

The Changing Japanese Market

By Masaru Uchida

As a magazine editor, I am constantly exposed to new trends in the popular culture, thought, and life-styles of the nation. Just as our magazines report on and help shape society, we are also inevitably influenced by societal factors beyond our control. This has been especially true, and there have been particularly conspicuous changes, in Japanese society as it has moved from complete desolation in the backwash of a lost war to unprecedented affluence just 40 years later. New trends and mores have been dictated in rapid succession by what I perceive as three distinct postwar generations.

The first generation was the baby boomers born in the first decade after the war. These people had to compete for food, education, and other resources in a country still reeling from defeat and determined to concentrate on economic recovery. They competed, for example, for entry into schools forced by the shortages of both facilities and teachers to restrict the number of students they could admit. Thus the baby boomers were the first to suffer through the entrance examination hell which continues to this day, albeit for different reasons.

This was also the first generation to be raised on television. By the time they were finishing elementary school, television had captured the nation's imagination and given birth to its own distinct mass culture. As television became the dominant medium, radio changed from being a shaper of mass attitudes to a personal medium and important conduit for popular entertainment, particularly on its late-night music programming targeted specifically at the younger generation.

A third medium for the youth culture was the comic book. This was the first



Young men and women who have turned 20 attend Adults' Day ceremony. Japanese young women are becoming more assertive and their taste dominates market trends.

generation to go heavily into comics, a graphic medium like television, and these children probably read more comic books than any other form of literature. *Shonen Magazine*, *Shonen Sunday*, and other *manga* that debuted in the late 1950s remain popular even today, along with numerous other comic books of all kinds.

By the time the baby boomers entered the universities, many of them were militant activists and the instigators of the nationwide student demonstrations that persisted throughout the 1960s.

The fervor of the 1960s eventually faded, however, as the baby boomers married and settled down to raise their own children, but even at this stage they were pacesetters. It was, after all, this generation that established new life-style

patterns by departing from the traditional extended family and creating the "new family"—a nuclear family with only one or two children.

The second postwar generation was born in the mid- and late-1950s. This generation shares many of the same traits that characterize the baby boomers. They too grew up on television, late-night radio programs, and comic books. They even have similar tastes in music, as seen in the Beatles' continuing popularity. Yet precisely because of these similarities, this second postwar generation failed to create a distinctive youth culture of its own, and this is in many ways Japan's "lost generation." If there is anything that sets them apart, it is their cynicism and passivity.

The third postwar generation, born in

the 1960s and 1970s, is completely different from the preceding two generations. The most striking characteristic of this generation is the fact that it has many more males than females.

This disparity stems from a natural phenomenon common to all mammals. Studies have shown that, on average, mammals give birth to significantly more males than females, but the higher infant mortality rate for males tends to offset their higher birth rate so that the male:female ratio is roughly one by the time they attain adulthood. It is my hypothesis that the mammalian conception pattern of having more males than females has evolved because the female, given the physical demands of reproduction, is inherently stronger and thus more likely to survive to maturity. Thus all mammals, man included, bear more males in order to maintain sexual parity and ensure the survival of the species.

However, modern science has radically altered this natural course of events by developing improved hygiene and sophisticated pediatric medicine to enable more males to survive than ever before. Laudable though these advances may be, they are creating an unnatural state of affairs and having a highly disruptive impact upon society.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 more boys than girls have been born in Japan every year since 1960. Thus this third postwar generation, which includes everyone below the age of 20 (the age of legal maturity in Japan), now has around 700,000 more males than females. In effect, this means that there are 700,000 boys who



will never get their girl, will never marry, and will never have families. The competition for female attention has taken on unprecedented intensity. Today's young girls are in a seller's market, and they know it. Girls have always matured faster than boys, but the mass media and contemporary social mores make today's young girls sexually aware at a much earlier age than their prewar counterparts.

The young Japanese woman's heightened sense of her own value is accompanied by a finely honed sophistication in her choice of men. In the male-dominated society of the prewar years, the young bride who could not marry her

true love settled for what she could get, and if this was a man she could not love she simply focused all her attention and energies on her children. Today's young woman not only has considerably greater freedom of choice and the ability to exercise it, she may very well choose not to marry at all. This, of course, narrows the number of available brides even further, forcing young men to pander even more to female whims in the hopes of winning a mate.

It is here that the male-female imbalance impinges upon market trends. Because young men are trying to impress and please young women, female preferences are dictating consumer fashions and market movements. When a young man goes out to buy a car, traditionally a "male" product, he may well take his girlfriend with him, if he has one, and her choice of color, style, and accessories is more likely to be the deciding factor than the performance facts and figures in the salesman's spiel—and if he does not have a girlfriend the choice will be made largely on the basis of what he thinks will get him one.

It is unlikely that this male-female imbalance will even out before the 21st century, when it may be possible to redress the disparity with prenatal genetic manipulation to influence the sex of the fetus. Until then, female tastes will most likely continue to govern market trends. The third postwar generation has entered the labor force and is developing into a formidable consumer market. Any company that wants to survive in Japan will have to court the ladies just like Japanese men have to. ●

