

MARKETING THE **OTAKU** LIFESTYLE ABROAD



AN INTERVIEW WITH TOKYO OTAKU MODE FOUNDER AND CEO **TOMOHide KAMEI**

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TOKYO Otaku Mode (TOM) is a massively successful shop that exports Japanese pop culture to the world. TOM's Facebook page boasts over eighteen million overseas fans, and its e-commerce site, the Tokyo Otaku Mode Premium Shop, processes a flood of overseas orders for anime character figures and stuffed toys.

In recent years, Japan's subcultures and *otaku* culture have been the subjects of intense interest from overseas. We spoke to TOM founder and CEO Tomohide Kamei about their appeal.

What trends do you see in Japan's subcultures? What are their distinguishing characteristics?

Japan is an island nation, so it wasn't subject to strong external pressure; it became the breeding ground for a distinctive culture. For example, although the West presents a larger market for anime, there's a contrast between Western heroes—who tend to be strong and powerful from the beginning of their stories—and Japanese heroes, because the latter prominently go through coming-of-age stories. They initially suffer as weak persons and then eventually become strong. I think that element strikes a chord with fans overseas. There are many fans of Japanese content with this deep sense of story among creators active in Hollywood and elsewhere now, and it's reflected in their work.

There is demand overseas not only for anime and manga but for Japanese food, architecture,

traditional handicrafts and cutting-edge technology such as bullet trains as well. Japan's geographic and historical situation has required us to create new technology or ideas every time we've lost something old due to war damage or natural disasters, and I imagine that led to the development of our current sense of originality.

What sort of content are customers overseas seeking, and what sort of impact is this content having on the world?

Japan's anime and manga are so popular that there are expos overseas dedicated to them that attract tens of thousands of attendees. On the other hand, I feel there's great potential interest in other Japanese subcultures such as fashion, bento and art. For example, TOM's e-commerce site offers "sushi socks" that look just like sushi when they're rolled up; they're selling like mad on the site, but they aren't very well known among our Japanese customers. *Shunga* erotic prints, whose distribution is now somewhat discouraged in Japan, have also gained explosive popularity as works of art in France and other European countries. When we, as Japanese people, see tourists from overseas happily snapping photos in unexpected places, it's an opportunity for us to rediscover the fun of seeing Japan through global eyes.

The word *otaku* once had a negative connotation, meaning "someone who is reclusive and obsessed with anime and manga." But that age has passed, and now the term is used by men and women alike as a way of identifying a style of personal self-expression. Even high school girls say things like "I'm a makeup *otaku*" in everyday conversation. The term is developing a wider, more positive application now, encompassing fashion and music in addition to manga, anime and video games under the idea that Japan is cool and has an interesting and fun culture. Just like I talked about how many overseas creators are fans of Japanese content, many style-conscious people enjoy the *otaku* culture, and it has developed into a lifestyle.

What sort of growth and development do you expect to see?

With the spread of the Internet, we now face many copyright violation issues, such as illegal uploads and pirating. We therefore need to develop an accurate grasp

of the areas where there is demand for content and to be proactive in delivering official content and products to those markets.

On the other hand, we'll have to make adjustments to meet the needs of overseas customers while preserving the original perspective that's expected from Japan. For example, with the food that's popular among overseas visitors, there are cases where culture clashes arise due to language issues or the seasonings or ingredients used in Japanese cuisine. If we on the Japan side take a proactive attitude, if we study the various cultural backgrounds and needs of our overseas audiences and offer services that satisfy those needs, I think we'll discover a significant business opportunity. **7**



These "sushi socks" (shown here rolled up and unrolled) are a massively popular item on TOM's e-commerce site