“Make Someone Happy”: Romantic Gift Giving of Teenagers in Japan

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Romantic gift giving practices of teenagers in socioeconomically troubled Japan are examined. The teenagers’ gift giving orientations are influenced by the gender and gift giving socialization and the media. Four emergent themes manifest as the synthetic cosmic order, Disneyfied intimate sphere, body and soul, and playing liquid romance.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study investigates the romantic gift giving of teenagers in Japan. Teens are a crucial consumer segment for the purchases they make themselves and for their influence over others. Not only do they present their gifts to romantic others (Belk and Coon 1993), but also they strive to perfect their gifts for expressing their selfless altruistic feelings (Belk 1996), vocalizing their “wish lists” (Tuten and Kieck 2009), and using gifts to delineate their perimeters of intimacy (Zelizer 2005). How do Japanese teens practice romantic gift giving? How does the contemporary Japanese culture amid whirling socioeconomic turbulence manifest in their romantic gift giving?

In today’s Japan, youth represent a pivotal, and at the same time, problematic segment in the society. Unlike the “New Breed” at the height of the Bubble economy (Anderson and Wadkins 1991), they live in a nation that has been infested by a “sick economy,” with chronic deflation, a high unemployment rate, and disparity of wealth (Shirahase 2011). The prolonged recession in the aftermath of “Bubble” economy of the 90s has led to the restructuring of organizations, abolishing the lifetime employment system and emphasizing merit over seniority. On the other hand, the falling birthrate and increasing life expectancy have made Japan an aged society. To ensure long-term sustainability of the nation, there has been much effort among policymakers to ensure the creation of adequate social infrastructure for the young to become competitive laborers and to support women to stay in the labor force after marriage and during childbearing years (Inui 2003; Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2012). Growing up with material abundance and a bleak outlook for the future has made them “youth without desire” (Yamaoka 2009).

In the consumer research, gift giving has been studied as a multidisciplinary area of inquiry (Belk 1979; Sherry 1983; Giesler 2007). Most of the prior research has dealt with the North American context (e.g., Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990), and interrogation of romantic gift giving by specific age groups has been largely neglected. Japanese gift culture has not been much explored in consumer research despite its importance and traditions (Minowa and Gould 1999; Rupp 2003). Investigating the gift giving practices of teenagers in Japan is significant for at least three reasons. First, the informants expressed that their romantic gift giving practices are constructed in two levels: One is the intimate sphere, and another is the synthetic cosmic order. Specifically, the analysis produced the following emerging themes:

* Synthetic Cosmic Order. The informants expressed that their perfect gift-giving should take place within a safety zone. Teenagers recreate the synthetic cosmic order with a collage of images from cultural media – manga and anime in particular. The world-system beyond their intimate sphere is perceived as dangerous. A surprise gift within a discernible domain is felicitous. No “magic gift” that is larger than “the size of their palm” is desired. Extravagance should be avoided as it dislocates them from the cosmic order.
* Disneyfied Intimate Sphere. The pacific politico-societal climate of the nation has cultivated “herbivorous” men and women whose sexuality is downplayed. They are juvenile, kidults-in-training (Barber 2007). Gender socialization is influenced by media: Their ideal masculinity and femininity are modeled after protagonists in the media stemming from a unique synthesis of Western and Japanese comic/anime cultures. The themes may originate in Chinese/Japanese mythologies (e.g., Fruits Basket). Furthermore, these fictional characters may be transfigurations of haunted animals and the popularity of stuffed animals as gifts seems to reinforce the traditional animistic folk beliefs as tacit knowledge (Ito 2007; Minowa 2012).
* Playing Liquid Romance. Their ambiguous anxieties about ontological security manifest in romantic gift giving practices as a regression to children’s playful fantasies of eternal romance. The relationship begins with a confession, equivalent to a “contract.” Monthly couple anniversaries confirm that not everything is ephemeral and these are important occasions to celebrate with romantic gifts; the desire is to avoid having no bonds yet handle them loosely in “liquid modern” times (Bauman 2003). Gift selections may be influenced by superstitions about calendrical coincidences with the anniversary. Lacking ambitions, both genders take pride in consequential accomplishments, such as baking from scratch and, with the sweet gifts, wish to “make someone happy” in a time of turbulence.

REFERENCES


