

Manga as a Cultural National Brand



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A good story seduces readers into it, making them forget about their daily stresses, and entrances them. When thinking about a story, do you think of a novel, a play, or a movie? Where else do great stories lie? Japanese comics, or manga, offer a wealth of excellent stories. Maybe you've heard of *One Piece*, *Astro Boy*, or *Full Metal Alchemist*. Manga are diverse and cover material by age groups, gender, and interests, in addition to genres. Not only do manga tell great stories, but also for those avid about anthropology, literature, or learning about Japanese culture they offer a vast amount of information. Manga already have a global audience, but there is room for expansion.

The upcoming 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics present Japan with an opportunity to showcase the country and culture to the world while gaining extra revenue from national brands. While there are many brands to choose from, such as traditional culture or high-tech robotics, the brand that will garner a rather large profit while providing education and entertainment is manga. It is a part of the "Cool Japan" movement, but manga deserve to be given a separate national branding from Cool Japan. Manga have already proven to be very successful and are so varied that unorthodox varieties, such as

fan-created manga (*doujinshi*) and manga from political parties, can also be successful. There is still more potential for a great national brand; it only needs to be marketed to a broader audience.

Brief History of Manga

The word manga means whimsical or curious pictures, and was coined by Katsushika Hokusai, a famous painter from the Edo Period (1603-1868), though the origins lie in the *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* (Animal Caricatures) scrolls from the 12th century. Known for his famous "Great Wave of Kanagawa" painting, featuring a large wave with Mt. Fuji in the background, and even for his great influence on French Impressionism, Hokusai's contribution to manga can be seen in his manga sketches. There are 17 books of Hokusai's sketches. According to the Harvard University Library, they all depict scenes of everyday life, nature, or supernatural themes. They are done in the Ukiyo-e style, different from the wide eyes and eccentric hairstyles of characters in modern manga, but their realistic style was familiar in the Edo Period. These books influenced other artists in depicting Japanese daily life and culture (*Images*).

IMAGES



Hokusai monk sketches from Vol. 2
Source: Courtesy of the Smithsonian Libraries



Hokusai sketch of shamisen player from Vol. 12
Source: Courtesy of the Smithsonian Libraries

The next movement in manga came after World War II, with the influence of American cartoons. During this time, modern-day manga's shape and style became recognizable. As Frank Fuller cites in his dissertation *The Atomic Bomb: Reflections in Japanese Manga and Anime* (2012), manga were influenced during the American occupation by characters such as Betty Boop and Mickey Mouse. *New Treasure Island* by Osamu Tezuka, known for creating *Astro Boy*, was one of the first manga to gain postwar popularity. Tezuka was greatly influenced by Disney films and cartoons and has been called the "God of Manga" for popularizing the modern layout and creating several manga genres.

Uncovering Japanese Culture & Customs Through Manga

While both Tezuka's and Hokusai's art differ in many aspects, these artists and the many that came after have an important similarity, displaying and discussing important themes and attitudes in Japanese society during their lifetimes. The most common method for doing so was devoting the stories' major and recurring plot points to the theme they wished to display.

For example, in *Astro Boy*, Astro and many other characters are struggling to find a home after their first is taken. Astro was invented as a replacement for the scientist's son who died in a car crash. When Astro never grew, the scientist sold him and afterward Professor Ochanomizu found the robot and provided Astro with a home. In a later chapter, an alien robot comes to warn Astro about an incoming invasion and to find a home after his planet was destroyed. These are just some examples of *Astro Boy*'s recurring theme, and it helps readers understand that Tezuka is commenting on 1950s' Japan. While *Astro Boy* was being drawn, Japan was rebuilding itself after World War II and a large problem during that time was rebuilding homes and returning to a more peaceful life. Tezuka's goal was to inspire hope for his readers by giving his characters a similar search and leading them to a happy ending.

Looking at a work's main subject matter is another way to interpret culture. In Hokusai's manga, there isn't necessarily a plot or story, but along with sketches of nature and buildings there are numerous sketches of daily life. From creating and working on wares to enjoying entertainment, Hokusai represented the daily life in Edo. Monks, deities, and temples are central in his collection and because of this viewers can interpret that the Shinto deities and Buddhism were a large part of Japanese culture during the Edo Period. Another aspect that is heavily drawn is entertainment. There are shamisen players and dancers, people enjoying a swim, poets, and people playing a ball game, just to name a few. The variety of entertainment revealed in these sketches shows how prevalent it was in Edo culture. Even without a cohesive story, Hokusai was able to highlight Edo's culture.

A person with more experience in interpretation and life experience can find more themes and cultural aspects to interpret in manga, but this is a skill that anyone can use to make reading manga more enjoyable. Reading the story itself is entertaining, but questioning the work or finding a deeper meaning transforms the story into an

amusing puzzle. This isn't limited to Tezuka's or Hokusai's work but can be found in almost any manga during any time period. It is a valuable idea, as it can track the changes in Japanese culture as well as help people understand the cultural aspects that have remained over time.

Advertising Japanese Culture: Cool Japan Movement

Besides finding it in manga, how does one learn about Japanese culture? Fans of Japanese culture will have heard of the Cool Japan movement, implemented in 2012, with its goal "to commercialize and capture overseas demand for businesses derived from Japanese culture and lifestyle", according to the Cool Japan Fund site's mission statement. Because culture and lifestyle are broad topics, there are many cultural objects and activities that fall into this campaign. Opportunities and strategies for products and advertising are extremely varied as a result, which has been said to weaken the overall message of the campaign.

An interesting strategy from Cool Japan is Kyoto's kimono passport. Certain shops and temples will give discounts and special services to patrons wearing kimono. During the 2018 cherry-blossom festival at the Kyoto Imperial Palace, people wearing kimono were allowed in for free and skipped the long lines. There were quite a few people dressed in kimono and walking down the Gion district in Kyoto as a result. There are many visitors interested in wearing kimono but who are afraid of being culturally insensitive, and this passport usually helps these tourists get over their fear and persuades them to wear a kimono. As the sheer amount of kimono rental shops and their packed schedules will attest, the kimono revival is doing well in Kyoto.

However, many facets of culture don't get this much special attention and are only given translations in order to be enjoyed by foreign visitors. Some temples post English directions for how to pray, while tea ceremonies have hosts fluent in English who explain how to participate in the tea ceremony as well as its nuances and history. Tourist sites such as Osaka Castle and Hiroshima Peace Park have historical information displayed in several languages as well. These places also hold events as another method of advertisement. Manga are a larger part of the movement and have been given more advertising than just translations, like the kimono revival in Kyoto. With a variety of ads on trains, in convenience stores and malls, and on television, they offer the most readily available and predominant cultural method of advertising.

The New, Creative Cool Japan

Most understand Cool Japan to be a plan to boost international interest in Japanese culture, but this is only a portion of the current operation. In preparation for the Olympics, the message behind Cool Japan was revisited and in 2014 the Cool Japan Promotion Council created a proposal addressing concerns about the movement and enforcing lesser-known aspects. From the proposal:

The broad concept of Cool Japan covers all aspects of Japanese

culture from subcultural products...to traditional cultural heritage. This diversity makes it very difficult to understand the current concept of Cool Japan...Cool Japan is a national movement encouraging the Japanese people to fully exercise their voluntary creativity in the international community. The term "creative" in this proposal not only means the production of artwork and design work, but also the creativity of anyone that helps develop a business and new schemes, makes innovative attempts, and forms relationships that result in interaction.

In other words, its goal is to boost creativity in both the artistic and the business sectors. It's a movement focused on finding solutions to Japan's current problems through creativity and communication. In the proposal, there were three recurring themes: becoming confident in English in order to communicate on a global scale, promoting a community with ample communication and where young people can creatively thrive, and finding creative solutions to current problems and then sharing those solutions with national businesses.

The Cool Japan movement, as most know it, is almost unrecognizable in this proposal. Few actions in this proposal deal with Japanese culture and only use it as a springboard to encourage creativity in Japanese society. For instance, creating classes in Japanese schools where students discuss the aspects of Japanese culture that they enjoy in English with other students from different countries. The action discussed in the proposal that deals with advertisement was to create a website where various experts can create educational articles and presentations on Japanese culture in various languages, making a "one-stop shop" for Japanese culture.

Signs of Popularity in Modern Japan

Even with the addition to the creativity aspect of Cool Japan, advertising Japanese culture is the main facet of the movement. Manga advertisements have gone extremely well and have influenced other types of advertisement in Japanese life. Many companies now have character mascots and many advertisements are done in a manga fashion due to the success and popularity of manga.

Manga have greatly contributed to Japan's gross domestic product (GDP). The All Japan Magazine and Book Publisher's and Editor's Association released a report on the 2016 sales of manga. Anime News Network has translated the report's highlights. Manga sales, on the whole, are rising, with a 0.4% growth from 2015. Without factoring in revenue from advertising, the manga industry brought in 445.4 billion yen (\$3.91 billion) in 2016. Japan's total publishing revenue in 2016 was 1.66 trillion yen (\$14.60 billion), meaning that manga made up 26.8% of Japan's publishing revenue. According to the Cabinet Office, Japan's GDP in 2016 was 539.25 trillion yen (\$4.94 trillion), making manga account for 0.08% of GDP. This is a large number from one subsection of an industry, which indicates just how influential manga are in Japan.

Another indicator of manga's popularity is in other advertisements. Many companies now sport cartoonish characters in an attempt to gain a bigger market share, such as Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp. with Mitotsuke the Otter and Sanrio's Hello Kitty. Ads are done in a

Photo: Author



Advertisement to report molesters at Mita train station

manga style as well. Railway companies are a notable example. Many of the notices and warnings, such as reminding people to be silent on the trains or to report molesters, are also in manga form (Photo). Even the Liberal Democratic Party created a manga to sway younger voters to amend the Japanese constitution. Manga have reached beyond the page to be a constant presence in the business, transportation, and even political sector of modern Japanese culture. This isn't an accomplishment that many cultural arts can boast and is an indicator of how popular manga have become and the potential for growth.

Manga have gone beyond bookstores and libraries and into cafes and museums. Manga cafes provide patrons with bookshelves of manga, computers, and some refreshments. Some cafes even allow patrons to stay overnight. According to Google maps, there are around 40 in the Tokyo area alone. There are also at least four museums dedicated to manga. Three memorialize Osamu Tezuka, Shōtarō Ishinomori, and Studio Ghibli, and there is an international manga museum in Kyoto. The most apparent examples, however, are urban areas that are huge proponents of manga. Tokyo's Akihabara and Osaka's Nipponbashi Denden Town are famous examples. In these cities, there are more than a few manga cafes as well as stores that sell manga, anime, and character goods. Cosplay is a common sight along with building-sized advertisements of manga characters. Manga have become a large component of Japanese life and have greatly influenced Japan's modern culture.

Branching Out

Manga's success in Japan has created a substantial opportunity in global advertising and a transcontinental cultural interest. Most readers read manga exclusively for entertainment. Because manga already contain aspects of Japanese culture, both modern and

historical, they are a natural conduit for further cultural introductions and enjoyment.

Interpreting the themes and cultural aspects of creative works is a skill that most people have and use regularly in other forms of art. Sometimes these themes and questions are in the foreground of the work; for example, *Full Metal Alchemist* questions the value of family through Edward and Alphonse Elric's attempts to bring their mother back to life and through their quest for the philosopher's stone. At other times, values and cultural factors are in the background, such as in *My Hero Academia*. The reliance on others is not a main theme of manga, but it is a constant one. Japan has a community-centered culture where people help others in order to benefit the group as a whole and this culture is featured in many manga including *My Hero Academia*. Most Japanese manga contain aspects of Japanese culture within them for readers to find. This is how manga should be advertised to attract a new audience.

While current manga sales are already high, there is always a possibility to attract more revenue. Current strategies are working, but advertising manga as a gateway to Japanese culture will gather a larger audience for those who are interested in learning about Japan in a more natural way than reading travel books or textbooks. If the cultural aspects of manga are advertised along with the current advertising methods, sales have a great potential to grow.

Possible Guide for Foreigners

One potential idea for the use of manga is a guide for tourists. Before traveling to a foreign country, research on sightseeing spots and hotels to stay in are normal, but the culture and manners of the country are often neglected. Japan does have an official tourism guide at <https://www.japan.travel/en/> where the Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO) has detailed everything from tourist sites to etiquette for traveling in Japan. Despite having this, there are still valid complaints about foreign tourists not following customs. One problem with this website is that it isn't advertised well. It doesn't show up in the first few pages of a Google search, and when advertising tourism in Japan the website doesn't appear unless it's an ad from the JNTO. Another problem is that this guide isn't as appealing as it could be. The articles are well written and informative but the format is very plain and does not hold readers' attention as well as it could. For these reasons, many tourists don't visit this website or research Japanese customs, which leads to manner-lacking tourists in Japan.

A recent survey by the JNTO has cited that there was an 18% increase in inbound tourism from January-March 2017 to January-March 2018. Due to the 2020 Olympics, this number is anticipated to dramatically surge. Complaints about tourists and foreigners usually stem from a cultural difference, a difference that can be easily understood and respected with a bit of research. For example, transportation manners or how to sort out the garbage can be complicated and unnecessary to foreigners. Using entertaining and easy to understand manga could potentially help Japan solve this problem.

One of the larger complaints is the language barrier. Tourists

complain of the lack of multilingual options in Japan and the Japanese complain about those who don't make an effort to learn Japanese. While foreigners aren't expected to be fluent in Japanese, an effort to understand simple phrases is appreciated. Apps, YouTube Japanese lessons, blogs, and easy-to-use textbooks are all created to combat this one complaint. One of these textbooks, *Konnichiwa Nihongo!* created by *The Japan Times*, is a small, 143-page book filled with illustrations, and simple and useful Japanese phrases. It's written in Chinese, Korean, English, and Japanese (both in Japanese characters and the Roman alphabet) to cater to a broad audience. This book isn't a traditional manga, but it is heavily illustrated, with all but one phrase being aided with a picture. Many other concerns could possibly be addressed through a similar book.

An official manga aimed at tourists or those wanting to learn more about Japanese culture will help increase interest and offer an affordable solution to these problems. Just as the manga created by the LDP was to discuss the Japanese constitution, a manga as a guide could be very helpful for tourists wanting to learn about the culture and manners, and to acquire easy-to-use phrases. Each chapter could be dedicated to a different topic. Train stations, as an example, could be an interesting area to cover. Buying a ticket, silence on the trains, and the phrases commonly announced can be jarringly different for tourists. Reading a chapter or two in a manga about train etiquette could be useful for them and make riding the trains a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. Another chapter could review shopping at a mall, where foreigners can learn the polite way to ride the escalators, or why they shouldn't directly hand the cashier their money, and illustrate the differences in paying for a meal at a restaurant. A manga for tourists could be a potentially helpful tool, especially if advertised in the right way.

In order to avoid the same mistake as the JNTO's website, the manga should have wider and more appealing advertising and promotion. Having people share it through travel blogs and social media, and selling it at airports, travel agencies, hotels, and bookstores would be a good start.

Final Thoughts

Manga have come a long way from their origins as cartoon animals frolicking on scrolls. They have gained a place at the heart of modern Japanese culture and have seeped into many aspects of daily life. Manga deserve to be a separate national brand. The Cool Japan movement is partially to thank for this popularity, but there is still unused potential in manga advertising. Tourist-oriented advertising and promotion of Japanese historical customs and culture would bring more revenue into the industry and the nation.

There are many brands on which Japan can spend its resources and time advertising, and manga constitute a worthy brand to showcase both during and after the Olympics. Doing so would strengthen the message of a "Creative and Cultural Japan". **JS**

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