

J-brand: What image of youth is getting sold in Japan's "gross national cool"?

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The story of J-cool—the global trade and popularity of Japanese youth goods—has been much heralded by the press and government officials in this first decade of the new millennium. Spurred by an article written in 2002 by the American journalist Douglas McGray who coined the term “Japan’s GNC” (gross national cool), the lexicon of “cool,” “Japanese cool,” “J-cool,” or “GNC,” has caught on in reference to how successfully Japanese youth properties are selling all over the world today. Signaled here is a recognition that youth sells; that it sells to sell to youth; and that selling a particular iteration of youth sells something for Japan and something of Japan in all those global markets currently flooded with Japanese kids’ goods. That is, in the new buzz around Japanese cool, interest is paid both to the capital generated by the youth market and to capitalizing on that market to extend the attraction Japanese youth goods have for global kids.

An iconic example of GNC and the press it’s garnered in Japan is *Pokemon*—what one American journalist called the global kids’ trend of the 1990s. A property that started out small in 1996—a Game Boy game targeted only for Japanese boys—*Pokemon* was soon expanded by its marketers into a media-mix conglomeration: a comic in *Korokoro Komikku*, trading cards, television *anime*, movies, tie-in merchandise, *manga* series, video game, toy lines, guidebooks, and both JR and ANA campaigns. As the property expanded in scale, the scope of its market shifted from domestic sales geared to boys to global sales targeted to kids of both genders and a much wider spectrum of age. Getting exported to East Asian markets in 1997, it soon spread to other global markets including the United States in 1998 where it generated a huge craze that the American press labeled “pokemania.” Observing all this back home, Japanese commentators called the *Pokemon* fad a sign of Japan’s new *bunka pawā* (cultural power). As a reporter for the *Asahi Shinbun* wrote in his account of the splash the first *pokemon* movie made in the States (it was the top-ranking movie of the week, yielding revenues in excess of even the *Lion King*) in 1999:

This is amazing. And it’s possible that, if we maintain these spectacular results, we’ll outrun Disney in a country where Disney is a pronoun for the United States itself.” (Hamano 1999:4).

Similarly, in another article in *Asahi Shinbun*, the reporter described how he was filled with tremendous pride when he saw *Pokemon* trading cards being sold in even grocery stores in the States. Noting how, after the war, Japan could only “hold out its stomach in pride” again when Japanese companies like Sony and Toyota became common names in the States, he added that “Japanese culture has at last produced products that circulate well in the US marketplace.” In summing up his viewpoint, he wrote “Products are the currency by which Japanese culture enters the United States” (Kondō 1999:4).

This is the formula of soft power, a concept put forth by Harvard professor Joseph Nye. As he has formulated it, soft power is the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” which “arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (Nye 2004:x). Power of this nature comes

from inspiring the dreams and desires of others by projecting images about one's own culture that are globally appealing and transmitted through channels of global communication (such as television and film). As it has been generally agreed, only the United States has had the soft power—in the strength of its cultural industries and the appeal of a culture that has translated around the world as rich, powerful, and exciting—to dominate the global imagination throughout the 20th century. But, as Iwabuchi Kōichi and others have convincingly argued, this operation of global power is shifting today, becoming decentered and recentered by new cultural producers, such as Japan. Yet whether the global popularity of Japanese cultural goods like *Hello Kitty* actually work along the lines of a soft power that is rooted in—and helps incite—the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies is another issue altogether, and one I am far more dubious about. Certainly, the belief in the soft power of Japanese cool is behind much in the way of new governmental and corporate incentives to build the youth industry and to spread the attractiveness it carries abroad of what is hoped is some essence or semblance of Japan. At one conference I attended on Japanese soft power, for example, this was the desire, clearly articulated by someone employed to advise the government on cool power. As he put it, there remain ill feelings towards Japan in parts of the world such as S Korea that stem from the past. This negativity, however, can be counteracted by consumption of J-cool which attracts young people with positive feelings they associate with Japan making J-cool an effective diplomatic ploy that will help raise Japan's image in the eyes of the international community.

Such (national, nationalist) value placed on the productive potential of the youth market stands in sharp contrast to the non-productivity and non-value attributed to much of the current generation of flesh and blood youth coming of age in the “lost decade” (*ushiwareta jūunen*) following the burst of the Bubble. Such a sentiment is commonplace today in all the attention paid—and moral panic accrued—to youth trends spelling out a lack of commitment to job, school, or home. Such behaviors include: *shōnen hanzai*, *enjo kōsai*, *futōkō*, *gakkō hōkai*, *hikikomori* and, of course, freeta and NEET. In a book just published in 2007 by Uchida Tatsuru, this position is clearly and loudly registered in its very title: *Karyū shikō: Manabanai kodomotachi Hatarakanai wakamonotachi* (The orientation to go downstream: Children who don't study, young people who don't work). Starting the book with his thesis—there is new type of Japanese coming of age today in Japan—he adopts the much-cited remark by Tōdai professor of education, Satō Manabu, about the flight from education of Japanese youth to characterize this new typology as “*manabikarano tōsō, rōdōkarano tōsō*” (flight from learning, flight from labor). As concerned with Japan's place and image in the eyes of the rest of the world as those who tout J-cool as a tool for Japanese soft power, Uchida uses an international study to substantiate his claim about the flight from learning of Japanese kids. Conducted by the IEA, International Educational Association, this survey calculates the time middle school students from 37 countries devotes to studying outside of class. In 1995, the average was 3 hours but for Japanese students, it was 2.3 hours. This made Japan ranked 30th out of 37. But things only got worse. By 1999 Japan had fallen to the rank of 35th which corroborates with a recent study Uchida cites showing that 60% of Japanese high school students don't study at all today. Referring here again to Sato Manabu, the author shares his assessment that, from once being ranked the world's most studious students, Japanese youth have now become its least (Uchida 2007: 11-14).

What Uchida and multiple other scholars, commentators, journalists, and officials concur about is that contemporary Japanese youth lack the power—educational, economic, moral, and social—to be able to lead their country into the 21st century. Failing to be productive at school, such children hold little promise for being able to produce and reproduce the Japanese nation-state at the next stage of its development. The national future is bleak, these adults lament, projecting their anxiety and uncertainty about the future onto children—those subjects who, as Larry Grossberg has pointed out, have always embodied the future under a modernity committed to the promise of a progressively better future. But, as Grossberg notes, modernity is in crisis or at least getting unsettled in an era of neoliberalism where attention is paid much more to present gains rather than future pay-offs and capital is geared to risk and speculation rather than savings and labor. Time has become reorganized and the role, place, and value of the future has diminished. In such a reorganization—of capital and time—youth and their value in/to society get reconfigured as well. Writing about the United States, Grossberg argues that the progressive narrative once upheld by American modernity has been severely undermined in these times of uncertainty and risk. And children are not the cause of this, but an unfortunate effect. No longer can they be assured of a better future. And, as adults can't as well, the investment adults—and the nation—are willing to expend on youth has been severely undermined. The figures of children growing up in poverty, abandoned, at risk of health or safety, have escalated in the States. And in the face of little public outcry or serious efforts devoted to helping children, Grossberg declares that America is at war with kids.

What I explore in this paper is the calculus by which youth are seen to be productive—as in the case of GNC and the market in youth goods—but also non-productive—as in the case of so-called real youth much cited for failing to work or study hard—for the Japanese nation-state in this moment of the early 21st century. In this I see, and probe, an apparent contradiction. For what are the two constructions, two demographics, two subjectivities of youth at work here and aren't they more linked than distinct? After all, the marketers of J-cool are selling playgoods to kids as well as a construction of play that captures and capitalizes on youth as a time and space for imaginative play. But isn't it also assumed to be a preoccupation with play—whether that be consumption of brandname goods, fandom of *anime*, or pursuit of *jibunsa* or *yaritai koto*—that characterizes those young people who are criticized for failing to “study” or “work”? Thinking of this as a paradox, I am reminded here of Tajiri Satoshi, the designer of the original *Pokemon* Game Boy game who launched one of the biggest J-crazes the world has yet to know, helping to establish Japan as a leading world producer of trendy youth goods at the turn of the new millennium. To those who champion GNC as a cultural resource for Japanese soft power, Tajiri would appear to be hero. And surely he is. But he also was a student who, so entranced by *Space Invaders* when—in 7th grade—the first video arcade came to town, he routinely played hooky to spend time with video games instead. Further, Tajiri cheated not only his schoolwork to play, he also took money from his mother's pocketbook in order to pay for it. A distracted student and a cheating son; one could say that Tajiri's behavior signals the fraying of both school and family—two of the three pillars (the other being corporate work) that shored up the enterprise society of Japan, Inc., now disintegrating in its post-Bubble collapse.

But there is even more to the Tajiri story. Managing to graduate from high school but not pursuing further education ala *gakureki shakai*, Tajiri became a game designer working, for the main, on his own. After a few years producing a gaming journal and a couple of games, Tajiri turned to the project that would preoccupy him for 6 years: crafting a new video game that would both challenge and tweak gaming conventions that—at the time and still are—geared to competitive battles in which a player seeks to conquer or destroy an opponent. Inspired by a new technological advance in Nintendo’s Game Boy handheld game apparatus called the *tsushin ke-beru*—a cable that links two gameboys together—Tajiri proposed to use this to foster not competitive matches but a cooperative play of exchanges between two players. Supposedly disturbed by a current tendency towards atomism in both gaming—as games become more complex, players get older and more inclined to play alone—and youth society in general—kids spend ever more time in commuting, study, and the classroom feeling ever more threatened by solitarism—Tajiri aimed to make his game one in which kids would “open up” to a world beyond themselves. In the genesis of *Pokemon*, was a commentary on postindustrial Japan and the effect its demands for performance and productivity were having on youth. And, in his design of a game intended to be challenging and fun yet doable by even small kids, Tajiri also aimed to make an imaginative universe that would be a corrective of sorts to the individualizing, isolating environment of a neoliberal society.

In the language of such scholars of capitalism as Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri who study the shift in production today away from material things to the immateriality of information, communication, and affect, *Pokemon* operates in the realm of immaterial labor. As Hardt and Negri note, while the sheer numbers of workers engaged in the production of so-called material goods such as agriculture and steel may still dominate today, it is the immaterial labor—of the mass media, advertising, service providers, internet—that is now hegemonic in shaping the logic, and future, of capitalism in the 21st century. Immaterial labor has two principal forms: 1) labor that is primarily linguistic or intellectual, involving symbols, ideas, and codes and 2) affective labor that engages affects such as well-being, excitement, and ease. In both cases, communication is involved—communicating information and communicating affect—which is utilized in the process of production but also produced itself as an end product. In that communication is social or a type of sociality that operates in the register of codes, ideas, and affects, immaterial labor signifies a shift in value away from labor per se to the production and productivity of social life itself: what Hardt calls bio-power but what might more accurately be called socio-power. This is precisely the currency at work—which means also at play—in *Pokemon*, I would argue.

A game whose objective is to get more and more of the pocket monsters inhabiting the virtual zones of poke-world, *Pokemon* both relies upon and generates an intense web of information. To be successful, players need to know a number of vital statistics about each monster as well as the eco-zones each comes from and is located within in order to calculate battle strategies for competitive matches. Though *Pokemon* is much known for the cool cuteness of its imaginary characters—Pikachu, for example, with its yellow body, pointed ears, squiggly tail, and red tummy—what really counts in the playscape of *Pokemon* are the relationships formed: those between players who exchange information, cards, pokemon, and battle tips and those between players and their virtual pokemon: relations of utility and possession but also of petdom and even

friendship. In doing ethnography on *Pokemon*, I discovered that players developed deep and affective attachments to this virtual playworld that struck me as doubled in nature. On the one hand, players were highly instrumental in how they assessed, collected, and competed the pocket monsters they gathered, treating these things as objects of utility calculated for the value they fed, and signified, in winning the game. On the other hand, pokémon were also regarded as objects of affection: entities that became animated in the course of play turning almost lifelike into partners, pets, parts of oneself. I have previously called such relations flexible attachments as the valence operating here moves flexibly and interchangeably between utility and affection, capital and community, person and thing. And such flexible attachments are made to entities that have flexible identities: pokémon that fluctuate between being things, pals, tools, pets, and cute characters.

Such a playworld that, not only relies on the communication of information and of affect, but continually generates it as well, is ensconced in the production and productivity of immaterial labor and, in particular, what I have called socio-power. Why I find this significant is that, in a property much heralded for the GNC it cultivated for Japan, the playscape was also associated with new patterns of communication and sociality that can be seen to typify the youth of today as well—those so maligned for their non-productive stance towards work and school. To speak first about *Pokemon*, “communication” was one of the keywords used in Japan to describe the *Pokemon* craze and what some even called a new form of play and a “social phenomenon.” In the words of Okada Toshio, for example, *Pokemon* is a play that goes beyond the world of the game itself (Yamato 1998) referencing the networks—of information, exchange, trade, and affection—players engage in the course of the game. In the voluminous reportage, commentary, and analysis that followed in the wake of the fad, this was an observation that was reiterated often with almost always the implication that there was a social, socializing potential to the game that was beneficial to Japanese kids—and, by extension, Japan itself.

As Kubo Masakazu, one of the producers of the movies, television *anime*, and *manga* version, articulated it to me; school demands and extracts a certain labor from kids that is both tedious and delimiting. In days crammed with school, *juku*, commuting, extra-curricular activities, and study, kids have little time for themselves which is what a game like *Pokemon* gives them: a space (*kūkan*) in which they can play with their imaginations and imagine a world beyond their everyday duties and routines. Though Kubo had a vested interest in viewing *Pokemon* as socially recuperative, his position was much echoed by outside observers who tended to see this virtual playscape as compensatory for the very structures—of school, work, and family—held accountable for building the country, and disciplining its youth, into the hardworking subjects of Japan, Inc. So, embedded in *Pokemon*, a property that yielded big capital (both real and symbolic) for Japan in its marketing of “cool,” was a construction of youth—as those who play, catch, and collect imaginary playthings—quite at odds from that inculcated by the *gakureki shakai/kanri shakai* model of the nation state.

Striking here was a view that not only was *Pokemon* a virtual play that could refresh and renew kids in lives increasingly spent alone, in transit, or pressured to perform, but also that the way in which this works is through a circuitry of communication that yields—if not also borrows upon—affect. As one scholar of Japanese

youth, Watanabe Naomi, put this, young Japanese are hard pressed to ever receive what she called “unconditional love” these days. Noting the solitary, bleak, alienated life led by kids in an atmosphere of consumer capitalism and academic competition, *Pokemon* is a route by which children can open up and connect to a world outside the solitary existences they tend to retreat within. This comes from being given a challenge that is achievable by any child: getting pocket monsters. And as the child keeps playing the game and getting more and more pokemen, she keeps receiving what Watanabe takes to be the main message of the game – “You’re great.” Calling this a form of self-confirmation that Japanese youth are not receiving—from parents, from teachers, from society—these days, the author sees in *Pokemon* a resource for providing children with a fount of affective connection and bolstering of the self. And this, all through the virtual apparatus of “getting” pokemon that sends back to the player the endlessly reiterative message – “you’re great!!”

One might be beginning to wonder here what precisely the construction of youth and of cool is in these properties like *Pokemon* so trumpeted for their value in producing a gross national cool with its potential for Japanese soft power. And how precisely does this “cool” construction of youth differ from what is decried as decidedly uncool in the behaviors and inclinations of Japanese youth today so castigated for an unproductive stance towards school and work? Looking only and very initially—at the realm of what could be called communication, I find an interesting overlap with *Pokemon* in the webs of attachment, affection, and sociality that scholars such as Asano Tomohiko identify as emergent in the lifestyles of young Japanese today. In contradistinction to the much cited—and lamented—reports of a dissolution or weakening of human connectedness amongst youth in recent years (*ningenkankei no kihakuka*), Asano argues that sociality has been transformed rather than eroded. According to his own research which is based on surveys conducted over the past two decades, *ningenkankei* has changed little in intensity but has become much more condensed and context-specific. Relationships are pursued through what he calls multiple channels—parttime job, school, outside activities, internet, phone—and this “diverse channelification” (*tachyanneruka*) also bears a tendency to gear different relationships or interactions to the specific context in which it is carried out. In this situation-oriented friendship—what Tsuji Daisuke has called “flipping”—the specific activity at hand heavily shapes with whom one hangs out and the behavior one assumes when doing so. Work thus dictates one kind of friend, school another, *keitai* another, and club activities yet another. Flipping is also intensified by the usage of technology, particularly the internet and *keitai*, which are heavily relied upon to initiate, maintain, and expand relationships.

In this promulgation of situation-oriented or selective friendship, youth are aiming to expand their networks of association in order to minimize the risk of being alone or unconnected. In an era where relationships are also fraught and the risk of being abandoned or ostracized through *ijime* ever acute, what Asano calls the sociality of connectedness (*tsunagari no shakaisei*) bears a complex affective mix. On the one hand, getting together with friends is what a number of studies have shown to be what youth enjoy doing more than anything. In a survey conducted by NHK in 2004, for example, kids rated this as the activity that fulfilled them the most in life. On the other hand, however, balancing the delicate nature of friendship requires great care and attention, and also provokes stress and anxiety in kids, particularly girls. As shown in a recent study by

Hakuhōdō on the lives and attitudes of Japanese teenagers, youth highly value friendship but hesitate to share their true feelings with anyone. Motivated to express something unique about themselves, they also engage in a form of communication, particularly in mailing over *keitai*, that stresses accessibility over contents. Being continually available and able to engage in what Asano calls instantaneous feelings, communication becomes brief but continuous and engaged with multiple partners across a range of various contexts and situations. In its section on girls, the Hakuhōdō report discovered that the single most important attribute for evaluating a girl's prestige and popularity today is what it calls "*shunkan comyunicashunryoku* (instant communication ability). Contrasting this with even ten years ago when a wider range of qualities could help win a girl recognition, the orbit has now narrowed to this one skill above everything else. And it is the girl who, adept in feeding a web of relationships fueled by instantaneous communication, is the one who signals her popularity to others and herself by the number of mail messages she receives on her *keitai*. As another comes in as she is talking to a friend, the message registers—"you're great!" The flip side, of course, is that when messages don't come in, the receiver feels rejected, unworthy, and alone. Kids, especially girls, report stress in managing their *keitai* for the messages that do—or do not—come in. But, along with the stress, is excitement—excitement that comes from maintaining the connection itself. So, in all of this, one can see the stock of affective value that is invested in the sociality of connectedness for youth these days.

Communication winds up sounding like a game which is what one of my students at Sophia University said *ijime* has become as well: a game of turning on—or off—others. And it all sounds very rooted in the immediacy of the present moment, which is what youth report as well. For boys too, being sociable has become far more important in calculating the popularity or merit of other kids: far more important than how one does in school or even other activities once given more claim such as sports. And for both girls and boys, school is said to be pay far less a role in the organization of their psychic and social lives than other factors such as parttime jobs and friends.

All of this returns me to the contradiction I see at the heart of the "coolness" so proclaimed as a source of Japanese soft power in the traffic of made-in-Japan youth goods selling so well overseas. For, what sells here—a form of electronic sociality and digital communication—is also what exists in the lives of Japanese youth in the 21st century, even those free-floating from job to job and away from school in behaviors (*freeta*, *NEET*) decried for their non-productivity. How to reconcile these two demographics and constructions of "youth" and how to think more critically about what kind of behavior and youth is valued in/by Japan today are questions that need addressing in our inquiry of Japanese "soft power."

