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TOURIST PREFERENCES AND EXPECTATIONS OF URBAN PARK: A CASE STUDY IN KITAKYUSHU, JAPAN

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Abstract

The quality of an urban park can be evaluated by understanding the tourist's reasons, preferences, and expectations. This study analyzes several variables based on answers to field survey questionnaires using 425 respondents. Furthermore, Green Park, located in Kitakyushu, Japan, serves as the case study. The result found six essential variables: 1) "Playing with children" is the most popular reason for visiting this park; 2) Tourists living closer to the area frequently visit; 3) The existence is necessary; 4) The relationship between the importance and the origins of the tourists is related to a sense of place; 5) Tourist preferences are affected by seasonality; 6) The most favorite expectation is the availability of water facilities. This further can contribute to tourism development in urban parks with similar climatic and environmental characteristics.

Keywords: Tourism; tourist preferences; tourist expectation; outdoor activities; urban park; sense of place

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INTRODUCTION

There are many benefits of urban park, including social and environmental services (Rouhi, Monfared, & Forsat, 2017). For example, it can mitigate the heat island effect and improve the outdoor thermal environment quality (Yan, Wu, & Dong, 2018), and also increase residents' satisfaction and enjoyment as well as avoid stresses produced by activities (Razak, Othman, & Nazir, 2016). It also has social, economic, and ecological roles in improving the quality of life and community development (Chiesura, 2004; Othman, Mohamed, Ariffin, & Razak, 2015; Riki, Rezazade, & Miri, 2016; Ward, Parker, & Shackleton, 2010).

This study aims to understand tourists' reasons, preferences, and expectations in Green Park, Kitakyushu, Japan. The six crucial questions to be considered are: 1) What is the reason for visiting this park?; 2) What is the relationship between the frequency and the source of the visits?; 3) How significant is this park to visitors?; 4) What is the relationship between the significance of visiting and their origins?; 5) Are tourists more inclined to visit during specific seasons?; and 6) What are the expectations on this park facilities?. This could also be useful for tourism development, specifically for urban parks with similar climatic and environmental characteristics.

The criteria considered for the eligibility of the case study are a large-scale park (Aram, Solgi, García, Mosavi, & Várkonyi-Kóczy, 2019) with a legal classification (MLIT, 2006). According to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport of Japan (MLIT, 2006), there are two legal classifications of Japanese parks: natural and urban parks. Urban parks are specific areas of land opened for public use and created by central government or local bodies. In the Kitakyushu City area, 23 parks fall within the territorial area, according to their official tourism information website (KCTIC, 2021). Green Park Kitakyushu was the most eligible to serve as a case study based on these criteria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visiting urban parks is a fun activity for many people, and the experience can reduce mental stress (Ulrich, 1981), increase meditation, and provide peace of mind (Kaplan, 1985). There is a significant relationship between park use and perceived health conditions. Frequent users of local parks are more likely to have good health (Godbey & Mowen, 2010) since they visit for functional needs such as exercise, relaxation, and outings with children (H. Liu, Li, Xu, & Han, 2017). Parks and urban green spaces can provide opportunities for recreation, sport, leisure, and residents' physical and mental health (Riki et al., 2016). Urban nature fulfills many citizens' social functions and psychological needs, making it a valuable municipal resource and an essential ingredient for city sustainability (Chiesura, 2004). According to a study conducted in Malaysia (Razak et al., 2016) and (Othman et al., 2015), the primary reason for visiting an urban park is for recreational purposes. It shows that the feelings and the emotions evoked in this park are perceived by people as significant

contributions to their well-being, such as regeneration of psychophysical equilibrium, relaxation, break from the daily routine, and the stimulation of a spiritual connection with the natural world (Chiesura, 2004). Furthermore, (Riki et al., 2016) (Jones, 2006) stated that the reasons for visiting a park are: exercise or fitness, picnics with family, playing with children, educational/study purposes, taking part in certain activities or events, and relaxing or having pleasant diversion. Chiesura (2004) stated that visitors conduct several activities with different motives. Children are always eager to explore water because it is fascinating and intriguing (McMillan, 2014). Water play can also help them acquire problem-solving and thinking skills (Hoisington, Chalufour, Winokur, & Clark-Chiarelli, 2014; Olowe, Ojoko, & Onuegbu, 2020). These findings show that tourists' behavior and activities are related to age, reason/purpose to visit, and the urban park's environment. The design and management also play an essential role in increasing tourists' feelings and emotions.

The tourist's satisfaction and expectation of environmental conditions can affect their perception of comfort in outdoor space, and the park quality is significantly correlated to physical activity (Rosli, Leh, Adzmi, & Marzukhi, 2020). Nature and human interactions need elements of open spaces such as green environments, water elements, and physical attributes to enhance the interactions between human-human and human-nature (Ibrahim, Omar, & Nik Mohamad, 2017). According to Klanicka (2006), expectations for developing urban park facilities can indicate a sense of belonging to the local community. This is strongly associated with memories of childhood and youth (Klanicka, Buchecker, Hunziker, & Böker, 2006).

One of the most significant challenges an urban park faces as a tourist destination is seasonality. It affects the optimal use of investment and infrastructure and can create a negative experience of crowding at destinations (Sætórsdóttir, Hall, & Stefánsson, 2019). Visits are also affected by seasonality variation (Corluka, 2019; Zainol & Au-Yong, 2016; Corluka, Mikinac, & Milenkovska, 2017; Geng, Innes, Wu, Wang, & Wang, 2021; Sætórsdóttir et al., 2019) and tourist preferences.

STUDY METHODS

1. Study case

This park is located at 1006 Takenami, Wakamatsu-ku, Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan. It has various types of attractions (Hibikinada Green Park, 2020), such as a lawn square or large green open space (Figure 1), kid's playgrounds, e.g., slider house, the world's longest swing, adventure forest, cycling terminal, an open stage for public performance, animal square (pony horse square, goat square, and kangaroo square), plant garden, e.g., three tropical eco-parks in greenhouses, rose garden, and seasonal plantation.



Figure 1: Green Park Kitakyushu facilities: Lawn square and Bumpy open space
 Source: Authors (2021)

This park has seasonal attractions, for example, there is a swimming pool and giant air slider in summer, while there are skating and night illumination in winter. There are also some natural sceneries, such as forests and reservoirs. Several new tourist attractions have been inaugurated in 2020 - 2021, including Bumpy open space (Figure 1), Dino Park, Nyoki-nyoki forest, and fossil valley. A water house that is a supporting facility as a relaxing room for families containing a nursing room for babies, a toilet, and a water curtain was also provided. The urban greenery center provides information on greening and flowers, consultancy activities, exhibitions, and seminars.

2. Study subject

The study subject is the tourist of Green Park Kitakyushu, which are participated by a random and voluntary approach. Except for children under 10 years, there are no special provisions to avoid bias/misunderstanding. The number of respondents is 425 people, consisting of 187 males, 236 females, and 2 undecided genders. The study location is focused on the large grass open space, as the most frequently visited, based on the observation results of the pre-study.

3. Data collection method

The data collection method was conducted by distributing field survey questionnaires to tourists. Respondents were limited to volunteers who had been screened by entering this park on purpose (Statistic-Canada, 2017). This study was conducted in 4 different seasons within one year. Each season consists of 3-4 days of data collection, and each day consists of 2-3 location spots (Table 1).

Table 1: Seasons, number of days, and period of data collection

Seasons	Number of days	Period
Summer	4	19 July - 16 August 2020
Autumn	3	14 - 18 October 2020
Winter	4	17 January - 14 February 2021
Spring	4	10 April - 8 May 2021
Total	11	

4. Data analysis method

Data analysis was carried out using quantitative approaches and statistical techniques using computer software. The distribution analysis technique determined the reasons, frequency, and importance of tourists to the existence of Green Park Kitakyushu. In addition, it obtained the most favorite season, area, and tourists' expectations of urban park facilities. The correspondence analysis technique was used to determine the closeness between factors, importance, and frequency of visiting the Green. Meanwhile, the analysis data were processed in Microsoft Excel and illustrated by graphs. The JMP statistical software is utilized to gain a correspondence analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

1. Reason to visit urban parks

This study determined tourists' reasons, preferences, and expectations at Green Park, Kitakyushu. The trends on the bar graph indicate an urban park that is friendly to families with children. The most popular reason is playing with children, which is popular for spring's respondents. "Having a picnic or gathering with friends" accounts for the second reason, as shown in Figure 2.

The heatmap graph (Figure 3) presents the correlation between reason and age groups. The result shows that adults between 30 and 40 years mostly have a motive to play with children. Meanwhile, most teenagers are motivated to have a picnic or gather with friends. The elderly above 70 years visit this park for pleasure or pleasant diversion.

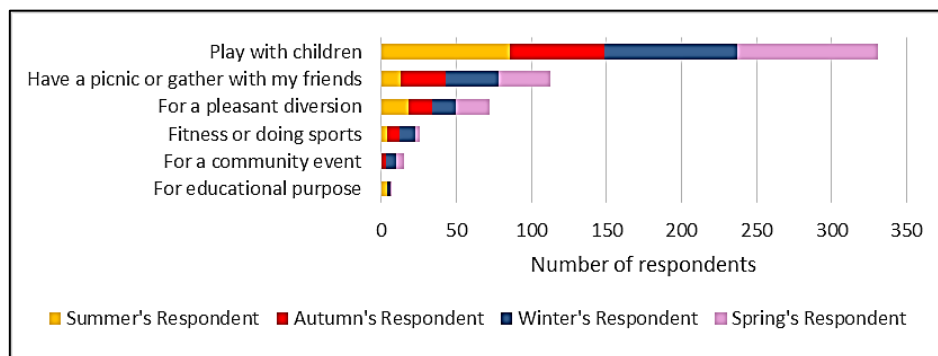


Figure 2: The reason for visiting Green Park Kitakyushu
Source: Authors (2021)

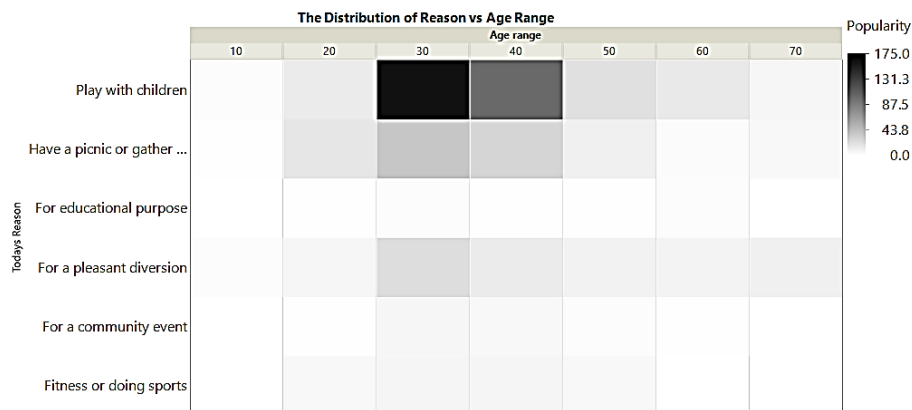


Figure 3: The correlation between current reason and the age-group
 Source: Authors (2021)

2. The frequency of visiting

Tourists were asked how often they visit Green Park Kitakyushu. Based on the survey results, 61%, 26%, and 11% answered (4) “once or twice a year”, (3) “monthly or more often”, and (5) “this is my first time”, respectively. Compared to the results obtained, this pattern occurs in all seasons. This finding shows that most respondents “rarely” visit this park. It also shows that the tourists living outside the city, i.e., Fukuoka or other cities in Japan, are primarily associated with the first-timer tourist to this park (Figure 4).

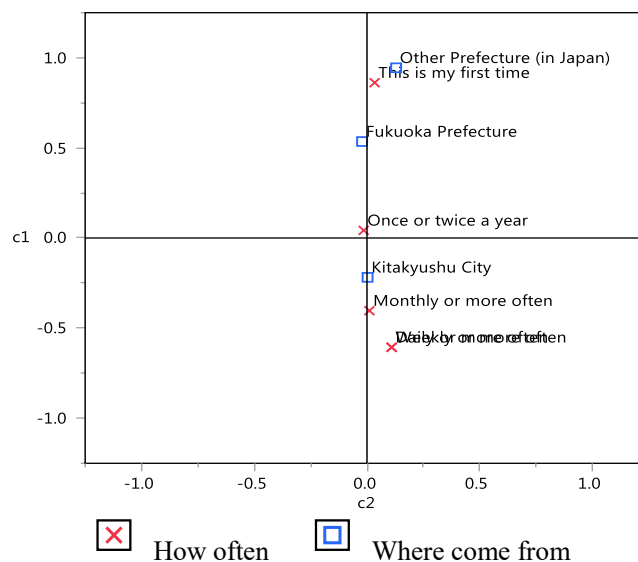


Figure 4: Correspondence analysis between “Where come from” by “How often”
 Source: Authors (2021)

Tourists in Kitakyushu City are classified according to their frequency of visits. Based on this correspondence analysis, it is founded that tourists living closer to this park frequently visit.

3. The importance of visiting urban parks

The frequency analysis (Figure 5) shows that 33%, 29%, 21%, and 16% answered (+1) slightly important, (+2) important, (+3) very important, and (0) neutral, respectively. Almost no respondents (0%) answered negatively, and each season has a different pattern. From these findings, tourists feel that the existence of Green Park Kitakyushu is important to their lives.

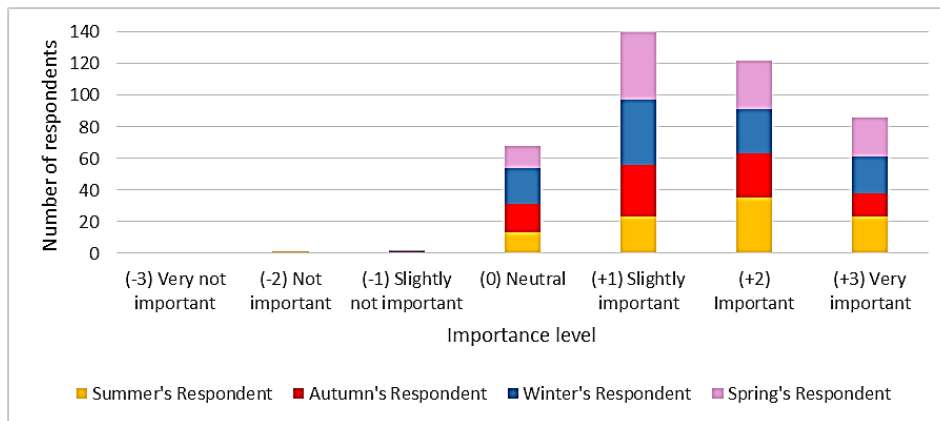


Figure 5: The importance of visiting Green Park Kitakyushu
Source: Authors (2021)

4. The relationship between the significance and the origin of location

Based on the correspondence analysis (Figure 6), the correlation between the two variables tends to be positive. Respondents who answered that visiting this park is essential are from Kitakyushu (local tourists), while the majority from outside answered neutrally.

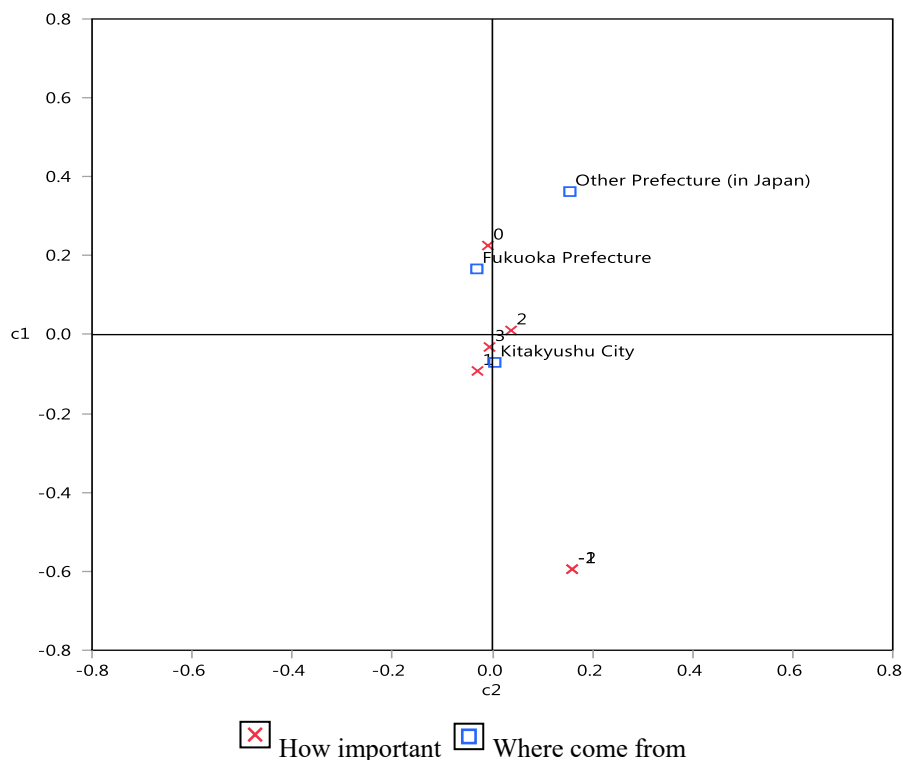


Figure 6: Correspondence analysis between the importance of visiting this park and the origin living area of respondent
 Source: Authors (2021)

5. The most favorite season and area of urban park

The result confirms that seasonality affects tourist preferences to visit an urban park. Most tourists select the spring season as their favorite, followed by autumn and summer (Figure 7). Almost all respondents selected “spring” as their favorite season, except autumn. Meanwhile, the summer respondent has two favorite seasons, spring and autumn. Based on the survey results shown in Figure 7), the favorite area in Green Park Kitakyushu is the lawn square, followed by the playground for kids, then the natural, indoor, and outdoor areas. The lawn square is used as a picnic area, setting up a tent or storing personal belongings based on field observations. This result is correlated to the tourists’ answers regarding the reason for visiting this park.

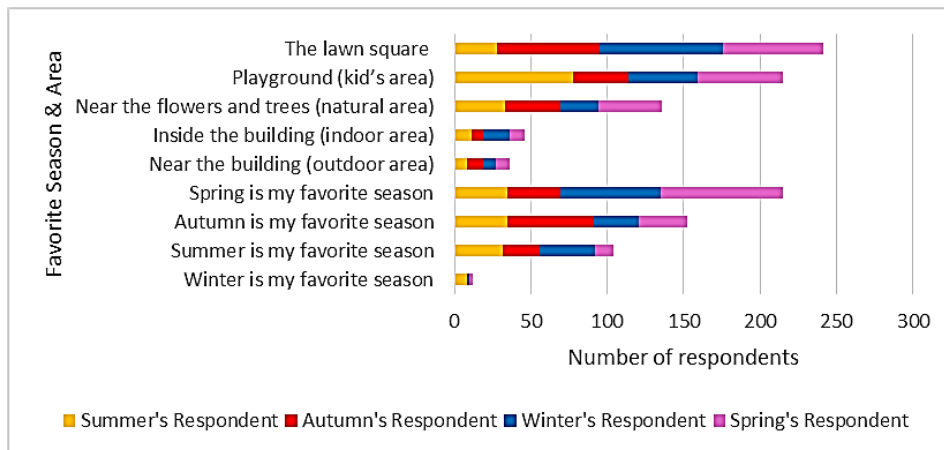


Figure 7: The most favorite season and area of Green Park Kitakyushu
Source: Authors (2021)

6. The tourist expectations for urban parks

The survey result shows that most respondents selected the expectation of the availability of permanent water play facilities as the most popular one (Figure 8). This is followed by camping space facilities, the answer of “I am satisfied with the current condition,” pets play facilities, can stay all night, more animal varieties, athletic ground or sports space, and skate park.

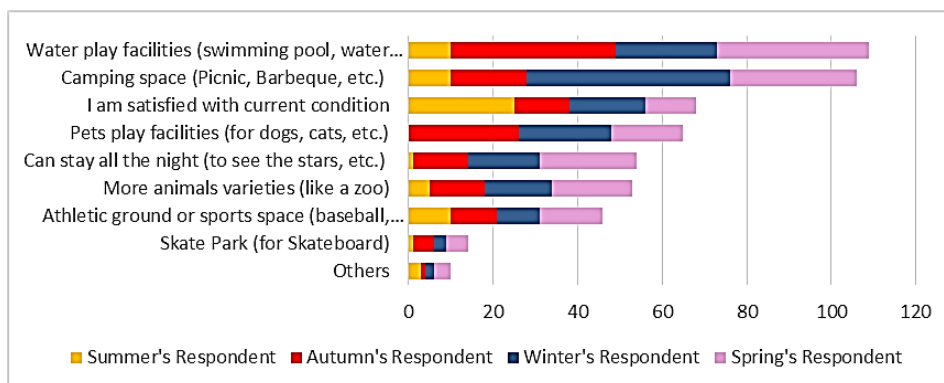


Figure 8: The tourist expectation of park facilities in Green Park Kitakyushu
Source: Authors (2021)

This result shows that even though the temporary water play facilities are provided only in winter, it is still the best for all seasons. This may be due to children’s great interest in water-related play facilities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study showed six crucial things, first, most of respondents visited to play with children. These findings indicate that Green Park Kitakyushu is friendly to families and children. The adult and older age groups mostly visited because of children, while teenagers visited for picnics. The motive of the elderly groups above 70 years is to seek pleasure.

Second, most respondents rarely visit this park, and the tourists living closer to the area visit frequently. This result strengthens the finding that distance tends to affect the frequency of visits.

Third, the existence of this park is critical for tourists, and there is a positive correlation between its importance and origin. Fourth, respondents who stated that visiting this park is necessary are from Kitakyushu, while the majority from outside gave a neutral answer concerning the sense of place felt by tourists.

Fifth, tourists mostly select spring season as their favorite, followed by autumn and summer. This finding confirms that seasonality affects tourist preferences to visit. The most favorite area in this park is the lawn square, followed by the playground for kids, as well as natural, indoor, and outdoor areas. These results may be correlated to the tourists' answers regarding the reason for visiting this park.

Sixth, even though the temporary water play facilities are provided in winter, most respondents expect that permanent facilities will be provided in different seasons. This may be due to children's great interest and parents' wisdom in water-related play facilities.

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