiced. First, cheering and other vocalizations are prohibited. Instead, clapping and using penlights are allowed.

The Super Sentai series shows held at THEATRE G-ROSSO (1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17 and 19 in Table 1), which encouraged people to cheer for their heroes on stage through vocalizations before the spread of COVID-19, are an example of this trend, requiring clapping and using penlights sold at the venue only.

Furthermore, social distance from characters during handshakes and photo sessions are also practiced. In the Ultra Heroes EXPO (4, 10, 15, and 20 in Table 1) and other events, direct contact between the costumed characters and tourists was prohibited, and services involving physical contact, such as handshakes and hugs, were suspended to maintain a social distance between the characters and visitors. Meanwhile, at the Pretty Cure (2004) series events (22 in Table 1), produced by Toei Animation, there have been attempts to return to the original state, such as handshaking events with plastic gloves and “goo touch” events, in which participants touch Pretty Cures with their hands in the shape of rock from the rock, paper, and scissors game. Thus, the ability to make direct physical

contact with the costumed characters varied from event to event. In particular, in the Pretty Cure (2004) event, there were moves to return to the state trend before the spread of COVID-19 infection, and it was found at that site that the infection control measures taken at the event venue with a view to preventing mass infection were only temporary.

4.2. If online events could be a more fundamental approach, would local in person events be more useful as tourist resources? With the spread of COVID-19, online events that can be enjoyed on PCs and smartphones while at home have rapidly expanded as a new form of leisure. In other words, as tourists are no longer able to gather at given site to prevent mass infection, we are seeing more and more people enjoying events in their own homes and other individual locations. A typical example is online events, for which live performances or shows held at a specific location are distributed and people enjoy them through their devices. However, while online events are a convenient infection control measure in person, viewers are faced with the drawback that it is difficult to feel the local atmosphere. As shown in Figure 1 below, visitors participate in online events mainly through site and hearing. Unlike events held on-site, it is impossible to touch the people and objects at the event front of them, or to feel the heat and smells in the venue. That is, the online event lacks the atmosphere of an event attended in person.

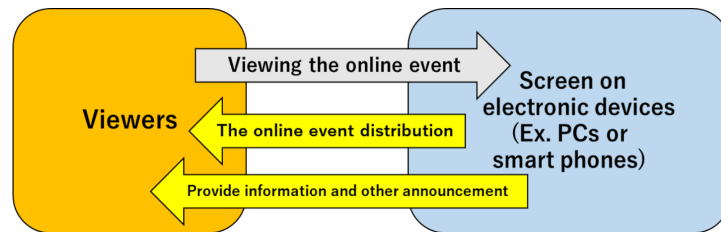


FIGURE 1. The relationship between the viewer and the screen

According to Leiper (1990) [12], as shown in Figure 2 below, tourism consists of two areas, a living area (the tourist-generating region) and a destination area (tourist-destination region), and tourists leave their living area with some purpose, fulfill that purpose at their destination, and return to their living area. In other words, if tourism is seen as a phenomenon of human mobility, the existence of places is essential, and the purposes of tourism are diverse, including becoming familiar with local natural resources and the enjoyment of cultural resources. It is difficult to imagine that these diverse tourism motivations could be well-covered by online events through screens, so it seems likely that tourism using the five senses will come into closer focus after the pandemic.

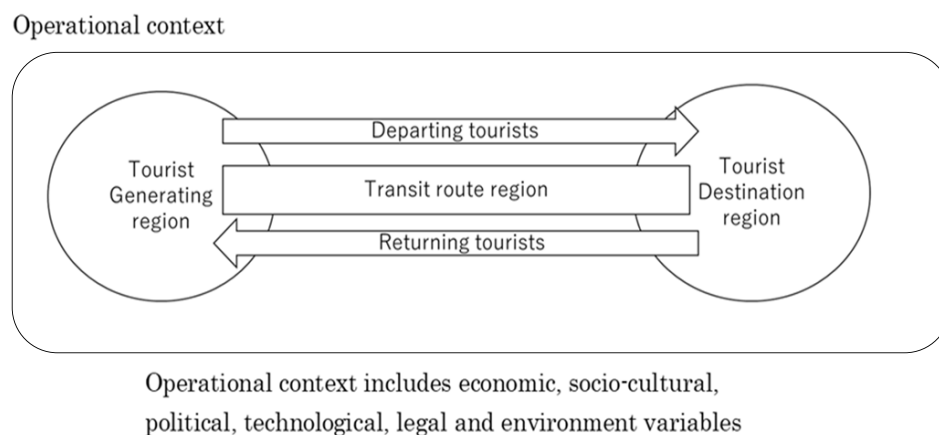


FIGURE 2. The tourism system: A spatial construct [12]

Through field survey, the author toured 22 events and found that the major difference between these events and online events is that they involve physical activities such as interacting with the performers and directly viewing the exhibits. Some of the events were adopted both for local performances as well as for online streaming of live coverage of the events (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 14, 15, 18, 20 in Table 1). However, many events are held only for local performances (1, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22 in Table 1), and it is difficult to imagine that real events that attract tourists to the area will decline in the future under the current circumstances. With multiple local events scheduled for 2023 [13] and beyond, it remains questionable whether online events will necessarily become more fundamental approach to holding events in the future. Therefore, after the end of Corona, the holding of events at the site will not be a more valuable tourist resource, but will function as an existing tourist resource that attracts people in the same way as it did before Corona.

4.3. Even if COVID-19 were to end, will things always return to how they were? In this chapter, the author discusses whether events such as Super Hero Shows will return to their pre-pandemic status if COVID-19 moves into the background in the future. However, it is unlikely that, for Japan, holding events will completely return to the pre-pandemic period, especially due to the rise of online events, and changes will likely occur. The following two factors may be considered as reasons for this.

First, all social activities have shown a rapid shift toward online implementation. Meetings, work and other activities often take place online and are now often done from home. With the spread of COVID-19, various social activities in contemporary Japanese society have rapidly moved online. This shift to online events has led to a novel diversity of ways of participating in events, such as a rise in subscription services that allow individuals to download a dedicated app and watch events exclusively on their own devices.

Super Hero Shows featuring tokusatsu and animated movies are exhibited via subscription services. One example of this is Tsuburaya Imagination [14] which has been providing online distribution of the Ultraman series stage show produced by Tsuburaya Productions, and is now providing distribution of local events on an irregular basis.

Second, online events may become regular post-pandemic as a novel form of event holding. For example, the purpose of events like this has also changed, as in the case of the Healin'Good ♡ Precure Appreciation Festival held in 2021 [15], which was done without an audience, where, by contrast, the Tropical-Rouge! Precure Appreciation Festival held in 2022 [16] was attended by a live audience being also delivered to those who could not make it to the site. Thus, online events transmitted via websites and subscription services, continue to be held even at this stage of the pandemic, and the reasons for holding these events are not only to limit infection but also to communicate to those who cannot attend in person. This shows that the purpose of these events has diversified.

Regarding destination management, which operates tourist destinations sustainably by bringing about the circulation of money within a region through the economic activity of tourism, the impact of events going online must be taken into consideration. As shown in Figure 3, tourists both enjoy local events at tourist destinations and engage in consumption activities at various places, using local transportation infrastructure, eating and drinking facilities, stores, and lodging facilities, and each tourist area in the region benefits from this. In other words, if events continue to be largely online in the future, it may prove difficult for local residents to obtain the benefits that only local events can provide [17].

5. Conclusion. This study focused on the Super Hero Shows that have been held for long featuring characters from Japanese tokusatsu and animated films, and it discussed how these events might respond to the spread of COVID-19 infection, documenting the

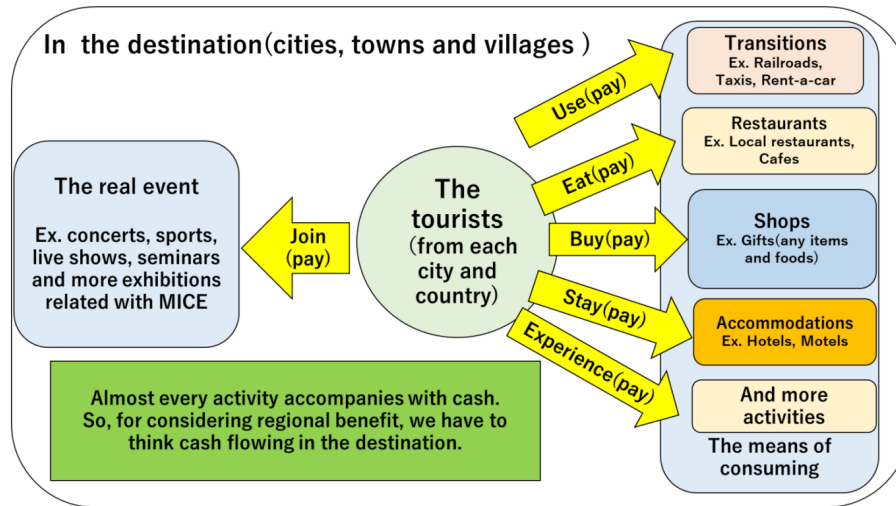


FIGURE 3. The money flow in the tourism destination [17]

current situation and what appears in the post-pandemic future, and how it might affect leisure activities in Japan. Some events are returning to their pre-COVID activities, such as the resumption of handshaking and photo sessions, while others are using the latest technology, such as the introduction of online events, to maintain themselves. It was difficult to support or deny the study hypothesis “After the end of the pandemic, Super Hero Shows will return to the same state as before COVID-19” under the current circumstances. Events utilizing animated and tokusatsu characters are no longer only practiced in Japan but also appear in other countries around the world. Future research will focus on the management of these events in different countries during the pandemic.

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