

The Human Factor: Working with Users

Case Study

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1 Problem

Japan is famous for its dedication to tiny details. People coming to Japan for the first time are highly likely to be shocked by lots of Made-in-Japan designs. *Otohime*(音姫), or *Sound Princess*, is undoubtedly among the very first Japanese devices which people encounter and find difficult to figure out.

Otohime is very common in women's toilets in Japan. It makes flushing sound lasting around 25 seconds every time the button is pressed, masking the sound of urination. Users can lengthen the sound by waving hand or pressing the button again, depending on the exact design. In Appendix, Figure 1 shows a stand-alone *Otohime* which appears on the wall of a toilet booth. Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4 show *Otohime* on the control panel of washlets.

While Japanese find *Otohime* helpful to mask their embarrassment of being heard by others(whether they are strangers in public toilets or colleagues in toilets in companies) during urination as they are self-conscious, most visitors to Japan, especially those from distant Western countries, might be unable to understand this kind of device. I have interviewed a couple of Westerners during my stay in Japan. Almost all of them had never seen devices functioning in that way before, thus confused about the usage of *Otohime* when coming to Japan. Especially when there is Japanese only on the device(Figure 1), Westerners become rather puzzled. Even though there is English translation in Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 2, the vague or generic words(SOUND, FLUSHING SOUND, and even PRIVACY¹), which are not self-explanatory enough, cannot solve the problem of helping Westerners understand the usage and necessity of *Otohime* and why Japanese fancy it so much.

Avvannavar, S. M., & Mani, M.(2008) suggest, people have various approaches to sanitation across different cultures or countries. *Otohime*, as a Japanese particular approach to sanitation, is accepted because of its location in culture and everyday life(A Chun, 2002).

“The parlor may have its charms, but the Japanese toilet truly is a place of spiritual repose.”(Tanizaki J, 2001)

In toilets, Japanese avoid external concerns and seek for privacy and inner peace. In contrast, there does not seem to exist similar cultures in the Western world, broadly speaking. Even though modern washlets were originated in the West, the localization of washlets in Japan progressed in an incredible speed. The debut of *Otohime* is exactly the adaption of toilets to the subtle and delicate sense of privacy deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

¹ Some example questions collected from Westerners regarding the English translation on the button of *Otohime*:

SOUND: Why would I need to make any sound when peeing?

FLUSHING SOUND: Doesn't flushing sound naturally come together with flushing water? Why do I have to MAKE that sound manually?

PRIVACY: What do I do with this PRIVACY button when peeing? It does not make any sense to me.

2 Solution

To help people understand the usage of *Otohime*, providing meaningful translation is necessary. Instead of some current versions such as SOUND(Figure 3), FLUSHING SOUND(Figure 4) and PRIVACY(Figure 2), translation such as *artificial flushing sound(to mask sound of urination)* is worth considering. As long as people can understand how to use *Otohime*, the beauty of personalisation in its English name *Sound Princess*, can be accepted better as well.

In addition, as a part of aids to foreigners, local governments can make handy booklets introducing the unique aspects of Japanese cultures. As visitors to Japan are mostly likely to be interested in Japanese cultures, I believe people are willing to know and accept the idea of *Otohime* given enough cultural information.

Bibliography

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- [2] Chun, A. (2002). Flushing in the future: The supermodern Japanese toilet in a changing domestic culture. *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy*, 5(2), 153-170.
- [3] Tanizaki, J. (2001). *In praise of shadows*. Random House.

Appendix

Figure 1. A stand-alone *Otohime* (Japanese only) on the wall of a toilet booth (by waving hand to the upper right corner, the flushing sound will be played for 25 seconds; lengthen the sound by waving hand again; stop the sound halfway by pressing the Stop button at the lower right corner)



Figure 2. *Otohime* (with PRIVACY in English) on the control panel of a washlet (Start the flushing sound by pressing the button and stop it by pressing again)



Figure 3. *Otohime* (with SOUND and SOUND STOP in English) with volume control on the control panel of a washlet
(Start the flushing sound by pressing the SOUND button and stop it by pressing the SOUND STOP; control the volume of the flushing sound by pressing – or + of VOLUME)



Figure 4. *Otohime* (with FLUSHING SOUND in English) with volume control on the control panel of a washlet
(Start and stop the flushing sound by pressing the FLUSHING SOUND button; control the volume by pressing – or + of VOLUME)

