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Repositioning the Story Concept in Marketing Studies

—A New Perspective of Consumption Desire Analysis—

Naoki TAMURA

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the revisit of story concept in the Marketing studies. First, we point out the question of the story function in marketing activities such as advertising to emerge a specific consumer desire. Second, we reconfirm some points that our previous studies discussed in the advertising study. Third, as our perspective, we introduce the concept of “text” to understand the story function. Fourth, we describe that Softbank TV CM creates a specific consumer desire by using story functions. Fifth, we will discuss about the concept of Textualized Me and Desire Shape those are key concepts to describe the mechanism of consumer desire emerging.

As a conclusion, we emphasize that the dichotomy of Following Model and Differentiation is overridden. It means we revisit the traditional perspective of the Marketing studies in this paper.

Keywords: consumer desire, text, advertising, marketing, differentiation

1. Introduction

The “story” concept that is often used in advertisements, such as television commercial messages (CMs), has an enormous impact on consumers. In Japan, JR Tokai produced a famous Japanese television CM, Christmas Express, in the 1980s. The CM described the heart of a young girl awaiting her boyfriend’s return from Tokyo. The CM certainly had a significant impact on consumers, and hence it rapidly increased JR Tokai’s popularity ¹⁾.

However, our research question examines if impact is the only goal of a CM. This paper attempts to understand the “story” concept as a driving force for consumer behavior rather than focusing on only impact. That is, a precondition to explaining consumer actions resulting from impact is the assumption of a process of comparing and evaluating goods with other products and services. This is the well-known Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory, and

Action (AIDMA) process²⁾. In this case, an advertisement that has a huge impact becomes easily memorized and evaluated by the consumer.

This logical structure suggests an assumption: a consumer has a desire before purchasing. This assumption refers to the issue of selecting between product A and B. Along these lines of discussion, there is the well-known marketing approach in which a marketer creates a product concept for his preferred brand. However, this paper focuses on how consumer desire emerges. We believe that product selection follows consumer desire, and that the function of a story in creating consumer desire is a very important issue for discussion.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 will discuss previous studies to reconfirm the role of advertising in marketing studies. In Section 3, the text concept is discussed from a basic perspective. Section 4 will discuss Softbank CM as a case study. Section 5 will reconsider the traditional marketing ideas from the text concept perspective. Finally, Section 6 is a summary of the conclusion.

2. Previous Studies in Advertising and Marketing

2-1. Role of Advertising

Lively marketing has an important role in our current society. According to Hikita (1998), this role is to resolve an estrangement between producers and consumers.

This estrangement includes two aspects: (1) personal estrangement and (2) physical estrangement. *Personal estrangement* means that a producer has to search for his consumers. Alternatively, the consumers also have to search for the producer who makes their favorite products. It is difficult for all of these to find each other. A distributor can reduce this difficulty. *Physical estrangement* refers to estrangements in time and space. These estrangements are resolved by storage and transportation. The role of a distributor is to create opportunities for the producer and the consumer to meet.

The key point is that a product made by a producer should be one needed by consumers³⁾. However, it is not easy for a producer to ensure that this is the case. In this affluent time, consumer needs are widely diverse. On the other hand, a producer will prefer mass production to achieve economies of scale. This illustrates a significant estrangement between the thoughts of producer and consumer. As a result, consumers observe on retailer shelves many products that do not match their needs. This situation happens because of

informational estrangement between producers and consumers.

To reduce informational estrangement, producers and distributors need to precisely determine consumer needs through marketing research. Based on the results of that research, producers will plan and produce their products. In this case, because the type of product is not the only one of its kind, they have to inform consumers about each product. Without such information, it is not easy for consumers to obtain their favorite products. The basic role of advertising is to inform consumers about products in appropriate ways.

2-2. Marketing Management

A marketing manager is a person who makes marketing plans in a firm. There are two types of marketing manager: (1) Top management and (2) Middle management. Top management conducts strategic marketing, which aims in the long run to manage the entirety of the firm. It includes, domain decisions, market analysis, product portfolio management, and so on. Middle management conducts managerial marketing, which includes advertising strategy.



Figure 1 Marketing Mix
(Source: Hikita (1998), p. 89)

Marketing managers analyze the environment and select a preferable market. Generally, because it is impossible to satisfy all consumers, the manager defines some specific target markets. To each target market, he will plan, decide, and promote the company's marketing mix. Advertising is one of element of the promotion strategy.

2-3. Advertising and Communication

According to Murata (1998), an advertisement not only conveys some information, but

also persuades the consumer to buy the product. In other words, advertisements have some elements of persuasion. They are regarded as persuasive communication. The aim of this communication is to shift human behavior in a specific direction.

When the information from a sender is reliable and attractive, the effect of persuasion becomes strong. However, it is difficult to predict consumers' behavior because they have different personalities, educational background, and so on.

Such persuasive communication study is one of the core subjects in Social Psychology⁴⁾ that tries to understand a personal behavior, to predict it, and to control it. By understanding a person's behavior, one may be able to predict it in a given situation. Therefore, persuasive communication is studied as an opportunity to shift a human behavior. For example, the study discussed what kind of advertisement can change a specific brand preference in consumers who follow such preference.

In advertising studies, the study also reviewed behavior formation by persuasive communication, indicating that consumers may form a new behavior for each new product. In short, advertising has a role in demand creation. However, there are not many studies researching behavior formation (Murata, 1998). Therefore, the field of demand creation is a promising future research area for psychological studies of advertising.

According to the summary of Murata (1998), the following four points are important conditions in determining an effective advertisement: (1) Social proof, (2) Authority, (3) Preference, and (4) Scarcity.

First, Social proof means judgment by another's value standard. As an example, "Customer Satisfaction No.1 in USA" is a way of advertising to solicit Social proof. A principle of Social proof is Similarity. People are influenced by a person who is similar to them. They will follow the similar person rather than the non-similar one. For instance, a woman accepts some influences easily from another woman. Children are sensitive to other children's behavior. Therefore, marketers use different models for advertising to each target market.

Second, it is easy for consumers to be influenced by an Authority figure. In other words, the thought of a specialist is easily acceptable. Third, in the case of Preference, famous athletes or TV stars makes positive impressions on audiences. Therefore, such individuals are very effective as models for advertising. Fourth, in the case of Scarcity, consumers tend to buy products advertised by a campaign within limited time period.

2-4. Models of Advertising

Many attractive models appear in advertisements and inform the public about products. Social Psychology suggests that people prefer attractive persons rather than not-attractive ones. This implies that attractive models raise the effect of persuasion, indicating that is easy for people be influenced by such models⁵⁾.

According to Tanaka & Maruoka (1991), the important issue is that consumers make a linkage between a product image and their self-image. That is, consumers are going to create a relationship between the products and themselves by defining the positive association. Simultaneously, they are also going to gain positive feelings themselves from the relationship. Through these operations, a product purchase will be instigated. After creating the relationship by defining an association between the product and themselves, consumers will attempt to achieve those positive feelings by acquiring and using the products. In the case that they succeed the realization of those positive feelings, they will purchase the products again.

As a summary of this section, an advertisement can create consumer desire by communication. To understand this mechanism, this paper focuses on the story concept in advertising. The following section presents some perspectives of story analysis.

3. Three Perspectives of Story Analysis

This section will describe three perspectives of story analysis: Actant analysis by Greimas (1966), transactional analysis (TA) by Stewart & Joines (1987), and text analysis by Roland Barthes (1979).

3-1. Actant Analysis by Greimas

Fukuda (1990) argues that the actant analysis developed by Greimas⁶⁾ is useful to create television CMs. According to Greimas (1966), there are six actants in any story (See Figure 2). At the beginning of a story, a subject wants an object for a certain reason. This object is sent to the subject by someone, a sender. In this case, the receiver and the subject are the same person. To create a more attractive story, an assistant and an opponent (enemy) are added. According to Greimas (1966), these six actants build the story structure.

Using this analytical approach, Fukuda (1990) discusses some CMs in Japan. While working for Dentsu (Advertising Agency) as a marketing director, Fukuda (1990) analyzes

some CMs as “story” media. For example, JR Tokai released television CMs as a story⁷. The story narrates about two little boys traveling by a JR bullet train without their parent to meet their grandfather. It suggests such traveling is an adventure for the children. Moreover, it suggests that a JR bullet train can help family members keep in touch with each other.

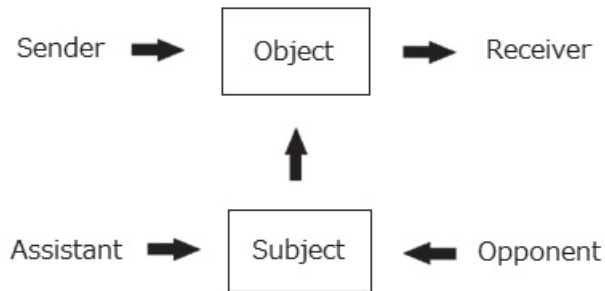


Figure 2 Actant Analysis
(Source: Greimas (1966), p. 234)

When consumers as parents watch this CM, they may choose to send their children unaccompanied to visit relatives in a home prefecture using the JR bullet train service. Fukuda (1990) suggests that a CM story creates a specific consumer desire by following the story. However, we believe this explanation is not sufficient. It does not consider the mechanism of how the desire emerges. Before this paper discusses that aspect, the function of story is reconfirmed in the following section.

3-2. Transaction Analysis by Stewart & Joines

In this section, this paper reconfirms the function of story as a tool to form human behavior. Therefore, the function of story is able to form new consumer behavior as part of a marketing activity.

Jan-Michel (1984) discusses that there was a relationship between story and recognition as shown below⁸. Some stories that have been told since ancient times control the structure of human recognition, such as like or dislike. These stories provide a means to perceive the world. That is to say, human culture is built from stories communicated by parents.

This section refers to Stewart & Joines (1987) who practice medical mental care using TA⁹. TA has become a popular tool for the treatment of certain mental problems. According to Stewart & Joines (1987), a story serves two important purposes. First, it gives some power to children who feel that they have none. Second, it gives children a feeling of having the

power to control their lives. As the author notes, the power to solve problems is “magic,” and is not useful in the real world. However, this power can help children survive in the real world.

This important point indicates that if children feel they can control the world by using magic, they may believe that they can lead a happy life. As a result, they may create their own preferred life stories at an early age. For example, a child strongly controlled by his parents cannot mention his willingness to obtain safety. He will obey his parents without argument because the situation is comfortable to him. Therefore, he will tend to not change his behavior. Although the current situation is not preferable, it is better than an unknown situation. Such non-preferred behavior and thought pattern is repeated as the child grows. The end of the story might indicate whether the child will be a winner or a loser or not lead an exciting life. Children choose these alternatives at an early age. If a child chooses a sad story, he may have psychological problems in the future.

Based on these thoughts, mental clinics do not discover the real thinking of a client. The important point is to create an alternative story between a counselor and a client, which is agreed between only those two¹⁰. In this story, the client would find himself. A point that should not be overlooked is that someone making a story forms himself. In other words, the purpose of mental care is not finding any underlying facts of reason that are the cause of the client’s mental problem. Instead, the purpose of re-starting a preferable alternative story is to create alternative personality. If the client agrees with the new story as his real life story, he should obtain the power to live in the world. It means that to gain the life people wish for themselves, creating a story is crucial. Therefore, the story function forms human behavior.

3-3. Text Analysis by Roland Barthes

To understand the story concept and the structure of story, this section will further discuss the perspective of the “text” concept. “Text” means something to read. Roland Barthes (1979) discusses the text concept without giving a specific definition¹¹. Roland Barthes (1979) defines “text” in the following sentences:

- (1) “Text” means textual information coming from uncountable cultures.
- (2) “Text” is not works.
- (3) “Text” is a methodological field.
- (4) “Text” can span many works.
- (5) A quotation from an unknown author or unknown reference can be classified as a “text”.

(6) A quotation of “text” can be something previously read. For example, some messages come from parents.

Uchida (2002) discusses “text” as follows¹²⁾. “Text” and a reader do not exist independently. For example, a reader can find another meaning in the second reading of the same book, which was overlooked during the first reading. The reason that this can happen is that a new reading method is used for the second reading. In other words, once the first reading is completed, the reader would be transformed into a new reader who can find another meaning in the same book. The reader becomes a different subject with a different perspective from the experience of reading the “text” at the first time. Therefore, there is a reflexive relationship between the “text” and the reader.

As illustrated above, “text” is not only something to read but also something more than literature. In the traditional view, an author is the person who defines the concept of a work. Moreover, he has authority over the works. However, in the view of Roland Barthes (1979), the author does not have the authority over his works. From the perspective of “text,” there is no concern with an author’s authority: meanings are simply surfaced by a reader of the text. A “text” does not have fixed meanings. The meaning changes along with the reader’s way of reading.

The function of “story” follows the thought of Roland Barthes (1979). As discussed in this section, it is concluded that consumer desire comes from an experience of reading the “text.” We will therefore discuss the concept of story in depth in the context of marketing studies in the following sections.

4. Case Study: Softbank Mobile Phone CM on Television

In this section, we introduce a case for discussion about the most successful advertisement in Japan. The case is a Softbank mobile phone CM. The CM provides a certain family-oriented message.

In 2007, Softbank released a CM on television to advertise its mobile phone product and service. In this CM, Softbank emphasized a concept of “surprise” with the story of the Shirato family. This concept of “surprise” is related to their promotional campaigns, such as family and student discounts. Big discount “surprise” campaigns are considered to exist in this story. Picture 1 shows the Shirato family members. Consumers who watch the CM on television

would be surprised at the composition of this family. In 2010, this Softbank CM was ranked No. 1 in Japan¹³. In addition, the model Aya, at the time, contracting with 13 companies, was the most popular CM model in 2011¹⁴.



Picture 1 Shirato family, Aya, Jiro, Masako, and Kojiro
(Source: NAVER, <http://matome.naver.jp/>)

As this paper discussed in Section 2-3 and 2-4, this Softbank CM uses an attractive model. The daughter Aya is played by the most favorite CM model in the advertising field in 2011. Such a preferable model will raise the effect of a persuasive communication. Furthermore, this family structure (Father, Mother, Son, and Daughter) is a very standard one in the typical Japanese lifestyle. In other words, the Shirato family is similar to the standard family in Japan. Therefore, audiences will be easily influenced by this similarity.

The basic concept of this CM story is that spending time with the family is the most important aspect of life. Numerous episodes featuring the Shirato family have been released by Softbank. As of September 2011, 101 stories have been released. With each new Softbank promotional campaign such as Family discount, Student discount, and Christmas campaign, a new story is aired¹⁵. The campaigns' limitations as to scarcity also satisfy one of the conditions for an effective advertisement.

The point of the Softbank story is that the most valuable thing is "Family." In order to maintain a good family relationship, Softbank offers a good mobile phone service. In other words, when consumers receive this message, they may become inclined to purchase a Softbank mobile phone to maintain good family relations. This is a very crucial point in this discussion: consumers follow the Shirato family as a model.

As discussed above, consumers will make a linkage between a product image and their own self-image. When the consumer finds his/her self-image reflected by the Shirato family-image, he/she may try to realize that self-image by purchasing the advertised product.

5. Discussion: Textualized Me and Desire Shape

This section expands the discussion of the relationship between text and desire based on the Softbank story. This discussion implies a mechanism for how consumer desires emerge.

5-1. Concept of Textualized Me

In the following, the subject “I” indicates the author of this paper. First, the author’s structure of recognition has been organized by many text pieces of uncountable stories that I have previously heard and read. From this point of view, the author can uncover the same text piece across many stories. For example, there is a text piece, “Family is reliable,” in our common thoughts. This text piece is quoted in many stories that are distributed all over the world.

Let us assume that I saw a Softbank CM on television one day. I would read the text piece “Family is reliable,” from it. Moreover, this piece refers to one of the elements that organize my structure of recognition. It indicates that the piece and I are not independent of each other. It can be said that I am sharing the elements of the Softbank story suggesting that family is reliable. It is implied that I can discover myself in this story.

As an example, I could read in the CM that Jiro is believed by others in his family. Alternatively, I could read that Jiro also believes them. Then I could read that family is reliable. At this moment, I could textualize this experience. It means that I also read the text piece, “Family is reliable,” in me. In other words, I become a text to read. We refer to this perspective as Textualized Me.

After I read “Family is reliable,” the concept of family would be regarded as a good one by me. At the same time, I may read that I want to have good family or that I should have a good family. In this case, I incorporate a text piece for desire in Textualized Me (See Figure 3). This paper refers to this text piece for desire as Desire Shape. In this paper, the concept of Desire Shape is introduced as distinguished from the general concept of desire. Desire Shape is characterized by certain leading text pieces such as “I want this,” “I should have this,” or “I need this.”

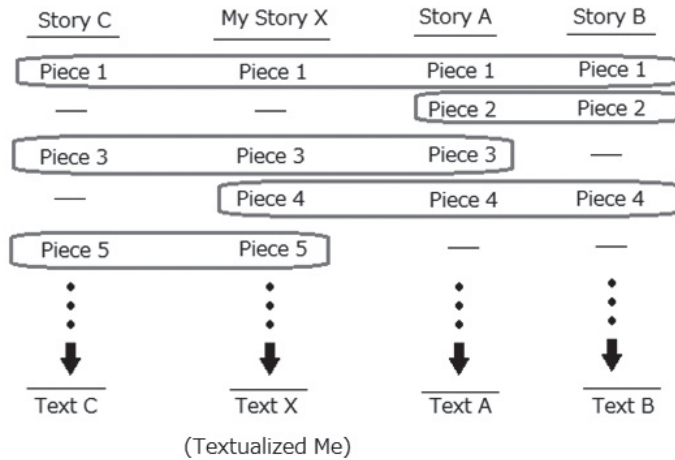


Figure 3 Textualized Me and text pieces across the stories

5-2. Concept of Desire Shape

Below, the above process will be summarized.

- (1) I can read a text piece “Family is reliable,” in many stories distributed throughout the world.
- (2) This text piece is the same as one of the elements that I have to organize my humanity¹⁶⁾. Therefore, the Softbank Shirato family story and I share the same element. It means that the Softbank story and I are not independent each other. In other words, I read the Softbank story and my own life story at the same time.
- (3) I also have other opportunities to read other text pieces such as “Family is good to me.” This piece is a Desire Shape as mentioned earlier. In this case, I can say that I read Desire Shape in the Textualized Me.
- (4) Following the Textualized Me, we are able to connect to many other text pieces, such as “I want to have a good family like the Shirato family,” “I should have a good family like them,” “I need good a family like them,” and so forth. These pieces indicate my desire.
- (5) Eventually, I want to have a good family like the Shirato family. This means that I want to simulate the ideal model conveyed by the CM. To accomplish this, I may choose a Softbank mobile phone. This consumer desire is delivered from the Desire Shape onto the Textualized Me. The key point is that Desire Shape is not my own thought. It is someone else’s thought.

In this process, there is a question as to who reads Desire Shape in stage (4). In this

stage, I read my Desire Shape (Family is good to me) on the Textualized Me. At this moment, I am able to exist as a Subject. In this case, I do not read Textualized Me; there is no existence of Subject in the world. Based on our text concept, we have to call actant analysis into question. Therefore, this analysis should be improved.

5-3. Following Models and Differentiation

The traditional marketing strategy model includes a key concept, "Differentiation." Consumers seek to purchase a product that meets their needs. Underlying this concept is an assumption that consumers are seeking to achieve their own, individualized life style. According to this assumption, if consumers adopted a model that is similar to someone else's style, they would feel that they lack individuality. To avoid this, consumers will choose a product that enhances individuality rather than choosing a standard product, implying that consumers prefer differentiation rather than following models.

In line with the above terms, this section describes a typical logic in the study of consumer behavior as follows. Assume that there are two brands, A and B, in the green tea market. Brand A has a 40% market share, and is standardized in this market. On the other hand, brand B has only a 5% market share, making it a minor brand in the market. Now, if consumer X were to choose brand A, he would regard this purchase as not individualistic because he is following the major purchase behavior. Therefore, he will choose brand B. After a certain time period, if many consumers choose brand B by the same reasoning, brand B would eventually expand to match brand A's 40% market share. Brands A and B then would have the same level of market power. In this case, consumer X would avoid both A and B, because he does not wish to follow the major purchase behavior. Eventually, he will choose a new brand C in order to maintain his individuality.

This example assumes a dichotomy between Following Models and Differentiation. From the text concept perspective, the dichotomy is overridden. First, consumer X reads a text piece, "Choosing brand A means non-individuality." He therefore chooses brand B as a result, reading a text piece, "Brand B meets my style," at the same time. This purchase behavior is shown to other consumers as a preferred behavior. If another consumer Y observed the behavior of consumer X choosing brand B, consumer Y may read a text piece, "Japanese people should choose green tea for a break in keeping with their culture." It is said that he was following consumer X. In this case, both consumers X and Y choose brand B. However, the choosing of brand B indicates Differentiation for consumer X. On the other hand, the

choosing of brand B indicates a Following Model for consumer Y.

In terms of a text perspective, this paper shows that both Following Models and Differentiation can emerge even in the same situation. For this reason, choosing brand C would depend on what text piece was read by a consumer on a given occasion. Thus, the dichotomy of Following Models and Differentiation is overridden.

6. Conclusion

This paper emphasized that the experience of reading text would lead to consumer desire. On this topic, Following Models is a key concept. If consumers are following someone else's text piece, they will adopt the same purchase style. Alternatively, if consumers are modeling someone else's text piece, they will adopt a different style. Either way, consumers are following someone's text piece, which is connected by Desire Shape. This perspective emphasizes that (1) customers are not able to find their own original desire in their purchase behaviors, and (2) a specific story provides some Desire Shape to lead to consumer desires. Based on this discussion, marketing researchers should take into account the role of "story" in the field of marketing.

Notes

- 1) According to Fukuda (1990), the JR CM Express series increased the company ranking on the preferable company list for college students from 37th in the previous year to 1st.
- 2) AIDMA process comprises five steps: (1) Attention, (2) Interest, (3) Desire, (4) Memory, and (5) Action. The traditional study of consumer behavior describes that a large impact would affect a good consumer's memory. Therefore, the consumer would choose a product that has large impact on the CM.
- 3) See Hikita (1998), pp. 83-84.
- 4) See Murata (1998), p. 205.
- 5) See Murata (1998), pp. 216-217.
- 6) Greimas (1966) summarized that actant analysis indicates three points: (1) Subject and Object are in the relationship of desire, (2) Sender and Receiver are in the relationship of distribution, (3) Opposite and Assistant are in the relationship of battle. These three relationships comprise a typical story structure.
- 7) In 1980s, JR became a private company derived from the government owned company. Therefore, JR had to create better images to consumers by advertising. In this time period, JR Tokai created many

CMS with stories that gave some good messages. This JR Tokai CM series, Huckleberry Series, is a good example that improved its image.

The story created by JR Tokai is described as follows:

Two little boys are traveling by a JR bullet train to meet their grandfather.

The elder brother says, "After this tunnel, there are two more rivers, right?"

The younger brother says, "Yes."

"Adventure by two only," the narration says.

Suddenly, they see their grandfather outside the window. He is waiting on the ground near the river, waving a big flag (Picture 2).

The narration says, "Summer of Huckleberry comes at a speed of 220km/hour. Huckleberry Express."

A message appears on the screen, "To meet directly, the best."



Picture 2 Grandfather waving a big flag
(Source: JR Tokai)

The actants in this story are summarized below.

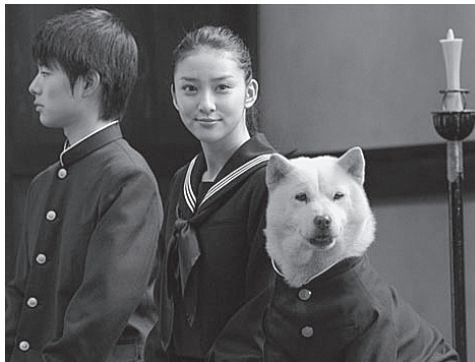
- (1) Subject: two brothers
 - (2) Object: grandfather
 - (3) Sender: parents
 - (4) Receiver: two brothers
 - (5) Opponent: adults
 - (6) Assistant: JR bullet train
- 8) Jan-Michel (1984) summarizes a story that requires four conditions to exist as a specific story.
- (1) Knowing (savoir): to know a problem
 - (2) Desiring (vouloir): to want to get something
 - (3) Power (pouvoir): to resolve a problem
 - (4) Conscious for action (devoir): need to do something

These mean that a subject in a story would have a problem, and he would attempt to resolve the

problem. For this purpose, he would need some power and understanding to resolve the problem. Finally, he may take an action to resolve the problem.

- 9) TA is becoming a popular method in the mental care field. The author of this paper attended the official seminar of TA in September 2011. A psychiatrist, who was one of the Japanese translators for Stewart & Joines (1987), delivered some of the lectures in that seminar.
- 10) In TA, to stop an un-preferable story, the counselor and the client have to rewrite the old story together. After creating a new story, the client would no longer feel the negative stress once the treatment is completed.
- 11) According to Roland Barthes, since text is not a specific concept, we need to use metaphors as much as possible around text.
- 12) Uchida (2002), *Nenagaramanaberu Kozosyugi*, pp. 125-126.
- 13) Resource: <http://life.oricon.co.jp> (Feb. 10, 2011); Softbank (No. 1), Suntory Boss Coffee (No. 2), and NTT docomo (No. 3).
- 14) Resource: <http://career.oricon.co.jp> (Feb. 10, 2011)
- 15) Softbank business began after NTT and au. To catch up the market share, Softbank released some aggressive discount campaigns. To send aggressive and surprising messages, Softbank used the Shirato family as a story messenger. From the CM effects, many consumers began to look forward to seeing Softbank CMs.

Picture 3 shows White Gakuwari High School. Jiro plays the role of a student. This picture suggests that the role of Jiro surprises consumers who watched the CMs on television. The consumers may remember it for a while and they may choose Softbank rather than NTT or au.



Picture 3 Jiro is a student in White Gakuwari High School
(Source: ORICON, <http://www.oricon.co.jp>)

Picture 4 shows a music concert with Jiro as a band conductor. Such unusual episodes give us some large impact to remember the Softbank CMs that has a message: Family is important. Many consumers may choose Softbank that gives a big family discount, "Free of charge for services between

family members.” This family discount will keep the relationship closer among family members.



Picture 4 Jiro is the conductor of music band.
(Source: ORICON, <http://www.oricon.co.jp>)

16) In our discussion, Humanity is defined as “Humanity depends on how to connect a text piece to another text piece.” This connection is different for each person. This difference indicates personal humanity in this paper.

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