

## JAPANESE TELEVISION: ADVERTISING, CULTURE, AND MEDIA PRACTICES

Associate Professor Sebastian Brooke

Faculty of Advanced Engineering, Kogakuin University, Japan

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### ABSTRACT

This brief overview examines Japan's enduring relationship with the small screen and television broadcasting, a surprisingly faithful relationship in a time of upheavals in media consumption. Television connects all 126 million inhabitants, informing, persuading, relaxing, befriending, and providing topics for discussion and ways of contextualising events, brands, people and world-views. It is now virtually impossible to escape the worlds of the screens in any way in Japan, meaning it is also impossible to escape the manufactured content on these screens. The driving force behind this promulgation of screens is at its most basic level a self-promotion, a need to perpetuate consumerism and brandism, to ensure that screens continue to be bought and continue to integrate into everyday life, providing a direct conduit between products and consumers. These products range from the television screens themselves, everyday consumer goods, through to opinions and worldviews, selections and slices of life for consumption by audiences eager to absorb and consume and connect.

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### Introduction

The world of television is a major factor in everyday life in Japan, with advertising being the financial pillar upon which television rests securely. Advertising plays a vital role in the sustainability of this medium that has almost complete coverage across the nation, with a television set in 99.5 percent of households and almost one television set for every person in Japan, 'at around 120 million' sets nationwide for a population of approximately 126 million (Nippon Television Network, 2011, p. 68). This almost total spread and coverage is also supported by the very high contact hours citizens have with this medium, totaling 3 hours 18 minutes on weekdays, increasing to 3 hours 57 minutes on Sundays (NHK, 2015, p. 11). Television is, as Yoshimi (2003) describes it, central to daily life in Japan:

Even today, Japanese people watch on average more than three hours per day,

making it the second largest use of their time after sleeping. TV forms a major part of the lives of people all over the world, but it is above all in Japan that it has come to play such a central role in the culture of daily life, besides simply being a major source of influence. A survey carried out in 2002 by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Association) Broadcasting Culture Research Institute (2003) shows that 23 percent of the Japanese population watch TV for an average five hours or more per day. This is close to double the figure for the United States or France (14 percent). In the same survey, 23 percent of Japanese surveyed placed TV at the top of a list of items deemed necessary for daily life. This figure is 4.6 times greater than for Americans (5 percent), 2.3 times greater than for the French (10 percent) and close to double the figure obtained among people surveyed in Thailand (13 percent). From an international comparative perspective, few

nations attach as much importance to TV as do the Japanese. (Yoshimi, 2003, p. 460)

### Advertising and Identities

Advertising is a culturally constructed and situated force, utilising and appealing to dominant social paradigms and discourses in its drive to connect with an audience and situate products more favourably. Given advertising's centrality in what is still the main medium for media consumption, television, this paper focuses on advertising's influences on and connections to concepts of identity, particularly dominant, privileged, national identity narratives, and what these narratives are in Japanese television advertising.

So, what narratives of national identity are being broadcast on these screens during the daily hours of television viewing? This discussion will explore television advertising approaches and practices in Japan and the relationships between identity narratives and constructions and these advertising approaches. Advertising is multifunctional and 'culturally situated', providing a framework for understanding and reproducing 'social and cultural identities' and relationships (Wharton, 2013, p. 76). It works to promote consumption while simultaneously promoting 'the dominant forms', social ideologies and narratives, particularly those that are culturally constructed, such as concepts of gender, sexuality, nation and power.

Advertising is a tool that serves the system of capitalist consumerism by connecting goods and consumers, but it also does so by providing realities and identities for these consumers/viewers, by selling something other than simply the products being advertised:

by constructing this 'reality as it should be', advertisements provide models for identity formation, at the level of both the individual and the nation. At the same time, I am not asserting that audiences uncritically accept mass-mediated images and build their identities around them. (Hogan, 1999, p. 748)

Hogan goes on to discuss how audiences are not simply passive consumers of these constructed realities, but active participants in the process of renewing and renegotiating identity through acceptance of and/or resistance to the dominant messages, images and meanings, and also through the filters and nets of class, gender, sexuality and cultural/subcultural identifications.

The relationships between society, culture and the mass media are therefore complicated and shifting, with a continuous evolution of images, messages and meanings through these processes of identification and resistance, or as Lyon (2000) so simply put it in his discussion of the media, consumption, and identity, 'we are recipients of entertainment, shopping for a self' (p. 75).

### Nations and Identities

Discussions of nations and when they were in fact born generally fall into three camps, although these approaches do overlap. The three approaches are generally classed into differentiated, yet overlapping, categories: primordialists, ethnicists, and modernists. Primordialists see human societies as having always exhibited some degree of national identity, the ethnicists focus on the *ethnie*, or ethnic community as a precursor in many ways to our modern conception of the nation, and the modernists connect the concept of the nation with the process of state-building. There are important commonalities between the approaches and theories with the real main difference between the approaches being one of timing as to the construction and development of such a concept in the minds and hearts of the group members.

Benedict Anderson refers to modern nations and their states as imagined political communities, 'imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). For Anderson, the modern conditions necessary for the rise of nations were not limited solely to the apparatus of the state, but also to the development of technology, in particular mass communication technologies. These technologies allow the state and corporate producers to purposefully create or appeal to imagined identities and reinforce bonding memories and myths to legitimate its control over a group of people. As Calhoun states:

What now seem settled, almost natural national identities are the results of symbolic struggles and both cultural and very material violence. Not only violence, to be sure: national identity and common histories are also the result of cultural creativity – the writing of novels that millions want to read, the shared exposure to television programmes. (Calhoun, 1997, p. 85)

The media continues this process of reinforcing identity constructions through the use

of national narratives and discourse. Media, literature, history, and myth, all play significant roles in the imagining of national identity, in helping to bring together people with varied backgrounds and unite them into an autonomous, separate group. As Morris-Suzuki puts it in a discussion of memories, nationalism and history:

Knowledge of and pride in the national past are seen as a glue which binds the nation together, saving it from “disintegration” in the face of external threats or internal insecurities. History is expected to serve as a primer of morals, whose inspiring lessons will temper the character of the next generation of citizens. But it is also understood as collective memory: the greater narrative of national society into which the smaller narratives of individual, family or local memory must fit like pieces of a jigsaw. (Morris-Suzuki, 1998, p. 9)

The connections made by the state with the national group must by necessity be rebuilt continuously across generations as the nation changes and develops, and it is this process of nation building that is referred to as nationalism (see Pettman, 2000, p.116), literally the creation of national identity.

### **Media Practices**

The most important tool for identity construction is the media, in all its forms, but most particularly through television. In the case of Japan, with television having almost 100% spread in homes across the country and a very high level of daily contact hours, this medium is important in reproducing national identity, by bringing the selected images, myths, histories and beliefs into each individual citizen’s home on a daily basis, by screening the selected cultural identities and narratives for citizens to identify with. These selected imaginings often focus on history and myth, whether real or fictional, as binding forces for the national community. As Guibernau (1996) puts it when discussing this element of nationalism, of national identity construction and reproduction:

Nationalism relies heavily upon tradition in so far as it has common memories as one of its central features. But not only common memories are important, ‘common amnesia’ is also crucial, since tradition is constructed by the careful selection of events which are portrayed as key elements in the history of the

community. It could also be argued that, whenever necessary, tradition may be, and often is, invented. (Guibernau, 1996, p. 133)

This focus on tradition and history is particularly relevant in the modern era in the face of globalization and the hegemonizing cultural forces that accompany developments in technology, communication, media, and economic integration.

The media, the world of television, and in particular advertising, is playing a powerful, leading role in the development of a changing world, in the widening of audiences for the discourses of consumption and identity. Lash (1999), when discussing the arrival of the new, globalized world order, the ‘multimediated cultural space’, writes that we have gone beyond the national to a global information culture, ‘a swirling vortex of microbes, genes, desire, death, onco-mice, semiconductors, holograms, semen, digitized images, electronic money and hyperspaces in a general economy of indifference’ (Lash, 1999, p. 344). It is, however, a little premature to talk of the end of the national as a force in identity construction. Part of this move towards a globalised order includes some very real and strong death-throes of nationalism, with national ideologies permeating the digital images and media spaces, resurgent discourses and forces identified with strong national sentiment.

In counter-balance to the trend towards transnational identity, history is often produced as a constant, seen as a reliable source of identity when identity is in a state of flux, when the available sources and options for identification are multiplying and expanding. As Harootunian (2000) explains it, history appeals ‘to older historical representations of the authentic cultural object as a way to replace abstraction and fragmentation with concreteness and wholeness’ (p. xxi). It is for this reason that many states, with Japan being but one example, focus their educational and media resources back onto the glory of the past, onto times when identity formation and reproduction was a much simpler task. History is not some static version of the past that remains unchanged in the present, but is, however, a ‘constant dialogue between the past and the present in which each interrogates and illuminates the other’ (Parekh, 1994, p. 504). As Olsen (2010) puts it in a discussion of material culture, objects, and social life, ‘traditions and

cultures are *invented*, nations *imagined*, and knowledge *constructed*' (p. 5). It is the imagining of some unbroken connectivity stretching back through a history that is usually anything but a smooth, peaceful transition from past to present, that is given life and material form in symbols such as flags, anthems, parades, capital cities, fairy stories, dance, literature, advertising, and familial bonds.

Falcous (2007), in an article investigating the connections between media constructions and national identity, particularly in relationship to advertising, discusses how advertising mythologizes, and does so because national myths are 'neither total delusions nor utter falsehoods but partial truths that accentuate particular versions of reality while marginalizing others' (p. 377). Advertising works as both the economic engine driving television broadcasting, and as a cultural or socializing force, binding audiences together through limited choices and offerings of preferred social, cultural, and identity narratives. As Holden (2003) states regarding television advertising in Japan:

Through ads, television plays a powerful socializing and ideological function, narrowly and repetitiously re/producing images of gender, cultural values, history, nationalism, and political, social and personal identity (among others) . . . in their selective communication of historical and contemporary events, sojourns to foreign countries, and introduction to foreign practices, TV ads serve as cultural repositories and educators. (Holden, 2003, p. 3)

These preferred identity narratives in television advertising do change over time, often following societal changes connected to global pressures and changes in ideas and beliefs regarding cultural and social roles. Some of these changes in advertising are often 'ideal' however, and not necessarily reflective of social and cultural realities, especially the narratives to do with gender and social roles. Ono (1990) in a discussion of the change in Japanese television advertising to show a more 'savvy international type' of Japanese person gave Asahi beer's advertisement as an example. Some of the dominant identity narratives for Japanese do seem to be changing, but others are rather slow to change. In Ono's example, it seems clear that social roles for identification are becoming more

flexible, for men - the Japanese professor is a man - showing that the urbane, savvy role is a new role for perhaps one particular gender only. Organisations such as Tokyo Women's Foundation have been instrumental in pushing for changes in gender portrayals in advertising, and in many ways such groups, and other social forces, such as the Women-Friendly Advertising Contest, have played their part in change coming to the screen. As Masamichi Kitani, the secretary general of the foundation in the late 1990s, put it:

We are trying to change society, and advertising is an important conditioning force . . . advertising reflects society's values and reinforces them. Sometimes it gets out of sync with the real needs of society, so we sponsor this competition for commercials that support ideas of equality, mutual respect and sensitivity to women. (Kilburn, 1998b, p. 24)

Television advertising links consumers and products by building connections between the worlds the audiences inhabit and the worlds the brands and products are situated in. Often these advertising worlds have more of a connection to the imagination than to reality, and not just when it comes to gender and social roles. The people of the world of advertising are often situated in idealized settings that have more to do with images of the past, a fantasised historical imagining, than they have to do with any real present. This past, or its imagined version, is a key tool in nation building and the construction of a national identity and advertising is a force in this nation-building project, in the continual re/creation of identity narratives. For the increasing number of city dwellers the gardens and natural world so often prevalent in the world of advertising have become something outside of everyday existence, something mostly to be found in Disney-like theme parks. Kalinowska (2008) discusses such idealized portrayals and narratives in Japanese television advertising, while making it clear that such settings and behaviours have very little connection to the realities experienced by viewers in their everyday experiences:

After a while we see the man drinking his tea in front of his garden, sitting on the engawa, which is a place in older, traditional homes where Japanese may rest, have a snack, or spend free time. The garden resembles a traditional garden in Japan, with a small

temple in the middle. This image of sitting on the engawa with a view of the garden is common place in Japanese commercials. Many ads for drinks and food seem to employ this idealized place – idealized because there are not many Japanese who can afford to engage in this behavior in their everyday lives. There is little time or money to sit idly in front of the garden. (Kalinowska, 2008, p. 82)

These representations of Japan's glorious history, a time when life and nature were more closely connected, when there was time to relax and contemplate the movements of the seasons, conflict with the reality of today's fast-paced urban environments, the pressures of a shrinking economy, and the need for greater and greater productivity in the workplace.

Television in Japan displays an all-encompassing approach to commercial advertising, where there are no clear boundaries or separations between programmes, products, celebrities, and endorsements. According to a study conducted by Dentsu, ninety percent of commercials rated as likable by the Japanese audience featured a celebrity. The very same celebrities, who a few minutes earlier may have been giving their opinion on the latest political scandal in a wide show, may now be hawking beer or household cleaners. Celebrities trump actual products or advertising concepts, and because the use of celebrities in advertising is so well-received by the viewing public, it is a method of advertising that has become widespread, with the product being advertised often secondary to the celebrity's character and personality – celebrities themselves are the real product, lending their meaning/s to cars and detergents.

### **Conclusion**

There has always been a steady use of foreign celebrities to market products in Japan, with Arnold Schwarzenegger making a deal worth \$6 million for DirecTV in Japan, Harrison Ford making \$4 million to sell Kirin beer and Brad Pitt pocketing \$3 million from Edwin Jeans. Prieler (2010), in a study that discusses ethnic representation in Japanese advertising in some detail, found that the dominant faces appearing and counted as non-Japanese in advertising were 'white', appearing in advertising at a rate far disproportionate to their actual representation in

the demographic reality of Japan. The census data for 2010 shows that of the 2,134,151 registered foreigners in Japan, approximately 79% were from Asia (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan, 2013).

According to a study by Kilburn (1998a), more than 70% of Japanese advertisements featured a celebrity and '90% of Japanese ads rated as likeable, popular, or memorable, by consumers, used celebrities' (p. 20). This same study, however, found that 'because consumers are more sophisticated, foreign faces are not the magnets they once were. Plus, there's a new word in the Asian lexicon: relevancy' (Kilburn, 1998a, p. 20). This recent decline in the use of western celebrities and western lifestyles to sell products (see Kageyama, 2007) can be seen as part of a movement towards a greater reliance on local identities, lifestyles and celebrities in Japan. One prominent campaign for shampoo, *Tsubaki*, which will be discussed again a little further on, extols the beauty of Japanese women as a way to position its product, using local celebrities and models in comparison to the use of western models and celebrities in this product category (see Francis & Davidson, 2014). The *Tsubaki* campaign was hugely successful, promoting the brand to top position in the highly competitive, Japanese shampoo market, bringing with it a new focus on the local, of local celebrities and faces, even though the commercials themselves were very formulaic in their approach to the product and the use of young, beautiful women. The series of commercials did however:

feature famous Japanese women and an unusually direct slogan: "Japanese women are beautiful." The message has struck a chord at a time when Japanese women are increasingly looking to role models in their own ranks, rather than stars from abroad, for definitions of their self-worth. Advertisers are beginning to recognize that. (Kageyama, 2007, p. 1)

Prieler, Kohlbacher et al., looked at age representation in Japanese television commercials in a 2009 study, discovering that older people are under-represented in Japanese commercials, particularly older females, and that there seemed to be a very unequal distribution of age groupings within commercials, with the world of advertising dominated by young adults, in a ratio completely disproportionate to this age group's percentage of the population. Their study

showed that this unequal age distribution had continued relatively unchanged throughout their study parameters of the years 1997-2007 (p. 8). The preferred narratives that dominate the world of Japanese television advertising are paradigms that have little connection with the realities of the socioeconomic and demographic realities of modern Japanese society - they are, however, powerful snapshots of the preferred worlds and identities the advertisers wish to place their products, and by extension their audiences, into.

It is these imagined realities, both individual and national identities, that advertising appeals to. Women in advertising in Japan continue to be young, models or celebrities, while men are middle-aged, working professionals. The world of advertising in Japan seems divorced from the changing social and economic demographics, from a society of rapid aging and abandonment of traditional families and marriages. Advertising campaigns such as the hugely successful *Tsubaki* shampoo campaign work by appealing to a sense of Japanese pride, by emphasizing the narratives of national identity, which are strongly influenced by ideas of belonging and exclusion, of the group and the 'other'. It is also interesting to note that the appeals to national identity and pride in this campaign are not simple refutations of Western ideals and images of beauty, but also those of other Asian countries. *Asience*, the shampoo surpassed in market share by *Tsubaki*, had appealed to images and representations of Asian identity, as opposed to Western identity, evidenced also by the product's name and connotations of Asian essence. *Asience* was perhaps a first step for Japanese television advertising on its move towards today's stronger, independent discourse of national identity and pride:

Tsubaki . . . launched a campaign highlighting the uniqueness of Japanese hair and Japanese women's beauty. Their slogan was 'Japanese Women are Beautiful', using six leading Japanese actresses for emphasis. After only one month of advertising, the new product achieved the largest domestic share, topping *Asience* and the long-standing leader, *Lux* . . . what can be safely stated though, above all, is that the value at the forefront of contemporary Japanese society and culture is the emerging assertion of Japanese pride and the associated de-

emphasis of Western beauty. (Prieler, 2010, p. 520)

In conclusion, discussions of television, and particularly advertising's role in identity constructions, can be surmised by pointing to Savan (1994), who put it like this, when discussing the connections between the worlds of advertising and the worlds of audiences, the ways in which advertisers create and appeal to experiences, beliefs, values, and identities in their construction of 'sponsored lives':

It has often been said by television's critics that TV doesn't deliver products to viewers but that viewers themselves are the *real* product, one that TV delivers to its advertisers. True, but the symbiotic relationship between advertising and audience goes deeper than that. The viewer who lives the sponsored life – and that is most of us to one degree or the other – is slowly re-created in the ad's image. (Savan, 1994, p. 3)

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