

This is the real hothouse of fashion ferment, where one-of-kind T-shirts and funky ensembles reside.

On a recent visit, for instance, a mannequin was resplendent in fake pearls, a negligee, camouflage Bermudas and, to round out the soignee look: Army boots.

In the Darwinian competition to stand up and be counted, conventional retail marketing takes a hike.

Forget accessibility -- the wooden floor of one shop slopes downhill, literally dumping shoppers into the racks.

Several boutiques -- including the drop-dead-trendy Bathing Ape -- are too hip to even hang out a sign.

Not to worry. Those in the know have no trouble finding their way to these obscure objects of fashion desire.

Deep pockets and an insatiable appetite for shopping have evolved Japan into the kingdom of cool, said Mr. Bizel, whose own taste runs to Noh-like dark camouflage.

With an average budget of \$400 a month to fritter away on accessories and apparel, Japanese "kids have more money to spend," compared to their counterparts in Europe or America, Mr. Bizel said.

"At the same time, they like shopping. Shopping is like a hobby or a sport."

The urge to break away sartorially is rooted also in the often oppressively conservative bent of Japanese society.

From the time they are old enough to attend nursery school, Japanese are obliged to wear uniforms.

Severe dress codes, though easing a bit, dictate practically every occasion and identify many occupations, especially in large corporations.

Parading after-hours in Harajuku is an antidote to the straightjacket conventions of weekday life, not to mention a way of standing out from the crowd, a not-inconsiderable challenge in this nation of 120 million.

Looking good seems to be the last thing on anyone's mind at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, where the dress code tends toward dark, ill-fitting suits.

### **Spinoff benefits**

Nonetheless, economic mandarins, such as Ryohei Tamura, are hyped about the country's new status as style trendsetter, especially in the field of entertainment.

"The contents industry offers tremendous spinoff benefits," he said.

"For example, the Pocket Monsters video game spawned a TV show, movie and licensed products. The contents industry also serves as good public relations for our country. It deepens understanding of Japanese culture and enhances Japan's image."

Japan's so-called "contents" market -- which includes everything from music and video games to comics and movies -- is estimated at \$100 billion, or about half the size of Japan's auto industry.

Hello Kitty and Astro Boy can't fix everything that's wrong with Japan, but for an economy past its prime, they're more than just comic relief.

### **Mega-manga**

Japanese-style comic books, known as "manga," have gained fans from Boise to Berlin, and have been credited with virtually single-handedly restoring enrollment in Japanese-language classes on American college campuses, where Japan had fallen off the map after its economy turned south in 1990.

Japan has become the cultural lodestar for a generation of trendy young Americans, say purveyors of pop culture.

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