

Testing What's Hot In The Cradle Of Cool

Fashion houses are trying out new products on the teenyboppers of Tokyo

Tokyo's armies of fashion-obsessed shopaholics have long made the city figure prominently on the map of Western designers. Sure, the suit and tie remain the uniform of the salaryman, but for originality nothing rivals Tokyo teenyboppers, who cycle in and out of fads faster than a schoolgirl can change out of her uniform and into Goth-Loli gear. (Think Little Bo Peep meets Sid Vicious.) For American and European brands, these young people are a wellspring of ideas that can be recycled for consumers back home.

But now, instead of just exporting Tokyo cool, some savvy foreign companies are starting to use Japan as a testing ground for new concepts. They're offering products in Japan before they roll them out globally, and more Western retailers are opening new outlets in Tokyo to keep an eye on trends. Ohio-based Abercrombie & Fitch and Sweden's H&M Hennes & Mauritz plan to set up shop in Tokyo in 2008, while Spain's Zara is expected to double its store count to 50 over the next three years. "Twenty-five or 30 years ago, major brands tested their new products in New York," says Mitsuru Sakuraba, who spent 20 years at French fashion house Charles Jourdan. "Now Japan has established a presence as a pilot market."

New York-based bagmaker LeSportsac would agree. About a fifth of the company's \$300 million in global revenues comes from Japan, allowing it to get a jump on trends. Last year, for instance, creative director Elizabeth Kiester noticed Tokyo shoppers gravitating to larger sizes in LeSportsac's lineup of casual nylon bags. After some research, Kiester discovered that fashion stylists in Tokyo's swanky Omotesando district used the bigger bags to lug their gear. High school girls started to mimic them, and the bags soon caught on in the rest of Japan and eventually across the globe. "Tokyo is a melting pot of a billion ideas," says Kiester, who travels to the Japanese capital four times a year in search of inspiration. "I can see something happen in Tokyo and watch the ripple effect across the Pacific to New York and then watch as it goes back to L.A."

Some Western companies have signed on with local partners who can better read the Japanese market. Gola, an English brand of athletic shoes and apparel, has teamed up with EuroPacific (Japan) Ltd., a Tokyo-based retailer of fashion footwear. EuroPacific tweaks Gola's designs for the Japanese market, and a few years ago came up with the idea of pitching shin-high boxing boots to women. They were a hit with Japanese teens and twentysomethings, prompting Gola to try offering them in other markets. "They've sold a hell of a lot in Europe," says EuroPacific Director Steve Sneddon.

SHOPPING SPREES

Japan's ascendancy in fashion circles has given rise to a new cottage industry: "cool hunt" tours of Tokyo. Loic Bizel, a French-born fashion consultant, charges upwards of \$800 a day to shepherd foreign visitors to boutiques such as Rosebud, ReStir, and 109 where Tokyo tastemakers congregate. Bizel says his clients typically spend \$20,000 or more buying up clothes and other gear that they ship back home for design teams to inspect, and one fashion veteran confesses to a \$100,000 shopping spree. To save time, some companies send their loot directly to factories in China, where garments are resized for American or European dimensions, sewn together cheaply, and then shipped overseas. "One day they're here, and next they can be in China putting their collection together," says Bizel.

Sometimes, though, all those Tokyo teenagers can be a bit too fashion-forward. Last year LeSportsac launched a range of bags in Japan with a pattern featuring brightly colored button mushrooms, a motif that figures prominently in the *kawaii* (Japanese for "cute") genre that includes icons such as Hello Kitty. Although the mushroom bags were a hit in Japan, Kiester has been reluctant to introduce them in the U.S. "It's too 1970s. Too psychedelic," she says. "We weren't ready for that at home."

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