

## Article

# The Sustainability of Ohanami Cherry Blossom Festivals as a Cultural Icon

Emi Moriuchi <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Michael Basil <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Saunders College of Business, Rochester Institute of Technology, 107 Lomb Memorial Drive, Building 12, Rochester, NY 14618, USA

<sup>2</sup> Dhillon School of Business, University of Lethbridge, 4401 University Drive, Lethbridge, AB T1K3M4, Canada; michael.basil@uleth.ca

\* Correspondence: emoriuchi@saunders.rit.edu; Tel.: +1-585-475-6313

Received: 4 February 2019; Accepted: 21 March 2019; Published: 26 March 2019



**Abstract: Background:** One important form of sustainability is the continuation of culture and cultural practices. This study examined the case of Japanese Ohanami or cherry blossom festivals. Historically, Ohanami focused on the cherry blossom as a symbol of spring's arrival, where communal aspects, consumption of sake and seasonal foods, painting or photography, and pilgrimages to sacred sites were used to celebrate the ephemeral aspects of blossoms, spring, and life. **Methods:** This study examines how cherry blossom festivals are celebrated and understood and how these celebrations are changing. **Results:** Current celebrations demonstrate several forces are changing this celebration. The changes in cherry blossom festivals are seen in four areas (bonding, cultural continuity, marketing exploitation, and cultural symbolism). Cherry blossom festivals are also observed overseas—at first glance this suggests its continuity, however, the ways in which Ohanami is observed raise concerns about the accuracy of this cultural practice. **Conclusion:** Ohanami celebrations are celebrated both in Japan and overseas, and although their practice continues, the nature of the cultural celebrations are changing.

**Keywords:** holiday; cultural celebrations; culture; Hanami; place attributes

## 1. Introduction

One important form of sustainability is the continuation and sustainability of cultures and cultural practices. One major force that threatens these cultures and practices results from modernization in the form of economic development and increasing international travel. As a result, there has been discussion of the importance of traditional cultures as something that we should attempt to preserve or sustain [1]. Most relevant to this study, Bauman [2] suggests that international tourism is influencing the traditional practices of religious festivals in a way he terms “liquid modernity”. In examining this idea, Suntikul [3] has examined how international tourism threatens traditional festivals in Bhutan and found evidence that the presence of foreigners is changing traditional festivals.

Research has also begun to examine how holidays have undergone globalization. Holidays that were traditionally important to a particular region or religion, such as Christmas, are now celebrated in the other parts of the world. Often these celebrations seem to hinge on the adoption of only a few symbols, while other aspects are adapted to local tastes. For example, in Japan, Christmas celebrations seems to have adopted some symbols, such as Santa Claus, while others are created, such as Kentucky Fried Chicken [4]. Similarly, in the adoption of Valentine's Day in Japan, the holiday has been adapted so that women give chocolate to men [5]. This demonstrates that the cultural constructions of holidays, and their reinterpretation by other cultures, may reflect very different reconstructions.



The notion that holidays and festivals are culturally constructed can be seen in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) [6]. This framework is important because it explains that there can be a multiplicity of meanings within the marketplace. This approach suggests that our examination of holiday rituals should not just examine what the rituals are, but also people's understanding of the rituals, the meaning behind these rituals, and how they can change over time.

The purpose of this current study is to investigate the historical transformation of Ohanami (Cherry Blossom Festival) in Japan. Changes in the meanings, functions, and structure of the Ohanami ritual are examined and also compared to how these original meanings are transferred to other countries. These changes in meaning echo the changes in social values, consumer ideology, and the strength of relationships in the Japanese society over the past century. In the current study, we examine the transformation based on netnography, overt observations, and in-depth interviews, to supplement the extant literature on cultural sustainability and build a deeper understanding of the Ohanami celebration. This article contributes toward existing consumer culture theory, cultural sustainability, and its novelty through a periodized analysis of this ritual in Japan. By investigating the cultural differences and addressing the relationship dynamics as a socio-historical analysis of Ohanami rituals in Japan, this study builds a foundation for further theory and model development on the cultural sustainability of traditional holidays.

### *1.1. Sustainability of the Japanese Culture and Cultural Practices*

Japanese people generally think of themselves as a homogenous society with a strong sense of national identity with little to no ethnic diversity. In Japan, a very high value is placed on the Japanese culture. This is important in determining where Japanese cultural heritage is sustainable. Japan believes that while there is a real benefit to diversity, there is also a real cost to it [7]. While Japanese localize how Christmas is being celebrated in Japan, or the creation of White day based on the idea of Valentine's day, the Japanese traditional events, such as Setsubun (or better known as bean throwing festival), Obon (which is an annual event where families honor the spirit of their ancestors), and other cultural events, stay true to its original form of celebration. In places where there is a large Japanese diaspora community and Japanese American population, such as Hawaii, Japanese cultural events dating back as far as the Meiji era (1868–1912) continue to be celebrated. The media in these diaspora communities also foster a sense of community and herald an important aspect of cultural sustainability.

### *1.2. Ohanami's Roots*

The Japanese people are generally believed to have a unique reverence for nature [8,9]. Some believe the reverence may be attributed to the agrarian history of Japan, where people believed that the divine "Kami" ancestral spirits were an important part of nature, and this developed into the Shinto religion. Others attribute the reverence for nature to the very distinctive and powerful seasons of Japan [9]. For whatever reason, this reverence towards nature has resulted in one of the most powerful festivals in Japan, known as Ohanami, or "cherry blossom festivals" [10].

Observation and celebration of spring blossoms in Japan can be traced back to roughly 712 A.D. [10]. Interestingly there is evidence that the celebration originated in China but focused on the plum blossom. Over time, however, the spring festival was adapted in Japan and became centered on the cherry blossom. Hanami, or, more formally, Ohanami activities have become a source of national identity for Japan [11]. Cherry blossom viewing has become so central to Japan identity that it is often called a "total social phenomenon" (p. 213 [10]). Ohanami and spring indicate new beginnings to many aspects of Japanese life, including the start of the fiscal and school years [12].

As it was traditionally celebrated, one of the most critical aspects of cherry blossom activities were focused on seeking out these blossoms themselves [13–15]. There is evidence that the concepts of travel and pilgrimage are historically important in Japan [16] and can be traced back to the Heian era (794–864). As a result, the search for the best cherry blossoms is geographic [17] but also temporal in discovering when the cherry blossoms open, reach their peak, and fall. Ohanami can involve travel



to particular locations to celebrate the cherry blossoms and the coming of spring. Such efforts can provide an easy way for people to engage in an important cultural pilgrimage (pp. 121–129 [18]). Historical evidence of travel for Ohanami can be seen in postcards sent to family and friends back home. Another traditional ritual associated with Ohanami celebrations was the consumption and sharing of sake, which has been interpreted as a hope for the rice crop, as well as an act of kinship between observers [10].

The contemporary meaning and interpretation of Ohanami has also been the focus of some investigation. In one survey [19], eight of the respondents believe the image of cherry blossoms is an important representation of spring in Japan. When asked what they thought of when asked about “spring”, the most popular answer was Ohanami (17,879 respondents). Respondents were also asked how many times they had participated in Ohanami, with the largest percentage (44 percent) having participated in one Ohanami. A follow up question asked how they go about observing Ohanami. The most popular approach was to visit the bloomed Sakura flowers during the day. The second most popular approach was to enjoy Ohanami in the evening—a light up event where Sakura trees are decorated with light bulbs. The third most popular approach was to go for a ride in a car and enjoy Sakura trees in nature. There have been some recent changes in how Ohanami is observed. For example, MyNavi noticed that although observing Ohanami in groups, such as with colleagues and schoolmates, was popular in the 1990s, the challenge of coordinating schedules has resulted in fewer Japanese professionals enjoying Ohanami with colleagues (79 percent of 442 working professionals) [20].

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study is best described as “multi-methodological” [21]. The study involved two authors—one of Japanese ancestry and the other a native of North America. The research was conducted in steps. First, we began with an observation of Ohanami celebrations. For the Japanese national, this involved reflections on growing up in Japan. For the North American, this involved a two-week visit to Japan for Ohanami. The study hinged on the observation of typical consumption activities through direct observation of Ohanami celebrations in Japan. The use of direct observation led the researchers to focus on observable acts of real-world behaviors. Photographs were used to record these consumption practices (e.g., [22,23]), so that the behavioral practices could be studied and illustrated. This allowed us to examine and preserve actual behaviors [24].

Second, we conducted a netnography—an analysis of online postings about Ohanami. This background analysis consisted of existing sources, which included online postings such as websites, blogs, and photos on the topic of Ohanami. This analysis was used to frame prototypical representations of the holiday and associated consumption rituals. This analysis included both English- and Japanese-language postings on the topic of Ohanami. The netnography allowed us to consider other important activities that we may have missed or overlooked. The observations and netnography also provided the foundation for later interviews that asked informants to tell us about their experiences and interpretation of Ohanami. Triangulation between these methods provided an opportunity to more fully understand the phenomenon. After each method was completed, we compared the results to the previous findings. Finally, in writing the paper we were careful to go back to the results from each section for comparison purposes. We noted any discrepancies between the observations from each method.

Third, we conducted ten in-depth interviews with people to ask about Ohanami rituals and their meaning. These interviews were conducted to allow additional insights into the observations and practices. This qualitative method was used to complement [25] the two other sources and to help resolve differences in findings from the covert observation and netnography studies. The sample size of 10 in-depth interviews is suitable to establish a reliable consensus [26] when the results demonstrate a theoretical saturation [27]. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 min. The ages of the informants range from 30–60 years old. All informants were Japanese and were living in Japan at the time of the interview. The average years lived in Japan among these informants was 20 years. Each informant



was encouraged to speak freely and honestly about their opinion on these holidays. Informants were assured that the data collected from the interview would not be identifiable and the data would only be used towards academic research. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Informants were asked each question and were asked to talk about the topic. When the informants had nothing else to add, the next question was asked until the interview objective was met.

With permission obtained from the interviewees, we audio-recorded these interviews [28,29] with a computer-based voice recorder. Each interview was assigned a code (i.e., their initial), for example “SS, 1 Ma 2016.” Where more than one interview took place on a specific date, the different interviews were identified by the initials of the participants. We recorded each on a voice recorder, which stores each separate recording with an ID number. The data also shows the time and date of when the interview was conducted. As soon each interview was completed, we listened to the recording and made notes. We transcribed all the interviews, word by word, including all the pauses and fillers (e.g., “Ah”, “uhm”, “you know”). We also recorded key words, phrases, and statements in order to allow the voices of research participants and informants to speak, even in writing. The questions asked were on individuals’ attitudes and opinions on the cherry blossom festival, also known as Ohanami (お花見). Each interview started with a question on what their thoughts are on national holidays that were observed in Japan. The responses from each informant were typically associated with their family and friends.

Finally, we conducted another netnography that examined international celebrations of Ohanami, or, as it was more typically framed, “cherry blossom festivals”. Through online searches conducted over several years we tried to find and understand how cherry blossom festivals were celebrated around the world.

Across the sources, we found a convergence on what constitutes the celebration of Ohanami, its interpretation, and its reinterpretation. Therefore, this study constituted a combination of observational research, “netnographic” analysis of online postings, and informant interviews to discover and understand the fundamental behaviors associated with Ohanami, as well as the meaning of the festival and its celebration.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Covert Observation

In our travels in Japan, we observed that a contemporary Ohanami observance usually involved a sojourn to a sacred site such as a temple, or a secular site such as a particular park that is known for its cherry blossoms. Often, this involved visits to sacred sites such as Buddhist or Shinto temples [30]. The importance of visiting temples could be seen in the flow of crowds to many sacred sites such as Kyoto’s Kiyomizudera temple. It was also evidenced in people’s travel and presence at secular sites that are well known for their cherry trees such as Osaka’s castle or Kyoto’s Maruyama Park.

As soon as we arrived at these locations, we were able to observe another important aspect of Ohanami hunt—attempts to capture images of the cherry blossoms themselves. The most common contemporary version of this was photography. In contemporary times Japanese were observed taking pictures of the cherry blossoms. An example of this effort to capture images can be seen in Figure 1. Having one’s picture taken in front of cherry blossoms also appeared to be a common activity among contemporary cherry blossom visitors. Although we observed a few instances of people drawing cherry blossoms, drawing and painting was observed considerably less frequently than photographs.





**Figure 1.** Capturing the images of cherry blossoms.

Our observation of these activities, done covertly onsite, also suggested several themes: Bonding, Cultural Continuity, and Commercialization Exploitation. These are explained below.

### 3.1.1. Bonding

In their pursuit and celebration of cherry blossoms, people were often observed “gathering together” in public places to share the experience. These included families, as well as what appeared to be other groups, such as schools and employers. Although not mentioned in most academic writing about cherry blossom festivals, these gatherings were prevalent in first-hand observation of Ohanami. So, the “gather together” aspect that was observed in American Thanksgiving [23] can also be seen in Ohanami festival celebrations, especially for Japanese. Examples of these celebrations can be seen in Figure 2 (Maruyama Park). In many instances the locations of these gatherings, whether on blankets spread out on the grass or in tables, were reserved for specific groups. Historically this included sending a lower level employee to hold those locations for a particular company. We also observed that as the day progressed there were fewer unconnected individuals, but group gatherings appeared to be more frequent. These work and school-based groups appeared to be more frequent on weekday evenings; meanwhile, family gatherings appeared to be more frequent on weekend afternoons.





Figure 2. Group gatherings.

### 3.1.2. Cultural Continuity

Historically, an important aspect of Ohanami was the consumption of foods and beverages. We also noticed this ritual in our observations. Some of the individuals and groups appeared to have brought their own foods to these outdoor sites. Many other people, however, purchased food from various stalls in the parks. Very few stalls were observed at the shrines and temple locations, however they were fairly common at secular sites such as parks. The importance of special foods was seen in our observations. Many participants in Ohanami festivities appear to consume some form of ritualized food or drink, sometimes brought, sometimes bought, but most frequently consumed under the cherry trees themselves. For Ohanami, this sometimes took the form of specialized lunchboxes or bentos that included decorations such as cherry-blossom shaped vegetables or pink or green dumplings. This can be seen in Figure 3. Even deserts were available that were decorated with cherry blossom images, as can be seen in Figure 4. Other foods typically sold at these Ohanami festivals included squid on a stick or octopus balls.



Figure 3. Special Ohanami foods decorated with images of cherry blossoms.





**Figure 4.** The images of cherry blossoms.

Another important historical ritual of Ohanami involved the consumption of sake [10,12]. Sake is a distilled spirit derived from rice; as such, both rice and sake are often honored with the most polite and honorific “o-” construction in Japanese, “o-gohan” and “o-sake.” Some view the consumption of sake as an act of kinship and hope for a bountiful rice crop, which is planted in the spring [10]. Evidence for the desire to connect sake with spring rituals can be seen in specially decorated sake bottles and cups. The importance of sake can also be seen in academic [10] and popular writing [12]. This sometimes involved a recognizable ritual, such as sipping sake in a local park with co-workers. We were able to observe this occurring in these celebrations, although this appeared to be largely reserved for night-time celebrations.

### 3.1.3. Commercial Exploitation

Although we saw many instances of commercial activities around Ohanami activities, the commercial recognition of Ohanami was not limited exclusively to cherry blossom events. Instead, symbols and themes of cherry blossoms and Ohanami pervade Japanese marketing and advertising in spring [15]. This was seen from advertising on our arriving flight to our walks to the various Ohanami locations. We also observed a newer consumption-related homage to spring in the form of pink plum. The connection was seen in the labels used, the seasonality of the promotion, and even in the form of displays that were used to associate plum wine with Ohanami. In these ways it appeared that commercial entities were attempting to tie aspects of the sacred, spiritual, or even simply aesthetic to be transferred to the more typical, or profane, aspects of everyday life. An example of this effort in a commercial context is illustrated in Figure 5.





Figure 5. Commercializing the image of cherry blossoms.

### 3.2. Netnography

The second method of data collection was through netnography. Netnography is an online research method that originates from ethnography studies. Netnography tends to dive deeper into the context behind the individual conversations, postings, interactions, and online experiences. Kozinets [31] claims that netnography is focused more on meaning than on precision. This method examined who posts information online, and what they post. A Google search identified more than 60 blogs, websites, and YouTube videos that provided examples of people's experiences, understanding, and deconstruction of Ohanami. One of the first differences that was observed was in the name itself, where Japanese writers were more likely to use the honorific and more formal form of "Ohanami", while visitors were more likely to use the more casual construction "hanami".

Our analysis of Japanese sources included community forums and blogs. These generally supported the previously identified Ohanami rituals. Further, some of these sources seemed to suggest that the appreciation of Ohanami has evolved over time. For example, a recent Japanese blog [32], listed six changes in how Ohanami is currently appreciated. (1) Enjoying the four seasons (Cultural continuity). Ohanami has been an important part of the Japanese culture since the Nara period. The birth of the unique Japanese culture is where individuals treat the Japanese culture with the deepest respect—this culture began during the Heian period. (2) An opportunity to consume alcohol (Bonding). "Company Ohanami" is an event where new employees are being hosted to enjoy sakura flowers with their colleagues. This is also an event where families, friends, and colleagues gather together and consume alcoholic beverages. Interestingly, in 1979, a group named "paraku-da" composed a song that popularize the behavior of Ohanami "must-haves". It was also noted that perhaps if no alcoholic beverages were allowed at this event, the popularity of Ohanami may not have lasted this long. (3) Enjoying the weather and scenery may be an expected ritual, which also may be perceived as a form of symbolism. The weather during this period is cooler than summer. However, since it is also a rainy season in Japan, the life span of the Sakura is short. (4) Good manners (Cultural continuity). The Japanese believe that because of their good manners, they are able to preserve the flowers, and thus able to enjoy Ohanami. This means not hurting the sakura trees but just admiring them from a distance is the right way to appreciate the event. (5) Exhibition of bentos (Cultural continuity). One of the top ranked food choices during an Ohanami event was sakura bentos (lunch boxes). Bringing bentos is an old tradition of the Japanese culture. These bentos need not be heated up and can be eaten at room temperature or cold. Japanese will bring their own personal picnic mat and spread it out right underneath the Sakura tree and enjoy either their homemade or store bought



bentos, or sometimes just enjoying sweet bentos, specifically known as the Japanese decorated desserts (see Appendix). Lastly, (6) respecting nature (Cultural continuity). The sakura, just like other living things, are greatly respected by the Japanese people. The sakura tree is believed to be blessed with a god's presence.

Analysis of the English online sources revealed that many of the postings demonstrated that visiting temples is often a part of the spring ritual for visitors to Japan. This was seen in various blogs, websites, and photographic sites that identified locations in their postings. For many of the Japanese, parks seemed to be the location of their celebrations, followed by temples and private parties. Some of the preference for parks might have been due to the timing of the activities, where the Ohanami activities often appeared to be after work or after school. Locations chosen by visitors, however, were more likely to be temples, though public parks were also common. The importance of recording the cherry blossoms themselves was seen in almost all blogs, websites, and videos, for both visitors and locals. Images of singular blossoms, single trees, or full groves of cherry trees in blossom were almost universal in these records. Some YouTube videos simply recorded the beauty while others explained its cultural significance. Although not mentioned in most academic writing about cherry blossom festivals, descriptions and images of these gatherings were prevalent in the online forms about Ohanami. The communal aspects were rarely noticed by foreigners, but often observed by longer-term visitors to Japan, sometimes mentioned as something they came to more fully understand after living there. The importance of foods, especially special Ohanami foods, was also only occasionally observed in our analysis of English blogs, websites, photographic sites, and YouTube videos. Specifically, only a few foreigners made mention or had photos of Ohanami foods. For those that did, the issue seemed to be observing how unusual the foods were from the better-known forms, such as nigiri sushi. Similarly, while the importance of sake was observed in Japanese online forms, often in written form, this was sometimes also seen among English speaking blogs, but mostly for residents of Japan. There were fewer recordings of that in photographic sites and YouTube videos, perhaps partly attributable to the fact that much of the sake drinking occurs after dark, which does not lend itself to photographic images.

Comparing across online postings of Japanese and English sources reveals several important differences. First, Japanese sources are more likely to make use of the honorific "Ohanami" and have a greater understanding of the history and cultural symbolism behind this celebration. Second, they are more likely to see Ohanami as a social event, including drinking. English sources, meanwhile, are more likely to simply be focused on the blossoms themselves, their discovery, and the rituals of outdoor consumption.

### 3.3. In-Depth Interviews

In general, Japanese informants reported mostly positive feelings about Ohanami. Almost all informants understood the historical and cultural importance of Ohanami. Conducting a content analysis on the ten interviews, similar themes emerged. These themes were further elaborated by Japanese natives and their effectiveness towards this cultural event. The process of qualitative analysis was divided into the following steps: (1) preparation of data, (2) defining the unit of analysis, (3) developing categories and a coding scheme, (4) testing the coding scheme on a sample of text, (5) coding all the text, (6) assessing the coding consistency, (7) drawing conclusions from the coded data, and lastly, (8) reporting the method and findings for this method of analysis. Content analysis does not produce counts and statistical significance, instead it reveals patterns, themes, and categories that are important to a social reality.

#### 3.3.1. Symbolism

Among our respondents, each of the 10 respondents mentioned that this celebration is unique to Japanese culture and symbolizes Japan as a nation. "Every year, it is something to experience as part of the Japanese culture. It is like "spring is here!" Similar to Easter, there is no need for any particular



preparation for this day. For me, rather than Ohanami, I have a special feeling for Sakura (cherry blossoms). To me, Sakura means Japan. Sakura is Japan's national flower, which is different from the imperial emblem of a Chrysanthemum. In fact, I noticed that the athletes who are representing Japan in any event wear uniforms that have a Sakura design. For example, the women's hockey team has a design that says Sakura Japan" (K.S., 33 years old).

Another question asked people's thoughts about others' knowledge and attitude towards holidays in Japan. Overwhelmingly, all of the informants feel that the younger generation (e.g., high schoolers), do not know or understand why many holidays are observed. For example, in Japan, there is a day known as the ocean day. One of the informants mentioned "I honestly don't know the origin of this day, but I assume that it has something to do with being environmentally friendly and caring for the ocean. Schools often conduct outside of classroom activities by having elementary students visit the beach and pick up trash. I think that is to educate these young kids about being responsible" (C.T., 36 years old). Another informant, however, strongly believed that some non-observed holidays have significant meaning. For example, she mentioned about the Appreciation for the Elderly Day (敬老の日). She said "I think this day has good intention and meaning. I believe many people, including young people understand why there is such a day. On this day, people would buy flowers or gifts for their grandparents, thanking them for all they do. I like this day because it is very meaningful and I do observe this day in my own way" (S.S., 35 years old). The relevance of the mention for this day is because, similar to Ohanami celebration, which is not an official national holiday, people all over Japan celebrate this day to commemorate and appreciate the relationship they have with their family, especially grandparents (e.g., bonding).

Despite the skepticism about understanding of other holidays, informants connected Ohanami with the seasons. To her, spring is when the new academic year and graduation ceremony happens—an end and a beginning to events. "When I walk down the Sakura "tunnel", I have the urge to work harder and thrive for the New Year. Sometimes I also feel that when Spring comes, it means there is going to be separations (M.A., 31 years old)." Some informants identified the unpredictability of the celebration. The uncertainty of when the tree is going to blossom is a mystery every year due to nature. "Look at the life span of the blooming of the sakura, it is only a day. I feel that Ohanami is a day for sakura blooming. A limited-time-only experience, not like Christmas where there is a fixed date" (K.S., 33 years old). The ephemeral aspect of the holiday was also acknowledged. The majority of the informants (9 of 10) acknowledged the short life span of sakura blossoms and trees—that it was a limited-time experience. In general, the Japanese interviewed are very appreciative toward this day and see it as a symbol of a new beginning.

### 3.3.2. Bonding

Almost all of our Japanese respondents (nine out of ten) mentioned that the purpose of this celebration is to allow friends, family, and the community to bond. The nature of the celebration described in interviews was generally consistent with those that was described historically and observed. Many informants mentioned that they enjoy sitting underneath the cherry blossoms and having a picnic, especially those who were married and had children. The communal "gather together" aspect of the holiday was also important to a majority of the Japanese informants. They liked the fact that they can use that time to bond. Both informants with children as well as with those who didn't have children mentioned the communal aspects of the holiday. Other informants echoed that Cherry Blossom is when people get together. "I think this day is an opportunity for colleagues, friends, and family to bond" (M.M., 50 years old). "I take this opportunity to bond with my children." Those without children mentioned that Ohanami is an opportunity to host welcome parties for newcomers.

### 3.3.3. Cultural Continuity

All ten of the Japanese respondents mentioned the importance of this event and how that relates to cultural continuity. Those with children mentioned going to local festivals with their children. "I want



my children to experience what I experienced when I was little. I think it is fun and they get to know their culture better" (C.T., 36 years old). Other informants also added that they like the atmosphere and want their children to experience this nostalgic feel of the cultural events. Furthermore, it was added by one of the informants that the reason why they volunteer to organize such events in their community is so that it will be kept alive. "I like to contribute and help out so that my children can experience the joyful and friendly spirit of the community. I think the use of such events to promote collaborative initiatives within the community and cultural understanding of why such event is important is great" (M.M., 50).

The pilgrimage aspect of Ohanami was rarely acknowledged by our Japanese informants. Informants, however, did mention the importance of locations. One of the informants who lives in the outskirts of Tokyo reported enjoying going to local festivals with their children (C.T., 36 years old). For informants who lived in the metropolitan area, however, the location was a cause for concern. Specifically, they mentioned that they dread bringing their children to where the festivals were held because of the crowds and concern of losing their child among the crowd. They also mentioned that with people rubbing shoulders to get through the crowd, strollers are not convenient. "I get tired, the children are unhappy, and we are all unhappy at the end of the day" (S.S., 35 years old).

The consumption aspects of Ohanami were also mentioned by most Japanese informants. We have bentos (lunch boxes) ready and we eat under a Sakura tree" (S.S., 36 years old). The informant who talked about welcome parties mentioned that the "welcome" aspect is often communicated by having alcoholic beverages and food available for everyone who is an attendee of the party. Another observed, "I think this is when working professionals drink (alcoholic beverages) and have fun! In the Japanese culture, the newest in the company would have the responsibility to secure a spot for everyone participating in the gathering—that's the tradition and I don't like it" (K.M., 60 years old).

### 3.3.4. Marketing Exploitation

Four of the ten respondents mentioned that a meaningful event is being taken advantage of by businesses. Some Japanese interview subjects reported some skepticism over the holiday and its contemporary observation. When asked their opinion of the cherry blossom festival, one informant answered, "I don't feel Ohanami is a special day, in my opinion" (K.S., 33 years old). When asked if Ohanami is being commercialized, especially if department stores use the opportunity to commercialize the celebration, all mentioned that "Yes, of course they do." The informant continued to defend the value of commercialization, "I lived in the US before and we don't have days like white days. In Japan, Valentine's Day is when a girl gives a guy a box of chocolate. On White day, it's when guys return that favor. During those days, there are long lines outside of chocolate stores, all rushing to buy chocolates for whom they like" (C.T., 36 years old). Overall, then, it appears that the commercial aspects of the holiday were not all bad. For example, one informant reported bringing their children to all the participating local stores for free drawings, to buy snacks, and get to know the neighborhood well.

One area where Japanese informants were concerned was not the commercialization of the holiday, but aspects related to violating the sacredness of the holiday. Recently, Japanese news reports have reported that Chinese tourists are damaging the Sakura trees by plucking flowers, climbing, and pulling the branches to take photos (Samuels, 2016; Sankei News, 2016). Some respondents (four respondents of ten) were furious about those behaviors and started questioning their manners. This reflects the importance of sakura in Japan and its symbolism to Japanese informants.

### 3.4. Findings

The results from the interviews suggests that this cultural event continues the traditions established the early Nara period (710–784), when the country was under the influence of the Chinese Tang dynasty. Primack and Higuchi [33] argue that Ohanami is argued as the special feature of Japanese life. Carnazzi [34] and McClellan [35] asserted that the choice of admiring Sakura can be traced back as far as the Heian period, which was between years 794–1185. While the ritual in the early times was



to predict the quality of the harvest or to decide the best time to plant rice, now, people celebrate the arrival of spring with cherry and plum blossom viewing parties. These viewing activities are also actually observed by the Japanese imperial court. Despite the change in celebratory activities over the years, the purpose is the same, which is to enjoy the beauty of simple things, a reflection of transience, and an exaltation of the joys of spring. Udagawa (2013), a Japanese scholar, exhibited similar positive attitude and its symbolic meaning toward Ohanami. He explained the blooming of Sakura, which is an indication of Spring, symbolizes new beginnings. He added that Sakura is appreciated during the Ohanami events, and Sakura holds a very special place in Japanese people's heart. This cultural ritual has ancient roots and it "broadcasts a message of contemplation and joy" [34].

### 3.5. *Ohanami Abroad*

On the question of sustainability, it is important to note that the celebration of Ohanami can also be seen in several other parts of the world. One of the most familiar cherry blossom festivals is celebrated in Washington DC, which is often framed as the remembrance of a gift of cherry trees from Japan. Ohanami festivals are also celebrated in many other cities around the world, often in locations with a sizeable Japanese population. In the United States, several west coast cities celebrate cherry blossoms, including San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland. In Canada, Vancouver also celebrates a cherry blossom festival. In the southern hemisphere, Australia, Brazil, and Peru, countries with a large number of Japanese immigrants in their history, all host cherry blossom festivals.

Importantly, however, an examination of these overseas celebrations demonstrates these foreign interpretations of Ohanami is often different. Generally they are less focused on the most traditional Japanese aspects of Ohanami—searching down cherry blossoms in nature and photographing or painting them. But there is also less focus on the traditional foods and sake common in Japan. In some of these overseas festivals, the focus of the "cherry blossom" celebration remains ostensibly on the cherry blossoms as a symbol of spring. In most of the overseas locations, however, the exported version of Ohanami shows much less focus on the cherry blossoms but are most often seen as a celebration of Japanese culture in general. As examples, Alnwick Gardens in the United Kingdom includes an origami workshop, a bonsai tree exhibition, Japanese calligraphy, and afternoon parades. Similarly, Cowra Australia's celebration includes a Japanese garden tea ceremony, bonsai and ikebana (Japanese flower arranging), calligraphy, martial arts, and Sumo. Honolulu and San Francisco's festivities involve a beauty pageant. Even further removed from its roots, Macon Georgia USA's festival includes more traditional local activities, such as a fashion show, formal ball, and tour of homes. As a result, these international "cherry blossom festivals" often are adapted to serve as a celebration of Japanese culture in general.

## 4. Discussion

Ohanami celebrates the return of spring. Importantly, this celebration seems to have been adopted and adapted from China. To the Japanese, however, cherry blossoms, better known as sakura, represent Japan and its culture. Historically, cherry blossoms not only represented the coming of spring, but also the start of the calendar, fiscal, and academic year. This occurred through activities that are associated with the blossoms themselves that are central to the event. Ohanami provide an opportunity to enjoy the warming spring air under the blossoms. In Japan, contemporary Ohanami celebrations have come to include several well-entrenched rituals. First, this often involves capturing images of the fleeting perfect cherry blossoms. Although historically this was accomplished with painting, more contemporarily this is primarily with photography. Second, Ohanami provides an opportunity for people to gather together, whether with the nuclear or extended family, or with friends or colleagues, or, even more widely, with other members of the community. Ohanami, as with other festivals and holiday celebrations, often involves others. Consumption is another important aspect of the celebration. The celebrations involve consumption of food and drink. The consumption of seasonal food items has evolved to be considered a "part" of cherry blossom festivals, especially for Japanese.



For example, Ohanami festivals often involve the consumption of bentos and other foods, as well as sake or plum wine.

The celebration of Ohanami in Japan, however, is undergoing change. One of the most important observations is that commercial enterprise is finding ways to commodify cultural practices. This is consistent with what happened with other holidays around the world (Schmidt, 1991); that is, Ohanami celebrations are evolving.

Perceptions of Ohanami are also important. Consistent with tradition, eight respondents perceived this event as aesthetic. They are also likely to see in-depth meaning, which ties back to their heritage. However, a common theme among respondents was seeing the celebration as a reflection of their efforts over the past year. The celebration of Ohanami was examined in its cultural context, but as we have shown here, also culturally deconstructed. A deeper appreciation of Ohanami comes from examining people's understanding of this holiday. That is, cultural customs shape how people celebrate and experience Ohanami. Culture also shapes how they come to understand the holiday. For Japanese, Ohanami not only represents the arrival of spring but an opportunity to capture images of the fleeting blossoms and gather together in the warming air to celebrate eating and drinking. Ohanami represents a celebration of the Japanese culture, and therefore is felt to be relatively sacred.

For Japanese, Ohanami celebrations reflect the communal togetherness that is also seen in other holiday rituals, such as American Thanksgiving [23]. In the case of American Thanksgiving, the communal group is typically the family or extended family. In the case of Ohanami the group may be family, school, or a work group. This might reflect differing social structures or focuses of the respective cultures. The desire for people to gather together was seen as an important aspect of Thanksgiving rituals in the United States [23]. Overall, then, an important aspect of cultural celebrations, at least those celebrated at home, appears to be the presence and social interaction of other members of the clan. How universal the importance of community is in festivals and celebrations remains a question.

In comparison with Ohanami celebrations in Japan, the idea of the celebration is slightly different when exported overseas. Kimura and Belk [4] asserted that the celebration of Western holidays such as Christmas in Japan is an example of "Western cultural imperialism" (p. 326). Our study, on the other hand, may suggest that Ohanami celebration is an example of "Eastern Cultural imperialism" overseas. However, the celebration of Ohanami in other parts of the world suggests evidence of globalization. This might seem to offer, at least at first glance, hope for the sustainability of Ohanami. Importantly, however, despite their being named "cherry blossom festivals," these celebrations are subject to a number of different local interpretations. The variety of ways in which the celebration changes in other cultures suggests that Ohanami is being modified or "glocalized" around the world. The main modification of these exported Ohanami celebrations is that these festivals often morph into a celebration of Japanese culture, where a variety of Japanese cultural aspects, including activities and foods, are celebrated. Some of the non-Japanese adaptations include fashion shows and formal balls in Georgia, as well as Japanese movies and manga (comic books) in Germany. As a result, the celebration of Ohanami demonstrates significant modifications in its observance overseas. Therefore, although these international celebrations demonstrate an internationalization of Ohanami celebrations through their worldwide celebration, they also demonstrate local adaptation and interpretation in the various forms of the celebration itself. In sum, although the preponderance of cherry blossom festivals appears to be a positive indicator for their cultural sustainability, the adaptations that take place suggest concerns about whether the true culture is actually being sustained in these observations.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is not a unified, grand theory, nor does it aspire to identify any scientific laws. This theory refers to a "family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (p. 868 [6]). CCT allowed this study to extract these themes through a variety of methods to analyze the lived culture and social resources, and between the perceived meaning and symbol of the way of life, each individual depends on. These results support consumer culture theory's expectations of a variety of meanings, not only within inside the Japanese and Japanese-American community, but that these meanings are



created within a broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism. More specifically, Ohanami has not only been commercialized but it has also been adopted overseas. These translations of Ohanami practices reveals slippage from the original practices. These changes suggest that although we may want to preserve or sustain traditional cultural practices [1], the celebration of these “exotic” festivals is reconstructed in different ways across time and across cultures with varying meanings deconstructed by the participants themselves.

As a result, this study demonstrates the difficulty in trying to preserve cultural practices. First, cultural practices are dynamic. Even the celebration of spring blossoms was adopted and adapted from China. Second, contemporary Ohanami celebrations are changing, even within Japan. Third, the meanings behind this festival and how people chose to celebrate it varies within a culture. Fourth, there is evidence of increasing commercialization of the Ohanami in Japan, from increasing sales of Ohanami foods and sake to the use and perhaps exploitation of the symbols in advertising and other marketing activities. In sum, these modifications are consistent with Bauman’s [2] notion of “liquid modernity”, where cultural practices are in a state of flux.

Future research should make use of larger and broader samples and of additional methods to further refine these findings in the context of other cultural festivals and practices. CCT has enabled this study to draw out contextual, symbolic, and experiential aspects of individuals’ consumption experiences as they live their daily lives. While previous research has focused on the acquisition, consumption, and possession of goods from a macro and micro theoretical perspective, this study illustrates that the CCT lens is also valuable in understanding cultural experiences. In a broader sense, we might inquire about other festivals, holidays, and cultural practices. The question remains of to what extent they are able to remain faithful to their historical practice, or if it is inherent that they will be modified through adaption and appropriation.

**Author Contributions:** Authors contributed equally to the writing, review and editing.

**Funding:** This research received some funding from the University of Lethbridge to cover travel to Japan

**Conflicts of Interest:** Authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Soini, K.; Birkeland, I. Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability. *Geoforum* **2007**, *51*, 213–223. [CrossRef]
2. Bauman, Z. *Liquid Modernity*; Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 2000.
3. Suntikil, W. Cultural sustainability and fluidity in Bhutan’s traditional festivals. *J. Sustain. Tour.* **2018**, *26*, 1–15. [CrossRef]
4. Kimura, J.; Belk, R.W. Christmas in Japan: Globalization versus localization. *Consum. Mark. Cult.* **2005**, *8*, 325–338. [CrossRef]
5. Minowa, Y.; Khomenko, O.; Belk, R.W. Social change and gendered gift giving rituals: A historical analysis of Valentine’s Day in Japan. *J. Macromark.* **2011**, *31*, 44–56. [CrossRef]
6. Arnould, E.J.; Thompson, C.J. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *J. Consum. Res.* **2005**, *31*, 868–882. [CrossRef]
7. Williamson, K. Homogeneity Is Their Strength. 2014. Available online: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2014/08/homogeneity-their-strength-kevin-d-williamson/> (accessed on 25 March 2019).
8. Kalland, A. Culture in Japanese nature. In *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach*; Bruun, O., Kalland, A., Eds.; Curzon Press: London, UK, 1992; pp. 218–233.
9. Martinez, D.P. On the “nature” of Japanese culture, or, is there a Japanese sense of nature? In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*; Roberston, J., Ed.; Wiley-Blackwell: Malden, MA, USA, 2015; pp. 185–200.
10. Ohnuki-Tierney, E. Cherry blossoms and their viewing: A window onto Japanese culture. In *The Culture of Japan As Seen Through Its Leisure*; Linhart, S., Fröhstück, S., Eds.; SUNY Press: Albany, NY, USA, 1998; pp. 213–236.
11. Ohnuki-Tierney, E. *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalism: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 2002.



12. Brender, A. Sake, students, and cherry blossoms: Japanese drinking rituals mark the cycle of the academic year. *Chron. High. Educ.* **2003**, *49*, 34.
13. Basil, M.D. Examining cherry blossom celebrations in Japan and around the world. In *Commercial Nationalism: Selling the National Story in Tourism and Events*; White, L., Ed.; Channel View: Bristol, UK, 2017; pp. 212–226.
14. Kobayashi, A. Cherry blossoms. In *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*; Buckley, S., Ed.; Taylor and Francis: Abingdon, UK, 2002; p. 63.
15. Moeran, B.; Skov, L. Mt Fuji and the cherry blossoms: A view from afar. In *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*; Asquith, P.J., Kalland, A., Eds.; Curzon Press: Richmond, UK, 1997; pp. 181–205.
16. Arlt, W.G. Thinking through tourism in Japan. *Tour. Hosp. Plan. Dev.* **2006**, *3*, 199–207. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Eiki, H. Pilgrimage and peregrination: Contextualizing the Saikoko Junrei and the Shikoku Henro. *Jpn. J. Relig. Stud.* **1997**, *24*, 271–299.
18. Roy, C. *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia*; ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, CA, USA, 2005.
19. Weathernews. Investigating Japanese' Knowledge on Ohanami: Country-Wide Investigation on Ohanami, Results. 2013. Available online: <http://weathernews.com/ja/nc/press/2013/130329.html> (accessed on 12 December 2018).
20. MyNavi. Times Have Changed? People Who Celebrates Ohanami at Work Is Measly 2 Percent of the Population. Scheduling Challenges. 2016. Available online: <https://gakumado.mynavi.jp/freshers/articles/35443> (accessed on 12 December 2018).
21. Brewer, J.; Hunter, A. *Multimethod Research: A Synthesis of Styles*; Sage: Newbury Park, CA USA, 1989.
22. Belk, R.W.; Wallendorf, M.; Sherry, J.F. The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. *J. Consum. Res.* **1989**, *16*, 1–38. [[CrossRef](#)]
23. Wallendorf, M.; Arnould, E.J. “We gather together”: Consumption rituals of Thanksgiving Day. *J. Consum. Res.* **1991**, *18*, 13–31. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Moisander, J.; Anu Valtonen, A.; Heidi Hirsto, H. Personal interviews in cultural consumer research—Post-structuralist challenges. *Consum. Mark. Cult.* **2009**, *12*, 329–348. [[CrossRef](#)]
25. Small, M.L. How to conduct a mixed methods study: Recent trends in a rapidly growing literature. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* **2011**, *37*, 57–86. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Atran, S.; Medin, D.L.; Ross, N.O. The cultural mind: Environmental decision making and cultural modeling within and across populations. *Psychol. Rev.* **2005**, *112*, 744. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Marshall, B.; Cardon, P.; Poddar, A.; Fontenot, R. Does sample size matter in qualitative research? A review of qualitative interviews in IS research. *J. Comput. Inf. Syst.* **2013**, *54*, 11–22.
28. Arkley, H.; Knight, P. *Interviewing for Social Scientists*; Sage Publications: London, UK, 1999.
29. Bailey, C.A. *Guide to Field Research*; Pine Forge: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1996.
30. Tanaka, H. Landscape expression of the evolution of Buddhism in Japan. *Can. Geogr.* **1984**, *28*, 240–257. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Kozinets, R.V. Netnography. In *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society*; John Wiley & Sons: New York, NY, USA, 2015; pp. 1–8.
32. Madame Riri. Explaining to the World the Japanese Culture. Why Japanese Loves Cherry Blossom Celebrations? 6 Differences between Overseas and Japan. 2013. Available online: <https://www.madameriri.com/2013/03/27/世界に伝えたい日本文化~なぜ日本人は花見好き/> (accessed on 12 December 2018).
33. Primack, R.; Higuchi, H. Climate change and cherry tree blossom festivals in Japan. *Arnoldia* **2007**, *65*, 14–22.
34. Carnazzi, S. Celebrating Cherry Blossom: Japan Teaches Us the Joy of Hanami. 2015. Available online: <http://www.expo2015.org/magazine/en/culture/celebrating-cherry-blossom--japan-teaches-us-the-joy-of-hanami.html> (accessed on 21 December 2018).
35. McClellan, A. *The Cherry Blossom Festival: Sakura Celebration*; Bunker Hill Publishing, Inc.: Piermont, NH, USA, 2005.

