

論文

# **Star Power of Western Celebrities in Japanese Television Advertisements:**

## **A Semiological Analysis**

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### **要 旨**

スターを広告に使うという手法は日本で長く使われてきた。その中でハリウッドスターを使うことは1960年代から始まったとされる。この論文では1990年代と2010年代にハリウッドスターが使われた広告を分析し、ハリウッドスターの使われ方に変化があったかどうかを見ようと記号学的分析をした。そこで見えてきたのは長年を通して広告が映してきたメッセージは変わらず、スター性が広告にうまく利用されてきたということだった。

キーワード：記号学 日本 CM ハリウッドスター

### **Abstract**

Companies have often used celebrities as advertisement (ad) endorsers in Japan, and, moreover, Western celebrities have starred in ads since the 1960s, which has worked as an effective strategy. This paper analyzes ads featuring Western celebrities in the 1990s and the 2010s to examine whether there has been a change in the way Japanese companies utilize these endorsers. A semiological

analysis reveals that the messages communicated through these ads have remained the same throughout the years.

## Literature Review

Companies in Japan spend a lot of money on advertising. For instance, 5.77 billion dollars were spent (103.61 yen per dollar as of December) in 2013 (77 bank, 2017). Ads not only have a strong impact on the selling of a product by providing information to viewers or possible consumers but also fulfill many additional functions such as establishing trends. In other words, ads can influence what consumers want to purchase (Kobayashi, 1996). In this sense, ads actually restrict consumers' choices, although purchasers may not be aware of this (Kashiwagi, 1986). What people purchase indicates their wealth, and people may unintentionally follow the trends created by advertisers in order to appear affluent (Sudo, 1997). Therefore, it can be said that ads actually control our lifestyles.

Thus, it is critical for advertisers to have individuals who represent their product effectively in ads. In Japan, employing a celebrity in advertising is used as strategy to increase sales (Sato, 1997), and it has a strong impact in terms of attracting consumers' attention (Asahina, 1997). When viewers see familiar celebrities in ads it can be beneficial to the sale of products (Kondo & Kaji, 1975). Thus, featuring a celebrity in an ad in Japan appears to have a positive effect on consumers' perceptions (Heath, McCarthy, & Mothersbauch, 1994; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins et al., 1989; Ohnian, 1991).

For this reason, Japanese ads often show celebrities, with eight out of the 10 most popular ads in the first half of 2015 starring celebrities (Oricon, July 11, 2016h). Among all celebrities, those from the West have frequently been used in Japanese ads since 1961 (Mukai, 1983). Advertisers first realized the power of Western celebrities due to the great success of ads for Mandom products, which were created to promote men's haircare products and cologne, and featured the American actor Charles Bronson in the 1970s and '80s (Hagiwara, 1994; Mukai, 1983).

In this paper, semiological analysis is utilized to investigate the messages Western celebrities have communicated in ads from different time periods, in the 1990s and in the 2010s, and to determine whether there are differences in these ads.

## Semiology

The linguist Saussure (1966) proposed the idea of a sign being composed of an object or a word, which he called the signifier, and the meaning of it, which he called the signified. The signifier and signified cannot be separated, yet Saussure did separate them for the purposes of investigation. Barthes (1972) utilized Saussure's concepts and further asserted that there are actually two levels of signs. The first level is what Saussure proposed, and the sign at this level becomes a signifier at the second level, and the signified at this second level has cultural implications. Again, a signifier and a signified create a sign. The first level of a sign is called denotation or a sign in the language system, and the second level connotation or a sign in the myth system. Barthes calls it connotation due to cultural variations.

For instance, the combination of five letters—n, a, i, v, and e—is a signifier, and its meaning, “being innocent,” is a signified. Its combination creates a sign at the first level. The sign at the first level becomes a signifier at the second level of a sign system. However, at the second level, a signified has various cultural implications depending on the culture. In the United States, for example, the word “naive” is synonymous with “innocent,” yet it usually has negative implications. However, naive, or *naiibu*, in Japanese, simply means “pure” or “sensitive,” and it does not have any kind of negative meaning. Thus, saying someone “is naive” in Japanese is usually taken as a compliment, as it almost always has the same meaning as he or she “has great sensitivity.” As seen here, a signified at the second level can differ depending on the culture. The present paper, then, analyzes some ads to examine the implied messages that are connoted.

In the following section, four ads featuring Western celebrities are examined. First, two car ads starring Kevin Costner (1999) or Bruce Willis (2011) is analyzed. Second, an ad for a pair of jeans, starring Brad Pitt, which was filmed in 1999, 2000, or 2001, and a different can of coffee ad almost two decades later featuring Tommy Lee Jones (2017) are analyzed.

### **A Subaru Lancaster Car Advertisement with Kevin Costner (1999)**

At the beginning of this advertisement, a Japanese sentence, “Rankasutaa uiikuendo hajimaru” (Lancaster weekend started) appears on-screen. Costner is seen in a bookstore.

In the next shot, someone is driving a car, though viewers cannot tell who the driver is, and also the words “Boxer + 4WD” are shown on-screen. An explanation of another car function, “200 mm no saitei chijyoukou” (200 mm minimum car ground clearance) can also be seen. The car is on an off-road vehicle, and a male voiceover says, “Arayuru michide hashiri takumashiku” (Runs on every kind of road). Next, the audience sees a big tree with several limbs in a forest and Costner is sitting on a limb of the tree.

The words “Legacy LANCASTER” appear in the center of the screen with the tree, Costner, and the car. In addition, the phrase “Legacy rankasutaa feaa” (Legacy Lancaster event) is shown on-screen. Here, the car brand’s name, SUBARU, is also seen at the bottom. In the next shot, a male voiceover says, “Regashii rankasutaa shin toujyou. Syumatsu ha Subaru he” (Now, we have a new Legacy Lancaster. Visit Subaru this weekend).

## **Semiological Analysis**

The ad suggests that the audience will spend the weekend not driving other cars but rather a Subaru Lancaster, as the voiceover says, “Lancaster weekend started.” This statement serves as a mild urging for the audience to go to a Subaru dealer on the weekend to check out the Lancaster. In this sense, this statement hypnotizes and gives an order to the audience.

In addition, by showing this Subaru car in a city, where a bookstore is located, and also in woods, where so much nature can be seen, it suggests that this car is designed for any type of road, which implies the high quality of the car.

Furthermore, Costner does not talk to the audience, and therefore it appears as if viewers are sneaking a peek into his life, which they may be interested in knowing about. It is suggested that he enjoys going to a bookstore and visiting a forest on weekends. Moreover, it is implied that the audience, too, can enjoy such a weekend once they purchase and own this product, the car.

In the following section, another car advertisement from Daihatsu, starring Bruce Willis (2011), is analyzed to determine whether there is a difference between Costner’s and Willis’ ads regarding the power Western celebrities have over audiences, as these ads ran in different time periods, one in the 1990s and other in the 2010s.

## **A Daihatsu Mira Advertisement with Bruce Willis (2011)**

This advertisement starts with a male voiceover saying, “Daihatsu” and the words “Kei ni dekiru koto” (Something a small car can do) and “Motto” (More) appearing on-screen. Thus, the whole sentence can be read as “Something a small car can do more.”

A young man wearing a pair of glasses, who seems to be a Daihatsu employee, holds a small white board in his hands for viewers to read that says, “Rittaa 30kiro shikamo tei kakaku” (Gets 30 km per liter. And it is cheap). Then, a senior male appears and says, “Ii kuruma da” (That is a good car). In this scene, the audience can see the interviewers with a camera crew, and these two men from Daihatsu are interviewed. Thus, the Daihatsu employees seem to be promoting their products, and the interviewers and the camera crew seem to be recording this ad campaign. The older man continues, saying, “Konkai ha tarento ni tayorazu, syouhin dake de syoubu shitai” (We will not reply on celebrities this time. Instead, we want to compete with other brands only through our product). But the interviewer replies, “Oomono Tarento yonjyatte masu kedo” (We already invited a big celebrity). The older man says, “E!?” (What!?). Then, Willis is shown walking toward the Daihatsu employees and interviewers, which is followed by the sentence “Daihatsu. Mira E:S shintoujyo” (Daihatsu Mira E:S new release), which is shown on the screen. In the next shot, Willis looks like he is on a private jet reading the same Japanese script and saying “Daihatsu Mira E:S Shintoujyou.”

## **Semiological Analysis**

Ironically, the older man’s statement “We won’t reply to celebrities this time. Instead, we want to compete with other brands only through our product” is not convincing, as most viewers are likely to pay attention only to Willis. Yet, this situation at least creates a comical element in the advertisement because, even though the older Japanese man wants to focus only on the product, and not a celebrity, the ad and the viewer’s actually make Willis the focal point. Thus, what the older Japanese male character says, seems to contradict the actual end result of this ad. The real purpose of the ad, then, and what the advertisers are aiming for, is for viewers to focus on Willis and what is said about the Daihatsu product.

In addition, the scene in which Willis prepares to read a Japanese transcript that

says, “Daihatsu Mira E:S new release” while on a private jet makes it look like he thinks this job in Japan is important. Furthermore, it also suggests that Daihatsu has a high reputation because a well-known celebrity like Willis places value on this project. Furthermore, the model of the car, E:S, is read as *iisu* (ease). Thus, there is an implication that driving this car is easy.

There is a contrast between these two ads, with the one featuring Costner being more serious, and the one featuring Willis rather funny. This may be because the two men’s images differ. Costner has appeared in various films as a character who has serious thoughts, such as *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and *The Bodyguard* (1992), according to *TV Guide* (2017a), and is not associated so much with funny movies. That image is well transferred to and merges well with his Subaru advertisement. However, Willis has appeared in some comedies such as *The Whole Nine Yards* (2000) and *The Whole Ten Yards* (2004), in addition to portraying a tough hero in the *Die Hard* series, which first appeared 1998 (*TV Guide*, 2017b). His image is again well represented in this Daihatsu advertisement. Thus, both Costner’s and Willis’s ads effectively transfer their spokesmen’s respective images to the endorsed products. In that sense, having Western celebrities appear in Japanese ads has continued to be an effective approach. In the following section, two other ads are examined. One is an ad for a pair of jeans featuring Brad Pitt, and the other for coffee starring Tommy Lee Jones.

### **A Pair of Jeans by Edwin Advertisement Starring Brad Pitt**

This ad was shown in Japan sometime between 1999 and 2001. The screen is divided in half, and Pitt is seen on both sides of the screen throughout the entire ad. Thus, Pitt (L) does certain behaviors on the left side of the screen, while Pitt (R) does certain other behaviors on the right half of the screen. First, each side of the screen shows a slightly different pair of jeans. In the shot that follows, Pitt appears on both sides wearing a pair of jeans with different shirts: Pitt (L) has a red-colored T-shirt, and Pitt (R) a gray-colored one. Both Pitts open a refrigerator and take out a bottle of juice, but Pitt (R) opens the bottle, smells the juice, makes a frown, and does not drink it, while Pitt (L) drinks the juice from the bottle.

In the next shots, both of the Pitts are seen in a not-so-fancy bathroom, and then in a kitchen. In the kitchen, the Pitts on each side look at each other, although they do not

make eye contact, yet toward the end of this shot, Pitt (L) hands a plate he is holding to Pitt (R). In the shot that follows, both of them lie down on a bed, and Pitt (R) says, “Go maru san” (503), while Pitt (L) says, “Go maru go” (505) in Japanese. In the last shot, the screen shows Pitt’s face on both sides, and he says “Edwin.”

## **Semiological Analysis**

In this advertisement, a famous celebrity like Pitt, who is wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, appears in a cheap apartment and is doing some ordinary household activities such as cooking and drinking a bottle of juice. This ad helps the audience feel close to him. In addition, the Pitt on both sides of the screen is wearing a pair of Edwin jeans, 503 and 505, and this implicitly tells and makes a promise to the audience about the quality of the jeans.

The Pitts on both sides of the screen do not make eye contact with each other, but do seem to check the other side, and the fact that Pitt (L) hands a plate to Pitt (R) suggests that the two Pitts are connected through the Edwin jeans. This actually reflects a typical behavior of many Japanese.

A more recent Japanese coffee advertisement starring Tommy Lee Jones (2017) is analyzed below. Although the product is not a pair of jeans, it is also a cheap product, coffee, and in that sense, it may have a similar value as a pair of jeans for consumers; therefore, it was selected for discussion in this paper.

## **A Suntory Coffee Advertisement with Tommy Lee Jones (2017)**

Boss is a famous coffee product from Suntory brand, and in this ad Jones portrays an alien exploring and investigating the earth. This ad, which is called the New Premium Kumamoto (prefecture) Edition, was the 58th version of the Boss coffee advertisement series, and was aired in February 2017 (Suntory, 2017).

A famous Japanese comedian, Tamori, appears at the beginning of the ad. He is visiting Kumamoto Castle, which is being renovated and is under reconstruction, and a male voiceover says, “Kono wakusei no Kumamoto jyo ha tenka no meijyo to yobarete irurashii” (Kumamoto Castle on this planet seems to be known as a great castle). A castle can be seen on-screen as Tamori says, “Yoku mochikotaeta-ne. Sasuga Kato Kiyomasa

no shiro dane” (The castle has held up so well. Yeah, it IS the castle the famous Kiyomasa Kato built). The audience sees the Kumamoto city mascot, Kumamon, behind Tamori. In this scene, Jones looks like a construction worker and shows up on-screen behind them and raises his index finger. Then a male voiceover says, “Jya, ikimasyo” (Then, let’s go there). On-screen, the words “Uchujin Jones Chikyu chosa-chu” (Alien Jones. Under investigation of the earth) are shown.

Jones raises his index finger, and a flash of light is seen, as if he is performing some magic. Then, Tamori, Kumamon, and Jones all travel back in history. Some samurai warriors are sitting on the floor and talking, while Tamori, Kumamon and Jones look down on them from the attic. When Kumamon moves slightly, the samurai warriors notice somebody is in the attic and say, “Kusemono!” (Intruder!). One of the warriors holds up a spear, aims at the attic and throws it into the attic. The three men hiding there are surprised and scared. Then Jones raises his index finger again. Another flash of light is seen on the screen, and then the three of them are outside of a castle, which makes it look like they have returned to the present time. Tamori says to Kumamon, “Kono shiro ga fukkatsu shinaito anta mo genki denai yone” (You will not feel good unless this castle is renovated, will you?), and Kumamon bends his knee a little bit, which makes it look like he is saying, “Yes.”

The male voiceover says, “Kono wakusei no Kumamoto jyo no hontou no tatakai ha korekarada” (The true battle for Kumamoto Castle on this planet has just begun). On-screen, first a sentence appears in Japanese that reads, “2036 nen fukyuu yotei (Renovation will be completed in 2036), and then another sentence is seen that reads, “Kono rokudemo nai subarashiki sekai” (This is such a nonsensical yet wonderful world). Tamori and Jones are shown drinking a cup of coffee. In the next shot, the screen with a black background, shows two big cans of coffee with the word *Purebosu*, which is the abbreviation for the name of one of the products, Premium Boss.

In the next, and last, shot, Tamori, Kumamon, and Jones are in a souvenir shop, and Tamori says, “Soreni shitemo Kumamon darake dane” (By the way, there are so many goods with Kumamon), as Tamori puts a hat on Kumamon and Jones tries to put a bag from the store on his shoulder. Eric Clapton’s “Change the World” can be heard as background music.

## Semiological Analysis

Kumamoto prefecture is known for Kumamoto Castle, in which a famous samurai, Kiyomasa Kato, resided in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (“Kato Kiyomasa,” 2017). Jones does not speak a single word in this ad; instead, a famous Japanese comedian, Tamori, keeps talking. This situation actually creates credibility for Jones, as a quiet person can give the audience the impression that he may be able to do his job very well. At least 58 versions of this coffee ad with Jones have been made (Suntory, 2017), and it shows his popularity and also that of the product.

This advertisement promotes the renovation of Kumamoto Castle as well. This is clearly shown by Tamori saying, “You won’t feel good unless this castle is renovated, will you?” “The true battle for Kumamoto Castle on this planet has just begun,” and “Renovation will be complete in 2036.” These remarks have a positive impact on the audience because many people might be interested in the renovation of Kumamoto Castle.

The power of having Western celebrities appear in Japanese advertising has remained throughout the years. Edwin employed Pitt as a spokesperson from 1997 to 2007, and then decided to use him again in 2012 (Fashionsnap.com news, Dec. 27, 2012). Pitt has starred in many films, such as *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *A River Runs through It* (1992), *The Legend of the Fall* (1994), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Seven* (1995), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), and *Meet Joe Black* (1998) (*TV Guide*, 2017c). His character in *Thelma & Louise* (1991) made a strong impression on the audience because he was wearing a pair of jeans in that film.

Jones has also appeared in many films, including the *Men in Black* series, which first came out in 1997; *Space Cowboys* (2000); and *Lincoln* (2012) (*TV Guide*, 2017d). His characters are sometimes portrayed as serious but funny people, and it suits his image for him to star in this coffee commercial as an alien who can be serious but funny at the same time.

As discussed here, the featuring of Western celebrities in television commercials has remained unchanged as a powerful advertising tool throughout the years. Companies borrow their credibility as well-known actors and actresses in movies, in order to have them endorse a product in Japanese ads.

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