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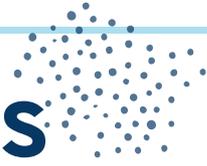
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Japanese sweets and the potential influence of Cool Japan on their distribution and marketing in Berlin

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Project Description

Introduction

In recent decades, many consumers have seen a significant increase in foreign products on store shelves. Due to ever-adapting supply chains and new shipping options, exporters bring fresh and often cheap products to markets abroad. This is also true for Japan, whose pop culture has also found a firm foothold in many countries (Allison 2003; McLeland 2017). There is even a set of strategies, named "Cool Japan Initiative" designed by the Cabinet Office. According to their brochure "Cool Japan" includes contemporary Japanese culture and products such as animations, manga, characters and games, etc. Japanese traditional cuisines and commodities in which people discover new values are also "Cool Japan". Japanese high-tech robots and cutting-edge green technologies are "Cool Japan" too." (Cabinet Office Intellectual Property Headquarters n.d.: 2). This refers not only to non-perishable products, but often also to the colorful, unusual sweets (and also non-sweet snacks) that are frequently picked up by the media. These are increasingly attracting international customers and have already led to special "subscription boxes"- filled with purely Japanese sweets- increasingly high price (NHK World Japan 2022). Often, however, the food supplied is not specifically about taste, but rather about the "experience" and the "trend factor," which is often promoted through product placements (NHK World Japan 2022; Allison 2003). As such, even in Berlin, many Japanese confectionery products can be found in stores that are not primarily focused on food (see, J-store, Figuya, Neo Tokyo...). Also, many East Asian and even European vendors now often offer Japanese-inspired goods (Rundschau 2019; O- mochi 2020). Such an occurrence suggests a cultural, as well as economic, influence of Japanese popular culture and warrants further investigation .

Our Goals and Objectives

We are examining the formal "boom" of Japanese/Japanese made or inspired sweets in the Berlin area. Our interest are anime stores, specific examples here Figuya, J-store, Neo Tokyo. Also we are interested in international stores like Sugarfari and GoAsia.

Our goal is to trace, the extent to which the efforts to promote the concept of "Cool Japan" may or may not have had an impact on the sweetscapes in Berlin. Examples for the special connection between cool Japan and Japanese sweets are subscription boxes, news reports, mentions in social media and the frequent marketing of non-Japanese products as purely Japanese.

In order to investigate the connection between Japanese sweets and "Cool Japan" we visited Japanese pop culture stores and Asian supermarkets several times.



Experience over price

Shops that sell sweets in Berlin can be divided into two categories. For one, there are pop-culture based shops, providing services not limited to food. They often sell merchandise, Books, DVDs, CDs, apparel and even household items (*Neo Tokyo 2019; Figuya 2020; J-Store 2020*). The other kind are Asian supermarkets that target the Asian population living in Berlin. They sell Japanese, but also Chinese, Korean or Taiwanese goods and food, as well as specific fruits and vegetables often deemed rare in general European stores (*go asia 2022*). Interestingly, they also feature a key difference when it comes to sweets; Pop-culture stores often price their sold items substantially higher than supermarkets, even with the same stock. During our research the go-to price for a 11/12 pack of mini Kitkats for instance amounted to a cost of about 5,99-6,99 Euros in general stores. In pop-culture based shops however, they often went above and beyond the 9 Euro mark and were priced at up to 10,99 Euros, with the lowest offer starting at 7,99 per package. Overall, pop-culture shops generally featured about 30 kinds of sweets, about half were KitKats. These results highlight the appeal of brand names and their association. While in supermarkets Kitkats and other sweets were sorted after country and did not receive a big shelf or advertisements, pop-culture based shops try to highlight their stock strongly. Even more so, they often used whole walls or windows to highlight the array of exotic flavors in conjunction with their merchandise, deepening the association between sweets and “Cool Japan” (*The Sun Uk 2018; The New York Times Magazine 2018; BBC 2017*). Kitkats are strongly associated with "Cool Japan" and are prominently displayed in the stores that sell Japanese pop culture . The prices also provide interesting insights: All Japanese pop culture shops we visited imported Kitkats via the same venues as Asian supermarkets. As such, the adjusted cost is most likely based on the experience of visiting such a store rather than on the product's value itself (*Figuya 2020; go asia 2022; J - Store 2020; Neo Tokyo 2019*). Such an assumption is further supported by our own experiences. The visitors of these shops donning costumes, visiting in large groups and taking photographs. Venturing out to stores like “Figuya” or “J-store” becomes more than a regular shopping trip and provides a certain atmosphere and experience for its customers. It caters to a certain crowd that values their time spent and not necessarily the actual items for sale or their price.



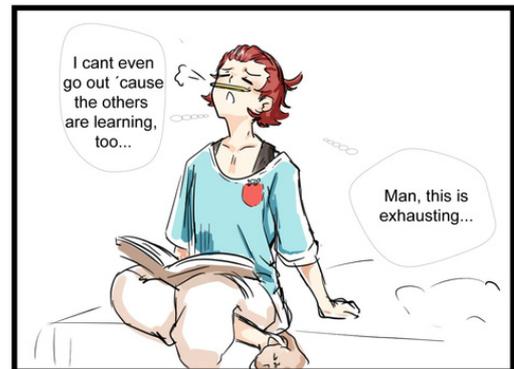
The P*kachu tax



During fieldwork, we often encountered a rather curious phenomenon in the sweets landscape. While conventional goods* were –comparatively– reasonably priced, we noticed that any type of sweet containing bonuses such as stickers, mini figures or special illustrated boxes would cost substantially more than the regular version of the same item. This can be attributed to multiple factors. The first factor is the licensing of the characters in question. The collaborative products we came across were mostly from highly popular shows or other types of media. As such, attaining their license often requires a higher amount to be paid by the manufacturer in the first place. Secondly, and most notably, is the marketability. Franchises such as Pokemon will always drive up the demand of goods, especially when they feature limited items such as stickers, figures or other collectibles. Their popularity also provides a way of catching the eyes of potential customers. By being more colorful than regular packaged sweets they stand out and people want to buy them, for no other reason than that they belong to a franchise (Allison 2003). This is supported even more so by the fact that, in Berlin, local sweets containing extras are mostly of rather unknown, child-oriented, or entirely original characters. For anyone who is following currently relevant franchises not just aimed at children and interested in Japanese media, sweets featuring Pokemon, Jujutsu Kaizen or Naruto often become the go to for “toy-sweets”. There is a famous example of “Haribo”-company and their collaboration with Nintendo. This product had “Supermario” characters on the packaging, and instead of the usual bears, the gelatin candies took the form of elements from the game. It was a smash hit and sold out almost everywhere on day one. The packaging, as well the individual gummies, were circulating daily on social media apps (Gameswirtschaft 2022). Later on these sweets popped up on online marketplaces for high prices, though not necessarily because people were interested in the actual food. Validating this stance even further is the fact that shops focusing on other branches of pop-culture like pvc figures, fashion or books also have been adapted. When counted during our research, we found that over 65% of the sweets in pop-culture based shops featured at least one anime, Manga, or videogame character. Some stores in Berlin even dedicated whole columns on their front-page websites to anime/game-themed food in general (Figuya 2020; Neo Tokyo 2019).

Made in... Taiwan?!

Even before our fieldwork, we were already acquainted with popular Japanese sweets such as *dango*, *mochi* and even savory snacks like *senbei*. What we did not know, however, was that manufacturers will often use writing, recipes and even Japanese characters to market their products as Japanese, when they are in fact not. We bought some sweets, only to later find out that they were made in countries like Taiwan, Hong Kong, or even France, just to name a few (*go asia 2022*). Their packaging often featured Hiragana or Kanji characters in bold letters and imagery alluding to Japan in some way or another. This was mainly achieved through packaging featuring Japanese temples, tourist-attractions or popular franchises. The only way one would be able to discern that the sweets were in fact not from Japan then, would be to read the labels. This is, however, not a common practice among customers of Japanese pop culture stores in Berlin. This highlights Japanese language as a marketing strategy. Also related to the concept of “Cool Japan”, Japanese media products like anime characters in and of itself has become profitable enough to attract customers. The name “Japan”, as such, has become a brand on its own already (*McLeland 2017; Allison 2003; Iwabuchi 2015*). This is also reflected in the prices of sweets represented as Japanese (although produced elsewhere), as they were often higher than “openly” non-Japanese goods.



Experience as added value

“Cool Japan” mainly caters to the experience provided and not the general goods acquired. Japanese sweets feature stickers and other bonuses of relevant media to their full effect (Allison 2003). Many Kitkat flavors mean to confuse the customers’ taste buds and provide a kind of “challenge”. Consuming becomes more of a game. There are multiple guides online to play games with sweets like the “Pocky game” and official instructions on how to fry certain Kitkats (Insider 2019; Japan Today 2017; Zenpop 2022). Gimmicks such as these provide excitement and transform the product from a conventional food product into an experience. The experience becomes a multi-faceted, sensual and aims to entertain in various ways in various ways. It allows people to communicate and share with others. Many for instance split their purchase so that one person receives a sticker while the other can eat the sweet, for example. Big packages of Kitkats are often shared between friends or within groups visiting the aforementioned pop-culture shops. In addition, the process of discovering these food-challenges or games often is a adventure in itself. Most knowledge is gained via internet research on blogs, popular circulated clips from shows, or even fanwork being written about specific sweets (ZenPop 2022; CanCam 2021). Consumption of these specific sweets also gives most individuals a sense of connection and provides a sense of belonging to a fan group. In conclusion, individuals who buy Japanese sweets in Berlin do so more for the emotions provided by the experience of discovering and sharing them with others. They specifically search out venues to live out certain expectations even under the presumption of having to pay substantially more (Figuya 2020; Neo Tokyo 2019; J - Store 2022; go asia 2022). This all shows how strong “Cool Japan’s” grip in Berlin’s Japanese “sweetscape” is. While our fieldwork can only provide a small glimpse into this world where Japanese food and popular culture overlap, we were able to distinguish between general consumption (via supermarkets) and one for the experience (pop-culture shops). People going to these shops also buy items branded but not originally Japanese, as long as it is marketed as Japanese. The individual might use sweets as a group-building activity and several people can profit from one purchase in different ways.



Conclusion

During our fieldwork, we were able to get an idea about Japanese sweets landscapes in Berlin. Using the research method of observation, we draw many interesting conclusions. The stores selling sweets in Berlin can be divided into those that concentrate on Japanese pop culture and Asian supermarkets. Pop culture stores were higher priced and made heavy use of the "Cool Japan" image (*Allison 2003; McLeland 2017; Iwabuchi 2015*). Sweets that were somehow related to *anime* cost significantly more than other sweets (*Figuya 2020; J - Store 2020; Neo Tokyo 2019; go asia 2022*). We found out that the sweets we thought were Japanese were not always made in Japan, but in other Asian countries, such as Taiwan (*go asia 2022*). This inspired us to think about what "authentic" Japanese products are and to reconsider our vision on this issue. Another finding is that despite the high prices of products that were often produced outside of Japan, people still buy these sweets. Furthermore, in this context, sweets are not just a product. They provide the customer with unique experiences and emotions, for example the pleasure of finding them. They also take on significance in a social context, becoming the basis for interaction between friends and creativity. In this way, sweets give consumers the opportunity to be part of the community and the sense of belonging with peers.



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