# Nekonomics and Feline stationmasters – The point of putting a hat on a cat

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# Abstract

Nekonomics, as a term signifying the economic impact of consumption related to domestic cats (Felis Catus), was coined by Miyamoto in 2016. Miyamoto, an Emeritus professor of economics at Kansai university has been publishing different reports on economic effects of megaevents, political elections, natural disasters, and tourist related themes since the early 2000s. In 2008 he published a report about the “Spillover effect of the calico cat Tama stationmaster”, and this was followed in 2016 by his report “Economic effects of Nekonomics” (Miyamoto, 2016), and later on the economic impact of healing provided by companion animals (Miyamoto, 2021). The word Nekonomics is a Japanese play on words, ‘neko’ being the Japanese word for cats, and the ‘-nomics’ coming from the then active prime minister Abe’s economic policies that were referred to as ‘Abenomics’. Miyamoto’s report coincided with an unprecedented ‘cat boom’ in Japan. The number of cats were rapidly increasing due to demographic changes (more working singles and couples without children, and an ageing urban population). Cats overtook in those years dogs as the most common companion animal, and became a staple figure in popular culture, media, and advertising.

Tama the stationmaster is often pointed at as an exemplification of Nekonomics (Archer, 2020). She was a stray cat who enjoyed coming to the Kishi train station, in Wakayama prefecture in Western Japan, to be fed and petted by commuters using the station. Kishi station, and the line it served as terminal station of, were in financial distress in the early 2000s and under threat of being closed (Videsjorden, 2020). However, after Tama featured in media as an unofficial stationmaster doing her rounds of the station, the interest in the station increased. The directors of the railway named Tama officially as Kishi stationmaster in 2007 and gave her a hat to wear, introduced a Tama themed train carriage set in 2008, and rebuilt the train station in 2010 in the shape of a cat’s head. The new station features a waiting room with windows to Tama’s living area, a café’ and a gift shop filled with Tama related merchandise. After Tama’s death in 2015 she was deified and given an own shrine at the station area, and later succeeded by Tama II (Nitama), with her ‘apprentice’ Tama IV (Yontama).

The success of Kishi station, and the Wakayama Electric Railway have inspired several copycats around Japan. There are, or have been, at least four other train stations with their own feline station masters, however also shrines, temples, tour boats, and historical castles have gained fame by appointing cats as their masters, guardians, or lords. There are some train stations that have adopted other animals too, though cats seem still to be the most popular ones. The official naming has often been associated with giving the cat a hat to wear, news media attention, and a social media presence. Cat themed merchandise including stationary, local food-items, clothing and books combined with visual signages often aim at building on the animals’ cuteness appeal. Beyond the direct economic impacts and media attention that these stationmasters create, many other issues remain unclear. My aim is to distinguish what Nekonomics mean beyond its entertaining name, and to determine whether there is an actual substance to the mostly casual references to it in popular media. To investigate this aim, I have formulated the following questions:

* What is the experience for visitors – what do they get out of it?
* What can be included under the umbrella term of Nekonomics? Is it enough to have a picture of a cat on a few products, or is a more substantial narrative needed?
* What is the long-term viability of these schemes, do they add to, or do they dilute the heritage environments that they often are introduced to, and are they enough to sustain themselves?
* What does the trend indicate about Japan, and largely about the world of late-capitalist societies’ consumption?
* How ethical is the use of live animals as promotional characters for unrelated commercial entities? Can cats be regarded as employees of the attractions?

I review initially both academic and mainstream literature surrounding Nekonomics and the stated linkages between it and the so-called ‘cat boom’ in Japan. Thereafter I investigate connections between cats and tourism from academic sources to show how sporadic attention they have received in the light of their contemporary popularity. The article’s theoretical framework is constructed along Knudsen and Waade’s concept of Performative authenticity” ‘in which meanings and feelings of self and place are both constructed and lived through the sensuous body’ (2010, p. 1). My methodology is a combination post-structural narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. I have selected these methodologies to highlight the importance of images and texts surrounding attractions in creating the substance visitors perceive, replicate, and consume, and to use the material to investigate tourism shopping as an essential element of tourists authenticating their experiences.

My empirical data comes from visits to four separate train stations with current or former feline stationmasters, as well as a journey to a historical castle with its own feline castle lord. The data presented is a combination of online and analogue visuals and texts representing the sites, as well as my own reflections and images from the sites. The conclusions reached highlight that cats are under-researched as attractors in tourism, despite having a close relation to heritage, destination branding and tourist systems to name a few.

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