
Specialities of Japanese Television Advertising

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Introduction

Japan has the second largest advertising industry in the world (Holden 2004), but its advertising industry and advertisements are still relatively unknown in the Western world. There are many different advertising forms in Japan, but television advertising dominates the field. TV advertising has 39.9 percent of all advertising investment, clearly the largest percentage (cf. Nikkei *kōkoku kenkyūjo* 2005:233).

There have been many short articles written about Japanese advertising, but there are relatively fewer longer works on Japanese advertising in the English language. Based on this situation, there are some “specialties” of Japanese advertising which are used again and again, though the two major books in the field (Moeran 1996; Mooney 2000) both criticize and question these specialties in one way or another.

In this article I will discuss some of these specialties of Japanese advertising, namely: (1) 15-second spots; (2) atmospheric ads; (3) comparative advertising; and what I regard as a real specialty of Japanese advertising, (4) the high use of *tarento*, or celebrities. This article will try to explain why these specialties exist (if they are special at all for Japan, which must be also examined), discuss the

most common explanations in the field and to what degree such specialties are valid or whether they might be based either on the sole referent system of the United States or some form of exoticization by foreigners and/or self-exoticization by the Japanese.

Let me start with one of the most often cited specialties when speaking about Japanese commercials—their length.

15-second Spots

One of the most often cited phenomena of Japanese commercials is the length of the commercials, which is 15 seconds. In many European countries and in the United States the average commercial length is approximately 30 seconds (Yamaki 1994a:66). In the Japanese case, there also exists a 30-second version of most commercials, but they are rather scantily broadcast in comparison to the 15-second commercials.

Many Japanese experts and advertising executives explain the brevity of these commercials with the Japanese fondness of short forms, like haikus for example. It is said that the Japanese understand each other without many words or explanation (Schlaile 2000:4; see also Mooney 2000, for a discussion). Also, this is an often cited self-stereo-

type by the Japanese, mentioned in *nihonjinron*. It is clear looking at Japanese commercials that this “cultural explanation” based on the uniqueness of the Japanese is a simplification of reality. Besides, Japan is not the only country with a high amount of 15-second spots. This is also true for France (Dallmann 1998: 75), which definitely has a very different cultural background.

Although it is certainly not possible to answer the question of why 15-second commercials are used entirely, economic reasons should be certainly considered. Mooney (2000: 88) refers to the high cost of airing TV commercials and also to the intense competition for airtime. The 15-second commercials began in Japan in 1961, when television stations started selling commercial airtime in 15-second units instead of 30-second units. This new system totally changed the style of Japanese commercials (Kawashima 2006: 402). Though it is unclear what the reasons for that change were, it might have been simply a way to increase television station revenue in a time shortly after all television stations started airing and a lot of new investment was necessary. Since 30-second spots were normal in Japan in the past, one has to question the sole cultural explanation of 15-second spots. In conclusion, there might be some cultural reasons at work behind the use of 15-second commercials in Japan, which will be also discussed in the following section of atmospheric ads, but on the whole it seems that economic reasons should not be overlooked.

Atmospheric Ads

The terms “atmospheric ads” or “mood ads” are often used in the context of Japanese advertising. It is said that Japanese people prefer emotional advertisement to informative advertisement. This idea led to many studies in content analysis on the question

of hard versus soft sell, with advertising from Japan mostly on the soft sell side (Lin & Salwen, 1995; Mueller, 1987, 1991, 1992; Madden, Caballero & Matsukubo, 1986; Ramaprasad & Hasegawa, 1992).

Soft-sell commercials do not show the characteristics of the products or company; instead, by using music, colors, symbols, aesthetics, art, beautiful nature, etc., they build a special emotion and atmosphere which may create a positive feeling in the consumer and thus a positive association with a product or company. Since there is often no real message, interpretation is the viewer’s job. That is why this style is often named soft sell, because hard sell shows logical arguments and product information for buying a product. As Mueller (1991, 1992) has shown, soft sell is much stronger in Japan than in the United States. Also Lin (1993) proved that American ads use more facts and have longer messages because it is a “low-context-culture”, whereas Japan is a “high-context-culture.” In contrast to these results, Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) found that Japanese commercials have more informational content than American commercials, but also have more emotional elements. However, they concluded that the informative and emotional strategies in both countries are similar. Holden (1993) also found soft sell strategies, but surprisingly, also found a great deal of hard sell.

Similarly, as in the case of the 15-second spots, cultural reasons are also often given for the use of atmospheric ads. Yamada (1997: 71) argues that these ads are connected with the directness of English and the indirectness of the Japanese language. Johanna Metzger from Leo Burnett (Japan) also explains the phenomenon of soft sell and mood commercials in Japan in connection with the directness of English, and the indirectness of Japanese

(Schlaile 2000:8). Schlaile concludes that one characteristic of Japanese society is the large role of non-verbal communication. She underscores this with a statement from Fukuda Toshihiko from the advertising agency Dentsū: “We are very weak in communication” (Schlaile 2000: 8). However, many Japanese advertising executives might have their own interests to play with the myths of the uniqueness of the Japanese (Moeran 1996: 38).

Moeran (1996) is a harsh critic of such cultural explanations for atmospheric ads which often go far beyond referring to the Japanese language, but are also often based on unique Japanese concepts. Moeran argues that many Western writers regard Japanese commercials as more intuitive or atmospheric and combine this argument with Orientalist arguments about Japanese culture. He states that “such assertions are never based on quantitative analyses of Japanese advertising, however, but rather on writers’ own intuitive perceptions (or moods) which carefully ignore a number of important issues” (p. 18). He concludes:

By characterizing all Japanese advertising as ‘mood-oriented’, these writers – consciously or otherwise – succeed in conflating the numerous strands of Japan’s domestic consumer market into a single entity called ‘the Japanese’ in a manner that smacks of Orientalism at its worst (p. 19).

Although there might be some cultural reasons involved, since television commercials are a cultural product, I agree with Moeran and I would like to mention some points which are often ignored in the purely cultural explanations of this phenomenon:

(1) One simple reason for atmospheric ads might be that in 15 seconds, you cannot convey much information.

(2) Most of the comparative studies conclude that Japanese ads are different based on comparisons with the United States. However, similar trends can also be found in other countries. For example, the description given by Schmidt & Spiess (1994:229) of German lifestyle commercials during the 1980s could easily also have been used for atmospheric ads in Japan. They found that these commercials use strong images and sound, have nearly no story, the people are exchangeable and the whole mood of the scenery becomes one with the product.

(3) The advertising style might be also connected with some kind of economic stage of a

country. Tse, Belk & Zhou (1989) showed that the information content in China is relatively high and emotional ads are seldom used, whereas in Hong Kong the information content is very low. Taiwan is in the middle. Based on this study, it seems there is no real cultural reason for the information content in ads, but instead an economic one. It also should not be forgotten that atmospheric advertisements are used when the consumer already knows about the qualities and characteristics of products (Dallmann 1998).

(4) The connection between “economic stages” and advertising style can be also seen in Japan. In the 1950s the product, its characteristics and the information content were dominant in Japanese commercials. This was still the case until the end of the 1970s, but at the beginning of the 1980s, mood or atmospheric advertising became more predominant (Görtzen 1995:70,83). Now, the mention of such ads is highly overstated. These overstatements seem more of a reproduction of older ideas. Since the end of the economic bubble, commercials have increasingly used product information again, as well as a “slice of life,” or scenes from everyday life, with many artistic products prevalent in the 1980s becoming absent (Haehling von Lanzener 1999: 247). Also Kawashima (2006) states that some distinctive features of Japanese advertising like soft sell, “indirect forms of expressions, brief dialogue or narration in television commercials with minimal explanatory content or a (Japanese) sense of humour to create a bond of mutual feelings seem to have gone” (p. 396). He says this is because “media buying power, rather than creativity, dictates the trade” (p. 400).

(5) Whether an ad is atmospheric or informative depends on the type of ad. Whereas television commercials tend to be atmospheric, print ads tend to be informative (Moeran 1996: 18). Besides, people might already get their information from other sources, such as retail stores. Japan has only half of the population of the United States, and is the size of California, but has the same number of retail outlets, where you can find all kinds of product information (Mooney 2000: 8–9).

(6) Finally, the borders between informative and emotional advertisements are often not as clear as indicated in some studies, so even emotional advertisements can include product information.

As could be seen in the last paragraphs it would be too simplistic to explain the specialties of Japanese advertisements solely culturally. The same is

also true in the case of comparative advertising, which is also often explained in terms of the Japanese mentality.

Comparative Advertising

An often-cited phenomenon when comparing Japanese with American advertising is comparative advertising. It amounts to approximately 35 percent of one form or another of advertising in the United States (Yamaki 1994b: 152), but barely exists in Japan. Comparative advertising directly or indirectly compares two products (sometimes mentioning names).

Comparative advertising is allowed in Japan after the Japan Fair Trade Commission (FTC) lifted its ban in 1987 (Mooney 2000: 20). However, there are some guidelines, including the prohibition of saying untrue things and slandering a competitor, and mandating that the commercial must include interesting information for the consumer (Haehling von Lanzeneuer 1999: 26).

Why such commercials are not used in Japan is often explained culturally. It is said that it is against the Japanese way of thinking to show one's advantages while showing the disadvantages of others. It is impolite to compare products and to speak about one's own product too directly and too well. This kind of advertising is against the Japanese nature of modesty (Trompke 1992: 86). The few existing examples did not prove that Japanese people would get discouraged by such commercials (Mooney 2000: 23). Yamaki (1994b: 153) stresses that there are reasons at work other than cultural, including business and economics. One reason for this is competing accounts in many advertising agencies, which means that an advertising agency deals with the accounts of two concurrent companies. For example, the same advertising agency may handle advertising for both Nissan and Toyota. If the same advertising agency makes comparative commercials for companies for whom they are in charge, they might have trouble with one of those companies.

Nevertheless, there are cases of this kind of advertising in Japan. The most controversial example was an ad for Pepsi broadcast in 1991. The commercial featured the rap singer MC Hammer becoming a crooner after drinking Coca-Cola and becoming a rap singer again after drinking Pepsi. Coca-Cola complained to the Fair Trade Commission, but the Fair Trade Commission said nothing against the commercial. Nonetheless, television

companies quit broadcasting the advertisement, probably because Coca-Cola is a huge advertiser in Japan. Finally, Pepsi made a new version of the commercial and covered the Coca-Cola bottle, which was again broadcast on television. Since everybody was already familiar with the previous contents of the commercial, this version also led to controversy. Thus, it is no wonder that after these problems, television companies show little interest in comparative advertising (Trompke 1992: 85–86; Mooney 2000: 22).

Although there are rarely direct product comparisons used in Japanese television, it has to be questioned whether comparisons cannot be found at a deeper level when, for example, a hair-care product is promoting its product for "Asians" in a very similar way as another hair product is promoted using a Western celebrity. This is only one example. It would be necessary to prove whether this is only a coincidence, or whether there are really references to another ad.

In conclusion, I want to point out that there are nearly no direct forms of product comparisons on Japanese television as in the United States at this time. Nevertheless, the degree to which this has to do with a Japanese culture must be questioned. There is certainly a connection between culture and commercials, but also in many other countries without the so-called "Japanese mentality," direct comparison of products is not used. Thus, the argument with competing accounts seems a better explanation; it is possible the question is the wrong one and the research should focus on why it exists in the United States and not in Japan and many other countries. The following section will discuss a real specialty, at least in comparison to US and most European advertising, which is nearly never highlighted in Western literature.

Tarento

Tarento comes from the English word *talent*, which means a major media personality. *Tarento* are omnipresent on Japanese television and in commercials. Yamada (2005) found that 46.8 percent of the commercials in her sample had Japanese celebrities and 3.0 percent had foreign ones. However, based on my own research this seems to be a rather low number, with Mooney stating that nearly 70 percent of Japanese commercials use celebrities seeming nearer to reality (Mooney 2000: 39).

Tarento will appear on a talk show, then on a quiz show, in between in commercials, and after-

wards on a variety show. They seem to share their lives with the audience; the most successful of the *tarento* are followed throughout their lives by the television audience. They might be one reason for the high popularity of Japanese commercials and also the reason why much is reported about commercials in diverse media in Japan. They are part of everyday talk and part of the life of Japanese people through their everyday appearance (often even multiple times a day). If a *tarento* is popular, it is nothing special when he or she advertises for diverse products at the same time, whereas advertising with celebrities is regarded as problematic in the West (Görtzen 1995: 79). However, most Japanese *tarento* do not appear as stars in the commercials but as normal people, more like a neighbor, with the commercial depicting everyday life. This “quasi-intimate” interaction (Painter 1996) in commercials is seen in the context that these *tarento* are a part of the life of many Japanese, since they regularly appear on television. Although Iwabuchi uses the word “idols,” he argues the same point: “The frequent appearance of idols in commercial films and other TV programmes make him/her look like someone living next door or studying in the same classroom” (Iwabuchi 1999: 191).

One good example of *tarento* who are already long-standing in the center of Japanese life are the members of the pop group SMAP. They sing, have their own television shows, act in dramas, are regular guests on variety shows, and so on. A day does not go by where one of the members of SMAP is not on television, including commercials.

Moeran (1996: 143) writes this about the use of *tarento*/celebrities: “One of the best ways of attracting attention to a company’s products in an age of communication clutter, overpriced television time and consequent fifteen second commercials is through celebrity endorsement”. This is especially true for commercials with only 15 seconds. Nonetheless, celebrity endorsement also leads to some problems. One of them is the risk that the advertisement might become an ad for the celebrity and not for the product. In other words, people remember the celebrity but not the product he or she advertised.

Conclusion

I hope this article will help to debunk some of the myths about Japanese television advertising and its so-called specialties. This paper does not want to deny the cultural aspects of Japanese commer-

cial, as commercials and media are embedded into the culture in every country, but I agree with Brian Moeran that many of the interpretations of the specialties of Japanese advertising “smell” of orientalism, or if produced by the Japanese, a form of *nihonjinron*. Especially in the case of advertising, there are reasons other than cultural aspects at work, including economic reasons which should not be ignored. This can be seen in the 15-second spots which are partly-based on the high prices of air time in Japan, or in the case of atmospheric ads which might be connected to some kind of “economic stage,” or finally in the case of comparative advertising where advertising companies might get into trouble with their clients because of competing accounts.

Many of the works on Japanese advertising are done as if advertising is non-developing and its “specialties” are somehow ahistorical, as if Japanese advertising has always been the way it is, which is the only way to then use cultural interpretations that often go back into Japanese history. However in reality, Japanese advertising—as every other cultural form—is under continuous change. Much of what is written about Japanese advertising is a reproduction of older works which are based on even older data. Another problem is that most so-called specialties are only based on comparisons with the United States, but often claim to be a comparison with “Western advertising,” which is a rather one-sided approach. There is no uniform West, as there is no uniform Asia, and this is true for many aspects, including advertising. German commercials are certainly different from Japanese commercials which are also different from Italian commercials. Also, if compared with other countries besides the United States, Japanese advertising specialties become much less special, though some cultural specificity should not be neglected. After all, Europe also has quite a different cultural background than Japan, so differences should not be surprising. What this article could not show, but what would be of interest to see, is how special Japanese commercials are in an Asian context.

In conclusion, this article does not want to be the last wisdom on Japanese advertising, but it should be regarded as the most accurate knowledge as of January 2008. At the time of printing this article and especially by the time of reading this article, Japanese advertising might have already shifted again in one way or another, as it has always done in the past.

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