



# The <Three Cs> of Japan's Pandemic Response as an Ideograph

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While the COVID-19 pandemic soared across the world and changed the political dynamics on a global scale, Japan was viewed by some news sources as a “miracle” exception that beat the anticipated projections by experts of how the virus would affect the nation. Though there are a number of potential guesses about Japan’s initial pandemic outcome, which include low numbers of testing, an existing culture of mask-wearing, sanitation, and certain degree of social distancing, the political environment and communication from the government have also been accredited to the so-called “success” of Japan’s pandemic experience. By using the concept of ideograph, this study rhetorically analyzes the key slogan that emerged from Japanese political discourse surrounding the COVID-19 situation: 3つの密 - Mittsu no Mitsu (The Three Cs). Specifically, the authors conclude the ways in which < Three Cs > function as a negative ideograph in this specific rhetorical context. By doing so, the authors argue that this slogan that stems from political discourse became culture-bound and serves as a present-day ideological construction in the form of an ideograph for collective governance to (un)justify certain behaviors.

**Keywords:** ideograph, ideology, political discourse, Japan, coronavirus, three cs

## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide political and politicized discourses surrounding the health emergency shaped and modified perceptions of social and cultural norms at the local, global, and global scales. On January 16, 2020, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare confirmed the second known case of COVID-19 outside of China, after Thailand (World Health Organization, 2020b). Since then, Japanese authorities and health institutions have been both criticized by some and praised by others related to their response and actions pertaining to the pandemic. Though experts predicted at the start of the pandemic that Japan would be hit heavily by the virus with up to 400,000 deaths (Feder, 2020), Japanese society fortunately steered clear of such a path.

Despite having been among the first three nations to identify cases of the virus, the COVID-19 growth rate in Japan had been rather low since the onset. For perspective, the daily number of new confirmed cases stayed below 100 until March 28, reached a peak of 743 on April 12, and fell to stay below 100 consistently since May 16 until the end of June (Roser et al., 2020). Multiple news agencies and health experts raised questions about why Japan was able to escape the dark fate many other nations experienced with this pandemic initially, especially given that Japan only tested 0.2% of the population and neither enforced widespread shutdowns nor utilized surveillance technologies (Feder, 2020). In the Business Insider article, Feder (2020) claimed that much of the success has been attributed to the messaging from Japan’s government, where “instead of encouraging social-distancing practices like staying 6 feet away from other people at all times, the government

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told people to avoid the Three C's: closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings" (para. 4).

Indeed, it could be that both the political discourse and general cultural norms of Japanese society had contributed to this seemingly positive outcome compared to the alarming statistics in much of the world. As such, this research study investigates how political discourse in Japanese society framed the COVID-19 pandemic in the earlier era from February to May 2020. The project specifically examines the rhetorical use of slogans in this period of the pandemic to answer the following research question: How did the Three Cs slogan used by Japanese politicians perform as an ideograph to persuade individuals to accept certain actions and alter perceptions of a rhetorical situation? That rhetorical situation in this case being the communication surrounding the pandemic itself.

The main goal of this project is to document the ways in which the earlier framing in political discourse to avoid the Three C's justified/unjustified certain decisions by the Japanese government, as well as certain behaviors of individuals under the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This study is guided by the communication concept of ideograph, specifically documenting how the <Three Cs ><sup>1</sup> could function as an ideograph in Japanese context as it relates to the rhetorical situation of the pandemic.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, the idea of political slogan as an ideograph is expanded in the literature review. Second, a brief summary of key events in Japan regarding COVID-19 as of May 2020 is provided, where the political speeches as materials of analysis are introduced. After exploring the role of the widely circulated slogan, avoiding the Three C's, this paper offers an analysis of how the political slogan functions as an ideograph within Japanese context. The discussion then offers a brief comparison to political communication from other nations, as well as some criticisms of Japan's pandemic response.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review below begins by outlining how political slogans can function as ideographs, followed by an explanation of positive and negative ideographs. Then, ideographs through an international lens are introduced. This concept of ideograph serves as the guiding theoretical framework for the rhetorical analysis.

### Political Slogans as Ideographs

In a study about slogans in the United States, Barry (1998) defined political slogans as "a catchword or rallying motto distinctly associated with a political party or other group" (p. 161). For slogans to be memorable, they typically include stylistic devices such as alliteration, repetition, and rhyme (Blythe, 2003; Koc and Ilgun, 2010). Further, these slogans could go beyond the political party or other groups to be endorsed by the nation as a whole

(Barry, 1998). It is when the public accepts slogans that shows their effectiveness, or conversely rejects that shows their ineffectiveness. In a parallel sense, Lu (1999) described slogans as "a particular form of public discourse aiming to unify public thoughts and agitate public actions and reactions" (p. 493). Further, Lu (1999) pointed out that a slogan is an ideograph, since the examination of political discourses characterized by slogans could unpack the practice of ideology.

In fact, McGee (1980) stated that "the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of 'ideographs' easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy" (p. 5). In this manner, slogans used in the political discourse to reinforce ideology can be understood as ideographs, which McGee (1980) described as common terms used and pervaded in political discourse in order to call for "collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defended goal" (McGee, 1980, p. 15; also see; Cloud, 2004; Condit and Lucaites, 1993; McGee and Martin, 1983). As Cloud (2004) claimed, an ideograph is a "vehicle through which ideologies...become rhetorically effective" (p. 288). Here, ideographs are capable of enforcing ideological beliefs and governing public behaviors as they are inundated with cultural meanings. This means that they can justify political practice of power, as well as certain actions and beliefs. Accordingly, these actions and beliefs can be considered as easily acceptable by the individuals in a community.

Moreover, ideographs that discourage certain behaviors are called *negative ideographs*, while ideographs that promote an ideal are called *positive ideographs* (Connelly, 2012). For instance, <rule of law>, <liberty>, <freedom>, <heritage> and <national security> often function as positive ideographs in United States context to justify certain practice of power and certain behaviors (see McGee, 1980; Ewalt, 2012; Connelly, 2012; Kelly, 2014). On the other hand, <terrorism> functions as a negative ideograph in the United States as a means of discouraging certain actions and beliefs among the general population (Jackson, 2011). Though ideographs within Japanese context are largely understudied, <和<sup>2</sup>> [<harmony>], according to Kanemoto (2019), acts as an ideograph because it follows the four defining characteristics of ideographs that McGee (1980) outlined:

- (1) They are commonly used terms in political discourse;
- (2) They are abstract terms signifying collective commitment;
- (3) They justify the practice of power and certain behaviors and beliefs as acceptable; and
- (4) They are culture-bound.

It is important to note that through the process of invoking culturally embedded ideology, ideographs could be used as persuasive tools to alter perception of a rhetorical situation (Connelly, 2012).

<sup>1</sup>Angle brackets (<>) are typically used by rhetorical critics to indicate ideographs (see McGee, 1980; Cloud, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>There is an alternate understanding of ideograph through the Japanese lettering system, *kanji*, which is the one-character Chinese writing system. Some scholars label kanji characters themselves as ideographs. This paper, however, utilizes McGee (1980)'s concept of ideograph, which are unrelated to *kanji*.

Within international contexts, there have been a few scholars who have rhetorically studied political slogans, such as in Australia (see Young, 2006), China (see Lu, 1999; Lu and Simons, 2006; Hartig, 2018) and Turkey (see Koc and Ilgun, 2010). In one such case, the repeated usage of political slogans in the Red Flag bi-weekly journal published by the Chinese Communist Party from the early 1960s to the late 1980s shifted and modified the dominant cultural ideologies in China (Lu, 1999). The Los Angeles Times even headlined Red Flag as China's "Maoist Theoretical Journal" (The Los Angeles Times, 1988). Though the journal ceased publication in 1988, it was, according to Lu (1999), the "most authoritative, official, and representative journal" of the Chinese Communist Party (p. 504).

After analyzing the political slogans in the journal, Lu (1999) discovered that the rhetorical strategies used were comparable to those used by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Yet, studies about political slogans are limited in political communication and there is a need to expand the understanding of political slogans as ideographs (Hartig, 2018). This need is evident from the potential rhetorical power of ideographs and far reaching persuasive ability to govern general populations while justifying/unjustifying certain behaviors and actions in the community. This current project is a case study that focuses on political slogans as a mode of ideographs, which can be viewed as effective rhetorical tools of articulating political goals, inducing political awareness, and shaping certain cultural attitudes (see McGee, 1980; Lu, 1999; Jasinski, 2010).

## Brief Timeline of Key Events and Materials Analyzed

While COVID-19 has spread globally at varying degrees since it was first discovered in Wuhan in late 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020c), this section provides a brief summary of selected key events of the early 2020 pandemic within Japanese context. Details are also provided about the analyzed speeches, starting with January 6th, when the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare called on Japanese citizens who had been in Wuhan and have certain symptoms, such as cough and fever, to have an immediate medical examination and report their travel history (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a). Soon after the World Health Organization declared a global health emergency on January 30th, the Diamond Princess cruise ship, with an infected passenger on board, arrived at Yokohama port, in Japan. On February 13th, the first death in Japan related to COVID-19 was confirmed (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a).

Given the worldwide impact of the pandemic on health, tourism, and politics, the International Olympic Committee and the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee jointly announced on February 24th that the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, scheduled to begin in July, would be postponed until 2021 (The International Olympic Committee, 2020). It was soon after this announcement that Japanese authorities became more direct about the serious nature and need to combat the pandemic. Precisely, on February 28th, Governor Naomichi Suzuki of Hokkaido prefecture issued his own emergency declaration. He urged all residents to try to stay home, especially on weekends, due to the virus spreading in

Hokkaido; having reached 63 confirmed cases and two deaths at the time of the declaration (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a; Yamaguchi, 2020).

Thereafter, a Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting (新型コロナウイルス感染症対策専門家会議 - *Shingata Korona Uirusu Kansenshō Taisaku Senmonka Kaigi*), was held by a Japanese advisory body on March 9th. They publicly expressed that people need to eschew situations where the following three conditions overlap:

- (1) Closed spaces with poor ventilation [換気の悪い密閉空間]
- (2) Many people in crowded areas [多くの人が密集]
- (3) Short-distance conversations and short-distance utterances (close-contact) [近距離での会話や発話(密接)] (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a).

This was the first occurrence of the Three C's before they became a slogan. The kanji 密 [*mitsu*] repeats in each of the three conditions to signify 1) "closed," 2) "crowded," and 3) "close."

Nearly one month later, on April 7th, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency in seven out of 47 prefectures; Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka. Finally, the state of emergency was expanded to the entire country on April 16th (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a). After just one month and a half, on May 25th, Prime Minister Abe announced the lifting of the state of emergency declaration across the entire country (Prime Minister of Japan and His cabinet, 2020c).

Throughout this time, the authors actively observed a total of eight speeches by Prime Minister Abe and 22 speeches by Governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, that were made at press conferences dating from February 24th until the end of May. Both the Prime Minister's and Tokyo Governor's speeches were delivered in Japanese. Though Prime Minister Abe's cabinet provided provisional translations for all speeches in English and Chinese, Tokyo Governor's cabinet, as of May 13, provided summarized provisional translations for three speeches delivered on March 20th, March 27th, and April 3rd in English, Chinese and Korean (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2020c). One of the author's is fluent in Japanese and thus was able to translate the speeches. Since Japanese is a nuanced language, the authors at times sought clarification from another fluent speaker of Japanese unrelated to the study.

Though all 30 speeches were actively analyzed for this study, the focus for the purpose of this research is only on the rhetorical construction of the Three C's rather than dissecting each speech individually. Therefore, the following section begins with a rhetorical analysis of the Three Cs that emerged out of political discourse and took over as a slogan from there. The authors specifically draw connections between the political construction of the slogan and McGee's (1980) concept of ideograph.

## < 3つの密 - MITTSU NO MITSU > [< THREE CS >]

This section presents an analysis of the slogan to "Avoid the Three Cs" [三つの密, pronounced as *mitsu no mitsu*, or 三密,

pronounced as *san mitsu*], specifically noting McGee's (1980) four defining characteristics of ideographs, which are that they 1) are commonly used terms in political discourse, 2) are abstract terms signifying collective commitment, 3) justify the practice of power and certain behaviors and beliefs as acceptable; and 4) are culture-bound. First, the emergence of the slogan is introduced, followed by an analysis of how it was commonly used in political discourse as a culturally bounded term signifying collective commitment. Afterward, examples are provided about the way political authorities (un)justified certain practices of power, as well as certain behaviors and beliefs as acceptable. Ultimately, we conclude the analysis by interpreting how the <Three Cs> function as a (negative) culture-bound ideograph in this specific rhetorical context of political communication surrounding COVID-19 in Japan.

### <Three Cs> in Political Discourse

To begin, we analyze the emergence and use of the <Three Cs> within political discourse since the initial defining characteristic of ideographs, as outlined by McGee (1980), is that they are commonly used in such discourse. In order to unpack this, it should be first noted that it was not until the February 24th announcement that the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics would be postponed that the Japanese government began to directly alarm the serious nature of the pandemic. After the decision was announced to postpone the Games, both Tokyo Governor Koike and Japanese Prime Minister Abe began to publicly encourage and remind everyone to "Avoid the Three Cs [三つの密]" (see Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2020a; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020a). The Three Cs slogan echoed the recommendation shared by the Japanese advisory body's initial Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting mentioned earlier. The first C stands for "confined spaces [密閉]", the second C stands for "crowded places [密集]", and the third C stands for "close-contact setting [密接]" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020a, para. 7).

The <Three Cs> were not just limited to speeches by Japanese politicians and the advisory body for COVID-19, but also through massive campaigns of public service announcements and materials such as flyers made jointly by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2020), urging everyone to "Avoid the 3Cs": *closed spaced, crowded places, and close-contact settings*. Additionally, as Blythe (2003) and Koc and Ilgun (2014) identified, for a slogan to be memorable, it must include stylistic devices. The Japanese pronunciation of the slogan (*mitsu no mitsu*) utilizes alliteration as a rhetorical stylistic device. Alliteration, as Davison (2008) explained, occurs when the initial letter or sound repeats in order to add emphasis or make a phrase more memorable. Therefore, the use of alliteration in "*mitsu no mitsu*" paves the way for it to become a memorable phrase. As a result, it can be considered as a slogan, even though the Japanese and Tokyo governments did not officially call it as such. This demonstrates that to "Avoid the 3Cs" is a commonly and repeatedly used phrase in political discourse. Though it emerged out of a fairly simple call to action from certain government officials, it spread throughout multiple public and

private sectors in Japan and functioned as an ideograph for collective commitment.

### <Three Cs> as Collective Commitment

As McGee (1980) outlined, collective commitment is another defining characteristic of ideographs. The first example of such a commitment happened to be about the closing and reopening of schools. To provide a brief context, at the end of February, Prime Minister Abe requested elementary, junior high, and high schools all over the country to temporarily close from March 2nd until the end of the school year, which is the end of March (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020a: Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.a). Later, the length of this request was extended, and then lifted little by little depending on the COVID-19 situation within each prefecture.

Schools in Japan typically start their academic year in April, but 93 percent of schools (kindergarten, elementary, junior high, high school, and special needs school) remained temporarily closed when they were supposed to open (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.b; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan, n.d.). Therefore, most schools nationwide were closed except for some areas that had rare cases of COVID-19, such as Iwate Prefecture, Tottori Prefecture and Kagoshima Prefecture (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.b).

Here, the <Three Cs> discouraged the collective group from being in crowded places, close-contact settings and closed spaces, which are all characteristics of classrooms in schools. This discouragement even fostered collective commitment in regards to in-person graduation and entrance ceremonies. Specifically, Prime Minister Abe requested graduation ceremonies be held with the minimum number of attendees necessary, if any (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020b). Although this was a request and did not have any enforcement capability over the school systems, 92.2 percent of universities followed the request and either canceled graduation ceremonies altogether or requested parents not to attend the ceremonies, thus only graduating students could attend (Ishiwatari, 2020). Similarly, multiple universities canceled in-person entrance ceremonies at the beginning of April. It should also be noted that these decisions were made before the April 16 nationwide state of emergency declaration, which highlights the proactive collective commitment by school authorities.

When restrictive suggestions eased, avoiding the <Three Cs> furthered collective commitment after certain guidelines to re-open schools were provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan. For example, the school systems were urged to thoroughly take measures to avoid the <Three Cs> at each educational facility (see Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020a). One such measure came in the form of a suggestion to have staggered school attendance by dividing students into two cohorts (Japan Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.b). In Saitama Prefecture, this worked by dividing elementary and junior high school students into morning and afternoon groups to attend classes in order to manage the number of students at a given time in

school facilities (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2020). This would in essence reduce the number of people in confined places, crowded spaces and closed-settings. In addition, daily temperature measurements were in effect and schools were ready to maintain social distancing between students in order to eschew the Three Cs in classrooms. It is clear that the general educational system under the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan became a pivotal institution to enact the avoidance of the <Three Cs> through collective commitment across government officials, educational institutions, as well as student and parent bodies.

Beyond the general educational system under the COVID-19 pandemic, such a collective commitment to avoid the <Three Cs> was also observed at the organizational setting, public transportation, and public events. There was a joint effort between Minister Kato of Health, Labor and Welfare, Minister Kajiyama of Economy, Trade, and Industry, and Minister Akaba of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism to request Japan's Business Federation, Japan's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Japan's Association of Corporate Executives, and Japan's Trade Union Confederation to cooperate with preventing the spread of infection (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan, n.d.). One of their major requests was to adapt telework and staggered commuting (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan, n.d.).

Major companies stationed in Japan, such as Sony Corp., Hitachi Ltd. and NEC Corp. then continued to hold telework arrangements even after the state of emergency was lifted out of principle in order to reduce the risk of infection (Kyodo News, 2020c). Fujitsu Ltd. continued to push remote working for more than 80,000 of their domestic employees (Kyodo News, 2020b). The employees were also allowed to use their time flexibly if they must come to the physical workplace, where the company used to have core working hours. By doing so, not only are they protecting the workplace and their workers, but these companies also reduce the overlapped <Three Cs> during daily commutes by trains, since trains are *confined*, *crowded*, and *closed-settings*. In this case, eschewing the <Three Cs> was enacted to further collective commitment at the work setting under the current COVID-19 situation.

### <Three Cs> (Un)Justifying Certain Behaviors

Next, we analyze the <Three Cs> in relation to the third defining characteristics of ideographs—ideographs justify the practice of power and certain behaviors and beliefs as acceptable. Through the analysis, it becomes clear that the slogan of avoiding the <Three Cs> has justified the government request as well as actions among the individuals in Japanese society. In this section, we present examples of how the <Three Cs> (un)justified certain practices of power and behaviors as (un)acceptable, ultimately paving the way for it to operate as a negative ideograph.

One of the first direct situations of practicing power occurred when Tokyo Governor Koike held an urgent press conference to request the residents of Tokyo to refrain from going to customer services places, specifically food and drink spaces, bars, and nightclubs that are open from night time to early morning

(Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2020b). She emphasized that these spaces could have conditions for the <Three Cs> in a denser manner. As much as avoiding the <Three Cs> govern people's behaviors and justify certain actions, there were still some who failed to avoid them. Any public figures that violated avoiding the <Three Cs> though were publicly criticized by the media.

For instance, Yuya Tegoshi, who was a member of a well-known boys' band, went to eat at a restaurant with a group of people during Japan's COVID-19 nationwide state of emergency (Sport Hochi, 2020). Immediately after the media reported about his group dinner, his agency prevented him from any entertainment activities. Later, he officially left his agency, but opened a personal Twitter account and a personal YouTube channel to try to remain active in the industry despite the criticism against him (The Chunichi Shimbun, 2020).

In a similar story, a gossip magazine reported a get-together and vacation in Okinawa between well-known celebrities Takayuki Yamada, Mackenyu Arata, and Niki Niwa (Friday Digital, 2020a; Friday Digital, 2020b). These public figures' behaviors activated the justification of <Three Cs>, and accordingly their actions were heavily criticized by the media and larger society. These examples demonstrate that the <Three Cs> unjustify certain behaviors and govern people's perspective toward these behaviors. Through this example, we can see McGee's (1980) explanation of how an ideograph "warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable" (p. 15). By publicly shaming those that violate the new ideology of the Three Cs, the rhetorical use of the <Three Cs> ideograph dictates what is acceptable and unacceptable under the current COVID-19 situation. It becomes clear that through this rhetorical usage within the context of COVID-19 in Japan, the <Three Cs> justify practice of power, as well as certain actions and beliefs as acceptable while others unacceptable.

Further, as McGee (1980) suggested, "ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior" (p. 5). In this similar vein, the <Three Cs> was used as political language by authorities in power with the intent to persuade public belief and control behavior related to the new way of living under the COVID-19 pandemic. As Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared, "Our goal is to create a new normal for our everyday lives. From now on, let us change our mode of thinking" (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2020c, para. 8). Therefore, the intent behind this ideograph can be understood as present-day ideology formation.

As part of that (un)justification of certain behavior, there is a common understanding of the negative connotation with the <Three Cs>. Therefore, we argue that the <Three Cs> acts as a negative ideograph since it serves to discourage the general population from engaging with certain behavior. It should be noted that negative ideographs are not necessarily bad as the word negative might imply, but rather they discourage instead of encourage certain behavior. In this case, the <Three Cs> are

collectively considered as something to avoid. Precisely, with the aim that individuals in Japanese society try to stop spreading COVID-19, protect themselves and others in the community, and prevent themselves from giving or receiving the virus. Thus, the Three Cs symbolize collective commitment to discourage individuals from certain behaviors that put themselves and others in certain conditions.

### <Three Cs> as Culture-bound

Finally, the <Three Cs> appears to be culture-bound in Japanese community. McGee (1980) explained the notion of ideographs as culture-bound when “each member of the community is socialized, conditioned, to the vocabulary of ideographs as a prerequisite for ‘belonging’ to the society” (p. 15). Since the <Three Cs> rhetoric emerged from and spread out specifically around Japanese political discourse, it began the conditioning for what norms one must follow in order to belong in this ‘new’ culture of pandemic Japan, as Prime Minister Abe described. This cultural shift was observed through specific political campaigns that promoted new ways of enacting lifestyles.

For instance, the Go To campaign, which is an initiative of Japan’s national government, directly promotes and establishes the “new lifestyle [新たな生活様式]” in the era of COVID-19 while activating the avoidance of the <Three Cs> (e.g., Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2020, p. 7; also see Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan, 2020; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2020a; Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2020b). It includes four specific sub-campaigns aimed at assisting local industries significantly impacted by the pandemic: Go To Travel, Go To Eat, Go To Event and Go To Shotengai (shopping streets). The Go to Travel campaign states that they aim to establish and normalize “a safe and secure travel style [安全で安心な新しい旅のスタイル]” in this new era of COVID-19, as well as recover lost travel demand and stimulate local tourism-related consumption during travel (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2020, p. 7). The travelers and participating businesses (travel agencies, accommodation businesses, etc.) are to thoroughly engage with the avoidance of the <Three Cs> in this new culture of travel.

Similarly, the goal of the Go to Event campaign is to promote and normalize a new lifestyle with respect to various events related to cultural arts, sports and more, while reducing risk of the <Three Cs> (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, 2020a). Along that trajectory, the Go to Eat campaign introduces how to enjoy eating at restaurants and other public spaces while staying safe under the COVID-19 condition (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan, 2020). The Go to Shotengai (shopping streets) campaign aims to inform a safe way of going to shopping districts based on this new lifestyle, also. Together, the Go To campaigns with these four components of travel, event, eat, and shotengai, infuse the avoidance of the <Three Cs> into a new lifestyle within the Japanese cultural system (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, 2020b).

This culture-bound aspect of the <Three Cs> demonstrates how the element of governing public consciousness seeps through

the ideograph. As McGee (1980) explained, an ideology created by terms used through political discourse “governs or ‘dominates’ our consciousness. In practice, therefore, ideology is a political language composed of a slogan-like term signifying collective commitment” (p. 15). The Japanese phrase for the <Three Cs> [3つの密 - *Mitsu no Mitsu*], thus can be classified as such a slogan-like term that is culture-bound and signifies collective commitment. That collective commitment of the ideograph in the case of the COVID-19 rhetorical situation is to halt the spread of the virus, which becomes culture-bound given the breath and spread of campaigns to protect not just one’s own health, but also that of protecting others, and by extension, protecting the economy that many world leaders seem to focus on when making decisions.

## DISCUSSION

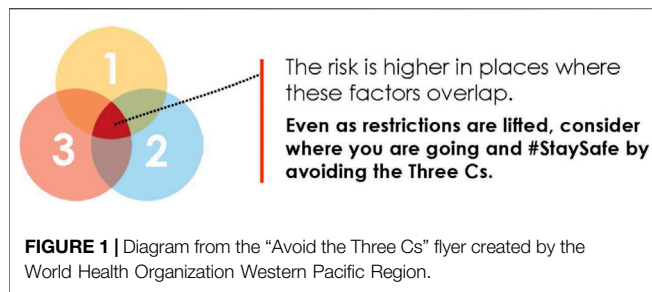
The discussion section highlights the key findings from the analysis above while offering some alternate experiences that have occurred and criticisms of the Japanese response to COVID-19, in order to paint a more holistic image regarding the realities faced by Japanese citizens. In addition, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced as a worldwide phenomenon rather than solely Japanese, we offer a description of political slogans that emerged from certain governments that are considered successful in their response, as well as some that have been criticized regarding their COVID-19 rhetoric as brief comparative points. To conclude, limitations, implications, and potential future directions for the study are also addressed.

### The Rhetorical and Political Power of Japan’s <Three Cs>

Since the onset, Japan had largely been looked at as a “mystery” in regards to COVID-19. A common online news discourse emerged similar to what Sposato (2020) wrote for Foreign Policy: “In the battle with the coronavirus, Japan appears to be doing everything wrong . . . Yet with among the lowest death rates in the world, a medical system that has avoided an overloading crisis, and a declining number of cases, everything seems to be going weirdly right” (para 1). Perhaps where Japan had gone right was precisely in the rhetoric of their political discourse.

Based on observations and analyses of the speeches made by the Prime Minister of Japan and Governor of Tokyo at press conferences between February and May 2020, we argue that the <Three Cs> from their political discourse can be considered as a negative ideograph under the specific COVID-19 rhetoric in Japanese context. After all, the <Three Cs> followed the pattern with the four defining characteristics of ideograph provided by McGee (1980). The slogan:

- (1) was a commonly used term in political speeches;
- (2) was an abstract term symbolizing collective commitment to prevent the spread of COVID-19;



- (3) justified the practice of power and actions to eschew the condition of the Three Cs, as well as unjustified actions activating the Three Cs; and
- (4) was culture-bound in Japanese society.

Those four elements together were exemplified through all facets of society; the government, educational systems, organizational structures, as well as the general public and media coverage.

Avoiding the Three Cs ideology has even been used by the World Health Organization, specifically the Western Pacific Region branch, which includes Japan. They likewise have circulated a flyer that urged everyone to avoid: “1) Crowded places with many people nearby 2) Close-contact settings, especially where people have close-range conversations, and 3) Confined and enclosed spaces with poor ventilation” (World Health Organization, 2020a, para 2). They even include a venn-diagram to emphasize that “the risk is higher in places where these factors overlap” (see **Figure 1**).

This slogan of the <Three Cs> had also been noticed by non-Asian/Pacific media agencies. For example, Business Insider headlined an article about how “Japan avoided a lockdown by telling everyone to steer clear of the 3 C’s” (Feder, 2020). In the article, Feder (2020) addressed that “Lockdowns in the United States have been framed as extreme, temporary procedures, while in Japan the three C’s have been framed as a new, permanent lifestyle for residents” (para. 15). This again pinpoints to another example of how the <Three Cs> are guiding others’ behaviors in this rhetorical situation. The culture-bound element of the ideograph is likewise present since it is understood within the current cultural context of Japan, as well as the collective commitment toward this new way of life. Slogans used to combat COVID-19 and persuade culture during the pandemic are not unique to Japan though, as they have been observed across the world, albeit to varying degrees of success.

## International Comparisons of COVID-19 Political Slogans

As of July 2020, various political messages have been promoted regarding the COVID-19 pandemic by nation states, political agencies, and nationally/globally influential interest groups. Some national political responses have been praised, such as New Zealand, who have been described by Paul Garwood, head of leadership and communications at the World Health Organization, as having “led the way in demonstrating how a

Government can readily respond to an emergency and implement guidelines from the WHO” (as cited in Deguara, 2020, para. 3). The World Health Organization even created a mini-documentary highlighting New Zealand’s pandemic response (see World Health Organization, 2020d). Unlike in Japan though, the approach in New Zealand is one of both extremely strict requirements and empathetic communication from government officials.

For example, the prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, swiftly instructed all people to “act like you have COVID-19” when declaring a nation-wide month-long lockdown for everyone when the nation accumulated just 205 total cases (Menon, 2020). Yet, according to a (BBC News, 2020) article, the success of New Zealand’s response to COVID-19 rests mainly on the clarity of government messages, which were kind, supportive, empathetic, and supported by science. The prime minister and her cabinet even took a six-month 20 percent pay cut to show solidarity with their citizens (BBC News, 2020). Perhaps this could be seen as a “collective commitment” from government officials themselves. Similar to Japan though, slogans were a common thread in New Zealand where they used “Unite Against COVID-19” during the initial lockdown and “Unite for Recovery” once the lockdown ended (Davison, 2020). In line with the empathetic nature of official government communication, “Stay home, stay safe, and be kind” also emerged as a government slogan (Pacific Media Center, 2020).

On the other hand, the United Kingdom drew cross-continental criticism across multiple facets in their response and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Henley, 2020). Though they had a series of slogans like New Zealand and Japan, the slogans in the United Kingdom were at varying degrees of success. The initial slogan, “Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives” (NHS referring to the National Health Service, the publicly funded healthcare system in the United Kingdom) was introduced in March and reminded citizens of their duty to stay home (McGuinness, 2020). Once lockdown restrictions were eased, a second slogan emerged from political discourse: “Stay alert, control the virus, save lives,” which received criticism from officials and the general public for being vague and unclear (McGuinness, 2020).

Afterward, “Hands, face, space” became the slogan unveiled by Prime Minister Boris Johnson with a press conference and tweet on July 31st. The tweet included text, the hashtag #HandsFaceSpace, and a graphic with three images of Prime Minister Johnson; one with “Wash Hands” written over an image where he washes his hands, another with “Cover Face” written over an image where he wears a face mask, and the third with “Make Space” written over an image where he stands alone (Johnson, 2020). According to Waterson (2020), this was the prime minister’s third attempt and may have been inspired from a slogan in Catalanian political discourse: “Distància, mans, mascareta [*Distance, hands, mask*].” Like in Japan and New Zealand, recovery related campaigns and slogans also surfaced from political discourse in the United Kingdom, such as “Eat out to help out” (McGuinness, 2020; Waterson, 2020), which could be connected to the justification of certain behaviors characteristic of ideographs.

Like the United Kingdom, the United States government had also received extensive criticism for their response and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Former director general of the World Health Organization, Gro Harlem Brundtland, claimed the United States was even counterproductive during the pandemic (Kyodo News, 2020a). It is perhaps interesting that unlike the other political entities mentioned in the study, the United States did not seem to have a national slogan to combat COVID-19 or influence behavior. However, such attempts did exist at local and state levels. In many cases, slogans were sought out from the public rather than emerging out of political discourse.

For example, the city of Newark, New Jersey along with the Mayor's Office and in collaboration with their Board of Education created a contest with monetary prizes for students to create original public service announcements featuring a catchy slogan (Newark Board of Education, 2020). Boston University likewise solicited help from their communication students, in what resulted in adopting and filing a trademark for the slogan, "F\*ck It Won't Cut It" (DeCosta-Klipa, 2020). According to graduate student and the campaign's public relations manager, Hailey McKee, the slogan was based on the idea that "saying 'F-it' to responsible protocols won't keep [students] on campus" (DeCosta-Klipa, 2020, para 11). Given that many of the slogans in the United States emerged out of public discourse or the local level, they appear to fail to meet that "commonly used in political discourse" condition of an ideograph. Just as many countries around the world have been criticized for various reasons, Japan's COVID-19 government response was likewise not free from criticism despite the perceived success of their slogan use.

## Alternate Realities in Japan

Not all was utopic in regards to the politics surrounding COVID-19 in Japan. First, the perceived success of the <Three Cs> is not a sole contributing factor to the low rates of COVID-19 in Japan. There have been criticisms that Japan has low numbers because they have not tested as many people (see Wingfield-Hayes, 2020). There have also been connections to the fact that mask-wearing had already been a common cultural norm since ancient times in Japan when it was common to cover one's "mouth with paper or the sacred *sakaki* (Japanese cleyera) leaves to prevent one's 'unclean' breath from defiling religious rituals and festivals" (Martin, 2020, para. 25). Centuries later, during the 1918 flu pandemic, masks officially became everyday products for common people in Japan and have remained as part of the culture since (Martin, 2020).

Other criticisms come from residents of Japan themselves, who have expressed major discontent with their politicians. Based on a multi-national survey about government leaders' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's leaders achieved the worst public rating out of all 23 nations and regions surveyed (Jiji News and Kyodo News, 2020). Japan's support rating was 5 percent for how their political leaders dealt with the pandemic crisis. For comparison, China received an 86 percent and the United States a

32 percent, while the average of all countries was 40 percent (Jiji News and Kyodo News, 2020).

Much of this virtually no support stems from criticism that Abe's administration delayed in declaring a state of emergency (Jiji News and Kyodo News, 2020). There was also a delay in active response related to the mask-shortage in Japan at the start of the pandemic (Akiyama, 2020). By the time the government had finally mailed two masks to each citizen, many residents across Japan had learned how to create their own masks thanks to social media tutorial videos. When the government finally mailed the masks, many locals thought it was too late since they made their own and criticized the cost of the 'two-mask' plan, which *Asahi Shimbun* (2020) reported at \$424 million (46.6 billion yen). Much of the criticism involves the lack of direct and strict action from the government though, while the political discourse used to influence collective action, (un)justify certain behaviors, and culturally bound the <Three Cs> is more indirect and reliant on the public to self-enforce. This demonstrates how ideographic criticism can reveal political irony since the public's perception of the government's performance seems incongruent with the messaging of the Three C's campaign at the very early stage of the pandemic.

It should also be acknowledged that although this study focused from the February to May 2020 timeline, there have been alternate experiences in Japan since then. Though daily new infection numbers remained relatively low and stable through June, it began to increase starting in July. The number of new cases went over 100 on July 2nd, then a peak of 1,581 by August 8th, followed by a drop through September to a second peak of 1,370 new cases by November 16th (Roser et al., 2020). Regardless of the change in trend for Japan's COVID-19 situation, the <Three Cs> continue as a culture-bound negative ideograph to govern and remind the public about their collective commitment to avoid certain behaviors in order to protect themselves and others.

## CONCLUSION

This study focused on political discourse specifically within Japanese cultural context with the aim to document the role of the widely circulated slogan, avoiding the *Three Cs*. In terms of ideologies, McGee (1980) explained that two exist at any specific moment within a culture. One is a "historically defined structure of ideograph meanings expanding and contracting from the birth of the society to its present" (McGee, 1980, p. 14). In this case, the ideograph should have historical roots to an already existing ideology from the past. However, one theoretical limitation of the study is that the <Three Cs> is a new and ongoing phenomenon that has taken over the Japanese political and cultural sphere as we write this research in 2020. Thus, there cannot be a historical structure to analyze with this ideology.

On the other hand, the <Three Cs> does meet the second condition for ideologies, which McGee (1980) described as *rhetorical* or "situationally defined synchronic structure of ideograph clusters constantly reorganizing itself to accommodate specific circumstances while maintaining its



fundamental consonance and unity” (p. 14). The <Three Cs> are specific to the rhetorical situation that emerged upon the COVID-19 pandemic political discourse in Japan. The ideograph was used to justify certain behaviors while unjustifying others, and worked to accommodate this specific circumstance while maintaining unity. Therefore, the <Three Cs> for now must be understood through the rhetorical perspective of ideologies rather than the historical. Future studies may benefit from a historical element to the <Three Cs> ideograph, and perhaps even a cross-cultural comparison at both the historical and rhetorical aspect given that varying political slogans have surfaced across the world under the COVID-19 situation.

The ideograph also served as a form of collective governance without the authorities having to create any specific laws or regulations punishable by fines that have been implemented in some other nations, such as Australia where states have raised millions of dollars from COVID-19 related fines (see Meixner et al., 2020). The influence of this new rhetorical ideograph even went beyond Japanese society to other governments and institutions. In July 2020, India’s Medical Education Minister, Dr K. Sudhakar, stated “that people should avoid the three ‘Cs’ - Closed spaces with improper ventilation, crowds (of more than two people) and close-contact settings” (Express News Service,

2020, para. 3). Sudhakar had taken it further though and “urged citizens to follow the three “Ws” - watch your distance (maintain six-foot distance), wear masks in public and wash hands frequently” (Express News Service, 2020, para. 4). Perhaps for future studies evaluating the historical element of the ideology, the <Three Ws> may serve an ideograph of its own or combine with the <Three Cs>. Given that Japan continued a culture of mask-wearing after they were mass-enforced during the 1918 flu pandemic, future studies may also analyze if and how the <Three Cs> continue or transform the political and culture-bound aspect in Japan post-COVID-19 pandemic.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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