

Article

Cool Japan, Warm Mexico: Bounded Others and National Identity

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The present paper is an approach to othering as a potential factor of coolness. Through the analysis of two case studies – the established cultural phenomenon of Cool Japan, and the rising buildup of what we call Warm Mexico – the aim is to understand the particular conditions of othering that can lead to a “cool” national identity. Japan is taken as a departure point to assess the usage of exoticism as a resource for building a cool national identity, and then the analysis turns to Mexico’s current national image to examine the possibility for that same strategy to be applied. The concepts of complicit exoticism, and bounded autonomy are used as theoretical axes to find out the factors involved in the cooling of an othered culture. The paper combines theoretical analysis and a content analysis of two case studies to strengthen the understanding of the links between concepts. The first part focuses on the historical and theoretical background that hint at the variables involved in process of building a “cool” other. The second part is an interpretation analysis of an exploratory content analysis done on conversations with fan communities that have received and replicated othering discourses of two foreign cultures, i.e. Mexico and Japan.

Keywords: Cool Japan, *Nihonjinron*, Mexico, National Image, Othering

Introduction

The present paper is an approach to othering, the establishment of conceptual boundaries between an in-group entity, “us”, and an out-group entity, “them” (Iwabuchi, 1994: 49), as a potential factor of coolness. Through the analysis of two case studies; the established cultural phenomenon of Cool Japan, and the rising buildup of what we call Warm Mexico, we aim to understand the particular conditions of othering that can lead to a “cool” national identity. Given its long and solid career on coolness, Japan is taken as a departure point to assess the usage of exoticism as a resource for building a cool national identity, and then we turn to Mexico’s current national image to examine the possibility for that same strategy to be applied.

The reason behind the choice of Japan and Mexico responds to two main conditions. First, the initiative of both public and private institutions to strengthen the promotion of Japanese creative industries as a way to heal Japan’s image after the Fukushima disaster could set a guideline for Mexico to follow. Cool Japan became a powerful tool for post-Fukushima Japan, hence adapting some of these strategies could help Mexico to improve its own damaged portraiture as a consequence on the war against drug cartels. Second, Mexico and Japan have been subject to othering, and exotization, and both have spawned fandoms that idealize both countries based on these notions. The national images that makes use of (self) exoticism do so theoretically, but also tangibly

through material culture. Japanese and Mexican fandoms could shed light on the concrete consumption and interpretation of said material culture and reveal how national image discourses are received, recontextualized and transferred to the sphere of cool.

The othering traits, and exotization are approached as cultural essentialisms. That is to say, the conception that all human beings carry a culture, which in turn is reduced to a set of characteristics that defines an individual's or a group's essence (Grillo, 2003). Cultural essentialism represents a form of stereotyping, a way of categorizing a community, or a culture. However, stereotyping also often brings to the table the discussion of the (mis)interpretation of a "real" culture, versus the "imagined" one (McGarty et al., 2002). In this paper we acknowledge the essentialist imagined and constructed nature of the national images of Mexico and Japan, and how they are used to "provide a useful fit with reality, rather than an exact match with reality (...)" (McGarty et al., 2002: 8). However, we also want to point out that the constructed quality of the national images here analyzed or their usage of stereotypes does not render them any less valuable. On the contrary, we intend to highlight the complexity of the cultural implications and power relationships that frame the selection of the "useful fits" that are the national images resulting from a complicit exoticism.

In order to evidence the tendencies that govern the contemporary image of Japan and Mexico, this study will first approach the relationship between national image, othering, and cool theoretically, and later will focus on the practical applications of this relationship through the discourses of fandom communities. During both stages, Japan will be taken as a reference, and Mexico as a potential application. The objective of our study is to examine the current image of both countries, according to each othering discourse and each consumer fandom, and find what values trigger appeal/coolness.

Consequently, the following research is done in two stages. First, the theoretical considerations here implemented gravitate around the concepts of complicit exoticism to explain the part that pertains national identity, and bounded autonomy to describe its connection to coolness (sections 1 and 2). Then, a content analysis will be conducted on the discourses (interviews) of key members of the fandom communities in both territories to assess the contemporary images of Mexico and Japan and the factors that display coolness (Section 3). These representative members of the communities are chosen given their leading roles within their circuit, where they act as promoters and creators of visual and material culture. In the conclusions we round up the theoretical considerations and the results of the content analysis in order to evaluate how Japan's exoticism and coolness relate, and consider the possibility of Mexico to follow a similar path as Japan down the road of coolness.

1. Complicit Exoticism and Cool Japan

Japan's career in cool is long, but when it comes to othering and exoticism it is even longer. Othering is the colonial practice of imagining an "other", an opposed pole of the "self", while setting the cultural boundaries, differences and hierarchies that generally results in a dichotomy between a superior self, and a marginalized inferior other (Ghandi, 1998; Yu, 2002). Territories regarded as Orient under Euro-centric standards, such as Japan, have been a constant subject of othering gazes; romanticizing at best (Machart et al., 2015), and derogatory at worst (Said, 2014) almost since the 17th century (Jorissen, 2002). The changes in the nuances of the notions of Orient have revolved around the identification of the West; Eastern countries become instrumental in positioning Western ones through a comparative process of divergence where the formers' "weaknesses" enhance the latter's "strengths" (Said, 2014: 45). The demarcation of East and West, "us" and "them", culminates in the establishment of an "Oriental other", an entity that confirms and stabilizes the "self", which in this case is the hegemonic system of Western values (Gandhi, 1998).

Specifically, in the case of Japan, its marginalization as an other has also gone through the ups and downs of shape-shifting where it would be sometimes portrayed negatively as barbaric and irrational (Gbazoul,

2007; Laver, 2011), or more positively as mysterious and *kawaii* (かわいい) (Okada, 2009; Sakurai, 2009). For example, the image of the geisha has been molded countless times; it has been a symbol of the exotic sexuality of Japan (Boer, 2003), of a naïve savageness (Okada, 2009: 39), and a representative of Japanese beauty (Okada, 2009, Gbazoul, 2007). Authors Ferial J. Gbazoul and Okada Mariko converge when both acknowledge that the process of building the image and significance of the geisha is imbued with both Western and Japanese values alike. Even though in Europe geishas were sexualized (Gbazoul, 2007) and even satirized (Boer, 2003; Okada, 2009), Japan subverted their polemic portraiture, adapted it, and chose them as representatives of their culture during world fairs since the 19th century (Okada, 2009).

The 20th and 21st century still see replications of these othering tendencies. Something similar has happened with contemporary Japanese fashion. Cultural and fashion studies scholar Masafumi Monden summarizes the exoticizing gaze behind the categorization of Japanese fashion affecting even big brand names like Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, where their “Japaneseness” would be emphasized rather their traits as individuals (Monden, 2014: 11). Fashion specialist Yuniya Kawamura traces the othering of Japanese fashion back to Takada Kenzo, claiming that his rise in the Paris fashion scene sparked an interest in Tokyo, the “exotic, mysterious city where there could be more creative designers, like Kenzo, hidden or waiting to be discovered” (Kawamura, 2013: 23). These two examples of interpretation of Japanese culture have served us to grasp that othering has been constant when approaching Japan, but also reveal two other tendencies that emanate from it; first, that it sometimes takes a positive turn and others a negative turn, and second, that Japan has absorbed and reverted Orientalism almost since the 19th century.

In this part of the study we shall address these two tendencies under the light of Cool Japan. Whilst othering and exoticism have proven to be reductive and embedded within a colonial system that establishes dyads of dominating-dominated cultures, we consider how Japan has integrated and reverted its stereotypes in the form of a contemporary self-Orientalism that possibly served as a basis for coolness to arise, and Japan’s soft power to strengthen. In order to explain the complex negotiations of self-othering and self-Orientalism, the concept of complicit exoticism as defined by Koichi Iwabuchi will be addressed. Next, its relation to Cool Japan will be explained and the literature regarding this topic will be reviewed considering the contrasts between the positive or the negative portraiture of Japan.

(1) Complicit Exoticism

Media and cultural studies Professor Koichi Iwabuchi defines national identity as “a battleground where various social groups compete with each other to define the meaning of national” (Iwabuchi, 1994: 51). Minding the contrasts of the aforementioned negotiations of Japanese identity that have passed through so many hands and translations, it is not difficult to imagine why Iwabuchi used the word “battleground”. However, the process is not always as violent as the previous definition might hint at, due to the occurrence of negotiations in the discourses between the parties that construct meanings and power hierarchies.

As it was mentioned above, Kawamura Yuniya made a study about Japanese fashion subcultures and pointed out that the division between East and West is still relevant and enforced nowadays. Nonetheless, her account on Japanese sartorial history has moments where Japan appears as a more passive receiver of what the West has imposed on the East, than an active culture with contributions of its own (Monden, 2014). For instance, she said that after World War II, fashion trends that emerged in the United States and/or Europe started arriving faster to Japan. As a result, people in urban centers, like Tokyo, “began to consume Western fashion at a rapid pace in the 1950s and 1960s; whatever trend was popular in the West was imported to Japan, or exact copies were produced locally” (Kawamura, 2013: 22). While the reality of the power of American-European fashion trends cannot be denied, to claim that Japan made “exact copies” poses a problematic view of Japan as a passive copier of Western tendencies. The very process of localization implies an incorporation of agencies and, in the case of fashion, re-styling that is worth analyzing as an object of study on its own (Monden, 2014: 11).

This active negotiation between East and West, Japan and United States/Europe, is the focus of Koichi Iwabuchi's study about Japanese national identity. He mentions that "Japaneseness" is the result of reciprocal recognition of others where Japan retakes the image that "the West" has drawn of it, and constructed its own portrait of both the "the West" and of itself. Consequently, "the relationship between the West's Orientalist discourse on Japan and Japan's discourse on itself is characterized by a profound complicity" (Iwabuchi, 1994: 52). This negotiated exchange is complicit exoticism.

Complicit exoticism can happen in different battlegrounds, borrowing Iwabuchi's own words. The competition between social groups to define Japan is still divided in two different corners, West versus East. Nonetheless, I would argue that sometimes the competition gets toned down and becomes a negotiation, almost a conversation. As it was previously argued, Orientalist tendencies to other Japan have also taken the shape of a positive-leaning essentialisms; for instance, othering could work as an endorsement of Japan's exoticism (Iwabuchi, 1994: 57). However, on Japan's receiving side, the differentiation between East and West has also served as a tool for establishing Japan's own differentiation from undesired Western values (Iwabuchi, 1994: 53). In sum, the conversation goes both ways; Euro-American discourses describe Japan as different, and Japan accepts said difference, enhances it, and uses it to even reject "Western" values. One of the battlegrounds where this conversation, and Japan's complicit exoticism is most clearly manifested and constructed is the very literature of theories about "Japaneseness" or *nihonjinron* (日本人論).

(2) *Nihonjinron*, Theories and Manifestations

Manifestations of complicit exoticism can be openly appreciated in *nihonjinron* or theories of "Japaneseness", according to Iwabuchi (1994: 54). Similarly, nowadays there are other examples that can be almost as illustrative, and that could also prove to be an embodiment of contemporary *nihonjinron*. In order not to lose Iwabuchi's pace to explain complicit exoticism, we shall consider first what *nihonjinron* can demonstrate about national identity, and later we shall move to other areas where the same relationships can be seen.

Nihonjinron is a genre in the social sciences that explains Japan as a unique, homogeneous cultural and social entity (Yoshino, 2005:2), and as such has been instrumental in defining Japan locally and internationally (Iwabuchi, 1994). Since its emergence around the decade of 1930, and after its boom in the 1970s (Iwabuchi, 1994: 55), its scope has widened to a point where it is challenging to try to cover most of its topics (Yoshino, 2005). But, what is worth highlighting is that it has become an arena for discussing Japanese identity under the conditions of complicit exoticism.

The values of Japanese culture that can be seen in *nihonjinron* literature is that Japan's culture and society is "almost too unique to be understood by others" (Iwabuchi, 1994: 60). Even if *nihonjinron* constantly assumes that East and West are different, and implicitly replicates its hierarchical and colonial implications, this self-exotization has at times been exploited to Japan's benefit. The fact that Japan still takes the entity of "the West" as a reference, and even defines itself under Western terms (Iwabuchi, 1994), is not a detriment to the powerful impact of its material and visual culture. Koichi Iwabuchi also brings to attention that the discussion of Japaneseness was not only supported by literature, but also by creative industries. This way, *nihonjinron* discourses both embodied by literature and material culture were widely successful overseas because, as Iwabuchi put it "cultural otherness sells in the age of globalization" (1994:68).

To put this into more concrete terms, looking at the expression of complicit exoticism in other areas that also happen to be more tangible can be of help. Iwabuchi's claims of cultural otherness being a successful marketing tool echoes with cultural anthropologist Anne Allison's experience with Japanese toys. In her book "Millennial Monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination", she gives her take on the popularity of toys made in Japan, regarding its "foreign references" and "distinctly non-American feel" as one of their biggest appeals. According to her, "signs of cultural difference is more the trend today than simple Americanization of such foreign imports" (Allison, 2006: 2). The idea of Japan's uniqueness that permeates *nihonjinron* is also present in

Allison's study, even if rooted in a more academically rigorous framework. The author mentions her awareness of Japan's cultural richness, but still deems *shinto's* animism a unique trait that influences Japanese consumerism and production in ways that "do not occur in the United States" (Allison, 2006: 12). In this example, Japan is still clearly demarked as an other, but, in spite of (or possibly precisely because of) its distinctive non-American traits, Japanese toys possess a special power to succeed and attract attention. Therefore, their "different" nature not only triggers their commercial success, but they also turns them into vessels of certain Japanese unique traits.

This does not happen only with toys. As it was previously introduced, Japanese fashion has also been subject to othering, and has appropriated that view to its own advantage. Be it re-styling trends that appeared in Europe or the US, or tinkering "otherness" into Japan-based projects, complicit exoticism has impacted the realm of Japanese fashion. Not only big names like Kenzo, or Comme des Garçons have received such labeling, but also urban subcultures. The late cultural promoter Sakurai Takamasa traveled overseas to places in Europe and Asia to research the status of Japanese popular culture diffusion. As a result, he wrote a book about the appropriation of Japanese sartorial subcultures, especially *lolita* (ロリ イ タ), taking it as an axis the concept of *kawaii*, and headed projects of Japanese cultural diffusion like the *kawaii* ambassadors based on what he discovered overseas. While his narration does not address directly the topic of othering or exoticism, his experience finding out about the hype around Japanese *lolita* brands, and deciding to capitalize on it is a story of complicit exoticism. During his interviews with European *lolita*, the concept of *kawaii* came up constantly, becoming an almost universal marker of contemporary Japaneseness (Sakurai, 2009: 87)¹. He highlights Japanese uniqueness when he talks about the word *kawaii* itself, claiming it is widely used unchanged because it is a concept that cannot be perfectly applied or translated to other languages (Sakurai, 2009: 41).

This way, complicit exoticism works as the conversation, or competition, of values that shape national image. As a result, national image can also be embodied in different containers, like literature such as *nihonjinron*, or creative industries. In the case of the latter, complicit exoticism also becomes a creative force that can mold Japanese creative industries, and/or their support system. Also, *nihonjinron* has a role to play; it is the carrier of particular values that laid a fertile ground for Japanese products to exploit their "distinctly non-American" traits. In order to understand how complicit exoticism continues to affect Japan's contemporary material culture, and its interpretation, we shall look at its most recent embodiment, Cool Japan.

(3) Cool Japan

The approach to Cool Japan as a discourse of othering has already been discussed in the academia. Asian studies scholar Jonathan E. Abel analyzed Cool Japan as a phenomenon that distorts the image of the real Japan. He regards it as a global fetish that is born out of exoticism and interest in what is hard to understand (Abel, 2011: 63,64). On the side of art, Professor Mōri Yoshitaka has a similar opinion regarding the Cool Japan values that have found their way into Japanese contemporary art through some Japanese New Pop artists, especially Murakami Takashi. Mōri mentions that Murakami has exploited stereotypical views of Japan as futuristic and especially postmodern, highlighting its uniqueness to position himself as unique within the international art world scene (Mōri, 2007). Uniqueness, exoticism and "traits that are difficult to understand" are concepts that were often discussed in *nihonjinron* literature, and continue to fuel complicit exoticism within creative industries.

The importance of creative industries for the study of complicit exoticism comes not only from Iwabuchi's introduction to the effect that otherness has on the sale of cultural products, but also from the relatively recent officialization of Cool Japan as Japan's national image. But, before delving into the particulars of Cool Japan as an institutionalized national portrait, it becomes necessary to understand the generals of how Cool Japan has

¹ In the particular case here quoted, "Japaneseness" is represented by Tokyo. When Sakurai Takamasa interviewed the French singer Solita, she said that *kawaii* comprises a feeling of "Tokyoness".

worked so far.

The article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” by Douglas McGray (2002) marks the popularization of the term Cool Japan, but also the beginning of a realization about Japan’s image in the 21st century. In the text, McGray talks about Japan’s growing soft power taking over the world through sushi, gadgets, and *anime*. His explanation of the conditions that rendered Japan a cultural super power touches on some of the aforementioned spots of otherness and complicit exoticism. For instance, Japan is still portrayed as somewhat mysterious since McGray states that “there is a Japan for the Japanese and a Japan for the rest of the world” (McGray, 2002: 52). But, probably the most relevant statement for the present study comes from the idea that Japan possesses an “ability to absorb and adapt foreign influences while still remaining an intact cultural core” (McGray, 2002: 52,53). This “ability” describes Japan’s active role in complicit exoticism, and, in this particular case, works as a metadiscourse on how Japan could also absorb the vision of itself as “cool” and integrate it to its “intact cultural core”. Additionally, McGray adds some other traits of Japanese uniqueness, like its postmodernism, due to this “talent” to fuse foreign cultures with local ones, but also for mixing tradition with futurism (2002: 49).

After the hype for Japanese popular culture and technology got a name and even some theoretical background, the Cool Japan machine did not stop. On the one hand, creators like the aforementioned visual artist Murakami Takashi, used it to enhance their own identity². On the other, private and public institutions also used the catalogue of “unique” traits and products mentioned in McGray’s text to boost their enterprises. For instance, Murakami supports the vision of Japan as postmodern and has even teamed up with postmodernism philosopher Azuma Hiroki (Murakami, 2005). Under said vision, he created a whole art project that greatly carved the place of Japan’s contemporary art in the world during the 2000’s (Favell, 2011). Regarding institutional initiatives, an example can be the All Nippon Airways 2012 campaign “Is Japan Cool?” where videos, text columns and SNS posts gather a wide catalogue of Japanese culture in order to promote tourism from overseas (ANA Global Channel, 2012). The Japanese government is in no way unaware of the economic impact that the Cool Japan discourse had and can continue to have on Japanese products. Even though McGray’s text talks about fashion, *anime*, phones and gadgets at the same time, Japanese public institutions chose creative industries to represent Cool Japan, and gadgets would fall under Digital Japan, or Tech Japan (Cabinet Office 1, 2004). Efforts to strengthen the promotion and protection of Japanese creative industries locally and internationally can be tracked back to the 2002 Japanese Intellectual Property Strategy (Daijot-Bul, 2009). However, the actual usage of the English-language concept “Cool Japan” on creative industry-related programs started appearing in Japanese government branding strategies in 2004 (Cabinet Office 1, 2004) although at times it would also appear with alternative names such as “Japan Cool” (ジャパン・クール) or “*Kakkoiï Nihon*” (かっこいい日本) (Cabinet Office, 2004a; Cabinet Office, 2004b). On 2012 Cool Japan took an important turn since it became one of the tools that the Japanese institutions had at hand to help reinvigorate Japanese industries after the earthquake, and restore Japan’s brand overseas (METI, 2012a).

This way, Cool Japan as a national identity has passed through different stages, and conversing with institutions, artists, consumers, academia, among other circuits. What we want to highlight after this brief review of Cool Japan is that the cultural phenomenon follows the tendencies of complicit exoticism as explained by Iwabuchi (1994), where the identity of a nation and its signifiers are negotiated based on a differentiation between “us” and “them”. Cool Japan as a Japan’s national image is complicit because it took an English-language, United States-born concept to define its own self, its particularities, and readapted it to its own needs. It is also exoticism because the separation between “us” and “them” is still done taking Euro-American views as a reference, producing stereotypes, such as the idea of Japan as a postmodern culture. The other point we

² Even though the Murakami himself has not claimed to be aligned with Cool Japan, if anything, he has voiced his contempt (Sasaki, 2012), his theories about Japanese art and art history are permeated with Cool Japan tendencies. If the contemporary stereotype of Japan includes the aforementioned uniqueness, postmodernity and futurism, Murakami has all that boxes checked with his artistic project Super Flat.

want to bring up for discussion is the mostly positive undertone of exoticism that permeates the Cool Japan phenomenon. As we mentioned before, othering can reduce cultures to essential characteristics that could be positive or negative. Sometimes both conflicting sentiments can exist simultaneously in the same timeline. Even though Cool Japan creative industries are not without its taints of perversion (McLelland, 2016), and the promotion campaign has had some criticism as well (Boas, 2016), Cool Japan is mostly a contemporary celebration and commodification of “Japaneseness”. In the past Japan has been mysterious, beautiful, now it is postmodern, *kawaii* and cool. Consequently, things that come from Japan are also tainted with these positive qualities. Nonetheless, it is important to signal that Japan is not only good, it is cool. There is a difference. So, what does coolness entail for complicit exoticism?

2. Coolness, Bounding and the Bounded Other

The definition of cool is not an easy task. There are different academic fronts that have tackled the phenomenon in ways that range from an elusive, rebellious attitude (Gladwell, 1994) to a reproducible, commercial trait (Sundar et al., 2014; Farnsworth et al., 2014). For the sake of analyzing the kind(s) of coolness that might be at play in Cool Japan, we shall focus on one of the factors that traverses most of the studies; subversion.

Subversion can come in different shapes; it has been called self-destruction (Pountain & Robins, 2000: 43), counterculture (Frank, 1997; Sundar et al. 2014), illicit (Fitton et al., 2012; Pountain & Robins, 2000: 31), rebelliousness (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2005), and autonomy (Warren & Campbell, 2014), just to name a few examples. This trait has been highlighted as one of the basic forces that drive urban contemporary cool from its origins among African-Americans (Majors & Billson, 1993), to recent surveys that culminate in a list of constitutive characteristics, among which a version of subversion is present (Warren & Campbell, 2014; Sundar et al., 2014; Fitton et al., 2012). This way, if subversion is crucial to the construction of cool, it becomes also crucial to understand how Japan is perceived as subversive.

Othering cemented a fertile ground for coolness. The idea of Japan as “different” echoes with the requisites for cool to arise given that a level of deviance is required. For instance, marketing specialists Caleb Warren and Margaret Campbell (2014) state that consumers perceive products as cool when they diverge from the norm. This is precisely the phenomenon that Prof. Anne Allison described when talking about the distinct foreign references that make Japanese toys so attractive (Allison, 2006: 2). Furthermore, other authors converge in this idea that Cool Japan entails an image of Japan as an “interruption of the normal” (Dailot-bul, 2009: 262), and a different unknown reality (Abel, 2011). However, Cool Japan is not the kind of cool that is “in love with cigarettes, booze and drugs” (Pountain & Robins, 2000: 13), nor is it just good or attractive, it has other nuances. The aforementioned study by Warren and Campbell delves in the particulars of how good is transformed to cool, and what kind of deviance is involved in cool. This way, to understand the particular kind of coolness that Japan has been bestowed with, it is first necessary to look for the particulars of its nuances.

(1) Bounded Autonomy

Marketing and business Professors Caleb Warren and Margaret C. Campbell (2014) carried out a series of surveys and experiments to find out what makes things cool. After conducting 5 studies their findings contributed to the understanding of cool not only as a marketing trait, but also as a cultural and social category. It stands in a grey area where the characteristics products and brands are perceived by potential consumers, but also frames the perceptions in a way that takes into account the social and cultural contexts that affect their perceptions.

The first study tests the role of divergence as a catalyzer of cool. They found out that people find a design cool when it diverges from the norm, rather than when it conforms (Warren & Campbell, 2014). However, the

other studies revealed that divergence, here also referred as autonomy, should be controlled in order to be perceived as cool. This is what they call bounded autonomy; a perceived appropriate divergence. For example, study 2 showed that coolness arises when autonomy is shown against a norm that seems illegitimate. Study 3 tests how an autonomy that is restrained, and empathetic can also lead to coolness, and can even influence consumers' decisions. The authors are aware of the heterogeneity of audiences, thus they conduct another study, number 4, in order to test whether the person's own level of subcultural tendencies affects their need for a higher autonomy. The results confirmed their hypothesis where participants with a higher counterculturalism would perceive coolness in products with extreme autonomy as well (Warren & Campbell, 2014). Finally, the fifth and last test suggested that there are contexts when autonomy should also be bounded. For instance, a job interview.

In the context of Cool Japan, bounded autonomy could be applied because of the conciliating area where it stands, between cultural and commercial, given that Cool Japan covers these two spheres as well. Also, the study on bounded autonomy discusses the positive nature of cool when it shows empathy and "appropriate" levels of counterculture (Warren & Campbell, 2014), and how that influences potential purchases. This could come in handy to understand why Japan's exoticism in the shape of Cool Japan is also seen as positive.

This way, we are going to use the understanding of bounded autonomy and cool's relationship to shed light on the current vision of Japan's coolness, and its seemingly appropriate form of divergence. Thus, in the following part we will introduce the concept of the bounded other.

(2) The Bounded Other

In the previous section we mentioned several characteristics of autonomy, or deviance, when it is associated to coolness. Some of these traits can also be found in the Cool Japan discourse as a national identity, and in the othering implied within it. As we mentioned in the Introduction, Japan has been seen as different and exotic for centuries. But, its image has been changing and the attitude towards it as well, sometimes it is positive, sometimes it is negative. Cool Japan is leaning towards the former. So, given the understanding that Japan is autonomous, and deviant as an other, but it is also cool, what is it that bounds it and makes it "appropriate"? The answer might be in the previous/simultaneous essentialist label that described Japan in the 1990's: Japan Inc.

Understanding of the transition between Japan Inc. to Cool Japan, might give some hints towards finding out one of Cool Japan's catalyzing agents. Japan Inc. is the American term that described the cooperation between the Japanese private sector and the Japanese government (Morris, 2013). Although the term appears to have been used also in the 1930's decade (Morris, 2013), fifty years later the concept rose up again and transformed as the Japanese economy developed. This time it was not used only to describe the Japanese economic system, but also its aggressiveness (Morris, 2013). It was during these period that Japan's exports, and overall economy grew so much that it became a threat to the United States (Morris, 2013; Horino, 2004; Brock, 1989). For example, the "iconic" automotive industry in the US. got affected by the competition of Japanese cars (Morris, 2013), American companies lost shares to Japanese ones, and as the decade advanced, the trade deficit in the US increased, while the Japanese trade surplus grew higher (Morris, 2013, Brock, 1989). This crisis spawned anti-Japan sentiments within the United States, spreading during a period of Japan-bashing. The feelings of frustration, fear and even envy could be seen among scholars and officials (Brock, 1989), Japanese companies were buying American ones; Nintendo bought a baseball team, and Sony acquired CBS Records and Columbia pictures, an event that *Newsweek* magazine covered, depicting a geisha instead of the Statue of Liberty in Columbia Pictures logo (Morris, 2013).

Even though Japan bashing emerged from an economic crisis, the critique was not without its cultural determinisms. There is literature that considers the failure in communicating and negotiating with Japan a consequence of cultural differences, since Japan could not be "put in any precedent negotiating categories"

(Horino, 2004: 33). Even when Japan's economic growth is seen under a more positive light, the nation's "singular society of vertical human relationships" is seen as a determinant advantage over the United State's system (Horino, 2004: 32). Going back to Koichi Iwabuchi's study on Japan's national identity, he recognizes that simultaneously Japan was being admired by some and bashed by others (Iwabuchi, 1994: 61). The decade of 1980 is also the time when scholars suggested learning from Japan (Vogel, 1979; Brock, 1989), and a discussion of "Americanness" arose as a consequence of the impact that a challenging "other" entailed.

The expansion of the Japanese market, along with the perception of Japan as an aggressive economical opponent with ungraspable cultural differences laid two main conditions that would allow Cool Japan to bloom: a growing presence of Japanese products, and a challenging "other" that had to be bounded. Japanese investment was welcomed in areas that were beneficial to American economy (Brock, 1989), thus there were lingering positive views to Japan's growth as a miracle to learn from. However, it was not until Japan entered a recession period in the 1990's that it stopped being regarded as an economical threat.

Starting in the decade of 1990, Japan entered a period of recession that marked what the academia calls "The Lost Decade", although more recent research points at the existence of more than one Lost Decades (Funabashi and Kushner, 2015). Once Japan's growth was halted, so was its quality as a threat. It became harmless, tamed, bounded. McGray starts his text about Japan's cool saying that "Japan looks more like a cultural superpower today than it did in the 1980's, when it was an economic one" (McGray, 2002: 44). The keyword in that statement is "looks", given that efforts to bring big artists and establish important cultural centers for Japanese culture in New York had been at work since the decade of 1970 (Shiner & Tomii, 2007: 43). Also, the gadgets and Japanese "quirks" that are now called cool have been acknowledged while Japan was an economic superpower as well, albeit under an unfavorable light. Japan "looks" more like a cultural superpower now because before, its economic dominance made it extremely deviant, which made it "look" more like a menace. Now Japan was in place, it was still unique and mysterious, it was still an other, but within the limits allowed by Orientalism, where the power is in the hands of "the West". Japan is now cool because it is a bounded deviant, its otherness has the "appropriate" levels of counterculture. Furthermore, Cool Japan has also been constantly mentioned along with the label of soft power (McGray, 2002). Douglas McGray (2002) mentions that Japan's cultural dominance represents soft power's unquantifiable non-traditional ways of exerting power. The label "soft power" places Japan in yet another dichotomist framework, where "hard power" lies in the hands of those with coercive, aggressive military resources. The "softness" of Japan's cool power further enhances its place as a bounded other. It is perceived now as an exotic, deviant and countercultural entity, but soft, tamed, and controlled. It has just the right amount of deviation.

The label of cool strengthens complicit exoticism insofar as it requires a negotiated othering. Coolness is a force that diverges and challenges (Pountain & Robins, 2000), but that requires an external gaze to be recognized as such (Abel, 2011: 64). In the case of Japan, creative industries are finding out what is cool through the eyes of foreigners (Kōkami, 2015; Abel, 2011; Sakurai, 2009), and acknowledging its "unique exotic" traits to promote themselves overseas, and to grasp their own potential. What is pointed out as potential in this case remarks commercialization potential, based on Iwabuchi's consideration that "othering sells" (1994:68).

Othering gazes have been directed not only towards the East, which puts the definition of "the West" in a critical position, and opens the opportunity for the emergence of a "cooling" process of complicit exoticism. Latin America has also been subject to asymmetrical relations with colonial powers since the Spanish domain (Miranda, 2013; Mignolo, 2009), and more recently with the United States (Chuang & Roemer, 2015). In the case of the latter, Mexicans are the most common target of othering due to the frequent immigration to U.S. territory, which has led to negative portraiture (Chuang & Roemer, 2015). However, there are other territories that do not see Mexicans as a threat, yet see them as an "other". Based on the previous example of Japan's career on exoticism and later on coolness, could it be possible for a cool complicit exoticism to happen in different othered national identities? In the following section we address this question and the possibility for a bounded other and

complicit exoticism to arise as part of Mexico's national identity, based on the patterns noted in the Japanese case.

(3) From Cool Japan to Warm Mexico

It was previously stated that Cool Japan is an exoticizing label that was originally coined within a Euro-American context, but the shape that holds now is a result of several negotiations. That is to say, the aforementioned theoretical and historical background suggests that the conditions for a "cooling" complicit exoticism to arise within a mostly American framework were there; exoticization, divergence, the diffusion of Japanese products, and the eventual bounding of Japan's challenging otherness. Also, we acknowledged that othering gazes are not exclusive of the West vs East dichotomy, thus opening the possibility for a cooling complicit exoticism to arise between different cultures. Therefore, at this stage some questions emerge: What would happen if the Cool Japan discourse is moved outside of the stated Euro-American conditions? And, what would happen if similar conditions would host the adoption of a different culture?

To address these questions, we shall take a case study: Mexico. In the introduction of this paper it was mentioned that Mexico had a similar need as Japan to restore its damaged image, consequence of the war on drugs. But, there are other conditions in common that make Mexico a useful and interesting point of comparison. For instance, Mexico has been the subject of colonial othering, with a similar gaze as Orientalism. The differences of Latin America have also been imagined following Euro-American standards of culture that contrast one another, placing Europe and the United States at the highest end of the hierarchy (Mignolo, 2009). Just like Japan is circumscribed to the systematic Orientalism of interpreting cultures in Asia, Mexico finds its place in colonial approaches to Latin America as a Third-World country, a label that explicitly highlights its perceived low hierarchical order. Going deeper into the Mexican case, the Latin American country has not only been the subject of othering, but also of bashing. The most recent form of Mexico bashing comes from President Donald Trump who started his campaign saying that Mexicans are rapists, that they bring their worst people to the US, and that they steal jobs from US nationals (Neate, 2015). However, this negative portraiture of Mexico is not new. Former Colorado republican congressman Tom Tancredo had a similar view as President Trump and railed against a "Mexican invasion" of illegal immigrants around 2007 (Arellano, 2012: 5). In this sense, Mexico is bashed because it is imagined, very vocally and explicitly, as a big threat to the United States' economy and safety. This is not to say that Mexican culture is completely rejected by its northern neighbor. Mexican journalist Gustavo Arellano analyzes how "Mexican food conquered America", and introduces the topic telling the story of the time when he met Tom Tancredo. Arellano and Tancredo got together on 2010 for a public debate about immigration and assimilation of Mexicans, and for a dinner at a Mexican restaurant afterwards. While both parties had opposed points of view, their antagonism seemed to vanish over their plates of Mexican food (Arellano, 2012: 7). Arellano says:

More than a year later, I can only recall some of the points of our philosophical fisticuffs, but the scene I can't get out of my head is Tancredo's ear-to-ear, tamale-induced smile. Tom may not like Mexicans, but he sure loves his Mexican food (Arellano, 2012: 7).

There is an othering of Mexico where it is seen as a Third-World country, opposed to the Euro-American First World, and there is an appreciation for parts of its culture. However, it is the ongoing strong perception of Mexico as a threat that hinders its transformation to a bounded other, and as a consequence, as cool. Nonetheless, there is another place in the world where Mexican culture is being othered, appreciated, and not perceived as threatening: Japan.

To make the jump from Cool Japan to Warm Mexico, there are a few considerations to take into account. On the one hand, there are studies that signal that the theoretical discourses of uniqueness and exoticism of Cool Japan might be practiced by replicating these set of values at a consumer-level in places different from the

United States (Sakurai T., 2009), hence supporting Iwabuchi's claim about the positive commercial impact of othering. On the other hand, Japan seems to be creating its own cool-triggering conditions for a new "othered" entity: Mexico. Therefore, in order to strengthen the understanding of the preconditions necessary for a "cooling" complicit exoticism, we shall address the aforementioned questions. First, we will consider what would happen if a country would have similar "cooling" conditions to engage in a complicit exoticism with a culture other than the Japanese i.e. Mexican culture. Second, we will test whether Cool Japan is seen equally cool and exotic in other places with a different historical and political relationship with Japan.

Japan has favorable conditions to incubate a positive othering phenomenon of Mexican culture. In fact, it has been happening for almost a decade now. Official Mexican events like the Fiesta Mexicana in Odaiba and Osaka have been around for 17 years now (Japan Times, 2000). However established these events are, it was not until very recently, around 2006, that a small community of Japanese fans of Mexican culture started getting strength in both urban centers and got committed to the diffusion of Mexican culture and the creation of specific events and spaces. If we are to follow the idea of the bounded other as proposed in Cool Japan, where an economic threat is tamed, it becomes necessary to also take a lot at the historical background of the Mexican presence in Japan in the 20th century.

In a wider scale, Mexico-Japan relations have stayed on the positive side, albeit with some moments of tension. During World War II, after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Mexico broke relations with Japan, and the small community of Japanese living in Mexico were subject of restrictive measures (Peddie, 2006). Their bank accounts were frozen, processes for citizenship and naturalization were suspended or revoked, and entire families were relocated and concentrated away from their homes with limited resources (Peddie, 2006). Mexico received and replicated its northern neighbor's propaganda against the Japanese, even if applying it with less rigor. For instance, Mexico did not declare war immediately to Japan, and limited itself to break political and diplomatic relations (Uscanga Prieto, 2015). Nonetheless, the Axis' attack on a Mexican oil boat, "Potrero del Llano", led the Mexican government to take further actions and actively engage in the armed conflict. The Mexican air force Escuadrón 201 was sent to train in the United States in 1944, and was deployed the next year to aid the attacks led by US forces in Asia, engaging against the Japanese (Salazar and Flores, 1998). Literature about this moment in history often emphasizes that Mexico was put in the middle of the conflict between Japan and the United States, countries with whom it had strong economic, and diplomatic relations (Peddie, 2006; García, 2014; Uscanga Prieto, 2015). The discourse of the history-long friendly relationship between Mexico and Japan, as well as the strong presence of Japanese industries in Mexico might have played a role in Mexico's swift normalization of the diplomatic bonds with the Asian country, and its support in front of the international community (Zambrano Barajas, 2007). In the end, it is these latter conditions, the diplomatic and economic partnership between the two countries, that largely defined the hegemonic discourse about the relationship between Mexico and Japan. The antagonism, as well as the segregation of the Japanese population in Mexico during the war have remained mostly invisible to the wide public, and have just started to be studied in the academia (Peddie, 2006).

That is not to say that the good diplomatic relations, and constantly strengthening economic ones are overestimated. They are indeed ongoing and have been growing in the last decade. In 2005, Mexico and Japan's Economic Association Agreement (Acuerdo de Asociación Económica) started to be implemented, which has brought an even more constant flow of Japanese investment in Mexico. By 2014 the number of Japanese companies in Mexican soil had almost tripled (Embajada de Japón en México, 2015). This favorable panorama of international cooperation, joined to the relative invisibility of the historical tensions, signals that for Japan, Mexico is not a threat.

The positive notions of the relationship between Mexico and Japan have been recently countered by the media's depiction of Mexico through the highlight of its insecurity and drug cartel activities. Amidst these conflicting views, a Japanese fandom that is interested in Mexican culture has risen. Members of this

community took the responsibility to diffuse Mexican products and information about them in a decentralized way through sales, organization of events, exhibitions, books, and websites. The formation of this community is rather recent, therefore it is still an incipient phenomenon that has not yet taken a defined shape. However, it is already showing some leading figures.

One of the most popular figures among this community is Sakurai Yōko, a Japanese artist who moved to the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. In 2005, she started her own cultural project, Saruya, which is both a blog and an online store that supports local artisans and introduces Mexican culture to Japan (Saruya, 2009). Additionally, she has welcomed other Japanese artists that are interested in Mexico and worked with them selling Mexican crafts (Kaneko, 2012). Another influential figure is Anderson Yuko, a specialist in Latin American studies who founded the Mexican craft shop Trensa (Trensa, 2007). Both women have presence online and offline; they both manage online shops, blogs, and have written books about Mexican culture.

Their discourses and promotion strategies have influenced a wave of Japanese men and women that got interested in the Northern Latin American country. Nowadays, there are some other Japanese who have set their online shops, blogs, and who travel frequently to Mexico, especially to Oaxaca, in the same fashion as Sakurai and Anderson. Both books by these authors describe Mexico through their own experiences in the state that they liked the most, Oaxaca. Even though they do not theorize explicitly about Mexican identity, they do emphasize the points that they find “attractive” (*miryoku*, 魅力), or “unique” (*dokutoku*, 独特) of Mexico. Their insights go further than just a travel guide, even if Sakurai wrote her book mostly as such (Sakurai, Y., 2009: 5). They engage with the community, tell their stories, give historical context about the Pre-hispanic origins of Mexican goods, and describe their colors, but most importantly, their “Mexicanness” (*mekishikorashii*, メキシコらしい), or “Oaxacanness” (*oahakarashii*, オアハカらしい). Particularly, Anderson Yūko (2007) approaches Mexican culture comparing it to the Japanese one (Anderson, 2007: 29), or by highlighting how she had never seen or tasted anything like what she experienced in Oaxaca (Anderson, 2007: 89). For example, she tells how the combination of colors that she saw in Oaxaca’s architecture and daily appliances are colorful in a way that she had never seen in Japan, or that could have been considered extremely flashy (Anderson, 2007: 24, 89, 140). Sakurai’s book is more historical and concentrated on Mexican material culture. She finds that the “characteristic” (*dokutoku* 独特) trait of Oaxaca’s arts and crafts is their freedom of design. Her book starts with the statement that in Oaxaca there are no two items done identically (Sakurai, Y., 2009: 12). The craft makers, or *artesanos*³, do things by hand and have creative freedom, thus allowing each product to be distinct and have an “original design” (Sakurai, Y., 2009: 12, 18).

While their discourses on “Mexicanness” lack the explicit and deep focus on national identity that *nihonjinron* uses, they do take some steps towards its theorization, and also replicate some strategies that can be found in *nihonjinron* literature. For instance, they use the words that accentuate uniqueness or singularity, like *tokuchō* (特徴) or *dokutoku* (Dale, 1986), make comparisons with other cultures to further enhance Mexico’s particularities⁴, and use words from the local language to refer to these singular traits. In this case, Mexico is established as an other when they describe that its characteristics are like nothing they have seen before, or when they have experiences that make them think “where in the world am I?” (Anderson, 2007: 140). Additionally, just like in the case of *kawaii*, which, according to Sakurai Takamasa and the people he interviewed, is a term that has no satisfying translation (Sakurai, T., 2009: 41), Mexico has its own terms too. For instance, for Anderson, the *mercados* are markets with a rich, warm experience where not only goods that she has never seen before are sold, but also function as places where people connect with each other (Anderson, 2007: 24). Even though the word *mercado* could be directly translated to English as “market” or to Japanese as *ichiba* (市場), Anderson

³ The original word is in Spanish, but she writes it in katakana, *arutesanos* (アルテサノス).

⁴ The comparison is usually vis-a-vis Japan, however Anderson includes in her book a story of two Mexican families who went to the United States to look for a better job, but they could not adapt and preferred to go back to Oaxaca in order to be fully happy even if they had no money.

constantly uses the word *merukado* (メルカド) instead, after she frames it as a special word when she dedicates a full page to describe its particular atmosphere. Something similar happens with the word *señora*, which she spells *senyōra* (セニヨウラ), when she talks about Mexican ladies in Oaxaca's streets or *mercados*. She describes Oaxaca women the following way:

The women from Oaxaca are strong-willed, and work hard for their families. But, within that strength, there is also charm, as you can see in their smiles and stylish sense. Their checkered embroidered aprons, flower-patterned skirts, fringe shawls, and colorful shopping bags, make me feel like I want to mimic them, but I cannot. Where in the world does this unique maiden-sense come from? (Anderson, 2007: 12).⁵

There are many more examples that both Anderson and Sakurai share in terms of Spanish language usage. While there are Japanese words for “market”, “lady”, “craft”, the authors insist on using their Spanish equivalent, spelled in katakana, tinging them with interpretations of cultural uniqueness.

There are also differences and particularities between the case of Japanese culture and the case of Mexican culture. For instance, compared to the complicit exoticism that shapes Cool Japan, Mexico only has the “othering” part established, but has not yet started negotiating its identity with its accomplice, Japan. Nonetheless, the two nations have had a relationship of complicit exoticism on the side of Japan, due to the reception of the Cool Japan discourse in Mexico. Even if there are still no studies specifically about Cool Japan's cultural or commercial development in Mexico, the Mexican audiences and fans of Japanese popular culture seem to consume the catalogue of goods covered by the Cool Japan discourse, albeit with their localizations (Hernández, 2012). Mexico has also participated in Cool Japan programs like the *kawaii* ambassadors mostly through efforts of the private sector. Therefore, there might be the possibility for Mexican fans to also be approaching Japan based on the values resulting from the complicit exoticism embedded in Cool Japan, while adapting it to their own local needs and limits (Hernández, 2012).

Another particularity in the relationship between Mexico and Japan is the kind of othering relationship. Cool Japan had the dichotomy of West versus East as one of its motors, but between Mexico and Japan not only the exoticizing gaze is coming from the East, but from a culture that has been subject to othering as well. Both cultures involved are discursive others. However, even if Mexico's recent othering in American media presents a negative portrait of Mexico as a threat (Chuang and Roemer, 2015), Japan seems to be coming up with its own portraiture of Mexico. While in the United States the election of Donald Trump as president has further affected the image of Mexico (Reuters, 2017), and enhanced the representation of the Latin American country as a threat (Thrasher, 2017), in Japan there is a community that sees Mexico as warm, colorful, and *kawaii* country (Sakurai, Y., 2009), beyond the violence described by the media.

Consequently, the two cultures are engaging in a two-way complicit exoticism. In this case it is not the same complicit exoticism that happened during the decades of 1970 and 1980 when the Japanese growing economical dominion triggered a counter-discussion on “Americanness” (Iwabuchi, 1994: 62). The current panorama involves Mexico and Japan having two different othering conversations at the same time. On the one hand, Mexico has emulated the Cool Japan discourse and started to adapt it. On the other, Japan has commenced an image of a warm, *kawaii* Mexico. Literature on Cool Japan can serve as a reference for understanding the Mexican fans' image of Japan, and the aforementioned books and blogs can give hints about the Japanese fans' image of Mexico, theoretically. However, given the fact that both these communities and their specific localization and diffusion activities have remained under-researched, it becomes necessary to reach directly

⁵ オアハカの女性たちは家族思いでよく働き、遅い。でも、そんな強さの中に、笑顔とお洒落心も覗かせていてとてもチャーミング。刺繍入りのチェックのエプロンに、花柄のプリントスカート、フリンジ付きのショールに、カラフルなお買い物バッグ等など真似したくても真似できない、あの独特の乙女センスは一体どこから来るのかしら。

to them in order to find out how they build their discourses and identify the values they attach to the foreign culture with which they have engaged themselves. Besides, their role as initiators and discourse boosters place them at the center of the discussion of how othering identities get interpreted and diffused.

This way, the following part of this investigation will focus on the practice of the discourses of a cool national identity as built through a process of complicit exoticism, and bounding an other. The main objective of the next analysis is to inspect the reception of the images of Japan and Mexico through the fandoms that consume and diffuse said images and products. We look for places where the discursive abstract plain of othering materializes into a consumption of the other. That is to say, where discourses of Japan and Mexico as a cool other are replicated in projects, promotions or purchases. Also, we search for the specific values that sustain interpretations of Japan and Mexico within the fandoms that take them as their object of interest.

3. Data Analysis

The analysis of the image of Mexico and Japan as understood by their consuming and diffusing fans will be done based on personal interviews held with key members of both communities; the Mexican fans of Japanese culture, and the Japanese fans of Mexican culture. The relevance of these actors falls upon the fact that they are not mere receptors, but actively engage in the decentralized diffusion and commercialization of the goods that they deem representative of the foreign culture they admire. Therefore, these fan circuits while they do not represent the wide population of Japanese or Mexicans that are receiving each foreign culture, they stand for the minority of innovators who shape the introduction of the culture they admire to their own countries. The selection was done attending events of the communities, and contacting the organizers, promoters, and brand owners.

In this section a content analysis will be conducted in the interviews done to the innovators who have projects related to Mexico in Japan and Japan in Mexico, and who have developed brands or spaces to spread their views and discourses. A word count and word correlation analysis done with R will be conducted on the texts with the replies of the interviewees. The interviews with Mexicans were conducted in Spanish, while the interviews with Japanese were done in Japanese. However, in the case of the latter, they constantly mixed Spanish with Japanese, thus the results will be in mixed languages. First, we will take a look at how Cool Japan behaves in conditions different than those that dictated its emergence embedded within the relationship between Japan and the United States. Next, we will analyze the image of Mexico in Japan as a way to diagnose the process of a different othered unit falling in a similar context as the one that triggered Cool Japan.

(1) Cool Japan in Practice

The Mexicans interviewed (n=6) belong to a community called Mexijuku, the adaptation of Harajuku urban subcultures in Mexico. They are either brand CEOs, organizers of Mexijuku events, and/or models, therefore they represent the aforementioned small population of innovators or trend setters that are actively involved in the process of introducing the Cool Japan discourse to Mexico through fashion. The interviews were conducted individually, following the pace of open end questions where the interviewee would reply extensively about his or her experience with Japanese culture. The interview had 19 questions regarding their experience with the community, their contact with Japanese culture, how did their interest in Japan start, and what were the specific elements they liked the most. Based on their replies an exploratory word count was conducted, and a word cloud generated.

The resulting words confirm that the Mexican word for “cool” (*padre*) appears often, as well as good (*bueno*). Nonetheless, adjectives that were frequent in Cool Japan literature that would exalt its culture as unique, futuristic, postmodern, or foreign are not in the top used words. The word “different” (*diferente*) is in place 66, “futuristic” (*futurista*) and “future” (*futuro*) are in place 720 and 1146, respectively, and “foreign” (*extranjero*) is in place 706. The word count also shows the nature of the conversation where words related to tastes or liking appear highly-ranked, such as “like” (*gusta*), “fashion” (*moda*), “style” (*estilo*), “well” (*bien*), and “good” (*bueno*). Also, the word “Mexico” does not appear in this top 20, but occupies the 35th place.

To deepen the specifics of the image of Japan that this community diffuses a co-occurrence analysis was held with the term “Japan” (*Japón*).

Table 2. Top 20 Most Correlated Words with the Term “Japan” (“Japón”)

Word	Correlation
<i>moda</i> (fashion)	0.97
<i>llegar</i> (arrive)	0.96
<i>parte</i> (part)	0.96
<i>tener</i> (have)	0.95
<i>todas</i> (all)	0.95
<i>aspecto</i> (aspect)	0.94
<i>dentro</i> (inside)	0.94
<i>dices</i> (say)	0.94
<i>específico</i> (specific)	0.94
<i>línea</i> (line)	0.94
<i>abarca</i> (cover)	0.93
<i>abiertos</i> (open)	0.93
<i>accesábamos</i> (accessed)	0.93
<i>acompañar</i> (accompany)	0.93
<i>acostumbrados</i> (used to)	0.93
<i>activas</i> (actives)	0.93
<i>actividad</i> (activity)	0.93
<i>adaptar</i> (adapt)	0.93
<i>admira</i> (admire)	0.93
<i>adoptar</i> (adopt)	0.93

The results did not include the word “cool” (*padre*), but showed a high co-occurrence with the word “fashion” (*moda*), due to the fandom’s main interest regarding Japanese popular culture. The other correlated words do not have a seeming pattern regarding the image of Japan. However, it is worth noting that the word “specific” appears with a correlation of 0.94. The term was used in the light of discussing the specific categories or rules of the styles that these fans follow, which could suggest a tendency to research said particularities. The correlation analysis resulted in more than 600 terms with a correlation of 0.93, therefore the ones that appear in the top 20 are higher in ranking only because of their alphabetical order. However, the words here showed suggest actions of interpretation of Japanese culture, like “activity” (*actividad*) “adapt” (*adaptar*), “admire” (*admirar*), and “adopt” (*adoptar*). There are no othering terms like “different”, “foreign”, or “unique” correlated to the talk about Japan, even though the word count shows that such words were mentioned.

(2) Warm Mexico in Practice

We approach the Japanese community of fans of Mexico in the same fashion we approached the Mexijuku group. The chosen actors are all brand CEOs, event managers, or gallery owners. They were asked about their experiences within the community, their contact with Mexican culture, and the specific traits and things they like about Mexico. Compared to the Mexijuku community, these individuals have all visited Mexico more than once, and/or have studied there. Therefore, they were also asked about their experience when getting in touch directly with Mexico. In this case also an exploratory word frequency analysis was conducted and a word cloud was generated.

Figure 2. Word Cloud from All the Interviews with Japanese Fans of Mexican Culture



The word cloud shows that the words “Mexico” (*mekishiko*, メキシコ) and “great” (*sugoi*, すごい) have a high occurrence. Also, Spanish words appear, including the names of places like Guadalajara, Cancun, and Guanajuato, names like Bustamante, but also the replication of the usage of the word *artesanía* to refer to Mexican crafts. We also see the presence of other words that were frequent in the books written by Anderson and Sakurai; *kawaii*, かわいい, “colorful” (*karafuru*, カラフル) and “cheerful” (*akarui*, 明るい). What is interesting to note is that the words “cool” (*kūru*, クール), and “trendy” (*oshare*, オシャレ) also appear, albeit with less frequency.

Table 3. Top 20 Most Frequent Words Used by the Japanese Fandom

Word	Frequency
Mexico (<i>mekishiko</i> メキシコ)	198
great (<i>sugoi</i> すごい)	74
image (<i>imēji</i> イメージ)	33
event (<i>ibento</i> イベント)	23
Japanese (<i>nihonjin</i> 日本人)	23
Spanish (<i>supeingo</i> スペイン語)	20
<i>México</i> (<i>mehiko</i> メヒコ)	19
Guadalajara (<i>guadarahara</i> グアダラハラ)	14
Europe (<i>yorōppa</i> ヨーロッパ)	13
United States (<i>amerika</i> アメリカ)	12
understand (<i>wakaru</i> 分かる)	12
cheerful (<i>akarui</i> 明るい)	12
design (<i>dezain</i> デザイン)	11
interesting (<i>omoshiroi</i> 面白い)	11
colorful (<i>karafuru</i> カラフル)	9
tequila (<i>tekira</i> テキーラ)	9
first time (<i>hajimete</i> 初めて)	9
old lady (<i>baachan</i> ばあちゃん)	8
changed (<i>kawatta</i> 変わった)	8
<i>kawaii</i> (かわいい)	7

The results of the word count confirm an affinity with the discourse laid by Sakurai and Anderson in their books, where they portray Mexico as colorful, friendly, and cute. However, there are places where the views of the community members also diverge. For instance, Oaxaca is not mentioned, but Guadalajara is. This is due to the fact that Guadalajara and Kyoto are sister cities, and became a strategic launching point for the event Mexican Port Market and the import of high-end Mexican jewelry. Also, the members often refer to Mexico as *mehiko*, メヒコ, instead of the usual Japanese pronunciation, *mekishiko*, メキシコ. This also suggests a replication of the aforementioned language tendencies, where the adoption of words used in the exoticized country are extracted and used to exalt its uniqueness. Consequently, the word “Spanish” (*supeingo*, スペイン語), referring to the language, appears in a high ranking spot, right below “Japanese” (*nihonjin*, 日本人), referring to the nationality. The results further enforce the impression that for this community the usage of Spanish, and the comparison with their own customs are instrumental in the creation of an image of Mexico. Furthermore, comparison with Europe and the United States appear as additional points of comparison to locate Mexican culture.

To deepen on the understanding of the image of Mexico in Japan, a co-occurrence analysis was conducted with the term Mexico, spelled *mekishiko*, メキシコ. However, only one Word appeared as correlated; “first time” (*hajimete*, 初めて). Hence, instead of Mexico spelled in the usual way, we tried with Mexico, spelled as *mehiko*, メヒコ. This time, more words appear as co-occurring.

Table 4. Top 20 Most Correlated Words with the Term “Mexico” (“メヒコ”)

Word	Correlation
activity (<i>actividad</i>)	1
friendship (<i>amistad</i>)	1
field (<i>campo</i>)	1
family (<i>familia</i>)	1
idea (<i>idea</i>)	1
passion (<i>pasión</i>)	1
sympathy (<i>simpatía</i>)	1
strange (<i>okashii</i> おかしい)	1
care (<i>osewa</i> お世話)	1
mutual (<i>otagai</i> お互い)	1
boring (<i>tsumaranai</i> つまらない)	1
accessory (<i>akusesarī</i> アクセサリー)	1
approach (<i>apurōchi</i> アプローチ)	1
artist (<i>ātisuto</i> アーティスト)	1
appeal (<i>ukeru</i> ウケる)	1
gallery (<i>gyararī</i> ギャラリー)	1
Taxco (<i>tasuko</i> タスコ)	1
friendly (<i>hitonatsukoi</i> 人懐っこい)	1
Latin (<i>ratengo</i> ラテン語)	1
kind (<i>yasashii</i> 優しい)	1

The first 9 correlated words are in Spanish and among them there are words referring to belonging like “family” (*familia*), and “friendship” (*amistad*). Also, words that signal the importance of creative industries like “accessory” (*akusesarī*, アクセサリー), “artist” (*ātisuto*, アーティスト), and “gallery” (*gyararī*, ギャラリー) rank among the Top 20. Finally, even though the state of Oaxaca does not appear correlated, there are words that enforce the exoticizing image of Mexico and its appeal a friendly country, such as “care” (*osewa*, お世話), “sympathy” (*simpatía*), “passion” (*pasión*), “mutual” (*otagai*, お互い), “kind” (*yasashii*, 優しい) and “friendly” (*hitonatsukoi*, 人懐っこい). However, there are also opposite words like “strange” (*okashii*, おかしい), “boring” (*tsumaranai*, つまらない). The instances when these words came up were related to comparisons between Mexico and Japan.

The content analysis of the interviews to key actors in the diffusion of Japanese and Mexican culture suggests that the drive to compare the local culture with the admired foreign one is a constant for both communities. In the case of the Mexican fans, the word “Japan” appears in the 8th place of the frequency word count, and while “Mexico” appears in the 35th place, it still represents the community’s point of departure to approach Japan. Generally, the context to mention their own country was to point out things that they deemed lacking. For instance, some mentioned that Mexicans lack effort, lack dedication, and have low respect for the different. Under this light, even though words like “different” and “foreign” ranked low in the word count, the tendency to compare puts both Mexican and Japanese culture on a stage of implicit contrasts.

On the other hand, for the Japanese fans of Mexican culture, mentioning Japan served not only to point out differences, but also to mention Japan’s limited understanding of Mexico. One of the interviewees even mentioned explicitly how she wanted to share Mexico’s varied and rich culture, since there are many people who do not know it and only get the news that usually focused around the mafia. This vision is directly related to

another high-ranking word, “changed” (*kawatta*, 変わった). Most of the interviewees that mentioned this word did so in the context of their experience before and after going to Mexico. It is also worth mentioning that there does not seem to be a pattern in the motives that have driven these people to Mexico, but they all seem to have expected something different from what they actually lived when going.

Regarding patterns within and across the fan communities, there are many other aspects that should be addressed in further research to deepen the understanding of the image-molding process. For instance, the socio-economic conditions of each population seem to be different, which could in some extent influence the communities’ resources to get in touch with the othered entity and to develop their own projects. Even gender and sexuality could shed light on the needs of the population of the communities. During this first approach, it was noted that the Mexican community, and their leading figures, are composed by a mixed population of female and male members, with a predominance of the former. Also, many of them identified with some spectrum of the LGBT community. On the side of the Japanese community, all the interviewees were female, which in turn represents the largely female population of attendees and participants of the events related to Mexican culture in Japan. These aspects are only two of the various others that should be focused on in the future to investigate the depths of the communities that adopt, mold, and diffuse a foreign culture in their own country, and the relationships they establish with cool and complicit exoticism.

4. Conclusion

The process of building a national identity based on complicit exoticism requires a conversation between two nations, but does not necessarily involve the colonial tension between the “West versus the East”. As it was shown with the case studies from Mexico and Japan, a conversation about both countries’ national identities is not only taking place among othered cultures, but hold parallel negotiations of othering. That is to say, a two-way complicit exoticism can happen beyond a counter-discussion, result of the fear of a threat (Iwabuchi, 1994), and develop two parallel negotiations of national identity without entering a zero-sum-game. In more concrete terms, we suggest that Japan and Mexico are establishing simultaneous conversations about Japaneseness and Mexicanness without having one conflict with the other.

Also, the presence of a bounded other was theorized as a variable that could trigger coolness. In the case of the United States, there was a tangible tension with Japan’s growing economy. However, in Mexico, Japanese investment is welcomed, due to the amount of jobs it generates (Embajada de Japón en México, 2015). Japan is seen as cool (*padre*), but its status as a threat has been virtually erased from the collective view. Therefore, it is not exactly a bounded other, it has been constructed as a beneficial other. However, Japan’s otherness did not appear as a common topic of explicit discussion among fans. The content analysis points out that even though difference, and rebellion were mentioned, the fans prioritize more the discussion of the particularities of Japanese fashion. However, there is evidence of a tacit cultural conscience that triggers moments of comparison, which imply an acknowledgement of differences between the local and the foreign culture.

In the case of Japan, given the friendly relations that both countries hold, Mexico is not seen as a threat either, and explicit statements about Mexico’s distinction are not among the most discussed topics. However, comparisons between Mexican and Japanese cultures also signal an implicit acknowledgement of difference in a similar manner as the Mexican community of Japanese urban fashion subcultures. At the same time, this community seems to be strongly replicating the discourses on Mexicanness as laid by Anderson Yūko and Sakurai Yōko. The words for colorful, passion, sympathy, compassionate appeared with a high frequency and as highly correlated with the word México. Also, the pattern to adopt the language as a part of their community is present in all their members. The most frequent words were all in Spanish, and the word that provided the most correlations was the Spanish-adapted word *Mehiko*, メヒコ, instead of the usual one, *Mekishiko*, メキシコ. Even though the word “cool” appeared in the word cloud and occupies the 38th place in frequency, the

terms replicated in this discourse on Mexicanness point at an image of Mexico as a place of human warmth. Consequently, we propose calling this rising image of the Latin American country “Warm Mexico”. The term does not only work as a contrast to Cool Japan, but also gives space to the consideration of different traits that can equally construct a cool bounded other. In the case of Mexican culture, fans consider it *sugoi*, *oshare* and acknowledge its deviance through its difference. But, at the same time, they also see in Mexican culture a positive difference -a bounded difference- mostly due to its perceived warm uniqueness.

Further research needs to be done to assess these two communities to find out the localizations of Cool Japan on othered countries, and to explore the possibilities for a cool complicit exoticism to take place among other cultures. The idea of a bounded other could help shed light on theoretical assumptions about national image and cool. However, given the political and historical baggage that the bounded other entails, the political engagement or conscience of these communities should be tested in order to achieve a better understanding of the cultural phenomenon.

The present study started taking Japan as a point of departure to understand the process of national identity and coolness based on a complicit exoticism, but finished in Mexican territory. Mexico is seen as an active receiver; it receives the discourse of Cool Japan, and localizes it, and receives lessons to follow regarding a possible cool, or warm, national identity. At this stage, the lessons that can be learned about Cool Japan that can be implemented in the Mexican case are two. First, Mexico needs to enter in contact with Japan to negotiate the exoticism created there and trigger a complicit relationship. Two, to complement and strengthen point number one, it is necessary to develop more explicit discussions on Mexicanness both inside and outside Mexico. The significance of the discussions on Japaneseness (*nihonjinron*) point out that Mexico could establish a “battleground” through literature and creative industries to explicitly theorize on Mexican identity.

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