

Constructing Model Toy Culture: Bandai's "Tamashii Nations" Exhibitions

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Abstract. This paper examines the cultural significance of the annual "Tamashii Nations" exhibitions held by the leading Japanese toy manufacturer Bandai to present the latest high-end model toys to its customers. The analysis concentrates on the exhibitions between 2019 and 2024, which serves as a case study to understand how Bandai engagement with cultural production and representation in a globalized and post-pandemic context. Drawing on Appadurai's "social life of things" and Kopytoff's "cultural biography of objects" as theoretical frameworks, this paper explores how Bandai's exhibition strategies, particularly through the promotion of the True Bone Carving series, generate cultural and economic value. The analysis highlights how nostalgia, craftsmanship, and fan engagement contribute to shaping the perception of model toys as both collectible commodities and cultural artifacts. Through a detailed examination of exhibition practices, consumer reception, and global market trends, the study demonstrates how Bandai not only integrates existing cultural industry strategies but also actively influences the construction of model toy culture. The conclusion addresses future trends, including digital exhibition formats, globalization, and the evolving role of collectible figures in identity formation in transnational fandoms.

Keywords: model toy culture, action figures, fandom culture, cultural representation, Japan

1. Introduction

Model toys, particularly action figures, hold a significant place in Japan's toy industry, contributing to the country's broader cultural economy. The term "action figure," which originated in the Western market, refers to articulated model toys designed for both play and collection. Unlike generic toys that lack a specific brand or trademark, action figures often derive from established franchises and are tied to specific cultural narratives around identity formation and collective memory. Bandai, as Japan's dominant toy manufacturer, has played a central role in shaping the action figure industry, particularly through its annual "Tamashii Nations" exhibitions.

A key factor distinguishing action figures from conventional toys is their deep-rooted connection to popular media and storytelling. Unlike generic plastic figurines, action figures serve as physical representations of characters from long-standing television series, films, and comic books. Their design, articulation, and customization enhance their appeal not only as children's playthings but also as collectible memorabilia for adult fans. As a result, action figures occupy an intersection between entertainment, nostalgia, and economic investment.

The “Tamashii Nations” exhibition, initiated in 2008, serves as a premier platform for Bandai to showcase its latest high-end collectibles, including action figures from franchises such as Kamen Rider, Ultraman, Gundam, and Dragon Ball. Over the years, Tamashii Nations has expanded from a niche event catering to dedicated collectors to a large-scale exhibition that attracts a diverse audience, including international fans, pop culture enthusiasts, and industry professionals. Such a development reflects the increasing cultural and economic significance of action figures within both Japanese and global markets.

Tamashii Nations, in fact, represents a highly sophisticated business model that integrates marketing with community engagement. The exhibition is not simply a showcase of upcoming releases but also a meticulously designed consumer experience that builds anticipation and fosters brand loyalty. Through limited-edition pre-orders, exclusive event releases, and interactive display zones, Bandai strategically cultivates a sense of scarcity and desirability among collectors. These tactics align with the broader framework of the cultural industry, where mass production and exclusivity operate simultaneously to drive consumer demand.

Since 2019, the “Tamashii Nations” exhibition has undergone significant transformations within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting from large-scale in-person events to digital showcases and then returning to hybrid and fully in-person formats. This period provides a valuable case study for understanding how Bandai adapts to social and economic changes while maintaining the cultural significance of its exhibitions. The pandemic accelerated the use of digital engagement tools such as virtual exhibition platforms, pre-order exclusives, and online product showcases, reshaping how collectors and consumers interact with new releases. These changes illustrate how the commodification of action figures is closely linked to broader shifts in consumer behavior, technology, and market dynamics.

Moreover, the resurgence of nostalgia-driven marketing in the post-pandemic period highlights how action figures are positioned as objects of cultural memory. Bandai’s emphasis on re-releasing classic characters and reviving legacy franchises demonstrates how model toy culture is not merely about product consumption but also about reinforcing emotional connections with past entertainment experiences. The popularity of the True Bone Carving (TBC) series, which meticulously recreates iconic figures with enhanced sculpting techniques and articulation, exemplifies this trend.

This paper examines the role of the “Tamashii Nations” exhibition in constructing model toy culture, with a focus on the display of the True Bone Carving (TBC) series. By analyzing exhibition strategies, fans’ engagement with the exhibited products, and the symbolic meanings embedded in these figures, this study investigates how Bandai bridges nostalgia, authenticity, and economic value in a highly commodified industry. The analysis also considers how the making and consumption of model toys shape identity formation and global fandoms.

Analyzing Tamashii Nations’ significance requires examining its broader role in the global action-figure market. While Bandai has traditionally dominated the Japanese toy industry, its influence extends beyond the domestic industry. The brand’s increasing collaboration with international streaming services, such as its partnership with Netflix on Ultraman, signifies its expansion into global markets. The growing demand for high-end collectibles in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia further illustrates how Japanese model toy culture has permeated international markets, shaping the consumption patterns of collectors worldwide.

To further understand the mechanisms behind Tamashii Nations’ cultural influence, this paper employs theoretical perspectives from cultural industry studies, anthropology of objects, and globalization theories. The next section will outline these frameworks and how they inform our

analysis of Bandai's strategies in shaping model toy culture. The subsequent sections will analyze how Bandai's exhibition strategies, consumer reception, and product narratives shape the evolving landscape of action figure culture. Ultimately, this study aims to highlight the significance of Tamashii Nations not only as a commercial endeavor but as a key player in the intersection of popular culture, fandom, and value creation.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1. Cultural industry and mass consumption

The theory of cultural industry, as proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, critiques the mass production of cultural goods and their role in reinforcing consumerist ideology. Bandai's Tamashii Nations aligns with this framework as an event designed to cultivate demand, control fan engagement, and create exclusivity around its collectible figures. The commodification of the sentiment of nostalgia, which is central to Bandai's marketing strategy, ensures that consumers continuously engage with the brand, perceiving it as both a producer of cultural artifacts and a curator of childhood memories.

Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital further inform my study. The high-end action figures, such as True Bone Carving models, function as markers of distinction among collectors. Unlike mass-produced toys, these figures require significant financial investment as well as knowledge of the franchises they represent. The scarcity of the True Bone Carving series enhances their desirability, demonstrating how exclusivity is deployed to construct the toys as an embodiment of cultural capital [1].

Akio Tanaka's work [2] on Tokyo's consumer culture provides a regional perspective, positioning Bandai within Japan's broader entertainment and creative industries. His analysis of consumption spaces in Tokyo helps contextualize how Tamashii Nations functions as both a commercial event and a cultural site for fan participation. As a major metropolitan hub, Tokyo facilitates the convergence of retail, entertainment, and subcultural identities, making it an ideal backdrop for Bandai's strategic engagement with both local and international audiences. Tanaka's studies also highlight how urban consumption spaces shape the ways in which pop culture enthusiasts interact with their preferred media.

Bandai's control over consumer engagement is also evident in how it structures its marketing campaigns. By leveraging digital platforms, social media, and exclusive pre-orders, the company ensures that demand remains high, even for re-released figures. This model aligns with the broader critiques of the cultural industry, wherein mass production and perceived uniqueness exist in paradoxical balance. Despite being widely available, the deliberate limitation of certain models transforms them into sought-after commodities, reinforcing the prestige of the brand among collectors.

2.2. The social and cultural life of objects

Appadurai's concept of "regimes of value" suggests that commodities do not possess fixed economic value but acquire value through cultural and social interactions [3]. Bandai's action figures, in fact, are not mere commodities, but evolving into cultural artifacts shaped by nostalgia, media narratives, and transnational fandoms. Action figures, particularly high-end collectibles, gain significance through their association with iconic characters and stories. Appadurai's framework

provides insight into how Bandai leverages media tie-ins, promotional events, and limited-edition releases to shape the social value of its products beyond their material worth.

Kopytoff's theory of the "cultural biography of objects" further elucidates how action figures transition between commodification and singularization [4]. The True Bone Carving series exemplifies this process: these mass-produced products gain unique status through the "Tamashii Nations" exhibitions which limit the sales and advertise them as high-end collectibles produced by high craftsmanship.

Moreover, Kopytoff's discussion of commodification cycles is particularly relevant to the model toy industry. Action figures, which is mass-produced, evolve into unique cultural artifacts through Bandai's strategy of generating the sense of scarcity and selling based on the valuation of the loyalty and qualification of buyers. This transition is evident in Bandai's marketing strategies, where selected action figures are deliberately produced in limited quantities and distributed through exclusive channels. The Tamashii Nations exhibition plays a central role in this process, serving as the primary venue for unveiling high-value collectibles that are destined to appreciate in cultural and financial value.

The concept of nostalgia is also key in the making and consumption of Bandai's action figures. Nostalgia-driven consumption reflects a broader cultural trend where consumers seek material connections to past entertainment experiences [5]. The "Tamashii Nations" exhibition capitalizes on this phenomenon by reintroducing legacy characters from the Kamen Rider and Ultraman series released in the Showa and Heisei eras, positioning these figures as both historical artifacts and contemporary collectibles. This interplay between the past and present reinforces the cyclical nature of cultural production, wherein older media franchises are continually revived and repackaged for new generations of consumers.

Furthermore, the globalization of model toy culture highlights the relevance of Appadurai's framework in explaining transnational flows of cultural commodities. Bandai's collaboration with international distributors, coupled with the increasing demand for Japanese collectibles in Western markets, illustrates how action figures function as globally circulating objects that acquire different meanings depending on their cultural context. For instance, while the True Bone Carving figures are marketed in Japan as premium collector's items tied to nostalgic sentiment, they are often framed in Western markets as examples of superior Japanese craftsmanship and authenticity. These shifting value perceptions exemplify how commodities traverse multiple cultural and economic landscapes, reinforcing Appadurai's assertion that value of objects are context-dependent and fluid.

Bandai's exhibitions reveal the complex cultural and economic processes underlying the production and consumption of action figures. The "Tamashii Nations" exhibition serves as a key site for understanding how objects gain symbolic significance, not merely through their aesthetic appeal or technical quality but through the narratives and meanings ascribed to them by consumers and media industries alike. Bandai's control over the branding and presentation of its figures at these exhibitions further highlights the importance of cultural curation in maintaining the desirability of collectibles within an increasingly commodified media landscape.

3. Bandai Tamashii Nations: 2019–2024

3.1. 2019: the pre-pandemic peak

The 2019 "Tamashii Nations" exhibition represents the peak of Bandai's showcasing of its dominance in the action figure market. Held in Akihabara, it featured interactive displays, exclusive product previews, and live demonstrations from designers. The introduction of the True Bone

Carving models for Kamen Rider and Ultraman series emphasized Bandai's focus on authenticity and nostalgia-driven marketing. Consumer response was overwhelmingly positive, with pre-orders for these figures selling out within hours. This year also saw a notable increase in media coverage, with mainstream Japanese outlets highlighting the growing cultural significance of action figures beyond niche collector communities. The physical presence of renowned designers and industry professionals at the exhibition added an extra layer of credibility to Bandai's positioning as a leader in premium collectible figures.

Additionally, the 2019 exhibition reinforced the importance of fan engagement through special panel discussions, where fans could interact with designers and express their preferences for future product developments. This feedback loop played a crucial role in shaping subsequent product releases, solidifying Bandai's strategy of maintaining close communication with its fan base. The year also saw the introduction of augmented reality (AR) display technologies at the exhibition, allowing attendees to experience digital previews of upcoming figures, an innovation that foreshadowed the digital adaptations in the following years.

3.2. 2020–2021: adapting to the pandemic

With the onset of COVID-19, Bandai transitioned to online exhibitions, using virtual showrooms and 3D renders to showcase new releases. While these digital strategies maintained the visibility of products, they were met with criticism from fans who lamented the loss of physical interaction. However, Bandai capitalized on digital engagement through exclusive online sales and limited-time preorders.

Bandai also leveraged social media platforms to create a sense of community among collectors who could not attend in person. Special online events featuring behind-the-scenes insights from designers as well as the announcements about exclusive product sales helped sustain enthusiasm despite the shift to a digital format. Another key innovation was the introduction of interactive livestreaming sessions where fans could submit questions to Bandai's development teams in real time, reinforcing the brand's commitment to fan involvement.

One of the most notable trends during this period was the accelerated expansion of Bandai's international outreach. With travel restrictions limiting in-person attendance, Bandai intensified its focus on global distribution channels, ensuring that international fans could participate through online releases. This shift highlighted the increasing role of globalization in shaping the future of model toy culture.

Before moving back to in-person exhibitions, Bandai had already laid the groundwork for a more globally-oriented strategy during the pandemic years, which influenced its approach after 2022.

3.3. 2022–2024: post-pandemic revival and expansion

The return to in-person exhibitions in 2022 marked a strategic shift, with Bandai emphasizing immersive experiences, live performances, and celebrity collaborations. The resurgence of physical events underscored the enduring appeal of in-person interactions within the collectible toy community. Fan anticipation was particularly high, as many collectors sought to experience firsthand experience with the craftsmanship of the new True Bone Carving releases.

By 2024, the exhibition expanded to dual venues, reflecting the growing significance of collectible action figures in Japan's cultural economy. This expansion allowed Bandai to separate its major franchises into dedicated exhibition areas, creating a more tailored experience for attendees. The True Bone Carving continued to be a major draw, with figures from Showa-era Kamen Riders

and Heisei-era Ultraman appealing to fans from different generations. Notably, the 2023 and 2024 exhibitions introduced a significant number of reissue of classic figures with improved sculpting techniques, further reinforcing the nostalgia-driven marketing strategy.

In addition to expanding product lines, Bandai also strengthened its presence in the global market by increasing collaborations with international distributors. The inclusion of multilingual exhibition materials and overseas-exclusive product variants signaled a more globalized approach to the Tamashii Nations exhibition. Furthermore, the integration of digital components—such as mobile apps providing interactive guides and QR-code-based content unlocks—bridged the gap between physical and digital engagement, blending the best elements of both pandemic-era adaptations and traditional in-person exhibitions.

Another emerging trend in the 2022–2024 period was the shift toward sustainability in product packaging and materials. Bandai introduced eco-friendly packaging solutions, a move that resonated with environmentally conscious consumers while maintaining the premium appeal of its figures. This initiative demonstrated how collectible toy companies are beginning to align with broader global concerns about sustainability without compromising product quality or exclusivity.

4. Cultural and economic significance of the bone carving technic

4.1. Nostalgia and cultural memory

Action figures produced through the Bone Carving Technic (真骨彫製法) serve as tangible representations of Japan's tokusatsu heritage [need to explain tokusatsu]. By meticulously replicating characters from TV series and movies released in the 1970s–1990s, Bandai invokes nostalgia among adult collectors while introducing younger audiences to classic franchises. Nostalgia, as defined by Boym [6], is not merely a longing for the past but a reconstruction of history to fit contemporary cultural needs. This process is evident in Bandai's strategy, where figures from the Kamen Rider, Ultraman, and Super Sentai series are carefully redesigned to appeal to both older fans who grew up with these characters and new audiences seeking high-quality collectibles.

These figures function as more than just commercial items; they become cultural artifacts that embody a shared media history. By reviving Showa-era heroes alongside more recent Heisei and Reiwa figures, Bandai facilitates a generational dialogue within fandoms, reinforcing the collective memory of Japanese popular culture. Through its precise sculpting, reinterpreted details, and enhanced articulation, the Bone Carving Technic creates a sense of authenticity, making the past feel present. This continuity strengthens the cultural significance of the figures, allowing them to serve as emotional and historical anchors for collectors.

The marketing of products made through the Bone Carving Technic draws on the affective feelings of consumers. Promotional campaigns emphasize not only the accuracy of the proportion of these figures but also their connection to specific episodes or moments in the history of the franchise they are connected to. For example, the heBone-Carving action figures of Kamen Rider Black was strategically aligned with the franchise's 35th anniversary, reinforcing the sentiment of nostalgia to make the products attractive to older fans.

4.2. Craftsmanship and market positioning

The craftsmanship of the Bone Carving Technic sets the action figures apart from their standard counterparts. These figures distinguish themselves through their high quality produced through advanced sculpting techniques and premium materials. Unlike mass-produced action figures, which

prioritize affordability and durability, figures made through (the Bone Carving Technic) focus on accuracy and intricate detailing. Bandai employs digital sculpting and traditional hand-painting methods to ensure that figures produced through the Bone Carving Technic capture the essence of their on-screen counterparts. This blend of old and new techniques positions the products within a broader discourse of craftsmanship, reinforcing its appeal to collectors who appreciate the artistry behind the production process. Moreover, the use of premium materials, including die-cast elements and multiple interchangeable parts, further enhances their value as collectibles rather than simple playthings.

Exclusivity is another key factor in the success of the Bone Carving series. Bandai strategically releases these figures in limited quantities, creating a sense of urgency among collectors to purchase. This controlled scarcity not only reinforces the exclusivity of the figures but also contributes to the long-term appreciation of their value. The resale market for the Bone Carving figures often sees prices double or triple their original retail cost, further solidifying their status as premium collectibles.

Additionally, Bandai employs a staggered release strategy, ensuring that only a select number of figures from a particular franchise is released at a given time. This method maintains sustained interest in the series while allowing for continued engagement with fans. The unpredictability of which character will be released next generates speculation and anticipation, further fueling collector enthusiasm.

4.3. Narrativization and fan engagement

Bandai strategically integrates storytelling into its action figures, with each Bone-Carving products accompanied by promotional campaigns that highlight the historical and cultural significance of the characters. This approach aligns with Kopytoff's concept of singularization, transforming mass-produced figures into unique cultural artifacts.

Narrative plays a crucial role in the branding of the Bone Carving figures. Bandai frequently associates these figures with pivotal moments in tokusatsu history, reinforcing their emotional impact. For example, the release of the Bone Carving model toys from Ultraman Tiga was heavily marketed around its legacy as one of the defining TV series of the 1990s, appealing to fans who grew up with the show.

Fan engagement is also central to Bandai's marketing strategy. The company actively involves fans in the decision-making process, conducting surveys and soliciting feedback on potential releases. By giving collectors a voice, Bandai fosters a deeper connection between the brand and its audience. This participatory model not only enhances consumer loyalty but also ensures that the figures released align with fan expectations.

Moreover, Bandai has embraced digital platforms to extend engagement beyond physical exhibitions. Social media campaigns, live-streamed figure reveals, and behind-the-scenes production documentaries have all contributed to making the Bone Carving series a dynamic, interactive brand. The use of augmented reality (AR) features in product launch further demonstrates Bandai's commitment to innovation in promoting fan interaction.

As collectibles, the Bone Carving figures do more than merely replicate on-screen characters—they encapsulate the essence of tokusatsu storytelling. Through meticulous attention to detail, strategic marketing, and a deep understanding of fandom psychology, Bandai ensures that these figures transcend their status as toys to become cultural artifacts imbued with meaning.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the cultural and economic significance of Bandai's "Tamashii Nations" exhibitions from 2019 to 2024, with a particular focus on how Bandai employs cultural production strategies to shape the perception of action figures as both collectible commodities and cultural artifacts. By utilizing theoretical frameworks such as Appadurai's "social life of things," Kopytoff's "cultural biography of objects," and Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques of the cultural industry, this paper has analyzed how Bandai integrates nostalgia, craftsmanship, and fan engagement into its branding and marketing strategies. Through an in-depth examination of exhibition practices, consumer reception, and global market trends, this research highlights how Bandai's "Tamashii Nations" exhibition has evolved in response to both external economic factors and shifting consumer behaviors.

One of the key findings of this study is that Bandai's strategy is deeply embedded in the commodification of nostalgia, which plays a central role in the success of the True Bone Carving series. The company's marketing approach deliberately leverages emotional connections that consumers have with past TV and movie franchises, transforming action figures into cultural artifacts that embody personal and collective memories. This nostalgia-driven consumption model is further reinforced by Bandai's meticulous craftsmanship, which ensures that figures possess a level of authenticity and detail that distinguishes them from standard mass-produced toys. The process of re-releasing classic characters with enhanced sculpting and articulation techniques has proven to be an effective method of sustaining consumer interest and reinforcing the value of collectible action figures within the global toy market.

The role of exclusivity in shaping consumer demand has also been a significant factor in Bandai's success. The scarcity of Bone Carving figures, combined with limited sales and region-exclusive releases, has cultivated a sense of urgency to purchase among collectors. This study has also demonstrated how Bandai's marketing techniques align with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, as high-end figures serve as markers of distinction among collectors.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 further underscored the adaptability of Bandai's business model. As physical exhibitions became impossible due to travel restrictions and social distancing measures, the company successfully pivoted to digital formats. The introduction of online-exclusive figure releases, interactive live stream events, and virtual exhibition platforms allowed Bandai to maintain product visibility despite the absence of in-person interactions. However, the lack of a physical exhibition experience did result in some dissatisfaction among collectors, as the tangible aspects of toy collecting—such as viewing figures up close, engaging with designers, and participating in live discussions—were significantly diminished. Nonetheless, Bandai's ability to maintain strong sales during this period illustrates the resilience of its brand and its capacity to adapt to market disruptions.

With the return to physical exhibitions in 2022, Bandai further refined its hybrid exhibition model, combining the advantages of in-person events with digital enhancements. This transition back to large-scale showcases, alongside an increased emphasis on global market engagement, highlighted Bandai's commitment to expanding its influence beyond Japan. The inclusion of multilingual exhibition materials, international distributor partnerships, and region-specific product releases demonstrated a more globally oriented strategy, which has contributed to the increasing popularity of Japanese collectibles in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The evolving nature of the Tamashii Nations exhibition, from a niche domestic event to a global showcase, exemplifies the transnational flow of Japanese pop culture and its integration into worldwide collector communities.

In addition to its commercial success, Tamashii Nations plays a crucial role in shaping identity formation within fandoms. The exhibition provides a space where collectors, fans, and industry professionals can converge, reinforcing the social aspect of toy collecting. Through panel discussions, interactive displays, and community-driven marketing campaigns, Bandai fosters a participatory culture where fans are actively involved in the brand's development. By positioning figures as both economic investments and cultural touchstones, Bandai effectively merges commercial interests with fan engagement, ensuring sustained loyalty and enthusiasm from its audience.

Furthermore, Bandai's innovative use of technology has enhanced the ways in which consumers interact with its products. Augmented reality (AR) displays, mobile applications, and QR-code-based content unlocks have added an additional layer of engagement to the exhibition experience. These digital components not only modernize traditional marketing techniques but also cater to younger audiences who are accustomed to interactive and multimedia-driven experiences. By blending physical and digital engagement, Bandai has successfully expanded the scope of Tamashii Nations, making it a dynamic and immersive cultural event rather than a mere product showcase.

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