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Selling the Spirit: A Semiotic Analysis of Omotenashi in the Visual and Textual Marketing of the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO)

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Abstract

Omotenashi, the Japanese philosophy of selfless and wholehearted hospitality, has become a central element of Japan's national tourism identity. However, its intangible and culturally nuanced nature makes it difficult to translate into clear and appealing messages for global audiences. This study explores how the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) navigates this challenge through strategic visual and textual communication. Using a semiotic analysis, the research examines signs, symbols, and meanings embedded in JNTO's promotional videos and official website content. The analysis identifies a consistent visual vocabulary that represents Omotenashi: respectful bowing, meticulous food presentation, orderly interior spaces, and serene natural settings. These images act as symbolic cues that communicate humility, harmony, and attentiveness—core values of Omotenashi—without requiring explicit explanation. JNTO pairs these visuals with carefully selected textual expressions such as "heartfelt," "authentic," and "crafted with care," which help emotionalize the viewer's perception and frame Omotenashi as a warm, spiritual, and culturally grounded experience. The findings indicate that JNTO deliberately simplifies and aestheticizes Omotenashi to make it more accessible to international audiences. Rather than attempting to convey the full cultural complexity of this practice, JNTO constructs a romanticized narrative that positions Omotenashi as both a distinctive and desirable tourism offering. This strategy allows the organization to effectively "sell the spirit" of Japan by transforming a deeply embedded cultural value into a consumable tourism product. The study demonstrates how intangible cultural concepts can be reinterpreted through semiotic design to strengthen national tourism branding.

Keywords: hospitality; JNTO; marketing; *omotenashi*; semiotic analysis.

A. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the theater of international competition has expanded far beyond traditional economic and military metrics. Nations now compete on the strength of their "soft power," or their ability to attract and persuade through their culture, political values, and foreign policies. This has given rise to the sophisticated field of nation branding, a strategy wherein a country's unique identity, values, and cultural capital are systematically packaged and promoted to cultivate a positive international image (Anholt, 2007). The goals are tangible: to attract tourism, secure foreign investment, boost exports, and gain international prestige. From France leveraging its gastronomy and art de vivre to New Zealand marketing its "100% Pure" natural landscape, nations strategically craft compelling narratives to stand out in a crowded global marketplace.

Within this global context, Japan presents a particularly fascinating and effective case. A nation that masterfully balances hyper-modernity with deeply rooted tradition, Japan has successfully leveraged its rich and distinct cultural practices into a powerful national brand. Central to its modern tourism brand, especially in the lead-up to major international events, is the concept of Omotenashi. This is not merely a word for "service"; it is a complex, core philosophy of hospitality that transcends commercial transaction. Omotenashi embodies a deep, selfless, and anticipatory care for a guest, performed without expectation of reward (Kikuchi, 2014). Its essence is rooted in ancient practices, most notably the traditional tea

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ceremony (sadō), where every meticulous gesture is for the singular comfort and honor of the guest, encapsulating the spirit of ichi-go ichi-e—"one time, one meeting."

However, marketing such a profound and intangible cultural philosophy presents an immense challenge. This is the first layer of the problem: how can a nation "sell" a spirit? Omotenashi is not a product that can be displayed, but an experience and an atmosphere rooted in complex social codes and a high-context cultural understanding (Ishii, 2018). In a high-context culture like Japan, communication relies heavily on non-verbal cues, shared understanding, and subtlety. A silent, perfectly-timed gesture or the artful arrangement of a flower can convey more meaning than words. This presents the second, more difficult layer of the problem: a diverse global audience, largely from low-context cultures, cannot access this meaning directly. A message that is profound in its native context risks being completely invisible, or "lost in translation" (Dann, 1996), when presented to an audience that requires explicit communication. Furthermore, sustainable cultural tourism is a proactive strategy designed to ensure that the tourism industry actively contributes to the well-being of society and the planet. It positions this form of tourism not just as a way to experience culture, but as a forward-thinking tool for creating positive, long-lasting change in both social and environmental spheres (Sihombing, et al., 2024).

This communication gap forces a delicate and fraught act of cultural translation. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), as the official entity charged with this task, cannot market Omotenashi in its true, subtle form. It must, instead, represent it. This act of representation is fraught with risk. If simplified too much, Omotenashi is trivialized, reduced to a mere stereotype of "polite staff" or "smiling, subservient service," stripping it of its deep philosophical moorings. If it is not simplified enough, the message remains inaccessible. This creates a central tension: the JNTO must transform a deep, internal, and subtle ethic into an external, accessible, and compelling message, all while maintaining a sense of cultural "authenticity."

This study, therefore, addresses the following research question: How does the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) use visual and textual signs in its international marketing to construct a specific, marketable meaning of Omotenashi?

This study argues that to solve this problem, the JNTO employs a consistent semiotic system to re-frame Omotenashi—transforming it from a complex social practice into a compelling and consumable tourism product. This new meaning is strategically coded as an "authentic, spiritual, and uniquely Japanese experience." By conducting a semiotic analysis of the JNTO's marketing materials, this paper aims to deconstruct this system of meaning-making. It will first identify the key visual and textual signifiers (such as the deep bow, meticulous food presentation, and serene natural settings). It will then analyze their powerful connotative meanings, and finally discuss how they combine to create a persuasive, albeit romanticized, narrative. This research contributes to the fields of tourism studies, nation branding, and cross-cultural communication by revealing the specific semiotic mechanics behind the commodification of intangible cultural heritage.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative, document-based approach grounded in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. This methodology is ideal for analyzing marketing materials, as it provides a framework for understanding how images and words create layers of meaning beyond their literal definitions (Chandler, 2007). The analysis is primarily based on the foundational semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (signifier/signified) and the myth-making concepts of Roland Barthes (1972), which are particularly useful for deconstructing modern marketing narratives.

The corpus for this analysis consists of a representative sample of JNTO's international marketing materials published between 2022 and 2025. This includes: 1). Promotional Videos: Flagship campaign videos featured on JNTO's official YouTube channel; 2). Official Website Content: Key landing pages and articles on the official JNTO global website that explicitly discuss Japanese hospitality and *Omotenashi*.

The analytical process involved a two-stage approach: 1). Denotative Analysis: A systematic identification of the primary visual and textual elements (signifiers). This involved cataloging recurring images (e.g., a person bowing, a carefully prepared meal) and keywords (e.g., "sincere," "heart," "detail"); 2). Connotative Analysis: An interpretation of the deeper cultural meanings and associations (the signified) these elements are designed to evoke. This stage focused on how the combination of signs works together to build a coherent narrative or "myth" about *Omotenashi* in the Barthesian sense.

C. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The semiotic analysis reveals that the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) constructs a consistent and powerful narrative of *Omotenashi* through a specific and recurring set of visual and textual signs. This narrative works to frame *Omotenashi* as an authentic, spiritual, and ultimately, a purchasable experience by creating what Roland Barthes (1972) termed a modern "myth"—a second-order system of meaning where cultural ideas are made to seem natural and universal.

Visual Semiotics: The Iconography of Sincere Care

The visual language used by JNTO is meticulously curated to evoke feelings of tranquility, respect, and meticulous care. It systematically builds a visual vocabulary for an otherwise invisible concept.

The Deep Bow: Signifying Humility and Honor

Signifier:



Fig. 1
a woman in a kimono in a tea party bowing deeply to the guest

Source: https://youtu.be/lBzZQSUZZTM?si=wPpEatGkSVPonI34



Fig. 2
a woman in a kimono working at a *ryokan* (traditional inn), bowing deeply with eyes lowered

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6xCJCm3Y2o

Denotation:

A formal greeting or gesture of respect in Japanese culture.

Connotation:

In the context of tourism marketing, this bow becomes a powerful symbol that transcends a simple greeting. It connotes profound humility, sincerity, and the elevation of the guest to a position of honor. The act of bowing, as a visual sign, functions to immediately communicate a service culture that is deferential and guest-centered, aligning with the tourist's desire for special treatment and recognition (Thurlow & Aiello, 2007).

Figure 1 and figure 2 above show that Japan's tourism organization (JNTO) markets the complex philosophy of Omotenashi (selfless hospitality) by transforming it into a "consumable tourism product" using a consistent system of signs (semiotics). The image you provided is a perfect, concrete example of this exact process in action.

The image deconstructs the "Deep Bow" to show how this system works: 1). The Signifier: This is the visual sign itself. As seen in the two video stills (Figs. 1 & 2), the signifier is the image of a Japanese woman, often in traditional dress like a kimono, performing a deep, formal bow. This is the visual that is presented to the person who works in the hospitality industry; 2). The Denotation: This is the literal, dictionary meaning of the sign. As the image notes, this is simply "A formal greeting or gesture of respect in Japanese culture." It's the straightforward, factual definition of the act; 3). The Connotation: This is the crucial stage where the marketing "myth" is built. The bow is loaded with deeper, emotional, and cultural meanings for the tourist. The image explains that the bow comes to connote (or imply) "profound humility, sincerity, and the elevation of the guest to a position of honor."

This is what it calls by "transforming a complex cultural practice." The bow is no longer just a greeting; it's a powerful symbol. It visually promises the tourist an "authentic" (traditional attire) and "spiritual" (humility, honor) experience. It aligns perfectly with the "tourist's desire for special treatment," framing Omotenashi as an exclusive amenity that makes the visitor feel uniquely valued. In this way, a high-context, non-verbal gesture is "lost in translation" on purpose—re-translated into a powerful marketing message that "sells the spirit" of Omotenashi.

Meticulous Presentation: Indexing Perfection

Signifier:

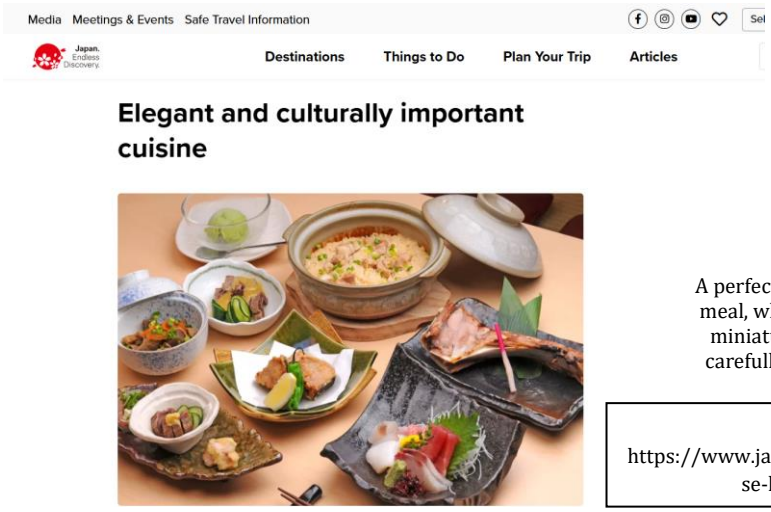


Fig. 3
A perfectly arranged *kaiseki* meal, where every dish is a miniature work of art on carefully chosen ceramics

Source: https://www.japan.travel/en/guide/japanese-kaiseki-cuisine/

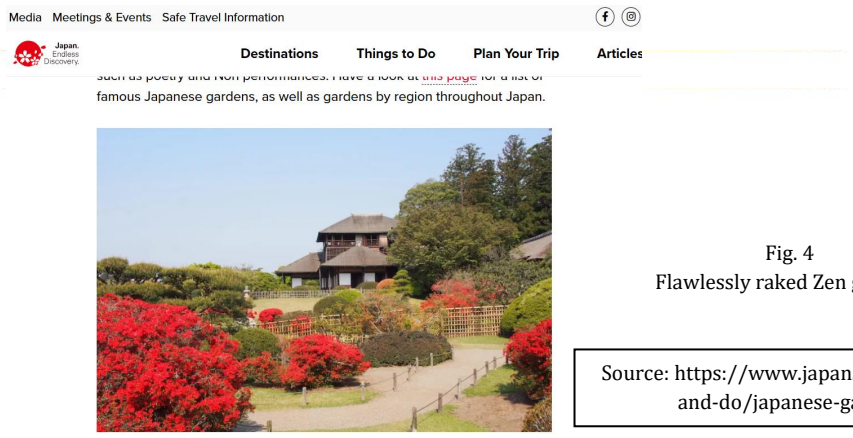


Fig. 4
Flawlessly raked Zen gardens

Source: https://www.japan.travel/en/see-and-do/japanese-garden/

Denotation:

Well-presented food, a tidy garden, or folded clothes.

Connotation:

These images act as indexes of a deeper philosophy: an unwavering attention to detail, discipline, and a pursuit of perfection. As argued by Williamson (1978) in her analysis of advertising, objects are used to signify abstract qualities. Here, the perfectly placed piece of sashimi does not just signify a good meal; it signifies a culture where care is ingrained in every action. The message is that this meticulousness permeates every aspect of the guest's experience, promising a flawless and thoughtfully curated stay.

Figure 3 and 4 provide a second key example focusing on how "Meticulous Presentation" is used as a sign to market Omotenashi.

The Signifier: The visual sign consists of images showcasing perfect, artful arrangement. The examples given are a kaiseki meal (Fig. 3), where every dish is described as a "miniature work of art," and a flawlessly raked Zen garden (Fig. 4). These visuals emphasize order, precision, and beauty;
The Denotation: The literal meaning is simple: "Well-presented food, a tidy garden, or folded clothes." It is a direct observation of objects being neat and orderly;
The Connotation: This is where the marketing logic, becomes clear. The image text explains that these visuals are "indexes of a deeper philosophy." They connote (or imply) abstract qualities like "unwavering attention to detail, discipline, and a pursuit of perfection."

This directly explain that an "intangible cultural philosophy" is being "sold." The JNTO uses these images to send a powerful message: this meticulousness is not just in the food or gardens, but "permeates every aspect of the guest's experience."

By presenting these images, the marketing implies that Omotenashi is a promise of a "flawless and thoughtfully curated stay." The tourist is not just buying a meal or entry to a garden; they are consuming "discipline" and "perfection." The perfectly placed sashimi or the raked sand becomes tangible proof of the deep, selfless care (Omotenashi) that defines the entire Japanese travel product. This transforms the abstract concept of cultural discipline into a high-value, consumable feature of the trip.

Harmonious Nature and Serene Interiors: The Atmosphere of Tranquility

Signifier:



Fig. 5
A guest sipping tea while looking outside

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0EkRkB8e_Q

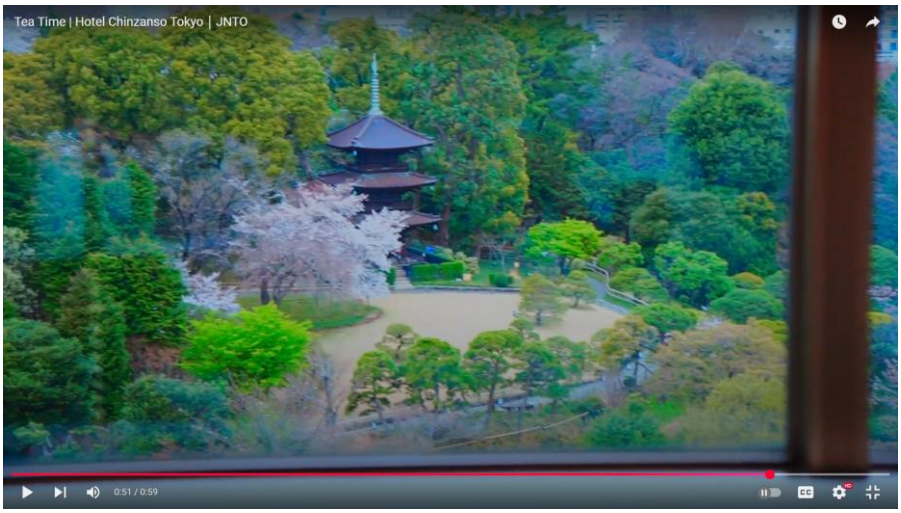


Fig. 6
The architecture of nature

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0EkRkB8e_Q

Denotation:

A person relaxing in a pleasant, natural environment.

Connotation:

This common visual trope links *Omotenashi* with core Japanese aesthetic values like harmony (和, *wa*), tranquility, and purity. It suggests that hospitality is not just an action performed by staff but an all-encompassing atmosphere. This aligns with what Urry and Larsen (2011) describe as the "tourist gaze"—marketing directs tourists on *how* to see a place. JNTO guides the gaze toward serenity, framing the experience as an escape from the chaos of modern life into a peaceful, ordered world.

Figure 5 and figure 6 demonstrate how Omotenashi is sold not just as an action or a quality, but as an "atmosphere of tranquility."

The Signifier: The visual sign consists of images that blend serene interiors with harmonious nature. The examples show a guest peacefully sipping tea while looking outside (Fig. 5) and classic Japanese architecture, a pagoda, set perfectly within a natural, beautiful landscape (Fig. 6);

The Denotation: The literal meaning is straightforward: "A person relaxing in a pleasant, natural environment." It's a simple depiction of a calm scene;

The Connotation: The analysis explains that this visual "links Omotenashi with core Japanese aesthetic values like harmony (wa), tranquility, and purity." This is a crucial marketing move. As the text states, it suggests that hospitality is "not just an action performed by staff but an all-encompassing atmosphere."

This directly connects to the argument that Omotenashi is framed as a "spiritual" and "authentic" experience. The "authenticity" is conveyed through the appeal to "core Japanese aesthetic values" like wa. The "spirituality" is sold as "serenity" and an "escape from the chaos of modern life."

The image text also references the "tourist gaze," noting that marketing "directs tourists on how to see a place." By repeatedly showing these tranquil scenes, the JNTO "guides the gaze toward serenity," effectively framing Omotenashi as a consumable product. The tourist is not just getting a hotel room; they are buying an "all-encompassing atmosphere" of peace and order. This completes the commodification of the intangible concept.

Textual Semiotics: The Lexicon of the Spirit

The textual discourse reinforces the visual narrative by consciously avoiding the corporate language of "customer service" and adopting a vocabulary rooted in emotion and philosophy.

Type	Example	Functions
Lexicon of Authenticity	Words like "heartfelt," "sincere," "genuine," and "from the heart" are used consistently.	This language frames *Omotenashi* as an emotional and authentic expression, not a scripted performance. It directly taps into the modern tourist's search for "authentic experiences," a quest described by MacCannell (1976) as a core motivation for travel in a world perceived as increasingly superficial.
Lexicon of Mystique	By labeling *Omotenashi* a "spirit," "art form," or "philosophy," the JNTO elevates it beyond a mere set of practices.	This adds a layer of depth and mystique, positioning it as something profound that must be *experienced* rather than simply understood, making it a more desirable commodity.
Lexicon of Intuition	The narrative often highlights the host's ability to "anticipate needs" before they are voiced.	This textual signifier is crucial, as it portrays the service as intuitive, effortless, and almost magical, reinforcing the idea that *Omotenashi* is an innate cultural trait rather than a learned skill.

Discussion: Constructing a Marketable *Omotenashi* Mythos

The systematic combination of these visual and textual signs created the *Omotenashi* mythos—a simplified, idealized narrative perfectly tailored for the global tourist market (Barthes, 1972). This mythos presents Japanese hospitality as an effortless, spiritual, and deeply authentic encounter that is unique to Japan. This process is a form of "staged authenticity," where a genuine cultural practice is framed and presented in a way that meets tourist expectations (MacCannell, 1976).

This construction involves a significant degree of cultural simplification and romanticization. The realities behind delivering *Omotenashi*—the immense emotional labor, the rigorous training, and the strict hierarchical social protocols—are conspicuously absent from this marketing narrative (Allison, 1994). For instance, the serene smile of a hostess does not convey the potential exhaustion or pressure involved in maintaining such a high standard of care. The perfect *kaiseki* meal does not show the years of disciplined, repetitive training required of the chef.

Ultimately, this strategy represents a highly successful commodification of culture (Cohen, 1988). The JNTO takes an authentic, lived cultural practice and transforms it into a branded product. *Omotenashi* becomes a key selling point, a compelling reason to choose Japan over other destinations. By "selling the spirit," the JNTO effectively leverages its cultural capital to create a powerful emotional pull, turning the promise of being cared for into a primary, and purchasable, motivation for travel.

D. CONCLUSION

This semiotic analysis demonstrates that the Japan National Tourism Organization employs a sophisticated and coherent system of signs to market the concept of *Omotenashi*. Through a carefully curated set to visual and textual signifiers—from the humble bow to the lexicon of the heart—the JNTO strategically frames Japanese hospitality as a profoundly authentic, spiritual, and heartfelt experience. This process effectively translates an intangible cultural philosophy into a powerful and desirable tourism product, serving as a masterclass in moren nation branding.

The study concludes that the “spirit” of *Omotenashi*, as presented in this global marketing context, is a strategic construction—a romanticized narrative designed to captivate and attract. While this branding is highly successful, it highlights the inherent tensions in commodifying culture, where depth and complexity are often sacrificed for clarty and market appeal.

Limitations of this study include its focus solely on the materials produced by the JNTO, without analyzing audience reception or the representations put forth by private enterprises. Furthermore, this analysis covers a specific time frame and would benefit from a longitudinal perspective.

Future research could therefore proceed in several directions. A reception study analyzing tourist reviews and social media posts could reveal how this constructed message is interpreted and experienced by its target audience. A comparative analysis between JNTO’s campaigns and the marketing of luxury Japanese hotel chains could explore variations in the *Omotenashi* narrative. Finally, further research could examine the impact of this global branding on the practice of *Omotenashi* within Japan itself, exploring how the hosts navigate the expectations set by this powerful, romanticized mythos.

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