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Advertising to the Japanese consumer

Japanese advertising culture examined

Ritgerð til BA

Jón Björn Ólafsson

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Háskóli Íslands
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Abstract

Globalization has paved the way for branching markets, allowing products to be advertised and sold in countries with different cultures and traditions. Different cultures, however, most probably have different values and when marketing the same product across cultural boundaries, companies need to adapt their advertising strategies in order to appeal to a specific population. My goal is to gain cultural insight into Japanese society by attempting to find out which is the most effective way for a “westerner” to introduce and advertise a product in Japan. I will need to define and examine the theories of cross-cultural advertising, inspect the norm for local Japanese advertising, and finally determine what strategies to use based on cultural insight. I will consider the different categories of advertisements in Japan, and approach them from a cultural perspective in order to figure out what values are being promoted, and find out if these values correlate with cultural values typically shown in western cultures, with American advertisements serving as the standard for comparison. The reason this comparison will be limited to America, is because according to Rose, Bush, and Kahle, professors of marketing (1998) “Japan and the United States have the largest economies and are arguably the most sophisticated consumer cultures in the world”, which supports the basis of this limitation for the comparison. Also, according to InterBrand (2009), U.S. and Japanese company brands comprise more than four-fifths of the top 100 brands with worldwide presence. For these reasons, cross-cultural comparisons in regards to advertising involving Japan, are rarely made between European countries, with analysts choosing the U.S. as a representative of the west (Okazaki, S., Mueller, B. & Taylor, C. R., 2010).

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Introduction

In advertising, there are many different appeals that are used to drive the message presented, such as status, youth and individuality. All advertisements make an effort to promote a value that the potential buyer can resonate with (Mueller, B. ,1986). Therefore, when examining advertising appeals from different cultures, and studying the frequency of certain appeals, it is possible to gain cultural insight as to what is most commonly valued.

When introducing a product to a new culture, there are two methods on which to base the advertising campaign, standardization and adaptation(Ryans Jr, J. K., Griffith, D. A. & White, D. S. ,2003). In advertising, the appeals that are consciously used to draw in consumers all over the world resonate with human emotions. We are all human beings after all and there are basic emotions that advertisements can exploit in order to make a product or service seem more appealing. Therefore, according to the standardization theory, which will be defined in the next chapter, there should be a way to create a standard marketing campaign, and use that standard to garner appeal for a product cross-culturally. That said, the means to invoke a specific emotion may be different between cultures. Therefore, a more adaptive approach to advertising has been considered, Agrawal, professor in marketing (1995) refers to this as the adaptation theory. Whether to use standardization or adaptation when designing an advertising campaign has been a hot debate amongst marketing specialists for more than five decades. Agrawal (1995) accounts the 40 year-old debate of international advertising, with academician perspectives to the Standardization/adaptation issue.

Two of the more common terms in advertising are arguably 'hard-sell' and 'soft-sell' (Beard, F. K. ,2004). Both describe a fundamental groundwork that shapes the tone of the advertisement. They are opposites in many ways and studying their frequency in a specific culture will reveal what attitude advertisers take towards their consumers as well as how the public views advertisements. Whether a company chooses to adapt or standardize their marketing strategy, there will always be a need for considering 'hard-sell' and 'soft-sell'.

Opinions towards advertisements can vary. Advertisements are usually considered intrusive (Shavitt, S., Vargas, P. & Lowrey, P. ,2004, p.1011-1032), yet vital as they provide an indispensable income for many industries. Advertisements pay for many things we take for granted, and are therefore in my opinion somewhat of a necessary evil. What are the opinions towards advertisements in Japan? I once showed a Japanese friend of mine a

quote from Banksy¹, the United Kingdom based graffiti artist and political activist, where he compared advertisements to bullies that come into a person's life and makes them feel inadequate, where the natural response to this emotion is to go out and buy products that compensates for this inadequacy. At first my friend did not understand the comparison. After further deliberation my friend thought it was odd that Banksy would think this way of advertisers, since advertising is an integral part of modern society and most of the time they are enjoyable to watch. My friend's opinion may not be as strange as it strikes someone with Icelandic background, as, according to Praet (2001), there is evidence showing Japan to have a high percentage of favourable opinions towards advertisements.

“Unlike in many other countries -where advertising is mostly considered a ‘necessary evil’ by the majority of consumers- advertising in Japan is fully integrated with the world of show business and society in general. Many Japanese consumers consider TV commercials enjoyable to watch and the appearance of popular *talents*, idols, and other celebrities seems to be the main reason for viewer's favorable response towards these commercials.”(p. 4)

The aim of my study is to examine and review research done in this field, look through statistics and empirical evidence on frequency of advertising methods with attention to Hard-sell/Soft-Sell, for the purpose of drawing some conclusions on what would be the most successful way to advertise a product on the Japanese market.

Standardization and adaptation

Export and import of goods between different countries and cultures, known as trade, has been around for as long as human history has been documented. It is safe to proclaim that trade has shaped the world we live in today. Advertisements of today however, are by comparison a fairly recent phenomenon. According to Norris ,associate professor of journalism at the Pennsylvania State University (1980), “the industrial revolution not only made possible the quantity and forms of advertising we have today, it transformed every aspect of the economy and life in general” (p. 3-11). Advertising can be defined as a paid exposure of messages through an assortment of mass communication media to impact viewers. Mass media is one of the main contributors and driving force for advertising and at the same time, it is reliant on advertising revenue. As advertising has become a dominant method of exposing a product, companies have had to find a way to advertise their product when attempting to introduce it to a new culture.

¹ Banksy is a street artist, this work in particular is referred to as banksy coke ad

There are two clashing theories as to how to approach cross cultural marketing, standardization and adaptation (Papavassiliou, N. & Stathakopoulos, V. ,1997, p. 504-527). Standardization is based on the idea that human beings are fascinatingly alike, independent of environment and culture, that all human beings have the same set of emotions that drive them and therefore the values we seek remain identical unaffected by context. Therefore, the same product should theoretically be marketed with the same values and appeals regardless of culture. The theory of standardization in advertising was formulated as early as 1923, where Brown, who worked as an advertising manager, contemplated the logic for standardizing cross-cultural advertising.

“Just as green is green in Buenos Aires as well as in Batavia, just as two and two are four in Cape Town as well as in Copenhagen, just as the main purpose of advertising is to sell goods, in Singapore as well as in Sydney or Santiago, so all the primary purposes of advertising are identical in all countries, and all fundamentals of good advertising are essentially the same north and south of the Equator and east and west of Greenwich”(Brown, 1923, p. 190).

The aforementioned definition of modern advertising stated that there is payment involved. The advertiser has to pay for the exposure that they seek and in doing so, the exposure becomes an advertisement (Richards, J. I. & Curran, C. M. ,2002, p. 63-77). Money plays a great role in advertising and companies are constantly trying to find ways to make it more affordable. Therefore, the main motivation to develop towards a standardized medium is the potential to save money. Supporters of standardization argue that the process of adapting involves costly research. It usually entails hiring third party companies to do the market research which also sacrifices a lot of control. Furthermore, this venture ends up being, more often than not, too costly and unrewarding. Therefore, companies trying to advertise a product cross-culturally want to focus on the things that are held common between cultures, and develop their advertising strategies to that norm. This will also allow them to more easily establish an internationally recognized brand that stands for the same ideals no matter where it is seen. In summation, applying standardization is less costly, affords more control and allows for brand recognition (Agrawal ,1995).

Is standardization really working across cultural boundaries, or is it just wishful thinking that it does? Experts supporting adaptation believe, that standardization is an impossibility and that the wish for it to be reality emerged from the attractive benefits (Agrawal 1995). Pratt (1985) on *Building export sales-advertising* has been quoted numerous times for the following statement:

“Each market must be considered for the most part as a distinctly separate unit and adaptations must be made accordingly” (p. 19-22)

Reasons accounted in support for adaptation range from simple to complex. The obvious reasons proposed are language, customs, tastes, quality of living and purchasing power (Horn, P. & Gomez, H. ,1959). Language is an understandable barrier, though overcoming it has proven to be the most common blunder an advertising company makes. According to Kaynak (1989), the reason for this is that in many cases, a company hires a non-native speaker to translate the company’s advertising message. A good example is humor in advertising. It is a common advertising appeal, however, what is considered funny or witty varies considerably between cultures. Humor in advertising is unlikely to have a standardized appeal. Without the proper market research, translating a message meant to be funny, and introducing it to a new market, will be a sure blunder (Gulas, C. S. & Weinberger, M. G. ,2006).

Then there are some even more complex reasons why adaptation is more favourable. Subtle elements in framing and visualisation, and symbolism play a huge role in influencing the subconscious mind, and these factors are typical pitfalls for cross-cultural advertisers. Kramer (1959) believed that translating an advertisement was not enough if the message was originally intended for a separate audience:

“the form in which a story is to be told depends on the temperament and psychology of the people for whom it is intended“

A good example would be the difference between Japanese horror films and western horror movies. Japanese horror films often play with traditional values and superstitions to present foreshadowing, while western films more typically use framing and different symbolism such as ravens or wilted flowers for its foreshadowing. Ólafsson (2007) takes a look at Japanese horror films that are remade for western audiences. He specifically examines the 2004 film *The Grudge* and praises director Takashi Shimizu for being able to scare the Japanese as well as the American audiences in the same scene for entirely different reasons using western horror film framing in correlation with Japanese customs relating to death.

In cross cultural advertising, care has to be taken in regard to symbolism. It can range from unlucky colours, numbers, use of animals and religious symbols. In the case of Japan, there are many superstitions, unlucky numbers and traditions that need to be carefully navigated around. One danger of standardization, is if an advertisement unknowingly displays elements linking to superstitions, in most cases it will result in a negative impact (Simon, G. H. 1952, p. 281-293).

When considering advertising in a foreign culture, looking at which method of cross cultural advertising appears to be most favourable out of the adaptation and the standardization theory, Agrawal (1995) concludes after studying the 40 year old debate:

“since it is impossible to have something which is perfect both in theory and practice. the answer lies in a suitable resolution between the theoretical and the practical. While the practical approach of standardization may contradict the theoretical findings pointing to adaptation, the practical approach can actually be made more effective if theory can determine when and to what extent standardization should be used.”

He argues that a good middle ground between the two extremes appears to be the most favourable for advertisers. A considerable number of empirical studies conclude that ignoring cultural values completely can be detrimental, and that advertisements reflecting some local values are more persuasive (Gregory and Munch 1997; Han and Shavitt 1994; Hong, Muderrisoglu, and Zinkhan 1987; Taylor, Miracle, and Wilson 1997). Agrawal (1995) goes on to argue that standardization will only be possible with certain set of conditions, which Rijkens et al., (1971) sums up quite well.

“The development of a standardized international product and/or advertising campaign will only be possible if the market conditions and consumer habits and motivations are sufficiently similar to justify such an operation. In that case, the savings in money and manpower can be substantial.” (p. 10-19)

This brings us to the following question: Are Japanese and American cultures similar enough for advertisements between the two to be compatible: is standardization applicable? The world is gradually moving towards standardization with increased communication and travel. Even the fact that America is most commonly used for cross-cultural comparisons with Japan, seems to suggest that there is a certain “western standardization” that scholars deem America to be suitable to represent. This “western standardization” can also be characterized as GCCP, ‘Global consumer culture positioning’, a term that describes the “global” culture that has emerged from worldwide brand recognition of global companies (Alden, D. L., Steenkamp, J. E. & Batra, R. ,1999). Many major global companies have been shown to favour standardization such as Levi Strauss & Co (Jain, S.C. ,1990). The Pepsi company has also stated the following:

“We do not believe that each country requires an individual advertising and product approach. In developing our international marketing strategy, we

believe in the basic psychological truth that there are greater differences within groups than between groups. It is the sameness in all human beings in which we believe we must base our selling appeals”(Boote, A. S. ,1982, p. 19-25).

Japanese advertisements, however, are very unlike the standard the world is moving towards. Japanese scholars note that many elements of advertisements in their home country appear to be a “unique Japanese phenomenon”. The elements that pushes Japanese advertisements is cuteness, silliness, detachment from reality and most importantly, amusement. What drives this “uniqueness” is the extensive use of celebrities to tie the world of advertising together with the world of show-business (Praet, C. ,2001, p. 6-13).

‘Hard-sell’ and ‘soft-sell’

Considering ‘hard-sell’ and ‘soft-sell’ is critical to understanding the attitude people have towards advertisements. ‘hard-sell’ and ‘soft-sell’ are two fundamentally opposite methods of approach in advertising. ‘Hard-sell’ is hard hitting, and considered to be an annoyance for the consumer due to the nature of the approach. ‘Hard-selling’ is an aggressive sales tactic that aims to influence a consumer to purchase a product that may not necessarily be needed. This response from the consumer is evoked with a variety of methods that ultimately “absorbs customers’ time and may impose psychological distress upon them” (Chu, W., Gerstner, E. & Hess, J. D. ,1995, p. 97-102). Advertisements do this by manipulating the atmosphere to feel more urgent to the consumer, prompting a quick and un-contemplated purchase. Examples of this is when advertisements use phrases such as limited offer, buy now or the “buy two, get the third for free” type of selling. Mueller (1986) defines ‘hard-sell’: “Sales orientation is emphasized here, specifying brand name and product recommendations”. Overstatements of a products merit such as cleaning products or diet pills advertising unrealistic results, is a very common type of hard selling. Hard selling focuses on product quality above all else. Keywords to look out for in ‘hard-selling’ advertisements are typically “leading” or “number one”. ‘Hard-selling’ advertisements also often prompt comparisons between competitors, followed up by claims that their product is more effective, more energy efficient or more long lasting.

‘Soft-sell’, by comparison, is less direct, does not emphasize product advantages or specific reasons to buy the product. ‘Soft-sell’ is the name given to the advertising approach of using image based marketing coupled with music and themes to evoke emotional

responses in the consumer. Mueller (1986), again, defines 'soft-sell': "Image and atmosphere are conveyed through a beautiful scene or the development of an emotional story or verse. Human emotional sentiments are emphasized over clear-cut product-related appeals." 'Soft-sell' advertisements focus on being enjoyable to watch rather than irritable. The viewer is invited to invest their attention on the basis that the advertisement is not forceful.

Comparing frequency of 'hard-sell' and 'soft-sell' appeals in American and Japanese advertisements reveals that 'hard-sell' appeal in advertising is much more common in America than 'soft-sell' (Rose, Gregory M. ,1998). The opposite is true for Japan, where soft-sell is much more valued, according to Mueller (1986), 'soft-sell' is as much as four times more common in Japan, while 'hard-sell' is a rarity. Explaining why there is such difference in advertising appeals between these distinct cultures will reveal considerable cultural insight.

First, whether or not the reason for the frequency difference is cultural, there is a need to examine if the frequency is reliant on the effectiveness of each method. Both methods of advertising are effective in their own right, being influential in different ways. The aggressive approach of hard-sell has been proven to lead to a stronger purchase intention. Regardless of how irritating or invasive they may be, well constructed hard-sell advertising is informative and can be convincing as to why the product is great. Soft-sell manages to better establish emotional appeal, and in Japan, underlines to the viewer the company reputation in order to win the trust and respect of the viewer. Soft-sell and hard-sell both exist in America and neither notably more effective, however in Japan hard-sell barely exists. The few hard-sell advertisements on the Japanese market have been met with favourable responses from the public (Ono, Y. ,1997). Mueller (1992) also found that hard-sell appeals are occasionally seen used in advertisements for high-involvement products such as equipment, tools and cars. Therefore, it is not a matter of hard-sell being ineffective in Japan, rather there must be a cultural reason for it to be rarely relied on in advertising.

One reason for why hard-sell is more common practice in America may be because Americans have a generally more negative opinion of advertisements. Advertisements are often met with doubt and distrust, even among children as young as four years old (Belch et.al. ,2008). Gaumer and Shah (2004) have hypothesised that the explanation for this skepticism is because children are told by their parents at an early age to not always believe what the advertisements are telling you (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988, p. 77-94). Because of the overall negative view towards commercials, it is possible that 'hard-sell' is rather used

over 'soft-sell' in American advertisements since building trust with the consumer has become less impactful. Hard-sell manages to get the message out there even if the consumer finds it irritating, while 'soft-sell' may not hold the consumers attention long enough to make an impact. Meanwhile, in Japan, advertisements are more generally viewed with positive perceptions. 'Soft-sell' is therefore very viable, as companies have an easier time building a trust relationship with the viewer.

Gaumer and Shah (2004) studied the difference between how advertisements aimed at children convey their message in America and Japan. In America, advertisements aimed at children have been a very controversial issue, the argument being that children are not able to discern reality from fantasy. Therefore, advertisement awareness is very high, parents talk to their children about advertisements and warn them not to believe what is being said or showed. There are also strict regulations for advertisements that are aimed at children. In Japan, however, there are no regulations and children have been shown to be less critical of advertisements, even being unable to distinguish a commercial from an actual television program. Advertisements geared towards children in America are, almost without exception, using 'hard-sell' appeals. The advertisements are designed on the premises that the child is watching without its parents present, and the advertisement actively encourages the child to pester their parents to buy the product. In stark contrast, Japanese advertisements for children still maintain soft-sell appeals, building company relationship with the child. Company reputation is stressed and it is assumed that it is viewed with a parent nearby and thereby, discussed between the child and parent (Tansey, Hyman, and Zinkhan, 1990, p. 30-39).

'Soft-sell' appears definitely more ingrained in Japanese culture than initial observations may have revealed, and Herbig (1995) reflects on how marketing is firmly rooted in the culture. He mentions that the Japanese view marketing differently from Americans, and goes on to state that in Japan marketing and production is considered to be the same process. Peter Drucker (1964), marketing specialist once said that when the rest of the world was talking about marketing, the Japanese were already doing it; they just didn't realize it. Marketing is intrinsic to the manufacturing process in Japan, as it is considered necessary to inform the public when a new product is distributed on the market. Herbig (1995) adds that Japan is a modern collectivist culture, and once a trend catches on, everybody has to own it. Japanese companies have possibly maintained a soft-sell marketing strategy for a very long time, ensuring that whenever a new product comes out, the consumers just need to know about it. Since the quality of the product is riding on the trust that consumers put in the company, the advertisements do not necessarily need to be

logical, scientific or explain the application of the product. That is not to say Japanese advertisements are lacking product information, it means that advertisements avoid touting the benefits or assurance of the product (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1990). Furthermore, underlining product benefits and application in advertisements, or adding any detail to make the product seem better, could be seen as insulting the intelligence of the Japanese consumer, suggesting they lack the ability to detect for themselves. In a way, soft-sell is a way for the companies to show the consumers that they respect them as well, making it critical to avoid hard-sell, to maintain the mutual respect.

The heavy reliance on 'soft-sell' in Japanese advertisements seems to stem from cultural reasons. The hard-sell element of comparing products to competing products on the market is also entirely absent, since culturally there is a reluctance to cause a competitor to lose face. Going back to the standardization and adaptation approach, "westerners" marketing to the Japanese willing to adapt their advertising campaigns, should adhere to soft-sell appeals. Even if hard-sell has been proven to have success in Japanese advertising, avoiding hard-sell outright lessens the likeliness of falling into one of many cultural pitfalls. This may change, as Erffmeyer, Keillor and Leclair (1999) found in their study of Japanese consumer ethics that traditional values are being gradually diluted in modern Japan with the younger generations.

GCCP: Global Consumer Culture Positioning

'Soft-sell' appeals, by all accounts, appear to be the method of advertising that any company trying to gain entrance to the Japanese market should rely on. Is it possible, however, that for a globally standardized advertising campaign, that 'soft-sell' would be the best appeal to rely on over 'hard-sell', for the same reasons that has been proven to be effective for in Japan. GCCP, "Global consumer culture positioning" is a term that describes the culture surrounding globalisation that has grown due to the cross-cultural marketing that global corporations pursue. It is a global culture of consumption that is emerging as a result of the "increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures as well as through the development of cultures without a clear anchorage in any one territory" (Hannerz 1990, p. 237). Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor (2010) sought to find out which of the two advertising appeals is best suited for GCCP advertisements. They conducted a study testing perceptions of soft-sell and hard-sell advertising appeals between U.S. and Japanese consumers. They chose Japan and the United States as the basis for the GCCP study

because the two countries, “whose cultures have historically been shown to have substantial differences” also represent the world's two largest economies.

“data from these countries provide a good test of whether similar appeal types can work within the context of a GCCP strategy. In essence, if consumers in these two cultures perceive an appeal similarly, there is a greater likelihood that that appeal could be used globally.” (p. 20-34)

Their findings suggest that ‘soft-sell’ appeals are perceived similarly in both the United States and Japan in terms of “believability and the degree to which they are irritating” and overall similar positive attitudes towards ‘soft-sell’. ‘Hard-sell’, however, appears to require more adaptive measures for each culture to have any meaningful impact other than irritation. They also found that ‘soft-sell’ ads appear more homogeneous in nature across cultures, meaning they innately work well cross-culturally, supporting the concept that ‘soft-sell’ appeals can work in relation of a GCCP strategy. ‘Hard-sell’ appeared more heterogeneous across cultures, meaning that though ‘hard-sell’ appeals are employed in many different advertisements in various cultures, these advertisements come in many different forms and are specific for each locale. Unlike ‘soft-sell’ appeal reliant advertisements that could easily be translated to a different audience, ‘hard-sell’ reliant advertisements are so specific to the demographic that they cannot be changed to easily.

“Our findings suggest that soft-sell appeals are largely uniformly believed across the countries. This means that soft-sell appeals may be more effective in transmitting global brand quality, social responsibility, prestige, and relative price in a symbolic and implicit form.” (p. 20-34)

For GCCP, building and keeping a consistent and clearly characterized brand image is an essential part of a company’s advertising campaign (Roth 1992, p. 25-36). Therefore, for the purpose of the GCCP study, Okazaki, Mueller, and Taylor (2010) argue that because the importance of branding, ‘soft-sell’ and its emphasis on image and theme-based messages, helps maintain uniform brand logos which further justifies ‘soft-sell’ as the appeal for GCCP to rely on.

Celebrities

What is it exactly that makes Japanese advertisements so unique and an interesting topic for discussion? In general, Japanese commercials are considered to be very alien to the western world. The free online video streaming website Youtube.com has a plethora of videos dedicated to show off the strangest and weirdest television advertisements that air in Japan. Youtube user JPCMHD uploads commercial compilations biweekly where an assortment of the newest commercials from Japan can be seen². Watching a year worth of advertisements reveals that there are certain trends, that in the vast majority of the commercials celebrities appear, often the same person advertising different products for different brands. Celebrity and singer, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu appeared in more than a dozen separate commercials last year, 2013, advertising clothing, toothpaste, pudding, cars and phone services. There is a great preponderance of celebrities in Japanese advertisements that forms their characteristics. To understand the advertising industry in Japan focus has to be on the appearance of celebrities.

Celebrities in advertisements are hardly unique for Japanese society. Celebrity endorsement is a common advertising strategy all over the world, customarily including famous athletes such as football players, movie actors, people from entertainment, arts, musicians et cetera. Advertising agencies often rely on celebrities to create a positive image for the client company or product being endorsed, celebrities are therefore treated as a company's spokesperson. Celebrities often hold a positive image in the eyes of the public which becomes an element that is logical to take advantage of when trying to push a message. This strategy falls under the 'soft-sell' category. Freiden (1984) provides empirical evidence to demonstrate the positive effect of celebrities in advertising (p. 33-41).

Celebrities are however involved in an overwhelming number of television advertisements in Japan. Kilburn (1998, p. 20-21) states that over 70% of Japanese advertisements feature some sort of celebrity. This high percentage comes from the loose definition of celebrity, where Kilburn talks of *talents*, essentially celebrities in the making, and stars as celebrities alike. Also, this percentage includes advertisements for concerts, album releases, movies and other media where a celebrity is the feature. If however, we only examine advertisements where celebrities are endorsing a product or service, then the

² YouTube. (2014). JPCMHD. [online] Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/user/JPCMHD/videos> [Accessed: 22 Mar 2014].

percentage drops to around 40% (Praet 2001. Millward Brown 2013) ³. This number is still remarkably large when compared to other countries. Praet (2001) made a cross-cultural study of television advertisements between a handful of European nations as well as America and Japan, looking at the frequency of celebrity appearances in order to test his hypothesis of high celebrity reliance in Japan. The study revealed that most European countries have celebrity appearances in less than 5% of television advertisements, with France and Germany as the exception, being closer to around 10%. US came in second to Japan with around 20% which is still less than half of the frequency displayed in Japan. Praet (2001) also notes that Japan features considerably more female celebrities in their advertisements than the western countries. This is most likely due to the *tarento* phenomenon (talked more about later on). Though these numbers suggest that Japan is unique in its usage of celebrities in advertising, this particular comparison was restricted to western countries. According to the advertising research company Millward Brown, Korea has the same percentage as Japan, around 40%, which may suggest there are cultural similarities that overlap in this territory.

In Japan, the world of advertising is a very different landscape from the rest of the world. The reliance on celebrities is part of this reason; however it goes further than that. Scholars suggest that the worlds of show-business and advertising overlap and have evolved into being one and the same. This means that while in the rest of the world, celebrities who are already famous use their positive image to endorse a product, in Japan, the world of advertising is much more than that: it is also a doorway for aspiring actors, models and singers to gain fame. These people are called “Talents” or “*tarento*”⁴, essentially, non-famous people who have been scouted by talent agencies and been cast in an advertisement. *Talents* are usually female and they are chosen for their cute looks and potential to gain long lasting fame. Advertisements have become a stage for people to become celebrities. If these *talents* manage to garner fame and topicality after their advertising exposure, they will quite often be offered to appear in television programs where their fame will ensure improved ratings for these shows. This is most notable in television dramas and quiz shows (Moeran 1996). It is very common that these *talents*, or “idols” which is what the *talents* are called after gaining enough popularity, then launch a singing career, with their fame and popularity ensuring good album sales. Nomura (1997, p. 14-20) calls the the 1990’s the golden age of *talent* commercials, a development that is stronger than ever in

³ WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CELEBRITY-BASED CAMPAIGNS?. (2013). [e-book] Millward Brown. Available through: <http://www.millwardbrown.com/Insights/KnowledgePoints/Default.aspx> http://www.millwardbrown.com/Libraries/MB_Knowledge_Points_Downloads/MillwardBrown_KnowledgePoint_Celebrity-basedCampaigns.sflb.ashx [Accessed: 26 Mar 2014].

⁴ Tarento is the Japanese adoption of the english word Talent written in katakana as “タレント”

the 21st century.

Finally, what really sets Japan apart is the focus of the advertisements: often the *talent* exposure takes priority over the actual product being advertised (Asahina 1997, p. 30-34). This is in a stark contrast to the advertising priorities outside Japan. Advertising agency Millward Brown (2013) published a summary of key points for clients to keep in mind when considering celebrity endorsement, and warns against the potential pitfalls of using celebrity endorsement, stressing the importance of not letting the product be overshadowed by the celebrity. That often, the celebrities “drown out” the very same message they were supposed to let consumers take away from the ad and that in such cases, not having a celebrity proves more impactful.

In the summary of key points that Millward Brown published, more pitfalls are noted that need to be considered before employing celebrities.

“Unlike, for example, an animated character, celebrities are human, and subject to human failings. So there are a number of ways in which a celebrity could become a liability to the brand.”

He then goes on to point out some examples: A celebrity may be involved in a scandal and consequently be portrayed as deceitful and untrusting by the media, in which case will negatively impact any advertising campaign the celebrity is involved in. Then there are other less complicated reasons. The celebrity could potentially come across as non-genuine, giving the advertisement an aura of lacking credibility where the viewer knows the celebrity doesn't care about the product being endorsed. In Japan, this is not a concern since the same celebrity often appears in multiple advertisements from multiple companies at the same time. What is a big concern, however, for Japanese agencies is the public image of the idols. It is very important that all celebrities appear pure in the eyes of the media and as such, tremendous pressure is placed on idols to maintain their image. Especially since the driving appeal of these idols is their cuteness and innocence, if any word got out about them being involved in adult issues such as having a boyfriend, publically drinking or even using profanities, this could lead to a devastatingly quick end to their career. In 2013, a member of the hit idol group AKB48, Minami Minegishi was caught having a boyfriend. This “scandal” caused uproar amongst fans and she got demoted to trainee in the group. She later appeared in a video, having shaved her head, with a regret-filled apology directed at fans and fellow members of the group⁵. This incident displays the weight put on idols in Japan to

⁵ Billones, C. (2013). *AKB48's Minami Minegishi caught leaving man's apartment, shaves head & posts tearful YouTube apology - The Japan Daily Press*. [online] Retrieved from: <http://japandailypress.com/akb48s-minami-minegishi-caught-leaving-mans-apartment-shaves-head-posts-tearful-youtube-apology-0122526/> [Accessed: 26 Mar 2014].

maintain their image.

Proposed Explanations

There are numerous reasons proposed as to why celebrities are relied upon in Japanese advertising. Praet (2001) provides an insightful analysis where he summarizes each hypothesized reason by dividing the explanations into three categories: Marketing tactics and media related explanations; agency and client characteristics based explanations; and consumer characteristics-based explanations. Each explanation will be examined in order.

Marketing tactics and media related explanations.

According to Moeran (1996) an anthropologist who did extensive field research in a major Tokyo advertising agency, one of the main reasons for celebrity endorsement is due to the short airing time of commercials. Television is the main venue for advertising in Japan (Hagan, J. M. ,1999, p.98-111). The expensive television time results in numerous advertisements being clustered together, and shown in short bursts during advertisement breaks. By hiring a celebrity, advertising agencies believe they are making the most out of their short airing time and getting lasting attention from the viewer and potentially generating lasting topicality. If the campaign extends beyond television advertisements, to billboards, pamphlets or newspapers, the celebrity can help the consumer make the connection to a previously seen commercial. Matsui (2006) mentions that an increasing trend, is to combine multiple celebrities into a single commercial to strengthen the impact. Sato (1997) explains that brands are ultimately similar and that the usage of celebrities carves out a face for the brand amongst the masses. Now 17 years later, this point is questionable. Celebrities do not endorse a specific product exclusively anymore and the landscape of advertising has developed into more of a popularity contest between idols.

Agency and client characteristics based explanations

When a client reaches out to an agency to develop a campaign for a product or service, the agency will first suggest which celebrity to use to give the client a better understanding of what kind of message they have in mind. In other words, picking the celebrity first, using that as a sort of shared jargon to better communicate the idea of how to present the product (Nomura 1997, Moeran, 1996). The advertising industry has often been criticized for this practice, replacing creativity with reliance on celebrity strength alone. Ironically however, if an advertising campaign does not rely on a celebrity, it will also run the risk of being criticized. It is considered as a sort of risk avoidance, that if the campaign turns out to be unsuccessful, it will not be the fault of the agency since the campaign was engineered towards what is considered mainstream. Because celebrities are not relied upon

as much in America, this approach to advertising in Japan is very different by comparison.

Consumer characteristics-based explanations

The aforementioned merging of show business and the advertising industry in Japan has led to a generally more positive attitude towards commercials amongst consumers. Commercials aim to be entertaining to watch, often displaying some silly humorous situation with a celebrity in the main role. Commercials are generally far removed from reality and have a firm presence in fantasy, which allows the commercial to provide the same kind of escape that movies offer. Japanese commercials commonly rely on bright colours, catchy music and a slogan uttered by a celebrity. It is possible that celebrities or people of high status achieve a place in society as trend leaders through advertising in Japan which contributes to the appeal of appearing in advertisements (Hall, E. T. & Hall, M. R. ,1990).

Many of these reasons however, are observably shallow and much of it is a result of going with the mainstream. It is questionable how effective it would be for a foreign product advertisement to rely on Japanese celebrities to this degree.

Foreigners in advertising

The celebrities that appear in Japanese commercials are not only Japanese in origin. There are many examples of Caucasian celebrities participating in advertising in Japan, and they are used for different reasons. While Japanese celebrities are used in commercials with soft-sell appeal to make the brand seem more reputable in Japan, foreign celebrities by contrast are often used to make the brand seem better known outside of Japan. According to Kelsky (2001), an anthropologist focusing studies on Japan and Asian-Americans:

'whiteness functions in Japan as the transparent and free floating signifier of upward mobility and assimilation in "world culture"; it is the primary sign of the modern, the universal subject, the "citizen of the world" (p.145)

What Kelsky means is that white people in Japanese advertisements are used as an indication of a world beyond Japan, particularly the West. White actors in commercials lend a more positive presentation to a product, taking advantage of the generally positive image of white people in Japan. If a product is available and enjoyed outside of Japan, that is a certification of quality. For this reason, Caucasians are used in advertising for both Japanese and foreign products. For Japanese products, the message is that since the product is also sold abroad it has quality above mediocrity. For foreign products on the Japanese market,

Caucasian actors enhance the foreign qualities and serve as an assurance of the global positioning of the brand. A recent example of this is the advertising campaign for the launch of the Playstation 4 home video game system in Japan, where the advertisement showed clips of its popularity in western countries⁶. Commercials for Japanese cars seek a more international feeling for the product by commonly employing European or American actors. Japanese sports stars appearing in advertisements are often placed in countries outside of Japan, interacting with the foreign population, usually Caucasians, showing that the spokesperson is validated by the foreign public. This enhances their sense of fame abroad, and builds to their fame at home (Holden, 2006, p. 117-136).

Certain stereotypes can be seen in the depiction of white people in Japanese advertisements. Foreigners are considered have the freedom of anonymity, therefore they are often used for comic relief, underlining the common perception of *hen na gaijin*, a phrase often used that translates to strange foreigner. Foreigners are often shown engaging in unusual behaviour in advertisements, which Japanese actors would traditionally never do unless they were professional comedians. Another white person stereotype used to enhance a product value, is when commercials show white people having a leisurely or relaxing time. This is the stereotype that portrays white people not being as hard working as the Japanese, and generally having more leisure time in their lives. Japanese ads tend to display foreigners as more extreme in all aspects, physique, achievements and expression. The foreigners used in advertisements in Japan are mostly Caucasians, where coloured people and Asians of other nations than Japan are simply used to represent a "native touch" from their cultural area when needed. Worth noting is that white people are shown in 14,4% of commercials in Japan while comprising less than 1% of Japan's population, Prieler, M. (2010). The centrality of whiteness, white people treated as norm, and thus, natural, justifies their appearance in commercials aimed at GCCP (Dyer, 1997; Yancy, 2004).

Conclusion

Japan and the U.S. have remarkably different approaches to advertising. Hard-sell appeals such as factual product descriptions and comparisons between competitors is a norm in the U.S. while it is generally frowned upon in Japan. The frequency of hard-sell appeals in western cultures, may potentially be the reason why irritation and negative views are associated with advertising in those regions. In Japan, however, the seemingly consistent

⁶ Playstation Japan. (2014). *PlayStation 4 : Japan 2.22*. [image online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQx7Fpv-Q10> [Accessed: 7 Apr 2014].

use of soft-sell appeals has made the consumer more respectful of commercials as this method allows the company to display a semblance of respect for the viewer. The use of celebrities and *talents* in commercials generates a lot of favorability and enjoyment among Japanese consumers, making them positive towards advertising in general. These remarkable differences between the Japanese and Western markets explain why any “westerner” seeking to advertise in Japan needs to adapt their advertising strategy to suit the Japanese public. Any attempt of hard-sell appeals in advertisements will likely be met with a blunder due to the negative feelings it could potentially stir up. Hard-sell also needs to be very specific towards a target group, which means it would require considerably more market research to avoid falling into cultural pitfalls. Soft-sell is the favoured appeal in Japan and utilizing that will be the first important thing to take note of. Secondly, the mainstream reliance on celebrities in Japanese advertisements has created an extraordinary merging of show business and commercials that is important to be aware of. However, the effectiveness of using celebrities can be questionable considering how frequent this advertising strategy is. It is possible that using local celebrities could lessen the impact of the message, and increasing the risk of the message being lost among the dozens of other commercials with similar appeals. Foreign product advertisers have the advantage, however, of being foreign, and therefore, by relying on local celebrities, the foreign appeal could be downplayed. Likewise, displaying a few local cultural qualities may have the same detrimental effect. As “western” products that make it to Japan are considered to have an aura of quality, since the product is imported to Japan, it must have already had success overseas. Therefore, when advertising in Japan, it is important to rely on soft-sell appeals while stressing the popularity of the product or brand in western countries, similar to how Sony advertised their latest home video game system. Advertising with white actors will also strengthen this appeal, although it may not be necessary to cast the commercial with western celebrities. Thusly, advertising with regards to the Global Consumer Culture Positioning standard, may surprisingly be the most effective way to enter the Japanese market.

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