

Hollywood stars in Japanese advertisements: Through Semiological analysis

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Abstract

This paper is a semiological analysis of Japanese advertisements starring Western celebrities. Being a celebrity has positive connotations for Japanese advertisements, and consequently, many advertisements in Japan can be found featuring celebrities. This paper analyzes several advertisements featuring Western celebrities from different periods covering the period from the 1990s to the 2000s to examine if the advertisements differ in tendencies of using celebrities. It shows that Japanese advertisements featuring Western celebrities have been used for the same reason over time: to associate the luxurious image of Western celebrities with the advertised products.

概要

これは西洋人スターを使った日本のCMの記号論的分析である。日本のCMにおいてスターを使うことは肯定的に捉えられ、このため、日本のCMの多くにスターが使われている。この論文では、1990年代と2000年代の外国人スターを使ったいくつかのCMを記号論的観点から分析している。分析の結果、1990年代から2000年代と年代を通して、外国人スターは「豪華」というイメージとの関連性を持って継続して使われていることが分かった。

Literature Review

According to the *Koukoku Toshokan* [Advertising Museum Tokyo] (2013), Japan's advertising expenses were almost the same as its GDP. Advertising expenses from 2001 to 2013 in Japan show that the highest amount, 701.9 billion yen or 6.24 billion dollars (112.46 yen per dollar, as of December 2007, according to The 77 Bank,

2017a), was spent in 2007. Even though a smaller amount was spent after 2007, Japan spent 597.6 billion yen or 5.77 billion dollars in 2013 (103.61 yen per dollar, as of December, 2013, according to 77 bank, 2017b). This clarifies the strong value Japan attaches to advertisements. They not only provide information about various products but also have the power to create trends (Kobayashi 1996). Advertisements also have an impact on the way people want to live their lives (Kashiwagi, 1986).

Per Sudo (1997), people are not persuaded to buy certain products unwillingly; rather, they are controlled by the trends that are unconsciously created by advertisements. For instance, when an advertiser is trying to sell a bottle of perfume, it would not show a teenager using the product in a cheap-looking apartment. Instead, a beautiful young woman would be using it in a big luxurious room where the audience could see also expensive furniture and bright lights. In this way, advertisements sell also a lifestyle that they want the audience to aim for (Kato, 1981). It is difficult to resist the mental assaults advertisements create to convince the audience (Dyer, 1982) because they show the “reality” the audience wish to achieve (Kashiwagi, 1986).

Consequently, having the right person to endorse a product is a requirement for advertisers. In Japan, having a celebrity endorse your product has positive implications. The 10 most attractive advertisements in the first half of 2015 included eight that featured celebrities (Oricon, July 11, 2016), and this result shows the popularity of having celebrities in advertisements. Among the various celebrities, Western celebrities also appear quite often in Japanese advertisements. According to *Chuou Nippou* [Central Daily News] (2009), the biggest Korean Newspaper, the number of Western celebrities starring in Japanese advertisements is lower than before; nevertheless, they can still earn a lot for a small amount of work done, which would be attractive, easy work for them. According to the *Gacchiri Mandei* [Grab Monday] (June 5, 2005), selling a product at a lower cost does not always promise effective results or higher sales, as consumers do not trust the quality of a product if it is cheap. Instead, some companies such as *Nippon Reeba* [Japan Lever], a famous haircare product company, attempted to create a luxurious image for a product and had a Hollywood star endorse it. It worked well for the Japan Lever Company, which achieved the highest sales in Japan in 1998, for a long time.

Many studies show a lower rate of Western celebrities starring in Japanese advertisements in the early 2000s (Ace Metrix, 2015; Belch & Belch, 2013; Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2005; Daboll, 2011; Schimmelpfennig and Hollensen, 2016). It was because Japanese viewers tired of seeing so many Western celebrities after having been exposed to them so much and so often in Japanese advertisements. This paper

analyzes some advertisements by semiology to examine if the power of featuring Western celebrities in advertisements has changed over time.

Semiology

After academic interest increased in the analysis of TV advertisements in the 1980s, semiological analysis started to be used to examine advertisements (Shimamura & Ishizaki, 1997). In this paper, Barthes' (1972) semiology, which is based on Saussure (1966), is utilized.

Saussure (1966), a famous linguist, first claimed the idea of a sign to be composed of a signifier or a word or an object, and a signified or what it signifies. For example, when someone is smiling, the image of the smile is a signifier, and its meaning, someone smiling, is a signified. Both a signifier and a signified form a sign. A signifier and a signified are inseparable; yet, Saussure isolated each item for analytical purposes.

Barthes (1972) proposed further another level of the sign system to incorporate cultural variations. What Saussure (1966) claimed is a sign in the language system becomes a signifier in the second level of a sign system, and there, another signified contains a cultural meaning. The signified for smiling in this second level would be described usually as a facial expression to show that a person is happy. However, Japanese people sometimes smile to hide their embarrassment. For instance, when Japanese people are asked by a foreigner on the street for directions, but they cannot speak much English and do not understand what they are being asked, they may smile in order to hide their embarrassment for not understanding English. Yet, this smile can be misunderstood as being laughed at by a foreigner. This example shows a culturally different interpretation for the second level of the sign. Barthes explained it as a connotation or a sign in a myth system while the first level of sign is a denotation or a sign in a language system. This paper analyzes some advertisements starring Western celebrities in the 1990s and the 2000s using his semiological analysis to see if the meaning of featuring Hollywood stars differs depending on the era.

A Green Tea Advertisement with Meg Ryan (1999)

This is the advertisement starring Meg Ryan for *Tanpopo cha* (Dandelion tea), a type of green tea, from the Suntory brand in 1999. Ryan is sitting on a veranda in a Japanese house, not a Western house. Viewers can hear the sound of an ocarina in the background. A middle-aged Japanese woman wearing a kimono is hanging wet

clothes on a pole in order to dry them out. She asks Ryan, who is reading a handwritten English letter, “*Hoomu shikku to chauka?*” (Aren’t you homesick?). The audience can tell that she has an accent of people who live on the west side of Japan. Ryan replies, “*Daijyoubu watashi tanpopo dakara*” (No, I’m fine because I’m a dandelion) in Japanese.

The Japanese woman then sits next to Ryan and says, “*Anta nipponjin mitai yanaa*” (You are like a Japanese person). The audience can tell the Japanese woman feels friendly toward Ryan because of the way she talks to Ryan in an informal way. At the end of this advertisement, a female voiceover says “*Tanpopo cha, hairimashita*” (We now have a bottle of dandelion tea) with this sentence shown also on the screen. In addition, the audience can see also another product’s name besides dandelion tea, “*Santorii: zoku Nohohon-cha*” (Suntory: A sequence of *Nohohon* tea) on the screen. The sentence, “*Nonda atoha risaikuru*” (Recycle after you drink), is shown also on the screen in small script. At the end of the advertisement, Ryan has a sip of this green tea, which is seen on the screen.

Semiological Analysis

Ryan is wearing a pair of jeans while the Japanese middle-aged woman is in a kimono, the traditional clothing associated with the Japanese. This shows a separation of the young and old. Ryan is holding a bottle of this product in her hands while the older lady does not, which implies that the product is suitable for the young but not for the old. This is re-emphasized also by the fact that there is a Japanese *shouji* (paper sliding screen) seen between them which separates young and old in the viewers’ minds.

However, this *shouji* sliding screen does not separate Ryan and the Japanese lady later in this advertisement because of the way the camera shows both of them. It implies a blending of the young and old, which means also that this product is fit for both the young and old. It suggests also Ryan’s acceptance of the Japanese culture. It is shown also by her putting Japanese *geta* (clogs) shoes on her feet. Ryan drinking this product later in this advertisement implies also her approval of the Japanese culture. These elements all work positively and effectively in the audience’s mind regarding both Ryan and the product.

Ryan has been very popular in the US film industry, starring in many movies such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *French Kiss* (1995), and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), which are shown before this advertisement is shown on TV, according to the TV guide (2017a). Ryan’s image as being relaxed in these movies suits the image of the product

the advertiser wants to promote.

Furthermore, *nohohon* is a Japanese word to describe someone who is relaxed and is perhaps a couch potato, and the name of the product implies it is something people can drink when they want to feel relaxed. Ryan, a very famous Western celebrity, speaking Japanese in the middle of the advertisement gives also a positive impression in the audience's mind. To sum up, the image of Ryan fits the impression that the advertisers want to create in the viewers' minds. In the next example, a different advertisement for oolong tea starring Miranda Kerr, more than a decade later, is examined.

A Black Oolong Tea Advertisement with Miranda Kerr (2015)

Kerr is seen in the photo studio taking photos. She changes clothes three times; she wears three kinds of dresses including a red one with many small metallic pieces on the surface, an asymmetrically designed one with white, blue, and black colors, and one that is all black. In the background, some funny Japanese music can be heard. Lyrics say "*Tonkatsu ga tabetai no*" (I wanna eat a pork cutlet) "*Atama kara hanarenai*" (Can't get rid of the idea of eating it out of my head) "*Afuredasu nikujiru ni hashi ga dounimo tomaranai*" (Can't stop eating juicy pork using chopsticks).

Toward the end of this funny music, a deep fried pork cutlet is seen on screen, and then Kerr, wearing a white shirt, enters the restaurant and has a bite of a pork cutlet. She continues to eat noodles, gets a bottle of oolong tea from her bag, takes a sip of it, and says "Kuro" (black), while the Chinese character for it is seen on the screen. She is almost done eating and has the last piece of a pork cutlet. The lyrics continue, "*Atarashii kuro wasurezu nomu wa*" (I won't forget to drink a new black oolong tea) while a male voiceover says "*Santorii shingata kuro uuron-cha tanjyou*" (Suntory brand. A new black oolong tea is on sale). Here, parts of the song and the male voiceover overlap.

In the next shot, Kerr is walking far away down the street wearing a white shirt and jeans, and the screen shows a big bottle of this product, which fills the screen vertically. There, some Japanese words are shown on the screen including "*Shingata kuro uuron cha*" (New black oolong tea), "*Shibou no kyusyu wo osaeru*" (Suppress fat absorption), and "*Karada ni shibou ga tsukinikui*" (Won't put so much fat on your body). At last, the male voiceover says "*Shingata kuro uuron cha-tanjyo*" (A new black oolong tea is on sale now).

Both of the products that Ryan and Kerr endorsed are Suntory brand products, and it is clear that the Western celebrities' popularity has been used as something

to distinguish their products from others even in different periods. In both of the advertisements, each celebrity, Ryan and Kerr, has a sip of each drink, and this helps identify the product with each celebrity in the audience's mind. An analysis of both Ryan and Kerr's advertisements reveal that the tendency for what is popular in Japanese advertisements has remained the same for a decade. Another kind of advertisement, a car advertisement starring Jennifer Lopez and Robert De Niro, is examined in the following example.

A Car Advertisement featuring Jennifer Lopez (2001)

Jennifer Lopez starred in an advertisement for the Subaru Legacy B4 in 2001, in which a voiceover using her voice is heard throughout, even though the audience does not see her talking at first. When she talks, a Japanese translation is shown in subtitles. First, Lopez appears on screen and says, "3 keys legacy SUBARU" in English while these words are seen also on the screen. As background music, one of her songs, *Ain't it funny*, can be heard. A man with a pair of glasses appears on the screen driving a car, and Lopez says, "He is the man" with the Japanese subtitles "*Sono otoko ha*" on screen, though she is not seen on screen with him at this point.

The next shot on the screen shows two Caucasian men talking in a big office and discussing something, and one of them seems to be the one driving the car in the previous shot. He says, "I want this" and keeps talking though the audience cannot hear what he says because the sound is not loud enough. Then, the audience sees a big window in the office with skyscrapers outside. Lopez, in the following shots says, "...with the key" as a continuous statement to her former remark, "He is the man." The Japanese translation for "...with the key" as (*Kagi wo motte ita*) is shown also on the screen. This sentence is continued further to the next statement with the male voiceover saying, "*Tamashii made mo kasoku suru*" (who accelerates my heart), which completes the sentence, "He is the man with the key to accelerate my heart."

Toward the end of the advertisement, the male voiceover continues to say "*Sono otoko. Regashii. B4*" (That man. Legacy. B4). The car is shown in the middle of the screen while Lopez stands at the side of it. Here, the man stands on the other side of the car. During this shot, the male voiceover is saying, "Perfectly new" with this phrase shown also on the screen. Then, the screen shows "Subaru. Driving Emotion" on the bottom of the screen with Subaru's big logo seen in the center of the screen, and the male voiceover says "Subaru."

Semiological Analysis

Lopez says, “He is the man,” “with the key” and the Japanese male voiceover seems to continue and end this sentence by adding *Tamashii mademo kasoku suru* (who accelerates my heart). It implies that the man standing beside Lopez makes her heart pound so much. In other words, he is so attractive and her heart cannot stop pounding. Here, he can be identified as not just “the man” but also the car, and the indirect message is telling the audience that the car is great and no one can resist it. This is re-emphasized by one of the men in the advertisement telling the other man, “I want this.” Surely, they are not talking about the car here, yet this comment fits perfectly with the feeling of the audience as if this advertisement is telling them that they want to own this car.

Another car advertisement, almost a decade later in 2009, featuring Robert De Niro is analyzed in the following example to examine whether the reasons to use a celebrity have changed over time.

A Car Advertisement featuring Robert De Niro (2009)

Music without lyrics can be heard at first, and a car is shown on screen driving at the seaside. Here, a camera shows a faraway shot of the car and then shows a beautiful ocean view and a small car. Then the screen shows De Niro in the car. Then the screen shows the English words, Love your life, in big letters, and he reads it. The next shot shows the car from the front, and a sheep is seen on the screen. Then, De Niro is seen on the screen looking aside, and the screen shows “5.20 debut LEGACY” in big letters, and again he reads the word, Legacy. Next, the screen shows De Niro in the rearview mirror, and the screen shows in big letters the Japanese sentence, “*21nen-me no inobaision hajimaru*” (Innovation started 21 years ago).

Semiological Analysis

De Niro portrayed various characters in many movies including a famous mafia character, Vito Corleone, in *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), and an authoritative dad in a comedy, *Meet the Parents* (2000) according to the TV guide (2017b). These movies show him as someone who sends a powerful and trustworthy message, and these images are transferred to this advertisement. He did not speak much or look at the camera directly in the advertisement. It works well to convince the audience about the high quality of the product he endorsed.

Both Lopez and De Niro's advertisements utilize effectively the power of Hollywood stars. They attempt to transfer the image of luxurious celebrities to the quality of the products.

Discussion

This paper analyzes four advertisements featuring Western celebrities in different periods. It shows that the power of celebrities is still used as an effective strategy in Japanese advertisements across different periods. Though Japan does not spend as much money on advertisements as before and Japan may have lower numbers of Western celebrities in advertisements, having Hollywood stars endorsing products still seems to work well in Japan.

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