Comfortable at Home, Curious Abroad: Examining Japanese Exceptionalism Among University Students

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Abstract

Japanese exceptionalism – the belief that Japan possesses uniquely positive social and cultural qualities – continues to shape national identity and global engagement. However, few empirical studies have examined how such attitudes influence young people's willingness to study or live abroad. This study addresses that gap by investigating how first-year undergraduate students at a university in Tokyo perceive Japan's uniqueness and how these perceptions relate to their international aspirations. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through a survey (N = 93) combining Likert-scale and open-ended items. The findings highlight a selective approach to internationalization – valuing short-term exposure but resisting deeper integration – and suggest the need for educational interventions that explicitly address safety perceptions and cultural comfort. This study highlights how national self-perception may affect global mobility and offers some guidance for internationalizing Japanese higher education.

要旨

日本の卓越主義（Japanese exceptionalism）—すなわち、日本には独自に優れた社会的・文化的特質があるとする信念—は、国家アイデンティティおよび国際的な関わり方を形作り続けている。しかし、こうした態度が若者の海外留学や居住への意欲にどのような影響を与えているかを実証的に検討した研究はほとんどない。本研究はこのギャップを埋めることを目的とし、[大学名非公開] の 1 年生を対象に、日本の「独自性」に対する認識とそれが国際的志向にどのように関連しているかを調査した。混合研究法を用い、リッカート尺度項目と自由記述項目を組み合わせた質問票（N = 93）によりデータを収集した。これらの結果から、日本の学生は短期的な国際経験を重視する一方で、長期的な国際的統合には慎重である「選択的国際化」の傾向を示していることが明らかになった。本研究は、国家の自己認識が国際的な移動性に与える影響を明らかにするとともに、日本の高等教育の国際化に向けた指針を提示するものである。

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The term 'exceptionalism' can refer to any widely held belief that an entity or institution, such as a country or a culture, is uniquely good or extraordinary. Unlike ordinary patriotism, which involves affection or pride in one's country, exceptionalism implies a belief in inherent national superiority or moral distinction that sets a nation apart from others. A popular term associated with this is 'American exceptionalism', attributed to the French writer and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, who, in comparing the United States with then-powerful countries such as England and France, suggested that America's goodness came from qualities inherent to it (Tocqueville, 1835/1954).

American exceptionalism has been studied extensively, with numerous scholars questioning both its premises and its consequences. Kaun (2007) argues that notions of American exceptionalism embed a predisposition toward inequality and racism. Chivvis (2021), analyzing Niebuhr's writings, observes that such thinking can foster "moral illusions" about the nature of power and purity, obscuring structural inequities. In the realm of foreign policy, Koh (2003) contends that American exceptionalism manifests as a double standard: the United States asserts moral authority while exempting itself from similar scrutiny, thereby alienating allies and undermining its own legitimacy.

Historically, ideas aligned with American exceptionalism can be traced to before the nation's founding, when the country was framed as an "exemplary" experiment destined to model virtue and progress. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his narrative has been reinforced by political rhetoric and popular culture, culminating in what Malone and Khong (2003) describe as the "deification" of the American way of life and its portrayal as "the best system yet devised." Drawing on Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, these beliefs can be understood as part of a socially constructed narrative that binds citizens through shared symbols and myths of destiny. Likewise, Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism explains how such ideals are reproduced in everyday discourse – through language, media, and routine acts of patriotism – normalizing a sense of national superiority. In the Trump era, scholars argue that this discourse has taken a "distorted" and "self-defeating" form (Stewart, 2025), reflecting both the endurance and the volatility of exceptionalist thought.

Japanese exceptionalism is a similar idea that points to the uniqueness of Japan and Japanese culture. In the essay 'Westernisation and Japanese "Exceptionalism": The Oddities of National Histories,' Ryo Yokoe (2012) notes that a sense of excellence inherent to the people of Japan was credited as the driving force behind the nation's rapid

transformation from a feudal archipelago to a modern, developed state and an ascendant global power in the early twentieth century. Following World War II, Japan's "economic miracle" and its dominance in consumer electronics, automobile manufacturing, and shipping – along with its global cultural influence through video games, anime, and manga – have continued to sustain this perception.

Exceptionalism as it is observed can be said to be closely related to *nihonjinron*, the field that focuses on the uniqueness of Japanese national and cultural identity. According to Huang (2017), although *nihonjinron* is a discredited field that has been roundly criticised, it continues to find acceptance in segments of society as well as among politicians. McNally (2015) highlights the influence of Confucianism, suggesting that early modern ideas of national identity, or *kokugaku*, helped shape a form of Japanese exceptionalism stronger than its American counterpart.

To understand how such notions of uniqueness are collectively imagined and reproduced, it is useful to view them through the theoretical lens of Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, which posits that nations are socially constructed through shared narratives, language, and symbols that foster a sense of belonging. Complementing this, Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism helps explain how everyday cultural references – such as media representations, language use, and even humour – can normalize and perpetuate feelings of national superiority without overt ideological intent. These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how Japanese exceptionalism persists both domestically and internationally, often through ordinary discourse rather than deliberate political propaganda.

Moreover, external representations contribute to the everyday circulation of Japanese exceptionalism. Memes such as "Japan is living in 2050," which proliferate on TikTok and Instagram, frame Japan as a futuristic, problem-free society. These portrayals form part of the media environment in which young people, both within and outside Japan, encounter and internalize narratives of Japanese uniqueness.

Studying abroad can often be a valuable experience for students. Japanese students currently face numerous barriers to studying abroad, including language and cultural challenges and high costs associated with the depreciation of the yen and living expenses in many host countries. Despite these obstacles, the number of Japanese students seeking overseas study opportunities has recovered following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the

United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom remain the most preferred destinations, interest in other Asian countries—such as South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia—has reached an all-time high (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2024). However, overall numbers remain low: 70,253 students went abroad in 2024 (Beattie, 2025), significantly lower than the target of 500,000 outbound students that the Japanese government seeks to achieve by 2033 (Tobitate- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.).

Considering this, it becomes important to investigate the attitudes of Japanese students toward studying abroad and to examine whether and how ideas of Japanese exceptionalism influence these attitudes. Much of the existing literature focuses on Japanese students' relative reluctance to study abroad (Oka et al., 2018) or on strategies to motivate them (Burden, 2020). Aspinall (2012) attributes this reluctance to students' risk-averse tendencies, which frame countries outside Japan as unsafe, as well as to the conservative nature of many faculty members, who often lack international experience themselves. Asaoka and Yano (2009) have shown that Japanese students tend to prefer short-term study abroad experiences or visits rather than long-term relocation. However, few studies have explicitly connected ideas of Japanese exceptionalism to this reluctance. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What concerns or anxieties do Japanese university students have about living and studying abroad?

RQ2: To what extent, if at all, are ideas of Japanese exceptionalism a factor in their reluctance to want to go abroad?

Method

Rationale For Mixed Methods Approach

The study of Japanese exceptionalism presents unique methodological challenges that necessitate a mixed-methods approach. Previous research on this phenomenon has been limited by overreliance on either purely quantitative metrics that fail to capture cultural nuances (Befu, 2001) or exclusively qualitative approaches that lack generalizability (Sugimoto, 2014). The complex interplay between national identity, cultural values, and global perspectives cannot be adequately measured through single method approaches alone.

Moreover, the implications of Japanese exceptionalism on practice demand both breadth and depth of understanding. While quantitative data can identify the prevalence and intensity of exceptionalist attitudes among students, qualitative insights are essential to uncover the underlying narratives and discourses that perpetuate these beliefs.

Subedi (2023) highlights that mixed-methods research provides a more holistic understanding of social phenomena by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data help identify patterns and trends, while qualitative data offer insight into lived experiences and contextual factors that numbers alone may not capture. In addition, the author suggests that combining these approaches enables triangulation and strengthens the validity and reliability of findings.

In this sense, this study therefore attempts to bridge the methodological gap between the two by integrating quantitative measures of students' attitudes with qualitative explorations of their reasoning, creating a more complete picture of how Japanese exceptionalism operates at the undergraduate level.

Design Type and Definition

Specifically, this study utilized a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design (Creswell, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), wherein quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously through a single instrument (survey; see Appendix A), analyzed separately, and then integrated during the interpretation phase. This design was selected to provide complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon, allowing for validation through convergence of findings while also enabling a more comprehensive understanding through the elaboration that qualitative responses provide. Given the exploratory nature of this study, quantitative analyses were limited to descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and frequency distributions). Inferential analyses were not conducted, as the aim was to identify patterns rather than test hypotheses or compare groups.

Participants

Data for both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study were collected from a single source: first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory academic and communicative English course at a national university in Japan, offering courses in economics, law, social sciences, and commerce. The sample consisted of 93 participants of predominantly Japanese but also mixed Japanese and Chinese nationals between 18 and 21 years of age who completed an online survey administered through Google Forms. The

participants predominantly belonged to economics, social sciences, and commerce departments, with English proficiency at the B1 and B2 levels on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. To begin with, it was made clear that the survey was not part of coursework and refusal to participate would not affect their academic performance. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no academic incentives or extra credit offered in exchange for completion. This approach ensured that responses were not influenced by external motivations and represented students' genuine perspectives on the topics covered. Participants were informed that the results of the survey, including more detailed answers, may be shared in an academic presentation or paper. They were also assured that their identities would be protected, and the responses provided would only be accessible to the creator of the survey on a password-protected online drive.

Component Approaches

The quantitative component employed a descriptive cross-sectional design using Likert-scale and categorical items to assess the strength and prevalence of exceptionalist attitudes and levels of international engagement among students. The qualitative component used thematic analysis to explore students' lived experiences and their self-reported reasoning behind attitudes toward Japan and toward living or working abroad. A single survey instrument integrated both components, with closed-ended questions generating numerical data and open-ended fields allowing participants to elaborate in either English or Japanese. The full item wording and scale formats are provided in Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected in two waves – once in July 2024 and the second time in December 2024. The quantitative data was analyzed through simple descriptive statistics. Inferential statistics were attempted (see Appendix B) but eventually the decision was taken to leave them out of the analysis in order to focus on the exploratory nature of this study.

The qualitative responses collected through Google Forms were exported into a spreadsheet for analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and categories within the data, following the general procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic procedure involved several stages: first, becoming familiar with the dataset through repeated reading; second, generating initial codes that

captured salient ideas; and finally, organizing these codes into broader themes that reflected students' lived experiences and self-reported reasoning regarding Japan and studying or working abroad.

To support the coding process and enhance consistency, an artificial intelligence large language model (LLM), Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4, was used as an assistive tool to generate preliminary code suggestions and summarize emergent themes (see Appendix B for prompts used) (Anthropic, 2025). The use of the LLM was motivated by its capacity to efficiently identify preliminary semantic patterns across a large volume of open-ended responses and to improve the transparency and reliability of the initial coding stage. Recent work suggests that LLMs can support the initial stages of qualitative coding by identifying tentative patterns that researchers may then refine, provided that the models' limitations and risks of bias are explicitly managed (Ashwin et al., 2023; Chew et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2023); this evidence informed the decision to employ an LLM in an assistive role within the present study. While example paragraphs were generated for structural clarity, the final written text was drafted or refined by the researcher. Moreover, all AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed, refined, and interpreted by the researcher to ensure that the final themes accurately represented participants' perspectives and the contextual nuances of the data. Furthermore, each respondent was anonymized and given a numerical label. Because respondents were given the choice of responding in Japanese, some responses were translated into English using an LLM, with all translations cross-checked for accuracy using DeepL (2025) to ensure semantic accuracy and consistency and to confirm that the meaning, tone, and accuracy of the original responses were preserved. In addition, the same LLM was used for outputting initial drafts of paragraphs in the discussion and contributions sections of this paper (see Appendix B), based on the provided data.

Justification for Integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was essential for several reasons. First, while quantitative measures could identify patterns and the extent of exceptionalist attitudes (e.g., 62.4% holding extremely positive views of Japan), these figures alone cannot explain why students hold these views or how these attitudes influence their willingness to engage internationally. Second, qualitative responses provided context and depth but would be difficult to generalize without the supporting quantitative patterns. The integration of these complementary data types produced a more nuanced understanding of Japanese exceptionalism than either method alone could provide.

Findings

Quantitative Analysis

The survey (see Appendix A) was used to collect responses from 93 first-year undergraduate students at a national university in Japan, but as all questions were optional, all percentages are based only on valid answers.

Demographic and Background Characteristics

Table 1 shows that overall, the sample is overwhelmingly Japanese and largely domestically rooted, with limited long-term exposure to international contexts. This background is relevant for interpreting later attitudes toward living abroad.

Table 1

Participant Background: National Identity, Residence History and International Travel Experience

Identity*	Residence History	Travel Experience
Japanese	Lived in Japan entire life	Have traveled abroad
97.8% (*n*=90)	71% (*n*=66)	60.2% (*n*=56)
Mixed-Japanese	Lived in Japan > 10 years	Too young to remember
1.1% (*n*=1)	25.8% (*n*=24)	4.3% (*n*=4)
Chinese	Lived in Japan < 10 years	Never traveled abroad
1.1% (*n*=1)	3.2% (*n*=3)	35.5% (*n*=33)

*Note** One respondent declined to answer.

Perceptions of Japan

Table 2 suggests a strong baseline positivity towards Japan, with no respondents expressing overly negative views. Overall, 62.4% of the respondents had extremely positive perceptions, 31.2% largely positive and only 6.5% had slightly negative views.

Table 2

Opinions About Japan

Response Option	*n*	%
Best country in the world	18	19.4
One of the best countries (top 5–10)	40	43.0
Great country with a few forgivable flaws	14	15.1
Has positives and negatives like any other	15	16.1
Good but beginning to decline	6	6.5
Not a very good place / dislike living here	0	0

Equally, in terms of their beliefs regarding Japanese uniqueness, Table 3 indicates a moderately strong belief in Japanese uniqueness (mean=3.50). On the other hand, results suggest only a moderate tendency toward superiority beliefs (mean=2.83), less pronounced than beliefs in uniqueness.

Table 3

Beliefs in Japanese Uniqueness and Japanese Superiority (5-point scale, n=92)

	Belief in Japanese Uniqueness		Belief in Japanese Superiority	
SP*	*n*	%	*n*	%
1	4	4.3	21	22.8
2	9	9.8	13	14.1
3	27	29.3	25	27.2
4	41	44.6	27	29.3
5	11	12.0	6	6.5

Note:* SP Scale point, 5 indicates strongest belief

In terms of the reasons for these superiority beliefs, Table 4 shows that students who endorsed superiority tended to cite cultural and social explanations rather than economic, political, or technological ones.

Table 4

Reasons for Perceived Superiority (among those selecting 2–5)

Reason	*n*	%
Politeness and cultural values	51	60.7
Education	38	45.2
Healthy diet	19	22.6

Interest in International Engagement

Interest was measured across three 5-point items (see Appendix A). Table 5 indicates very strong interest in travel (mean=4.31). However, there was a moderate–high willingness to live abroad short-term (mean=3.85), and a notable drop in interest could be observed for stays over five years (mean=3.02). Interest seems to decline as the level of commitment increases, suggesting strong curiosity but weaker long-term mobility intentions.

Table 5

Interest in Travelling or Living Abroad

	Interest in Travelling Abroad (*n*=91)		Interest in Short-Term Living Abroad (<5 years, *n*=89)		Interest in Long-Term Living Abroad (>5 years, *n*=92)	
SP*	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
1	2	2.2	4	4.5	17	18.5
2	9	9.9	14	15.7	24	26.1
3	4	4.4	10	11.2	10	10.9
4	20	22.0	24	27.0	22	23.9
5	56	61.5	37	41.6	19	20.7

Note: SP Scale point, 5 indicates strongest belief

Regarding the reasons why for low interest in travel, Table 6 suggests their concerns predominantly centered on personal safety and lifestyle differences, rather than academic or career factors.

Table 6

Reasons for Low Interest in Travel (rating 3 or below)

Reason	*n*	%
Safety concerns	41	77.4
Being away from family/friends	25	47.2
Lack of cleanliness / weak public infrastructure	24	45.3
Difficulty communicating in foreign languages	21	39.6
Expense	21	39.6
Lack of Japanese food	19	35.8

Future International Intentions

It seems the majority of the respondents remained undecided regarding long-term domestic preference, with only a small minority expressing a firm desire to stay in Japan permanently, as Table 7 shows below.

Table 7

Long-Term Domestic Preference (n=91)

Response	*n*	%
Yes, I never want to live abroad	15	16.5
No, I want to live elsewhere	29	31.9
Not sure	47	51.6

On the other hand, Table 8 indicates that views on domestic-only holidays were nearly evenly split, reflecting mixed attitudes toward international leisure travel.

Table 8

Willingness to Take Only Domestic Holidays (n=91)

Response	*n*	%
Yes	39	42.9
No	38	41.8
Not sure	14	15.4

Qualitative Analysis

Analysis of the 75 open-ended responses regarding perceptions of Japan revealed several recurring themes. Rather than listing comments individually, the following section synthesizes key patterns within each theme while retaining selected verbatim quotations to preserve participants' voices. Note: quotes are reproduced verbatim, including spelling and grammar.

Theme 1: Safety, Politeness, and Cleanliness as Primary Values

The most frequently cited positive attributes of Japan were safety, politeness, and cleanliness. These aspects were typically mentioned first in responses, suggesting their primacy in students' value hierarchies. In other words, it can be said that students view safety, politeness, and cleanliness not simply as positive characteristics, but foundational to national identity and comfort.

Selected quotations:

> "It is clean, safe, beautiful, has great food and culture, and very polite people." (Respondent 9)
>
> "It is because of the safety." (Respondent 8)
>
> "Japan is safe country, but price is high. However Japanese are very polite, so Japan is suitable to live." (Respondent 11)
>
> "It is clean, safe, the food is good and healthy, the people are nice and similar..." (Respondent 21)

Theme 2: Cultural Pride and Food Culture

Cultural elements, particularly food, were prominent in students' positive evaluations of Japan. These responses suggest strong affective connections to cultural practices, traditions, and everyday experiences such as cuisine. References to food often appeared

alongside statements about safety, implying a blended cultural-national identity where lifestyle, heritage, and comfort coexist as sources of pride.

Selected quotations:

> "ご飯美味しいし治安いいし困ることないし最高" [The food is delicious, it's safe, there's nothing to worry about, it's the best] (Respondent 3)
> "There are delicious dishes, beautiful scenery, unique culture." (Respondent 2)
> "Japanese has been developed economically, and Japanese people are very kind and fit me..." (Respondent 32)
> "Japan has a great culture that Japanese people can feel proud of it such as Japanese food, traditional clothes, and imperior [*sic*] family that has history of about 2000 year." (Respondent 37)

Theme 3: Economic and Social Concerns

While positive attributes dominated, many responses revealed awareness of Japan's socioeconomic challenges, against the backdrop of economic stagnation and the weakening yen. These comments reveal an awareness of structural issues that contrast with more superficial narratives of safety and cultural excellence.

Selected quotations:

> "However, due to the decrease of population and birth rate, Japan's economy is unhealthy now. In addition, there is a traditional patriotism and therefore, for women, we can't say that Japan is a definitely great country." (Respondent 40)
> "the economy of Japan is getting weaker and weaker so many people are suffer from low income and high price. Moreover, Japanese government do not support young people and parents enough." (Respondent 6)
> "Although it is pretty peaceful, the dominant narrative that pushes collectivism is somewhat depressing." (Respondent 24)
> "Japan is safe, but this country has still male-feminine, especially political side." (Respondent 53)

Theme 4: Balanced yet Exceptionalist Perspective

Many responses displayed a nuanced understanding of Japan's strengths and weaknesses, yet still framed these within an exceptionalist perspective. Even when listing concerns, students tended to conclude that Japan remained superior or preferable compared to

other countries. This pattern reflects a kind of 'critical exceptionalism,' where national pride coexists with awareness of decline or limitations.

Selected quotations:

> "It is clean, safe, beautiful, historic, has great food and sub-cultures, and very polite and kind people." (Respondent 16)
>
> "In japan [*sic*] it is clean and safe. These aspects directly connect with the quality of life, so we have to think much of them. However, recent economic conditons [*sic*] are not good, so some flaws exists. Overall, Japan is not the best country, but better country than most of other countires [*sic*]." (Respondent 51)
>
> "Although food, safety, medical system, cleanness(sic), and politeness is objectively one of the best in the world, its economic downfall in the last 30 years and the ageing population is highly concerning." (Respondent 17)

Analysis of Desirable Alternative Countries

Students' responses to the open-ended question about desirable countries to live in revealed interesting patterns. In general, preferences clustered around countries perceived as socially stable, culturally homogeneous or those that have effective welfare systems.

Theme 1: Preference for Northern European Welfare States

A substantial number of students named Nordic countries as desirable places to live, often highlighting generous welfare systems, free or low-cost education, and perceived social stability. These comments suggest that when imagining life abroad, students prioritize structural supports that may counterbalance concerns they hold about Japan's long-term socioeconomic trajectory.

Selected quotations:

> "I think Finland would be good because it has a great social welfare system." (Respondent 15)
>
> "I guess Northern European countries such as Denmark or Sweden would be good places to live in. Though the taxes there are very high, the fee of education or medical is free." (Respondent 14)

Theme 2: Cultural Proximity and Ease of Adaptation

Another cluster of responses reflected a desire to live in countries perceived as culturally similar to Japan. Here, cultural familiarity, shared lifestyle norms, and food preferences

appeared to function as markers of comfort and anticipated ease of adaptation. This aligns with earlier findings that students value safety, stability, and predictability in their living environments.

Selected quotations:

> "I think Korea would be a good place to live because the culture is very very similar to Japan, and the food is good." (Respondent 12)
> "I think Taiwan would be a good place as there are customs which is similar to that of Japan, and we can enjoy good cuisines there." (Respondent 13)

Theme 3: Absence of Developing Countries

Notably, very few students mentioned developing countries as viable options. This absence suggests a preference for societies perceived as highly developed, socially orderly, or structurally comparable to Japan. This pattern reinforces a broader tendency toward valuing stability, predictability, and strong public infrastructure—attributes that students consistently associated with Japan itself.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of descriptive quantitative and qualitative data revealed a set of interrelated patterns that illuminate how students navigate international engagement, national identity, and perceptions of Japan. Together, these findings show that attitudes toward studying or living abroad cannot be understood through descriptive statistics alone; rather, they are shaped by underlying value systems and personal evaluations of Japan's social, cultural, and economic context.

1. Conflicting travel desires and safety concerns: Despite high interest in traveling abroad (83.5% rated 4 or 5), safety concerns were the primary barrier (77.4%) for those hesitant about international engagement, highlighting a tension between the two. The qualitative responses consistently emphasized safety as a defining characteristic of Japan, suggesting that the perception of Japan as exceptionally safe creates a barrier to international engagement.

2. Subtle exceptionalism: While only 35.8% of respondents rated Japanese superiority as 4 or 5 (high), the qualitative responses revealed a broader tendency to frame Japan as uniquely positive. Even responses acknowledging Japan's flaws often framed them within a narrative that positioned Japan as "better than most other

countries" or having uniquely positive attributes like safety and cleanliness. This indicates that exceptionalist thinking operates less as overt nationalism and more as an implicit cultural framework through which students evaluate both Japan and the outside world.

3. Short-term versus long-term international engagement: The dramatic drop in interest between short-term (68.6% rated 4 or 5) and long-term (44.6% rated 4 or 5) international living suggests that students view international experience as valuable for temporary growth but not as a viable alternative to the perceived stability at home. This aligns with qualitative comments expressing appreciation for Japanese comfort and convenience.

4. Economic awareness and social critique: Many qualitative responses demonstrated an awareness of Japan's economic challenges and social problems, indicating that exceptionalism coexists with critical thinking. This suggests that exceptionalist attitudes may be more nuanced than simple national superiority beliefs.

These integrated findings suggest that Japanese exceptionalism among these undergraduate students operates as a complex framework that acknowledges flaws while maintaining a belief in Japan's special attributes, particularly regarding safety, cleanliness, and cultural uniqueness. This framework appears to influence their willingness to engage with the world—encouraging tourism but discouraging deep international integration.

Discussion

In response to RQ1 – "What concerns or anxieties do Japanese university students have about living and studying abroad?" – the data revealed that Japanese university students' main concerns regarding living or studying abroad centered on safety, language barriers, and separation from family and friends.

Regarding RQ2 – "To what extent, if at all, are ideas of Japanese exceptionalism a factor in their reluctance to want to go abroad?" – the findings suggest that ideas of Japanese exceptionalism—particularly beliefs about Japan's superior safety, cleanliness, and social order—may contribute to students' reluctance to pursue long-term international engagement.

As outlined in the integrated analysis, four central findings illuminate how beliefs and concerns shape students' attitudes towards international engagement. Finding 1 showed that while most students expressed enthusiasm for international travel, safety concerns were the most prominent barrier to longer-term engagement, suggesting that exceptionalist perceptions of Japan as uniquely safe may function as a subtle deterrent to studying abroad. Finding 2 revealed that exceptionalist attitudes were rarely expressed through overt claims of superiority but through normalized, everyday assumptions of Japan's cultural and moral excellence, aligning with Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism. Finding 3 demonstrated that students valued short-term global experiences but preferred to maintain Japan as their base, indicating a pragmatic form of exceptionalism predicated on financial concerns stemming from the weak Japanese yen that promotes temporary mobility without sustained international integration. Finally, Finding 4 indicated that awareness of Japan's social and economic challenges coexisted with national pride, showing that exceptionalism can persist even alongside critical reflection. Together, these findings shed light on the idea that exceptionalism functions as an adaptable, everyday framework rather than a rigid ideology.

Contributions

The findings of this study make a few contributions to the existing literature. Echoing Finding 1, the strong emphasis on safety and order as defining characteristics of Japan is consistent with previous studies on Japanese national identity (McNally, 2015), as is the tendency to view Japanese cultural practices as uniquely positive. In line with Finding 2, they confirm prior research on the persistence of Japanese exceptionalism (Befu, 2001; Sugimoto, 2014), while elaborating on how these attitudes manifest among contemporary university students. Similarly, as observed in Finding 3, the preference for short-term rather than long-term international engagement echoes findings from studies on Japanese study abroad programs (Asaoka & Yano, 2009). The study also extends prior research by revealing the specific domains (safety, food, cleanliness) through which exceptionalism is primarily expressed among this population.

However, a few findings diverge from or add nuance to previous research. First, while prior studies have mentioned Japanese students' concerns about safety abroad (Aspinall, 2012), these findings reinforce specific concerns about safety and cultural comfort that could potentially be addressed. Second, the findings reveal sophisticated critical awareness of Japan's economic and social challenges, indicating that exceptionalism coexists with rather than precludes critical thinking. Third, the strong preference for Nordic countries as

alternative living destinations differs slightly from previous research that has emphasized North America, Australia or Asia as primary points of interest, while continuing to align with existing studies on "lifestyle migration", in which people move between industrialized countries in search of a better quality of life (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). Fourth, aligning with recent data that reveals a growing preference for migration to Asian countries such as Taiwan and Korea (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2024), cultural proximity emerged as a minor pattern.

All in all, these contributions move beyond abstract discussions of Japanese cultural uniqueness (*nihonjinron* and *kokugaku*) and suggest how these ideas manifest as concrete attitudes among students in this sample who, perhaps unknowingly, express forms of cultural exceptionalism. By explicitly linking these patterns to Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities - a framework that continues to be relevant in recent scholarship on nationhood and globalization (Tryandafillidou, 2025) - the study suggests that collective national narratives continue to shape individual perceptions of global engagement even within highly educated populations. By examining these attitudes in the context of higher education, this study may help identify potential intervention points for internationalizing Japanese university curricula in ways that effectively address existing exceptionalist frameworks.

Alternative Explanations

Several alternative explanations for these findings merit consideration. First, the predominantly positive views of Japan and hesitations about long-term international living might reflect the natural home-country preference and comfort that most people feel with their native environment rather than specific Japanese exceptionalism. This interpretation could be supported by the answers of respondents who explicitly acknowledged they might feel similarly about any country they grew up in. Second, concerns about crime and safety abroad may reflect media representations rather than exceptionalist thinking. Third, the strong interest in travel coupled with low interest in long-term relocation might reflect more real concerns related to diet, way of living, environmental pollution, and language barriers.

Strengths and Limitations

A few strengths of this research can be highlighted. The mixed-methods approach allowed for both measurement of attitude prevalence and exploration of underlying reasoning, providing a more complete picture than either method alone could offer. The anonymous survey format likely encouraged honest responses on potentially sensitive topics regarding

national attitudes. The sample, while limited to one university, included students from various departments such as law, economics, social sciences, and commerce, potentially providing some diversity of academic perspectives. The inclusion of both Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses created multiple avenues for students to express their views, allowing for methodological triangulation.

In the same way, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to students at a single university, potentially limiting generalizability to the broader Japanese youth population. Their differing socioeconomic backgrounds and academic environment could contribute to stronger global awareness and varying attitudes toward Japan compared to students in other contexts. Second, most open-ended responses were written in English, sometimes in brief or grammatically limited forms, which may have constrained the expression of nuance or affected interpretation. It may also have created a response bias favouring students with stronger English skills or more international inclinations. Indeed, as students in a compulsory English course with B1 and B2 proficiency, which would correspond to intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, respondents may have had higher than average interest in or aptitude for international engagement. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to determine whether these attitudes are stable or evolving as students progress through university. Fourth, the study's context – conducted in the post-COVID period – likely influenced perceptions of safety, travel, and risk, making the findings time-sensitive. These limitations suggest that while the patterns identified are informative, they should be interpreted within the specific linguistic, institutional, and temporal context of the study.

Additionally, while the sample included one mixed-Japanese/Chinese participant and one Chinese participant, these numbers were too small to allow for any meaningful comparative analysis. The analysis also did not control for prior international experience, which might be an important mediating factor.

Last but not least, all of these considerations are underscored by a crucial limitation of this research: the use of *descriptive* statistics (as opposed to *inferential* statistics) and the inherent lack of generalizability of qualitative results. Since the statistical analysis in this paper concentrated on descriptive elements, inferring the extent by which these results may also apply to the larger population is a nor possible. This, compounded by the fact that qualitative analysis is not meant to shed light on anything other than the particular

sample studied, suggests that caution must be taken in generalizing the findings and it also points towards possible future research directions.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations emerged during this research. First, investigating cultural exceptionalism requires careful attention to avoid reinforcing nationalist narratives while still accurately representing participants' views. This was addressed by maintaining a balance between reporting exceptionalist attitudes and contextualizing them within critical frameworks on nationalism and identity – particularly Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities and Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism – which emphasize how national belonging and superiority are reproduced through everyday discourse. These frameworks provided an interpretive lens that allowed the researchers to acknowledge participants' perspectives while critically examining the sociocultural processes underlying exceptionalist beliefs. Second, as the survey was conducted within an English course, care was taken to ensure students understood participation would not affect their academic standing, although the power differential between instructor and students cannot be entirely eliminated.

Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

Research Implications

One clear avenue for future research is to conduct inferential statistics-based research that could illuminate trends in exceptionalist attitudes in the larger population. For instance, longitudinal studies tracking how these attitudes evolve throughout university education would provide insight into the impact of higher education on cultural worldviews. Comparative studies across different types of Japanese universities and international institutions would help contextualize these findings. Research examining the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions in addressing exceptionalist frameworks would move from description to intervention. While this study focused on Japanese students, future research could incorporate comparative analyses with students from other East Asian contexts such as South Korea or China, where cultural and educational factors related to national identity may similarly influence international engagement. Comparative work would help clarify whether the patterns observed here are unique to Japan or instead reflect broader regional dynamics in perceptions of global mobility. Additionally, studies incorporating social network analysis might illuminate how peer groups and media consumption patterns influence exceptionalist attitudes.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, these findings suggest several considerations. First, internationalization policies in Japanese higher education might benefit from directly addressing safety concerns and cultural barriers rather than simply encouraging more international enrollment or exchange. Second, policies promoting international experience might focus on quality and depth of engagement rather than quantity of international students or programs. Third, university curriculum policies might integrate more critical comparative perspectives on issues like safety, cleanliness, and food culture that emerged as domains of exceptionalist thinking.

Practical Implications

For educational practice, several implications emerge. First, educators might develop specific instructional units addressing perceptions of Japanese uniqueness in domains like safety and cleanliness, introducing comparative data and critical frameworks to help students contextualize these beliefs from a global standpoint. This could include classroom activities where students analyze international statistics on safety, quality of life, and health outcomes to compare their assumptions with evidence.

Second, study abroad programs could incorporate pre-departure components that explicitly address safety concerns and cultural adjustment expectations. Workshops could use case studies of Japanese students who have studied abroad to provide peer-based reassurance and realistic perspectives.

Third, classroom activities might leverage students' strong interest in international travel as an entry point for deeper cross-cultural learning. For example, assignments could involve reflective journals comparing travel motivations with broader social narratives about Japan’s global image.

Fourth, creating opportunities for meaningful interaction with international students on campus could help challenge assumptions about cultural uniqueness in a supportive environment. Facilitated intercultural dialogue sessions, collaborative projects, and exchange cafés are evidence-based strategies shown to enhance intercultural empathy and reduce ethnocentric attitudes (Deardorff, 2006).

Ultimately, the findings of this study have the potential to provide educators with a certain degree of informed understanding of how exceptionalist beliefs intersect with student

motivation and anxiety toward global engagement. By addressing these patterns directly, universities could design more culturally responsive curricula that foster reflective, confident, and globally minded graduates.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its previously mentioned limitations, this study sought to present an exploration of how ideas of Japanese exceptionalism intersect with university students' attitudes toward studying and living abroad. To recapitulate, the findings suggest that while many students might have expressed openness toward international travel, fewer seem to envision long-term engagement abroad. This may reflect a nuanced tension between curiosity about the outside world and comfort with Japan's perceived safety, cleanliness, and cultural cohesion. In summary, these attitudes appear to be shaped not merely by individual risk aversion but by broader cultural narratives that tend to normalize Japan's uniqueness and superiority in subtle, everyday ways – aligning with what Billig (1995) terms "banal nationalism."

By linking these findings to Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, this study highlights how collective identities and national myths may continue to influence individual decision-making even in an era of globalization and digital interconnectedness. An understanding of these dynamics is essential in sociocultural research, as it may shed light on how nationalism and self-perception might affect mobility and intercultural engagement.

The implications extend beyond higher education. Policymakers and educators alike must recognize that internationalization is not solely a logistical or economic challenge but a cultural and ideological one. Programs that seek to globalize education could benefit from addressing underlying beliefs about national uniqueness, safety, and social order, framing them as topics for critical reflection rather than unexamined truths.

Finally, by addressing Japanese exceptionalism not as a misconception but as a complex cultural framework requiring thoughtful engagement, educators can help students develop a more reflexive understanding of identity and difference. Such awareness can prepare them for meaningful participation in an interconnected world, one in which appreciation of one's heritage coexists with openness to other ways of living and learning.

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Appendix A

Instrument

[University Name Redacted]: Student attitudes towards travelling and working abroad

This is a short survey to ascertain the attitudes students of [university name redacted] have towards their own country and how it compares to the rest of the world.

Although the questions are in English, long-form answers may be provided in English or Japanese. It is absolutely fine to use a mix of both languages, especially for individual words, technical terms, and phrases.

Your identity and data shall be protected and not disclosed to anyone. Results of the survey, including more detailed answers, may be shared in a presentation or academic paper with the student's identity hidden.

The data that you provide shall only be stored on Google Drive, which can only be accessed by a password known to the creator of this survey. This shall never be leaked or shared in any other context other than in an academic context, with no mention of the identities of individual students. If this is acceptable to you, I would be most pleased if you could fill this form - it shouldn't take more than 5 to 10 minutes. **This is completely optional, so if you are not okay with the contents or any conditions pertaining to the survey, you are free to leave it blank and avoid filling it in.**

1. What is your nationality?
    - Japanese
    - Mixed-Japanese
    - Other

2. How long have you lived in Japan?
    - My whole life
    - More than 10 years
    - Fewer than 10 years

3. Have you ever travelled outside Japan?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Once or more, but I was very young, so I have no memory of it.

4. What is your objective opinion on Japan as a country? Select the one that is closest to how you truly feel.
   Provide detailed reasons for your answer below:
   E.g. if you picked 'It is a great country with a few flaws, which can be forgiven', you can write your answer:
   1. It is clean, safe, beautiful, has great food and culture, and very polite people.
   2. Because of the devaluing of the yen and low salaries, along with a strict work culture, life can be very difficult here. Many people are also very lonely.
   3. However, overall, I think it is still one of the best countries to live in."
   (Long-answer text)

5. To what extent do you believe that Japan and Japanese people are unique?

Don't believe this at all	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly believe this

6. To what extent do you believe that Japanese people are, in general, better than/superior to other nationalities?

No different than others	1	2	3	4	5	Definitely and significantly superior to others

7. If your answer to the previous question was between 2 and 5, what do you think the reason might be? Tick all that apply.
   ☐ I answered '1' to the previous question so I don't need to answer this.
   ☐ Japanese cultural values (such as politeness)
   ☐ Education
   ☐ Healthy diet
   ☐ Other:

   Other than Japan, what other country would you say is desirable for you as a place to live in? Could you also provide a short reason?
   E.g.: I think Canada would be a good place to live as it has natural beauty, diversity, and good work-life balance.
   (If there is no such country, just write 'None')
   (Long-answer text)

8. How interested are you in travelling abroad?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

9. How interested are you in living abroad short-term (less than 5 years)?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

10. How interested are you in living abroad long-term (more than 5 years)?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

11. If your answer for any of the previous three questions was 3 or less, what would your reasons be? Tick all that apply.

☐ Too expensive
☐ Difficulty communicating in English or other languages
☐ Safety -- specifically related to crime
☐ Lack of cleanliness and substandard public infrastructure
☐ Discomfort with behaviour and manners that are not common in Japan
☐ Exposure to diseases and worrying about falling ill
☐ Being away from family and friends
☐ Lack of availability of authentic Japanese food
☐ Lower quality of food
☐ Just not interested in visiting any place outside Japan
☐ Other:

12. Would you be happy to never leave Japan to live elsewhere, short-term or long-term?
    - ∘ Yes, I never want to live outside Japan for any length of time.
    - ∘ No, I absolutely would like to live elsewhere.
    - ∘ Not sure yet.

13. Would you be okay to only or mostly take domestic holidays (within Japan) for the rest of your life?
    - ∘ Yes, I would be okay with that.
    - ∘ No, I would not be okay with that.
    - ∘ Not sure.

14. If required, would you be okay with the creator of this survey contacting you for follow-up questions?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Maybe

15. If your answer to the previous question was 'Yes' or 'Maybe' please write down your preferred email address below.
    (Short-answer text)

Note: This instrument, as it is being shown here, is an adaptation of the original survey which was conducted through Google Forms.

Appendix B

Prompts Used on Claude Sonnet 4 for Data Analysis and Collection

1. Prompt used to analyze findings

For the 'Findings' section of this paper, please analyze the uploaded csv and ensure the following criteria are met:
• Describe research findings (e.g., themes, categories, narratives) and the meaning and understandings that the researcher has derived from the data analysis.
• Demonstrate the analytic process of reaching findings (e.g., quotes, excerpts of data).
• Present research findings in a way that is compatible with the study design.
• Present synthesizing illustrations (e.g., diagrams, tables, models), if useful in organizing and conveying findings. Photographs or links to videos can be used.
Provide information detailing the statistical and data-analytic methods used, including
* – missing data
  * › frequency or percentages of missing data
  * › empirical evidence and/or theoretical arguments for the causes of data that are missing—for example, missing completely at random (MCAR), missing at random (MAR), or missing not at random (MNAR)
  * › methods actually used for addressing missing data, if any
* – descriptions of each primary and secondary outcome, including the total sample and each subgroup, that includes the number of cases, cell means, standard deviations, and other measures that characterize the data used
* – inferential statistics, including
  * › results of all inferential tests conducted, including exact *p *values if null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) methods were used, and reporting the minimally sufficient set of statistics (e.g., *df*s, mean square [*MS*] effect, *MS *error) needed to construct the tests
  * › effect-size estimates and confidence intervals on estimates that correspond to each inferential test conducted, when possible
  * › clear differentiation between primary hypotheses and their tests–estimates, secondary hypotheses and their tests–estimates, and exploratory hypotheses and their test–estimates
Adhering to all of this, please draft the paragraphs.

2. Prompt used to summarize emergent themes

For the Discussions section, draft several paragraphs under different subheads corresponding to the following criteria:
• Describe the central contributions and their significance in advancing disciplinary understandings.
• Describe the types of contributions made by findings (e.g., challenging, elaborating on, and supporting prior research or theory in the literature describing the relevance) and how findings can be best utilized.
• Identify similarities and differences from prior theories and research findings.
• Reflect on any alternative explanations of the findings.
• Identify the study's strengths and limitations (e.g., consider how the quality, source, or types of the data or the analytic processes might support or weaken its methodological integrity).
• Describe the limits of the scope of transferability (e.g., what should readers bear in mind when using findings across contexts).
• Revisit any ethical dilemmas or challenges that were encountered, and provide related suggestions for future researchers.
• Consider the implications for future research, policy, or practice.
Wherever an academic reference is either required or you have one but you need me to check it, please write 'REFERENCE CHECK' next to it so I can flag and check it.

Author's Biography

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