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The Japanese Teenage Culture

When thinking of a typical American teenager's life, what activities come to mind?

Maybe it's going to the movies, grab a burger and fries at a fast food joint, shopping in the local mall, playing video games at home, and playing sports in the local park. And for the majority of Americans this is true; but this is not the case in Japan. The Japanese teenage culture is highly influenced by the competitive atmosphere that the high school students have to go through. It seems like every teenager has the image of a perfect student in their minds and they will not settle for anything less. Sleeping few hours a night, no free time, no time to hang with friends, and coming home at late hours are just some of the sacrifices that the Japanese culture has forced on these kids; however, this does not mean they never get to have a good time.

Japanese teenager's ways of letting loose are much different than those of American teenagers. In heavy metropolitan cities such as Osaka, there are no public parks and no open gyms. The teenagers only use the facilities that the schools provide them so hours are sometimes limited. This means, they have little opportunity to go out to the park and play a pickup game of basketball. When living in Osaka, I was disappointed to learn this fact; but it only made me push harder to find out more about the Japanese teenage culture. If it wasn't in pickup games or public parks, it had to be somewhere in the busy city that is Osaka. While walking around the city I kept on noticing teenagers walking in groups but unlike in America. They all wore their school uniforms during the summer when there was no school because it was mandatory if they had practice, and they all had matching bags with their school and sport

on it. But even more interesting were the places they would congregate. Arcade malls with a huge bike parking lot in front, convenience stores reading the newest manga, entertainment buildings, hot springs, okonomiyaki restaurant, and neighborhood carnivals or matsuri's are the usual hot spots. After experiencing every single one of these things with teenagers from Osaka, I can safely say they are just as or ever more fun than what most Americans do.

After one night in Osaka, my host family sent me to their grandson's house in Nara to stay for the weekend. I had told them I wanted to meet Japanese teenagers, and they knew exactly where to send me. The first day of meeting the grandson I was immediately enthralled to what we would do together the next few days. My mind was racing with all the possibilities of what could happen. But I quickly realized that I know nothing about what teenagers do in Osaka yet. That night we went to the onsen's or hot springs. They were relaxing, calming, and really a fun experience, which is something the American teenagers need more of. Then we came home to a box of "ice candy", or popsicles, that quickly became empty, and video games which kept our entertainment until late hours. The next morning I set out with the grandson to explore the city of Nara not knowing what to expect. After seeing a couple landmarks of the city including Daibutsu, I was asked what I wanted to do. To which I responded, "I want to do what you always do." Immediately we headed to a place called "Round 1." This particular Round 1 building held two floors of arcade games, a floor for food and pool, and three floors of bowling allies. Each floor was filled to the top with teenage kids just looking for a good time during this hot summer day. It seemed perfect, friends, entertainment, food, and air conditioning; the perfect atmosphere to have a good time is Osaka. This was truly a teenage hangout place unique to Japan. The only place close to this place would be the Metreon in downtown San Francisco; yet, it had a totally different atmosphere. Every single person there seemed to have forgotten about that perfect student image for just the time there were there. It was the concentrated zone of

fun for teenagers in Osaka that I learned to love maybe even more than the American equivalent. Round 1 was the first experience I felt that a true Japanese teenager would often take part in. It taught me a lot about what to expect from upcoming events with other Japanese teenagers and made me even more excited to learn more about their lives.

The next week I visited the grandson's house of my friend's, Anna, host family. On the way over I knew this experience would be much different than the one I had with my host family's grandson because we would be in a house and not out in the city. Not knowing what to expect, I went into the house with an open mind ready to enjoy whatever will happen. Right away I talked to the two grandsons, one younger than the other but both around my age, about all of the Japanese culture I know to which they replied with all the American culture they know. It was so interesting to find out what they know about our culture and equally interesting to watch their expressions of excitement when I named off the numerous Japanese musical artists I knew. After exchanging our home country's music, we went on to play videogames. We played a Japanese game which is equally popular in both America and Japan. I was intrigued by the realization that this game is one of the few bonds of pop teenage culture that both Japan and the US share. After playing for a while and eating dinner, I watched videos of the grandson's passion: handball. This was something I was not familiar with, but after watching their videos I immediately saw how sports was just as big a part of their lives as it is in the US. Maybe they are different sports, but the passion and dedication they show is the same. This trip to their house taught me more about the subtle but important connections the US has with Japan, but also added to my list of what Japanese teenagers do for fun. It was similar to the US in this case, but the unique sports and games of Japan is what makes the teenager's lives so interesting.

During the last week of my time in Osaka, I met a very unique teenager who I connected with very well. His name was Hiro and his parents were a friend of my host family.

The first time I met him I was taken over to his house right before he got back from school. His house was a very traditional looking Japanese style outside with a modern interior design. When he returned home, we immediately started a conversation which led us to realize how much we have in common. We both play drums, we both play sports, we like the same genre of music, read the same manga, watch the same anime, and enjoy the same cuisine. All of these things were independent things that the typical Japanese teenager does for fun. It was so interesting to find these things out because it was similar to American culture as well. That is, until he invited me to a local carnival. We went to his neighborhoods matsuri where we met up with his friends, explored the games and food, and had a very long conversation. The local carnivals were held pretty often and are always filled with teenagers who all seem to know each other. There is no equivalent to this in American that I can think of. To have such a casual place to hang out, talk, and have fun where everyone is at in the US is hard to come by. Japanese carnivals are very unique because they embody a childish atmosphere but still attract teenagers who are there to socialize and have a good time. This was a very fun and enjoyable night for me and taught me even more about the Japanese teenage life.

It seems hard to believe there is a life for Japanese teenagers outside of school, cram school, homework, and studying; however, the thirst for fun is very prominent in Japan just as much as in the US. Their idea of fun is the same as ours, just done in a different way. Meeting these Japanese teenagers taught me so much about their lives and culture that I am now starting to live more like a Japanese teenager myself. Yes, the Japanese teenage culture is filled with activities that are mysterious to most Americans, but they are also more similar than anyone could imagine.