

MOOMIN, COTTAGECORE, AND THE RETURN TO PEACEFUL LIVING: A CULTURAL DIPLOMACY CASE STUDY OF FINLAND AND JAPAN

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Abstract

From their origins as a children's book series by Tove Jansson, the Moomins were turned into Finnish national identity symbols and literary exponents of soft power. Their popularity in Japan, particularly through early TV adaptations and merchandise, offers a case study in how cultural exports can forge transnational links. The study highlights how the Moomins' aesthetic and values resonate with Japan's cultural sensibilities and Finland's nation branding as a peaceful, nature-oriented nation. The study also addresses the recent re-popularization of the characters and their tales within the "cottagecore" phenomenon, bridging nostalgia and modern soft power agendas.

Keywords: Moomin; Cultural Diplomacy; Japan; Finland; Cottagecore

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BRIEF OVERVIEW

Moomin, the beloved Finnish literary creation of writer and illustrator Tove Jansson, has transcended its origins as a children's book series to become an influential cultural ambassador for Finland, and a symbol for the rebranding of the Nordic country during the Cold War. First introduced in 1945, the Moomin characters, an eclectic family of fluffy round characters and their friends, quickly became intergenerational icons. The initial projections of the series's success were mainly concentrated at the national and regional levels; however, it had a particularly profound impact in Japan.

The initial publication of the book series in Japan occurred in the early 1960s, gaining a massive positive response. Therefore, in 1969, the Fuji Television network, famous for adapting Western stories, broadcast a 65-episode long series inspired by Jansson's books.¹ This was the second attempt for a TV adaptation, the first one being a less-known German puppet show.²

The initial Japanese adaptation greatly displeased the author, as it had been morphed into an inaccurate show for children, depicting violence and lacking a proper understanding of the source material. Due to legal arguments with the writer, the show hasn't been broadcast outside of Japan, and was not translated into other languages.³ In 1972, another Japanese adaptation appeared, this one was called *Shin Mūmin* (*New Moomin*), and while spotting some creative differences, it was approved by the author.⁴

In the following years, the Moomin series was also embraced by the Soviet Union, leading to an 18-minute-long adaptation from the Ekran production company,⁵ another puppet show for Polish, Austrian, and German audiences,⁶ as well as a more obscure Soviet reinterpretation done by Sverdlovsktelefilm.⁷ In the 1990s, however, the characters returned to

¹ ***, "The first Moomin tv-series 'Die Muminfamilie' (1959-1960)", *Moomin*, 8 June 2021, [www.moomin.com/en/blog/the-first-moomin-tv-series-die-muminfamilie/#14c37279].

² *Ibidem*.

³ ***, "Japanese Moomin animations: Moomin (1969-1970) and Shin Moomin (1972)", *Moomin*, 6 July 2023, [www.moomin.com/en/blog/japanese-moomin-animations/#14c37279].

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ ***, "The history of Moomin TV animations", *Moomin*, 29 August 2024, [www.moomin.com/en/blog/moomin-tv-animations/#14c37279].

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

the Japanese screens, through another adaptation, this time with a strong vision rooted in the source's material, and conducted with a Dutch company, Telecable Benelux B.V. The latter proved to be the most successful adaptation, being aired in 120 countries.⁸ The series remained primarily associated with the Nordic and Baltic states, as well as Japan, while in the US, it remained largely unknown, except in Hawaii, which had a large Japanese minority.

Consequently, this lasting popularity positioned the Moomins as one of Finland's most successful cultural exports. There is an underlying theme related to children's media and the national values embedded in them, as they can serve as a soft power tool, due to the usual positive outlook within the stories, the focus on good morals, and proper conduct, which align with an idealized version of reality. Moreover, drafting such stories positions authors indirectly as contributors to a state's white propaganda toolbox.

The whimsical, yet deeply symbolic tone of the stories resonated with the Japanese audience, who sought in the Western media a crutch for the reinvention of its own soft power apparatus. Over the decades, the franchise has contributed to the development of economic and cultural ties between the countries, with the creation of Moomin theme parks, cafés, and merchandise driving Finland's soft power in Japan.

The link is also present at the Finnish embassy in Japan, where the staff presents a business card featuring a character from the series, as well as plushies in the waiting rooms; this is a particularity of the two states' relations. In a 2024 interview, the Finnish ambassador to Japan, Tanja Jääskeläinen, relates: "Handing out these unique cards to Japanese people always breaks the ice and sparks conversations. Discussing the characters fosters a warm atmosphere and provides an opportunity to promote Finland."⁹

For post WWII Finland, cultural diplomacy overlapped with a complex geopolitical configuration: nested closely to the borders of the Soviet Union, and having a perpetual suppressing presence in the culture, the state sought to depart from its geographic limitation, and contribute to the stabilization

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Jun Kurosawa, "INTERVIEW | Finnish Ambassador on the Moomins and Japan-Finland Cultural Parallels | JAPAN Forward", *JAPAN Forward*, 28 June 2024, [japan-forward.com/interview-finland-ambassador-tanja-jaaskelainen-moomins-cultural-parallels].

and pacification¹⁰ of its relations, and the development of the post-war international political superstructures.

As author Louis Clerc notes, Finland's cultural diplomacy is tied to the development of the welfare state,¹¹ an outcome derived from the impoverishment and isolation resulting from neighboring totalitarian regimes. Therefore, Helsinki sought to develop a better domestic context as well as maintain solid relations with both East and the West.¹² Cultural diplomacy is typically carried out through state efforts; however, in the case of the Moomins, Finnish institutions did not directly support it when the series first appeared, but rather became involved after the phenomenon gained traction in Finland.

While Finland was recovering from World War II, a strong cultural movement emerged, focused on the preservation and promotion of domestic literature and art. This strategy aligned with Helsinki's intention to project a peaceful and creative image internationally, which complemented the whimsical and philosophical nature of the Moomins. Tove Jansson's recognition through prestigious children's literature prizes linked to regional icons like Hans Christian Andersen and Astrid Lindgren, along with her popularity among Finland's Swedish-speaking minority, positioned her as a natural heir to Nobel Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf's legacy.

After the series gained widespread popularity, state institutions, municipalities, and cultural organizations played a key role in their development as cultural and economic assets, supporting the construction of *Moomin World* in Naantali, the *Moomin Museum* in Tampere, and the adoption of *Moomin imagery for Finnish Embassies* and the country promotion program, *Visit Finland*. The Finnish Film Foundation funded media projects, such as the animated series *Moominvalley*, while the Children and Youth Foundation while educational initiatives incorporated the tales to teach social values.

The book series' early adoption in the Japanese media landscape was generated by the television's desire to adapt Western media for their audience, and the children stories provide a great opportunity in this regard; other examples just as successful as the Moomins were *Heidi* or *Anne of Green*

¹⁰ Louis Clerc, *Cultural Diplomacy in Cold War Finland*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy: London, 2022, [doi:10.1007/978-3-031-12205-7], p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Gables, all produced by Fuji TV. The simple design of the characters provided an easier template to follow for various products used as merchandise, ranging from clothing, accessories, and household items.

The Moomin brand's expansion in Japan also includes several dedicated spaces, the most notable being the *Moominvalley Park*, opened in 2019 in Saitama Prefecture. It remains the only theme park outside of Finland committed to bringing to life the world of Moomin in a faithful and immersive way.¹³ Visitors are encouraged to engage with Finnish culture in a tangible, experiential manner, learning about the beloved characters, as well as Finland's natural environment, traditions, and way of life. By promoting this kind of cultural tourism, *Moominvalley Park* plays an essential role in continuing the Finnish narrative as a peaceful, nature-driven nation in the eyes of the Japanese public.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws on a diverse corpus of literature that explores cultural diplomacy, national branding, and the intersection of identity and soft power in the contexts of the relations between Finland and Japan. Primary sources include Louis Clerc's *Cultural Diplomacy in Cold War Finland* and Natsuko Akagawa's *Heritage Conservation in Japan's Cultural Diplomacy*, which provide historical overviews of state-led efforts to recast global perceptions through culture. Tove Jansson's biography, *A Sculptor's Daughter*, and the ideational critique in *Moomin Management: Redefining Generosity*, offer a fascinating glimpse into Finnish imagination and its soft power transfer worldwide. Articles on cultural diplomacy, videos, and tweets have been consulted as secondary sources, along with the Official Moomin website and various accounts on the topic

I. From Authoritarian Shadows to Cultural Soft Power – Japan and Finland's Strategic Repositioning

Year/Period	Japan	Finland
1868-1912	Meiji Restoration - Westernization begins	Grand Duchy of Russia - Autonomy within the empire

¹³ ***, "Moominvalley Park: Theme Park about the Moomins near Chichibu", *Saitama Travel*, 1 October 2024, [www.japan-guide.com/e/e6558.html].

1930s-1945	Fascist militarism, cultural nationalism	Wartime alliance with Nazi Germany
1945-1952	U.S. occupation, democratization	Post-war neutrality, “Finlandization”
1950s-1980s	Economic miracle, cultural export (anime, technology)	Nordic identity, welfare state model
1990s-Present	Global soft power player	EU member, liberal diplomacy

Figure 1. Comparative Historical Trajectories: Japan and Finland

In the 20th century, both Japan and Finland underwent radical transformations of their national identities, driven by the dual pressures of confronting authoritarian legacies, concomitantly to adapting to a new world order. Both countries, shaped by different historical trajectories, undertook a similar mission of strategic rebranding, seeking legitimacy, power, and cohesion by rewriting their image at home and abroad.

Japan's perception of the idea of nationalism was different from that of the West, as political scientist Matsumoto Sannosuke remarked: Japanese nationalism developed as a state-centered, inward-national ideology¹⁴ with a top-down model of government,¹⁵ and a deep-seated assumption of Japan as a unique, advanced civilization.¹⁶ Unlike Western nationalism, which tends to adopt universalist values, Japanese national identity was focused on the preservation and expansion of the self due to historically driven concerns about the external world.

Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan embarked on an ambitious project of modernization, incorporating Western technology, institutions, and aesthetics. However, this approach was never simply an imitation, rather it lived within a history of national grandeur and expansion. The period between the two World Wars saw the rise of militaristic fascism, where elements of Western modernity, industrial might, and mechanized warfare, were hijacked in an effort to galvanize imperial pursuits under the umbrella of traditional values such as deference to the Emperor and Bushido codes.

¹⁴ Natsuko Akagawa, *Heritage Conservation and Japan's Cultural Diplomacy Heritage, National Identity and National Interest*, 1st ed., Routledge: London, 2016, pp.32-33.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Japan experienced a severe identity fracture after being defeated in World War II, the breakdown of its imperial system and the imposition of democratic¹⁷ reform required a revolutionary rebuilding of national purpose. Rather than abandoning its modernizing push, Japan remodeled it in the language of pacifism, consumerism, and soft power. In the postwar era, under the strategic cover of the US, Japan adopted a conservative cultural policy, generally eschewing the propagation of its culture in Asia.

The administration feared that cultural expansion would stir up wartime resentments on the basis of Japan's fascist imperial expansionism, damaging its economic and industrial interests in the region.¹⁸ Cultural diplomacy was thus de-emphasized, and Japan turned inward, seeing cultural export, particularly to neighboring Asian countries, as politically unwise and foolish.

In contrast, Finland's makeover was less sensational, but similarly timidly orchestrated. Finland never fell under complete fascist domination like Japan, though it briefly cooperated with Nazi Germany during the Continuation War (1941–1944) against the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it maintained the democratic function of political institutions, and a resilient civil society throughout the war.

In May 1949, the Finnish parliamentary committee, led by Professor Erik Lönnroth acknowledged the strategic importance of soft power in presenting Finland's image to the world. Composed of politicians, journalists, scholars, and diplomats, the parliamentary committee underscored the need to expand scientific, cultural, and artistic exchanges as tools of influence, intending to enhance the foreign role of Finland in the West, and to push forward the establishment of foreign goodwill through peaceful means.¹⁹ This initiative contrasted the ceremonial cultural events held with the Eastern European counterparts, often carried by private organizations emanating from the communist movement.²⁰

This geopolitical tightrope walking led to the popularization of the term "Finlandization", an international relations term that relates to a

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, "Geopolitics and Soft Power: Japan's Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy in Asia", *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 2012, p. 38, [<https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2012.678629>].

¹⁹ Louis Clerc, *op.cit*, p.38.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p.39.

situation in which a smaller or weaker state aligns its foreign policy with the interests of a more powerful neighboring country, while still retaining internal sovereignty and political independence.²¹ The term gained traction after Austrian foreign minister Karl Gruber criticized Finland's foreign policy approach in his 1953 book *Zwischen Befreiung und Freiheit*, warning Austria not to follow the same path.

The comparative political paths of Japan and Finland illustrate how states can strategically redefine their national identities in response to past ideological entanglements. In both cases, culture and identity were central instruments to the process. While Japan translated its post-fascist rehabilitation into a reorientation around aesthetics and pacifist foreign policy, Finnish caution and institutional strength allowed it to stake out a niche position as a progressive Nordic actor in international affairs.

II. The Cottagecore trend and Moomin Resurgence: Rebranding Nostalgia in Times of Crisis

In the midst of global challenges and the erosion of credible state authority, individuals increasingly turn to artistic and symbolic narratives as forms of comfort and escapism. These cultural expressions are increasingly co-opted by countries as soft power tools, shaping their cultural diplomacy strategies and expanding influence in the online sphere.

The resurgence of the Moomin universe in the cultural consciousness of the 2020s coincided with the widespread popularization of the “cottagecore” aesthetic,²² particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cottagecore, an internet-born subcultural phenomenon, emerged as a romanticized response to late capitalist exhaustion idealizing rural life, domesticity, and harmony with nature.²³ It seeks to construct affective ties through shared fantasies of

²¹ Woonju Roh, Jaechun Kim, Dong Suk, “Reconceptualizing Finlandization: Fear, Autonomy, Economic, and Cultural Dimensions,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, Aug. 2024, pp. 93-94, [<https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2024.08.22.2.91>].

²² Isabel Slone, “Escape Into Cottagecore: Calming Ethos for Our Febrile Moment”, *The New York Times*, Published 10 March 2020, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/style/cottagecore.html>], Accessed 19 March 2025.

²³ Leah Brand, “Crafting Cottagecore : Digital Pastoralism and the Production of an Escapist Fantasy”, *The Coalition of Master’s Scholars on Material Culture*, 2021, [<https://cmsmc.org/publications/crafting-cottagecore>].

a slower, more meaningful life, set in a timeless, pastoral landscape untouched by the demands of modernity. In the context of a global health crisis, the cottagecore ideal became more than just a visual aesthetic; it also acted as a distraction repackaged as emotional self-preservation²⁴, favoring feelings of softness, comfort, and sensory intimacy over the hyper-mediated stress of everyday life.

The *Moomin*verse, particularly the 90's Finish-Japanese animated TV series *Moomin*, which were Jansson's original books, aligns effortlessly with this ethos of cottagecore. The main characters live in a peaceful, tranquil setting nestled in Moominvalley, where daily life revolves around shared meals, walks in nature, and seasonal rituals, rather than a perpetual sense of urgency or productivity. The animation style is key to creating this immersive atmosphere: its soft pastel color palette, hand-drawn visuals, and whimsical sound design cultivate a mood of sensory intimacy and contemplative ease. At the same time, the series' emphasis on slow storytelling and relational care, illustrated in episodes like *The Spring Tune* or *The Invisible Child*,²⁵ showcases how the characters navigate various challenges with patience, gentleness, and communal support.

We can therefore view the Moomin books, comic strips, and animated series as a form of escapism that goes beyond the act of retreating from contemporary pressures. Instead, they offer an imaginative reorientation toward an alternate temporality, one that is structured around nostalgic imagery of domesticity and peaceful routines.²⁶ Even in times of crisis, these stories evoke hope through gentle resilience. For example, both *The Moomins and the Great Flood* and *Comet in Moominland*²⁷ follow characters displaced by disasters, yet anchored by a shared longing for reunion, safety, and the comfort of home.

²⁴ Irina N. Simaeva, Anna O. Budarina, "Self-preservation attitudes of youth and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic", *Siberian Journal of Life Sciences and Agriculture*, vol. 13, 2021, no. 4, pp. 75-98.

²⁵ Tove Jansson, "Moomin (TV Series)", Directed by H. Saitô and M. Kojima, Japan: Telescreen Japan, 1990-1992.

²⁶ Noralities, "The Moomins Nostalgia", *Youtube*, Published 26 May 2020. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StPPKdqNbig&t=1s>].

²⁷ Moomin, "Mamma will know what to do – How Moomin books comfort us in times of crises, part 1.", *Moomin.com*, Published 27 October 2023 [<https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/moomin-books-comfort-1/>], Accessed 10 April 2025.

These sequences may help explain the *Moominiverse's* renewed relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic, when audiences turned to media that offered comfort and stability amid the relentless circulation of distressing news.

On digital platforms, the convergence between the Moomin universe and the cottagecore aesthetic gave rise to the viral online movement #moomincore.²⁸ The 2019 reboot of the series, *Moominvalley*,²⁹ introduced the Moomins to a new generation of viewers, sparking renewed cultural interest and fueling a surge in Moomin-themed content across social media. On the one hand, platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Youtube, and Pinterest became sites for the circulation of Moomin-inspired imagery that blends video edits, handmade crafts, and vintage décor with whimsical illustrations of the characters.

For instance, Tumblr users curated posts that captured the serene and nostalgic essence of the *Moominiverse*, featuring elements like baked goods, snowy mountains, clear streams, wildflowers, harmonica music, and candles, all tagged under #moomincore or #moominvalley. In one viral 2021 TikTok post, a user wrote “POV: Your dad kept the Moomin sweatshirt his girlfriend brought him from Japan in the 90s”,³⁰ thus blending personal memory with a collective yearning for emotional and material continuity across generations.

On the other hand, the Moomins' influence has permeated global consumer culture, blending nostalgia with aspirational consumption. Moomin-themed ceramics, journals, coffee, and even wellness products are available in dedicated shops across Finland, Sweden, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom, Japan, Hong Kong, and the United States³¹. Additionally, the official Moomin Shop offers worldwide shipping, making these products accessible to fans at an international level. These offerings reflect what Sara

²⁸ “#moomincore”, Tumblr.com, [https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/moomincore], Accessed: 13 March 2025.

²⁹ “Moominvalley” (TV Series), Directed by Steve Box, Gutsy Animations, 2019.

³⁰ @tatamigal, “Thanks Yoko wherever you are it’s mine now”, *TikTok.com*, Published 18 October 2021, [https://www.tiktok.com/@tatamigal/video/7020428047660715270?_t=ZN-8vkpeWmYH1G&_r=1].

³¹ Moomin, “Moomin Shops Around the World”, *Moomin.com*, Published 26 April 2023, [https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/moomin-shops-around-the-world/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#e3c40107], Accessed 28 March 2025.

Ahmed describes as “affective economies”,³² where emotions and attachments circulate through objects and digital spaces, shaping collective imaginaries of comfort.

The rebranding of the Moomins as cottagecore icons demonstrates how nostalgia can also serve as a form of political commentary. We can therefore argue that online trends like cottagecore offer a subtle commentary on the modern-day emphasis on speed, productivity, and individualism. In this context, the Moomins appear as agents of soft resistance against capitalist ideals,³³ not through overt or aggressive means, but through quiet subversion. Characters like Snufkin have come to symbolize a kind of anarcho-pastoral freedom, embodying a model of living that values generosity without ownership. His rejection of traditional societal structures, such as property, bureaucracy, and formalized schedules, resonates with an ethos of refusal that is both deeply personal and politically charged.

On the same note, Janne Tienari and Paul Savage’s work suggests that the Moomins offer a gentler, more value-based kind of leadership.³⁴ The Moomin family offers refuge to outsiders, wanderers, and misfits such as Groke, a shadowy figure who longs for warmth and connection. In a world that often feels rushed and isolating, their stories stand a quiet antidote to the loneliness that modern life can bring, offering a space where acceptance and meaningful connections flourish.

Lastly, the Moomins’ cottagecore imaginary intersects meaningfully with constructions of Finnish national identity. The *Moominverse* operates as a form of cultural capital,³⁵ an emotionally charged symbol that extends beyond childhood nostalgia to embody values of stability, coherence, and belonging.

³² Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies”, *Social Text*, 79, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 117-139, [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117].

³³ Louisa Büsken, “Seeking Refuge in Nature: Escapism and the Contemporary Pastoral Impulse in Cottagecore”, *Aspeers*, vol. 17, 2024, pp. 9-24, [https://www.aspeers.com/2024/buesken].

³⁴ Janne Tienari and Paul Savage, “Leadership and Humor, the Moomin Way”, *Discourses on Culture*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2024, pp. 15-39. [https://doi.org/10.2478/doc-2024-0008].

³⁵ Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska, “Moomins Take the Floor. Finnish Trolls in Contemporary Mass Social (Media) Events”, *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 55, 2022, pp. 313 - 324, [https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-022-09497-6].

These elements not only contribute to the construction of a national self-image, but also resonate strongly with the preferences of Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2012).³⁶ This demographic is increasingly drawn to authentic, mindful, and visually cohesive storytelling. However, Gen Z is also known for rapidly adopting and just as quickly discarding cultural narratives, creating a dynamic environment in which multiple soft power strategies compete for attention, each offering distinct, and often conflicting, symbolic frameworks. Within this context, the Moomins represent more than literary nostalgia; they function as a form of soft power that skillfully merges national branding with the affective and aesthetic sensibilities of youth culture.

III. Cultural Storytelling and Soft Power: The Moomins as a Bridge Between Finland and Japan

Based on prior arguments, the *Moomin*verse coincidence with the globally popular cottagecore aesthetics does not merely provide a comforting visual and heartfelt spectacle, it performs a sort of intrinsic cultural storytelling that extends Finland's soft power abroad. The soft, homebound, and nature-based values embodied in the Moomin tales resonate deeply with international audiences, not only as markers of Finnish identity, but as informal tools of cultural diplomacy.

This resonance is most evident in the long-standing cultural affinity between Finland and Japan, in which the emotional register of the Moomins finds particularly rich soil. Japan's aesthetics of *mono no aware* (a sensitivity to evanescent beauty) closely align with the Moomin values of simplicity, community, and a close relationship with nature. By this connection, the characters become transnational symbols of promoting a sense of openness contrasting with modern tendencies towards hostility and individualism.

The underlying motifs of soft power are also apparent in their subtle comments on recurring worldwide fears. For instance, the second book in the series, *Comet in Moominland*, has been read as an allegory for nuclear threat,³⁷

³⁶ Kamila Sierpień and Andrzej Tucki, "Cottagecore as an idealisation of rural life and a new dimension of tourist activity for Generation Z in rural areas", *Geographical Studies*, vol. 174, 2024, pp. 169-184.

³⁷ Moomin, "Dance in the face of the Comet – How Moomin books comfort us in times of crises, part 2.", *Moomin.com*, Published 3 November 2023, [<https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/moomin-books-comfort-2/>], Accessed 11 April 2025.

a topic that permeated even children's literature. The stories do not encourage denial, but rather, underline the importance of a secure space for dealing with fear through community, empathy, and affective resilience. This subtle affinity is an important part of what Henry Kathman identifies in the rising significance of the Moomins across younger generations, especially Generation Z.³⁸

In online spaces, the appearance and emotional resonance of *Moominvalley* have also generated considerable cultural interest in Finland itself. Social media posts, YouTube vlogs, and travel blogs often connect the image of the Moomins with broader visions of Northern projections of well-being, ecological harmony, and a slow-paced life. In this way, the characters become not just an intrinsic reference point, but also a cultural portal towards the introduction of Finnish values to international audiences.

According to author Stijn Reijnders, individuals often carry a personal "treasure trove" of stories: narratives encountered during childhood through books, films, or television, that continue to shape their inner world and influence travel choices.³⁹ These formative stories, deeply associated with youth and nostalgia, act as powerful motivators for visiting real-world locations connected to familiar fictional worlds. This insight helps explain the widespread appeal of places like Japan's *Moominvalley Park* and Moomin Café.⁴⁰ Such sites serve as emotional touchpoints, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in beloved narratives that evoke feelings of comfort, wonder, and a refreshed sense of identity. Far beyond simple theme parks, they serve as cultural sanctuaries where personal memories intersect with national storytelling.

³⁸ Henry Kathman, "The Complete Amateur's Guide to Moomin.", *Youtube*, Published June 26, 2023,

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRCzmBd5psI&t=29s>], Accessed: 20 April 2025.

³⁹ Evgenia Amey, "The Distant Snowy Land Where Rounded Creatures Dwell", *Matkailututkimus*, vol. 19, no. 2, Dec. 2023, pp. 10–11, [<https://doi.org/10.33351/mt.124944>].

⁴⁰ Moomin, "Moomin in Japan: From Past to Present", *Moomin.com*, Published 8 March 2024, [<https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/moomin-in-japan/#e3c40107>], Accessed: 27 March 2025.

As Laura Ipatti argues, this form of nostalgic agrotourism constitutes a type of “soft nation branding”⁴¹ wherein culturally iconic narratives, such as the Moomins, are mobilized not through overt nationalism but through immersive experiences. While Studio Ghibli advances Japanese soft power to the world, the Moomins helped Finland make its name in Japan, not through politics or commerce, but through sentiment and fantasy. In this way, the Ghibli and the Moomins are both involved in a quiet cultural dialogue between Japan and Finland, each using gentle narrative and aesthetics to build national reputations and create worldwide friendship.

Therefore, the Moomin universe serves as a soft but powerful mode of cultural diplomacy, exerting Finland’s soft power through sentimental storytelling, nostalgia, and beauty. Its alignment with values of community, nature, and emotional resilience is specifically appealing to international audiences, most notably in Japan, where cultural consonance amplifies its strength.

CONCLUSIONS

The cultural relationship between Finland and Japan offers a compelling example of how soft power, rooted in nostalgia-driven narratives, can shape international diplomacy. The *Moominverse*, with its deeply embedded values of simplicity, community, and resilience in times of crisis, has become a symbol of Finnish identity that resonates deeply with Japanese audiences. This shared affinity is not merely a product of cultural exchange, but serves as a quiet yet powerful form of cultural diplomacy, subtly aligning Finnish and Japanese values through emotionally rich storytelling and aesthetic resonance. This dynamic also illustrates a broader trend in contemporary politics, where states use iconic stories like Moomin and the cottagecore online phenomenon to influence global perceptions, thus bypassing traditional statecraft. In this context, soft power and cultural diplomacy merge to redefine a country’s national image through affective storytelling that connects across different age groups and reflects universal values.

⁴¹ Laura Ipatti, “At The Roots of the <<Finland Boom>>: The Implementation of Finnish Image Policy in Japan in the 1960s”, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol 44, 2018, no. 1, pp. 103–130. [<https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2018.1502680>].

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