

Example of report on what is japanese popular culture

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Abstract

The aim of this report is to explain what the meaning Japanese popular culture. In this context it shall be also outlined what it means to be cool in Japan and what the potential implications for spreading of Japanese popular culture into other cultures and distinct societies are. The examples of popular music bands and manga will be analysed.

Key words: Japanese popular culture, manga, anime, history, brand, fashion.

In the contemporary world with its fast and predictable tempo of development and spreading of globalisation, it becomes quite difficult to distinguish one culture from another or the line between which effects another. Looking at the contemporary national cultures, one of the most distinct and controversial is a Japanese pop culture. From American perspective, it may seem that the essence of the Japanese pop culture is following the common brands and reading comics, and following everything which is on screen, but the essence of contemporary Japanese pop culture is much deeper into history of the nation and its traditions of the past. The aim of this report is to explain what the contemporary Japanese popular culture is, what it means to be cool in Japan and what the potential implications for spreading of Japanese pop culture into other cultures and distinct societies are.

At the first glance, it may seem that the contemporary Japanese popular culture is the same as American popular culture, with the only difference in national specifics and tastes. In fact, it is one of the ways to look into the matter. In this context, it is often concluded that all types of popular culture are the result of globalisation. In fact, globalisation has effected Japanese

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culture but not entirely in the way it is reflected in other countries, and in the USA, in particular (Condry, 2011). Although the global brands in clothing, food, TV and entertainment are quite popular as in the USA, Japanese popular culture is characterised by adoption of the existing foreign practices and their further transformation into national, contemporary, popular understanding and perception (Tsutsui, 2010). In this context, Douglas McGray argues that the main characteristic feature of the Japanese popular culture is that it is oriented towards national market, in other words, it concentrates on Japanese perception of the world, values, and hidden message and context to each brand, movie or manga theme (McGray, 2010).

In other words, it can be argued that brands and franchises become popular in Japan not because they are widely spread and came from abroad, but rather because they are understandable and oriented on the local traditions and values, although they have changed and evolved through time and might be entirely different from what they were initially (Tsutsui, 2010). From the historical perspective, the reason for such distinctiveness is in a long history of Japanese reserved existence outside the outer world and further imposing of Western values by force, further military flaws of two World Wars and a necessity to develop the economy and prosperity from the zero level with preserving Japanese traditions as a corner stone, although in its entirely modified and sometimes blurry form (Condry, 2011). In this way, it can be also argued that each aspect of popularity of Japanese culture among Japanese people is actually in that corner stone of values, common history and subsequent common understanding of context for each theme

described in this or that way (Tsutsui, 2010).

The distinctiveness of Japanese popular culture is that it is popular in Japan, and it cannot be entirely accepted by other distinct cultures. This does not mean that Pokémon hegemony is an exception of the general rule; rather it shows that due to the globalisation, Japanese brands and franchises begin to dominate and affect other cultures. On the other hand, they cannot be replicated and simply adopted by other societies entirely mainly because of their distinctiveness and orientation on Japanese understanding of themes, messages and means of their description, because the context is lost in transition of images and brands from one culture to another (Condry, 2011). Summarising all mentioned above, it can be concluded that Japanese popular culture is in transformation of the old Japanese traditions into contemporary reality and fashion, which is entirely understood by Japanese audience, since it was made exclusively for the Japanese audience, although effected by ideas and themes of the West and Globalised world (Tsutsui, 2010).

The best example of this conclusion would be the popularity of the new band Lipless X Sister and the new brandish dance they perform - the Pada Pada. The band was created a concept group, which is quite popular in Japan. The idea behind the creation of the band was to put together girls of 18- to 22-years-old, who had children of about 2 years old. The message behind it was entirely Japanese in its essence - it showed the duality of female nature: "You can like them. But they're mothers, so you can't kiss them" (McGray, 2010). Their performance was staged in the popular shopping mall, with promotion of brandish clothes, which could be easily bought in the store next door. The dance they performed involved wheeling strollers with their kids

and singing " Pada Pada, mama, Pada Pada mama" (McGray, 2010). So here one can see the combination of traditional American-style branding of clothes by famous people together with distinct Japanese style message of traditional family values, femininity and importance of children in lives (McGray, 2010). In this regard, the message is also of social value, particularly for the Japanese society, where the annual birth rates were decreasing in the last decade. So, there is a wider context to understand the message and subsequent popularity of brands and franchises.

Keeping all this in mind, it is important to explain what it means to be cool in Japanese popular culture. From the point of Japanese teenagers, being cool is following the popular brandish trends in various aspects of life (Condry, 2011). This means to have the most recent technological devices, listen to the most contemporary music, have brandish clothes, the recent editions of manga, know the dancing moves of the new popular dance, and in the same time to express yourself in your own individual way (McGray, 2010). In this context, the difference between Western cool and Japanese cool is that in following these trends, Japanese teenagers are trying to combine them all in order to look unique and different from anybody else (McGray, 2010). Some sociologists and psychologists analysed the matter and came to an conclusion that Japanese popular culture has more in common with Western underground, non-stream sub-cultures rather than general popular culture of Hollywood style (Condry, 2011). The main reason for this is that Japanese society and teenagers are more perceptive to diversity and uniqueness in appearance and tastes, and their popular culture actually combines diverse trends all at the same time, although possible with different interest between

age and social groups (Tsutsui, 2010). Therefore, girls wearing clothes of their favourite manga characters, those in emo or gothic outfits and those with Dolce & Gabana bags would be equally popular and stylish, just in different styles, which are still part of popular culture (Condry, 2011).

In other words, being cool for Japanese teenagers, means not simply in following fashion trends, but rather in uniqueness of their combination and personalisation of them. Until a certain extent, such boom of diversity is conditioned by the fact that when they begin to apply for the job positions, they have to change their appearance entirely and follow uniformed rules of behaviour and appearance, which a codified business style look (McGray, 2010). So, further on when they start working young individual begin to observe 'cool' in a different way, through having brandish clothes and goods in terms of their position and place in society. It could have been be argued that the older they become the more globalised and uniformed the popular culture might seem, but irrespective of position in the society, it remains popular to follow one's hobby and interests, that is why popular books, manga, movies and music remain predominant in Japanese choices of purchasing (Condry, 2011).

According to the contemporary scholars, the main notion of being cool, which is applicable not only for the Japanese case, is that an individual wants to belong to a certain group or to be accepted in the society in general (Condry, 2011). On the other hand, the main difference between Western and Japanese perception of this notion, Japanese popular and cool refers to the whole spectrum of trends within the Japanese culture and society, while the Western culture is more divided by various sub-cultures, which oppose

each other's perception and the notion of being cool (Tsutsui, 2010). In other words, it can be argued that Japanese popular culture is more accepting of individuality rather than Western, Hollywood style equivalent. This might be one of the reasons why Japanese popular culture cannot be entirely accepted in the West. In order to look into this matter in depth, the case of manga should be analysed.

Manga is often described as a symbol at the forefront of Japanese popular culture. Allison (2013) states that Japan has created and developed “Japanese cool” figures to the world since Pokémon merchandise was exported from Asian to Western countries in 1997. However, it is ambiguous why Japanese manga is remarkably marketable among different countries. Alison (2013) points out that appealing Japanese style “cuteness” is one of the key methods by which Pokémon matured its dominant supremacy today. Nevertheless, while it is not difficult to follow the “Japanese cute characters” drawing style in dramatic and fantasized stories, almost none of foreign manga becomes famous like Japanese ones.

Furthermore, the rapid manga boom mounts the anxiety of providing worthless consequences across borders. The level of understanding of the concepts and stories by different social background readers, and also a vague criterion to globalize each manga are problematic. For example, some nations argue about the violent story of DEATH NOTE, a story in which the people whose names are written on a notebook will die. Even the writer conceptualizes “no one has right to kill anybody”. The manga has created a negative influence in China and Russia by causing a number of bullying and suicide cases in which insensitive jokes like writing the victims’ names on a

notebook were made (Japan Today, 2013, The Beat Comics Culture, 2007).

The main reason for the whole misunderstanding of this particular manga and various heavy and explicit variations of Japanese manga is in the fact that national cultural specifics clashed over what is acceptable in each country and what might be viewed as immoral (Tsutsui, 2010). In this context, it should be outlined that the very history of Japanese culture argues for acceptance of death and what life brings to one; for a very long time suicide was an act of honour, something which was not allowed to be interrupted. It was part of the samurai and noble code (Condry, 2011).

Although, nowadays, the act is forbidden and immoral in Japanese society, the perception of blood and various acts of violence is a bit different than in the West. It is not tolerated, but is rather argued to be present in life, and therefore, it should be shown for people to be aware and cautious (Condry, 2011). Again as in the case of the DEATH NOTE, the message was that it is not allowed for anyone to kill and decide how life of another person should end. From religious and mythological perspectives, Japan used to be a polytheistic country, with various gods and spirits and Shinegami - gods of death were part of that folklore (Condry, 2011). The inconsistency between perceptions can be again conditioned by the orientation of Japanese popular culture on the national audience rather than its further adaptation for the Western audience.

Thus, it can be concluded that Japanese manga has great potential, which other countries and foreign competitors could not imitate effortlessly, and it plays an important role in sustaining Japanese economy and enhancing its soft power. However, the obscure discipline of the prevalent Japanese manga

might also offer disadvantages to both Japan and recipient countries due to the misinterpretation of its primal intentions. Looking at the matter in the context of the whole Japanese popular culture, it can be concluded that irrespective of slight misinterpretations, this culture is spreading quite fast into the European and American popular markets. This is largely conditioned by its inner accepting nature and inherent ability to absorb difference and make them benefits and new trends in the popular culture for the next season. Overall, it can be also concluded that a corner stone of Japanese popular culture is Japanese history and set of national values, and therefore, the key for its understanding and complete accepting is in the ability to interpret the context and a hidden meaning behind each brand or franchise.

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