

Caucasians in Japanese Advertisements

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Abstract

This paper analyzes two Japanese advertisements (ads) that feature Caucasians for Procter & Gamble (P&G) Bold and Trivago, through semiology. Although the number of foreigners living in Japan is only about 1%; Caucasians often appear in Japanese ads. The P&G ad shows a Caucasian housewife with a sweet personality, and that of Trivago, a travel search website, shows a Caucasian woman who explains how to use the Trivago website. Both the ads analyzed in this paper present positive images of Caucasians, and this suggests that Japanese have an inferiority complex in relation to Caucasians.

概要

白人を起用した P&G と Trivago の CM の記号論分析を行った。日本に住む外国人は 1% 少々だが、白人は日本の CM に頻繁に見られる。P&G の CM では愛されるキャラクターとして白人女性が専業主婦として描かれ、Trivago では白人女性が Trivago サイトをどう使えばよいかを説明していた。両方の CM において白人に対する肯定的イメージが描かれており、これは日本人の中にある劣等感を表しているものと言えるだろう。

This paper focuses on ethnicity/race in ads and analyzes the possible inferiority complex that Japanese have toward Caucasians as reflected in Japanese ads through the application of semiology. First, television commercials for Procter & Gamble (P&G) Bold are analyzed. A detergent brand, P&G Bold has been represented by Caucasian women in its advertising, such as Miranda Kerr, a famous model (“Miranda Kaa,” 2013), and Cailin Russo (Kent, 2017), a Caucasian jazz singer. According to

Mai Repi (My recipe) (2018), which is operated by P&G, an imaginary character named Cameron, who appears in Bold ads, plays an American wife who was formerly married to a Japanese man and got divorced. Cameron is portrayed as someone who was originally from California, is always cheerful and friendly, and enjoys doing laundry.

Cameron's last name is Yamada, which is not considered cool in Japan. The name "Taro Yamada" is a common name in Japan, like "John Smith" in English. In a study by Garone (2014), which found more than 35,000 entries for that name on LinkedIn, the author discussed how a person can be easily recognized when writing a résumé if his name is John Smith. Yet, in the case of the P&G ad, because Cameron has a Western first name, it is easy to remember because it stands out. Consequently, this Caucasian wife who is unfamiliar to Japanese is considered a friendly person, partly because of her common, uncool last name.

A P&G Bold ad from 2018 (P&G, 2018a) shows a Japanese housewife who is ironing clothe, and says, "Airon taihen" (Ironing's troublesome), but she hears a neighbor saying "Airon sururiin" (Iron smoothly). The Japanese housewife says "Yamada-san?" (Ms. Yamada?) and checks on the neighbor. She sees a Caucasian blonde woman, Cameron, ironing clothes in her garden and she says, "Sururiin" (Smoothly). The Japanese woman then goes outside and, wearing a mask to hide her face, crouches behind a bush and says, "Usō nagasode anna kantan ni" (Cannot believe she irons long sleeves so smoothly). Cameron says, "Bourudo sama sama deesu" (Many thaaaanks, Bold).

Then, the Japanese housewife appears from behind the bush and says, "Bourudo?" (Bold?). Cameron is surprised to see her. On the screen, some Japanese words can be seen: "Bourudo. Jeru bouru. 3D ha" (Bold. Gel Ball 3D), and a male Japanese voiceover speaks these words. Then, the screen shifts to a shot of a Caucasianshirt, and the voiceover continues, saying, "Iruī no hyōumen wo nameraka shiage ni, Nagasode no iron shiage mo" (Make the surface of clothes smoother. Make it easier to iron even long sleeves) with the text of a Japanese sentence on-screen: "Funwari appu seibun haigou" (More chemical components to make it softer).

In the next shot, both the Japanese housewife and Cameron are ironing, and they say, "Suisui kuriin" (Smoothly). Cameron smiles, and the same male voice that was also previously heard in this advertisement says, "Shirosa kagayaku" (Shiny white), and then the Japanese housewife smiles and the voiceover says, "Kaori Kirameku" (Smells so nice). These words appear on-screen with both of the women, with the Japanese woman wearing a blue striped skirt and Cameron a pink pant suit. The last

shot in this advertisement shows the name of the brand “Boorudo” (Bold), with two containers, one pink and the other blue. The colors of the two containers, and those of the two women’s clothes match, and this reflects the superior quality of the two types of the same product, Bold.

In addition, the iron and Cameron’s pants that appear in the middle of this ad are both pink. This color stands out in this shot, as no other bright colors are shown with the natural surroundings in green, and laundry all white. A neighbor’s house in the background has a brown wall. Thus, the color pink stands out in this shot. The use of the same color for the iron and Cameron’s pants also connotes in the mind of viewers that she is a great wife who does household chores.

Another P&G (2018b) Bold advertisement first shows a blue bottle along with a combination of Japanese and English words: “*New bourudo*” (New bold), with “New” in English and in pink, and “bold” in Japanese and in blue. Cameron and her neighbor, a Japanese woman, are having a garden party with other Asian women. Cameron wears the same pink pants with a Caucasianshirt that she was wearing in the other P&G ad discussed above, and the Japanese woman wears a pale blue cardigan. One of the guests says, “*Yakiniku oishii*” (Hot plate beef is so good). Then Cameron stands up and prepares to leave. The woman with the blue cardigan says, “*Yamada san doko ikuno*” (Mrs. Yamada, where are you heading?), and Cameron replies, “*Musuko no jyugyou kansen desu*” (To the class observation day for my son). The Japanese woman says, “*Jyugyou sankan? Watashimoda. Nioi doushiyou?*” (Class observation day? Me, too! What can I do about this stinky smell?), as she prepares stir-fried beef, it is smelly.

Cameron says, “*Konna toki ha Nade Poko Pon*” (In such a case, use this odor eliminator. Smells nice). The Japanese woman smells Cameron’s clothes and says, “*Kusaku nai*” (Not stinky). Cameron smiles and nods. On the screen some text reads, “*Renoo honkaku syoushu seibun haigou*” (Lenor), while a male voiceover says, “*Atarashii Renoo ha honkaku shoushu in. Iya na nioiwo nadete pitatto shousyu, Pon to kaoru*” (New Lenor has new odor eliminator chemical components) and “*Nade, pita, pon*” (smooths, kills the odor, and smells nice instead). Here the original Japanese three words “Nade, pita, pon” do not actually make sense by themselves. The whole sentence is translated here because these are the words stated in the voiceover. However, the screen only shows the first few characters for each word, which sound like mimetic words.

Cameron and the Japanese woman go the parents’ day, or the class observation. The other parents say, “*Ii kaori*” (Smells nice) as they step into a classroom and walk

past the other parents. The Japanese woman says to Cameron, “Yamada-san zurui” (So unfair, Mrs. Yamada). From here on, what the voiceover says and what the screen shows are the same as in the P&G advertisement described above.

In this ad, in the school classroom, Cameron is the tallest person among all the parents, and she is the only one wearing pink out of everyone in the classroom. Therefore, she stands out from the crowd. Viewers might also pay attention to the Japanese woman with a blue cardigan because, although some other parents are also wearing blue, those blue colors are rather dark, and the Japanese woman’s pale blue cardigan looks brighter in contrast. Consequently, both of these women stand out from the crowd.

In addition, as is also seen in the first P&G advertisement, pink and blue are the colors of P&G Bold products and are used throughout the advertisement, including as the color of the products and of Cameron’s and the Japanese woman’s clothes. Consistently showing the same colors makes it easier for the audience to remember them and the brand. Cameron’s positive personality, which is evident in both ads, not only implies her sweet personality but also conveys a positive image of the products.

In these two ads for P&G Bold, Cailin Russo portrayed Cameron (Kent, 2017). Having Caucasian endorsers, such as Kerr and Russo, indicates Caucasians are preferred to be used in these Japanese ads. Cameron could be an African-American or an Asian American, but P&G chose a Caucasian woman. This suggests that a Caucasian person can have a positive connotation in the mind of Japanese consumers. The second advertisement analyzed here is for Trivago, which is a hotel search website designed to help customers look for the best hotel deals. It originated in Germany and has branches in 55 countries (Trivago, 2018). Trivago put 85% of its budget into advertising in Japan (Takiguchi, 2017), and its ads are shown repeatedly on television in that country. Trivago’s commercials were ranked as the third most frequently shown among all service ads in the first three days of 2017 in Japan (Video Research Ltd., 2017).

Thus, this company’s ad endorsers are well known as the Trivago woman or man, although they are not very famous celebrities. Natalie Emmons, a Caucasian American woman who has been employed as a Trivago endorser in Japan since 2014 (Emmons, 2018), is widely known as the “Trivago woman” in Japan (Oricon news, 2018), and the spokesperson for Trivago’s American advertising, Tim Williams, is also known as the “Trivago guy” (Hampson, 2017, para. 1).

In these commercials, both Emmons and Williams explain how to use the Trivago website by showing the audience what they see on their computer screen and how they

can get the information they need and the best hotel deal. In the Japanese ad, Emmons wears a navy pantsuit. Here, navy shows “independence, freedom, intelligence, calmness, concentration, autonomy, and reason” (Yuki, 2017, para. 19). This suits Emmons’s image as someone whom the audience can trust. Williams (Trivago, 2013) wears a brown shirt and a pair of loose black pants. Although Williams was an actor before starring in Trivago’s ads, he was not famous and therefore was suited to be the spokesperson for Trivago, as “they wanted someone real, approachable, and genuine. I just did it over and over until they had what they needed” (Montgomery, 2014 July 31, para. 10). In his Trivago ad, brown symbolizes “security and reliance” (Fukase, 2012, para. 10). This color thus corresponds with the message Trivago wants to communicate to the audience.

In Emmons’s Trivago advertisement in Japan, she wears a navy pantsuit and explains how consumers can search for the best hotel (Trivago, 2014). She does not look sexy or seductive, which is usually a common approach in American ads. Sexualization in American ads has been analyzed and criticized in many studies, including Graff and Murnen (2013), Hatch (2011), Martin (1999), and Oppliger (2008). In contrast to the American strategy, however, Trivago’s ads starring Emmons in Japan in 2014 (Trivago, 2014), and Williams in the United States in 2013 (Trivago, 2013) both portray characters with a rather conservative appearance. Emmons said she had to tell the foreign marketing staff, who were creating a Trivago advertisement in Japan that attempted to make her look sexy and confident, as is commonly seen in European and North American ads, that she knew this approach would not work in Japan (“Nihongo pera pera,” 2016 12. 10).

Although both Emmons and Williams have successfully endorsed the Trivago brand, Emmons as a Caucasian woman clearly does not represent the majority of Japanese (i.e., Asians), while the Caucasian Williams can represent an ordinary person in the United States. Interestingly, Trivago’s (2017) ads in different countries employ ordinary people or not-so-famous actors and actresses, but the Japanese Trivago ad utilizes Emmons, a Caucasian woman, while Korean and Chinese ads employ Asian endorsers (Trivago, 2017). The percentage of foreigners in Japan was just slightly higher than 1% percent (1.22%) in 2005 (*Soumusho Toukei* [Statistics Bureau], 2005), but they are shown quite frequently in Japanese ads. This suggests that a positive image is associated with Caucasians in Japan. Thus, what one can see in the Japanese Trivago ads are racial stereotypes that present a positive image of Caucasians (Prieler, 2010).

In order for ads to be effective, they should include certain elements. For example,

Mott (n.d.) stated that “identifying your target” (para. 2) and “messaging through appropriate media” (para. 3) are a few of the factors that should be included in effective ads.

Thus, it is natural to conclude that a successful ad differs depending on the culture. For instance, Maheshwari (2017 Oct. 12) discussed Toyota’s strategy of creating different kinds of Camry (one of the Toyota car models) ads that targeted people of different ethnicities in the United States. According to her, audiences enjoyed viewing ads that portrayed their own ethnicity as well as those targeted at other ethnicities because they could see the lifestyles of people of other ethnicities. This approach suggests that ads are tailored to a target audience.

Thus, Japanese advertising that features Caucasians may be the result of Japanese having an inferiority complex toward Caucasians. Hagiwara’s (2004) study compared the percentage of Caucasians in Japanese ads between 1993 and 2003. He concluded that, although Caucasians had been featured most often in earlier decades, the percentage decreased slightly between 1993 (78.0%) and 2003 (72.9%). Yet, the high percentage in these decades still reveals the reliance on Caucasians in Japanese ads.

Hiyoshi (2001) examined various ads in 1990, 1996, and 2000 and found that in these years, Caucasians were shown significantly more often than African-Americans, Asians, and others. In addition, Arima (2004) examined 164 haircare TV commercials in Japan and found that most of the models utilized in these ads were Japanese (83.5%), and that Caucasians appeared in only 10.4% of the ads. Even though, the percentage of foreigners living in Japan in 2005 was about 1.22% of the Japanese population (*Soumusho Toukei* [Statistics Bureau], 2005), Japanese ads show them much more frequently. Thus, this suggests the preference in Japanese advertising of employing Caucasians.

Yamada (2013) examined more than 1,600 Japanese ads from 1999 to 2001 and found out that out of a total of 284 commercials featuring foreigners, automobile ads had the highest numbers of foreigners (67 ads or 23.6%). Among these ads, one-third (109 ads or 38.3%) featured Caucasians. Interestingly, none of these ads featured African-Americans.

This shows a positive connotation for an unfamiliar Caucasian endorser in Japanese ads, for which most of the target audience are Asians. Caucasians are seen positively by Japanese, as observed by Suzuki (1969). Priler (2007) collected 40,000 Japanese ads and analyzed the meaning of Caucasians or African-Americans starring in them. According to him, Caucasians are depicted as people who are clearly different from Japanese and “often appeared in romantic or sexual scenes (p. 144),

while African-Americans are shown as simply “different from Japanese” (p. 145). In considering both race and the most emphasized component (either impact, sympathy, or understanding of content) in ads, Togano, Kawamono, and Takabayashi’s (2016) study found that “the most effective one is the advertisement with Caucasians having impact element in advertisements” (p. 71; translated by the author). Thus, Caucasians in Japanese ads can have positive connotations.

However, this approach may also show an inferiority complex on the part of Japanese toward Caucasians (Moribe, 2017 May 9). As Ashikarhi (2005) showed in a study, Japanese women hoped to have fairer skin, and so-called “whitening” cream to make one’s skin lighter was very popular among them. She further claimed that Japanese prefer to identify with a Caucasian which as opposed to African-American. Cho (2013) compared televisions commercials for Shiseido cosmetics in China and Japan, and one conclusion drawn was that Japanese commercials often showed brown-haired models, which suggested Japanese admiration for Westerners’ hair, that often has a lighter color than Japanese black hair.

However, African-Americans are also utilized in a positive way in Japanese ads. For example, Softbank, a cell phone company in Japan, started running in 2007 a series of commercials that depict the Shirato family, in which a dog is featured as the father; an African-American man, Dante Carver, plays one of the sons; and all the other family members are also humans and Japanese/Asians, (“Shirato-ke,” 2017). Softbank decided to have a dog as the father of a human family because the company faced difficulty in deciding on an endorser. According to Son, the president of Softbank, the company could not find the right person to portray a father figure, and so Son decided to feature a dog as the father (Oricon news, 2010).

Carver, who portrayed the African-American son in the Softbank Shirato family commercials, started his acting career around 2006 in Japan and has starred in Softbank ads since 2007 (Oricon news, 2010). As Sekine (2017) noted, the unexpected story of the Shirato family attracted viewers’ attention, and this series of ads depicting the Shirato family were ranked as the most favorable ones, 60 times in a monthly ranking from 2007 to 2017. Softbank created this advertisement by employing the surprising and unexpected approach of having a dog as the father of a human family in order to avoid familiar situations in its ads (Senoo, 2015).

Although Yamada’s (2013) study did not identify any ads that featured only an African-American endorser, there were six (2.1%) that showed both Caucasians and African-Americans. Thus, African-Americans also seem to be used as attention-getters in Japanese ads, and featuring a foreigner can have a positive impact in these

ads. However, Japanese commercials still rely heavily on Caucasians, and this definitely indicates the positive image associated with Caucasians. As discussed here, both the Japanese and American versions of Trivago ads have Caucasians as endorsers, but the Caucasian female endorser in the Japanese version means something different from the Caucasian man in the American version.

A preference for Caucasians in Japanese TV ads has existed for a long time. Although African-Americans are also used in these ads, positive images are definitely attached to Caucasians and therefore they are featured more often.

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