

THE JAPANESE ADVERTISING FAMILY

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Abstract: This paper deals with the representation of the family in Japanese TV commercials. Based on empirical research conducted in 2004 and 2005, it argues that Japanese commercials tend to depict the family and its members in highly stereotypical ways. Mothers are almost always shown doing some kind of housework, at times supported by their daughters, preparing for their future role as a mother and wife. In contrast, Japanese fathers tend not to work in the household at all, but are favorably depicted waiting to be served or taking a nap. Sons do not contribute much to running the household either, but instead reproduce the role model of the father. The spheres of the two sexes appear to be almost completely separate. Also, despite the increasing number of elderly people in Japanese society, grandparents are not very frequently shown in the family setting. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the depiction of Japanese family life in TV commercials and to reflect on its influence on commonly held assumptions about the family in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

No other cultural medium in Japan is consumed as frequently, by so many people, as television. There is a TV set in nearly every Japanese household, which, on average, is turned on more than eight hours a day (cf. Cooper-Chen 1997: 106). Except for the government-related NHK channels (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, Japan Broadcasting Corporation), Japanese TV stations are largely financed by commercials. It can thus be expected that an overwhelming majority of the Japanese population watch commercials on a regular basis. According to a publication by the Nikkei Advertising Research Institute, the largest percentage of the corporate advertising budget (34.9%) is invested in television commercials, and most people regard TV commercials as the most interesting type of advertising (cf. Nikkei Kōkoku Kenkyūjo 2005: 233, 286). This preference was found particularly pronounced among younger people, suggesting that the importance of TV advertising will further increase in the years to come.

Media and communication researchers have emphasized that advertising practices are strongly related to the culture and society in which they are embedded. In order to reach and attract as many people as possible, commercials must reflect cultural values and norms (Schmidt and Spiess 1994, Fowles 1996, Frith and Mueller 2003). However, it is also clear that

advertising is not merely a reflection of cultural values but at the same time contributes to the establishment of these values. As Waters and Ellis (1996: 91) stress, advertising “plays a critical role in both reflecting and shaping culture.” The complicated relationship between advertising and cultural values is a key issue to be examined when focusing on the representation of the family in Japanese TV commercials.

With only 1.26 children per woman, Japan currently has one of the lowest birthrates worldwide. Fewer children and a shrinking number of three-generation households have resulted in the Japanese family getting smaller and smaller (MHLW 2005, MIC 2007). Traditionally, women have been responsible for raising the children and running the household, while husbands work long hours and only spend less than one hour per day engaged in household tasks (MIC 2003). 47.3% of mothers, however, do work outside of the home (MHLW 2006). It is interesting to also note that it is usually the women who are responsible for making purchasing decisions (Hendry 2003: 40).

This paper starts with a brief outline of the methodology of my study, followed by a short discussion of previous research. The main part analyzes the different family constellations presented in the commercials studied and the role models they provide. The discussion section summarizes the main findings and critically examines the ideological bias of TV commercials. The concluding section emphasizes the crucial role of commercials in shaping commonly held assumptions about the Japanese family.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The set of data used for this research is based on a sample of TV commercials that was produced for my dissertation “The Representation of ‘the Foreign’ in Japanese Television Commercials” (Prieler 2006). For a total of four weeks, over a one year period, commercials were recorded from four private TV stations in Sendai, Japan (each affiliated with a mother station in Tokyo). Each recording elapsed for 20 hours a day, from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. Using two VCRs simultaneously, each channel was recorded for 10 hours in an alternating fashion. This resulted in the recording of 1,120 hours of TV programming, 39,710 total commercials, and 6,740 unduplicated commercials. The commercials analyzed in this paper were recorded from August 23–29, 2004 (Sample 1) and from April 4–10, 2005 (Sample 2). Sample 1 consists of 9,768 commercials, 1,680 of which were unduplicated. Sample 2 includes 10,037 commercials, with a total of 1,672 unduplicated. By basing the analysis on a clearly defined and systematically collected pool

of data, this study aims to gain some representative and quantifiable insights to the image of the Japanese family as presented in TV commercials. Previous research on Japanese TV commercials has focused on the representation of gender. Thus, Sakamoto *et al.* (1999) undertook a longitudinal study of award-winning Japanese TV commercials between 1961 and 1993. Their main findings indicate that the majority of the depicted men were job holders, while the majority of the women appeared as dependents. Contrary to the authors' hypothesis, these stereotypical gender representations did not recede over the years but remained virtually unchanged throughout the three decades.

Holden (2000) studied gender representations in Japanese TV commercials using the markers of Goffman's classic *Gender Advertisements* (1979). Goffman's framework focused on US print advertising in the 1970s and Holden wanted to test the applicability of this framework to the present-day Japanese context. Holden's findings show that despite the differences in culture and media type, Goffman's observations are largely applicable to the situation in Japan. Major similarities include the representation of women as household keepers responsible for cleaning, cooking, and shopping; the representation of men as serious and hard-working; and a pronounced separateness of the two sexes in general. Similar observations were made by Arima (2003) in an empirical study of gender roles in Japanese commercials in 1996.

The most relevant study is Yoshida's (1998) research on the changes of family images in Japanese commercials from 1984 to 1994. Though he found that stereotypical role relationships were still widely reproduced, he also observed certain instances suggesting a change in these relationships. He links these changes to the adoption of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (*Danjo koyō kikai kintō hō*) in 1986. Whereas family scenes with fathers were virtually non-existent before this year, Yoshida identified an increasing number of representations of men actively involved in the household and family tasks after this time. He also observed a growing number of scenes depicting women at work. Similar tendencies have been observed by Bresnahan *et al.* (2001).

To summarize, previous research has shown that stereotypical views on the Japanese family and the relationship between the sexes are still ubiquitous in Japanese TV commercials. On the other hand, it has also identified certain instances of adapting to more equal, less gender-based family relationships. To what extent the two tendencies are observable for the Japanese advertising family as depicted in this sample will be analyzed in the next section.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAMILY IN JAPANESE ADVERTISING

The term “family” as used in this paper refers to the combination of at least one parent or grandparent and at least one child. The analysis does not include couples, unless it is apparent from the commercial that they are married and/or have children. Based on this definition, a total of 7.6% of all commercials in Sample 1 and 7.9% in Sample 2 could be identified as including a family. If we focus only on commercials featuring Japanese people, these ratios rise to 11.2% and 11.5%, respectively.

Not surprisingly, the Japanese family is not used for all products advertised in commercials. The main product categories are relatively narrow. As can be seen in Table 1, the product category “food” is most frequently represented (16.5% and 20.5%). Other domains salient in both samples are cosmetics and body products as well as pharmaceuticals.

Sample 1 (N=127)	Sample 2 (N=132)
Food (16.5%, N=21)	Food (20.5%, N=27)
Real Estate, House (14.2%, N=18)	Household Products (15.9%, N=21)
Cosmetics, Body Products (8.7%, N=11)	Financial Insurance (9.1%, N=12)
Automotive (7.9%, N=10)	Cosmetics, Body Products (8.3%, N= 11)
Pharmaceuticals (7.9%, N=10)	Pharmaceuticals (6.1%, N=8)

Tab. 1: Percentage of product categories in commercials with families

In order to make a more detailed analysis of the representation of the family in Japanese advertising, the data has been categorized on the basis of the family constellations depicted. The total number of these constellations and their representative strength is given in Table 2. Although some of these sub-samples are relatively small in size and vary between the sample weeks (especially in the numerical appearances of fathers and mothers), a qualitative analysis shows that the underlying traits and stories are basically the same. The following constellations will be discussed in turn: parent(s) and baby, parent(s) and daughter, parent(s) and son, father, mother, son, daughter, and grandparent(s) with other family members.

Family Members in Ads	Sample 1 (N=127)	Sample 2 (N=132)
Father	63.8% (N=81)	49.2% (N=65)
Mother	74.8% (N=95)	84.1% (N=111)
Father, Baby	0.0% (N=0)	0.0% (N=0)
Mother, Baby	3.1% (N=4)	3.8% (N=5)
Father, Mother, Baby	3.1% (N=4)	3.0% (N=4)
Father, Daughter	5.5% (N=7)	6.1% (N=8)
Mother, Daughter	13.4% (N=17)	25.0% (N=33)
Father, Mother, Daughter	12.6% (N=16)	13.6% (N=18)
Father, Son	10.2% (N=13)	7.6% (N=10)
Mother, Son	11.8% (N=15)	20.5% (N=27)
Father, Mother, Son	11.0% (N=14)	12.9% (N=17)
Father, Son, Daughter	2.4% (N=3)	2.3% (N=3)
Mother, Son, Daughter	1.6% (N=2)	3.8% (N=5)
Father, Mother, Son, Daughter	21.3% (N=27)	8.3% (N=11)
Grandparents	10.2% (N=13)	6.0% (N=8)

Tab. 2: Family constellations in Japanese commercials with families¹

Parent(s) and baby

The most striking aspect about commercials with babies² is that no father ever appears alone with a baby. Mothers, by contrast, do to some extent (3.1%, N=4; 3.8%, N=5)³. What are mothers doing in these commercials that fathers are seemingly incapable of? Nearly all of the commercials in question were diaper advertisements. Mothers are shown washing their babies in a baby bath, putting a diaper on them, holding them in their arms, or sleeping side by side with them. These images do not indicate that caring for a baby is hard work, so it seems that fathers would be just as capable. However, as has been said, babies are only shown with their mothers.

¹ These percentages do not equal 100% because it was sometimes necessary to code multiple codes into one commercial. Some of the categories overlap, such as grandparents and mothers/fathers.

² It appeared unnecessary to make a distinction between the sexes for babies.

³ Here and in the following, these numbers indicate the ratio of all commercials with families featuring a constellation (here, mother and baby) in the first sample (3.1%) and the second sample (3.8%), each followed by the total numbers of cases (4 and 5, respectively).

The absence of the father-baby pattern indicates the strong social connection in Japanese TV commercials between mother and baby. This point is further exemplified by the fact that the voice-over in many cases directly addresses the mother rather than both parents. For example, in one diaper commercial, the mothers are directly asked if they knew that after drinking milk, babies increase their belly size by three centimeters. This information is naturally connected with the adjustable waist size on the advertised product.

In some cases, a father is shown together with a mother and a baby (3.1%, N=4; 3.0%, N=4). However, this does not necessarily mean that the father has any contact with the baby. Most often, the man stands beside the woman. There is a small distance between the man and the rest of the family, suggesting that the father somehow is no real part of it. The only case where a father himself is holding a baby is a commercial for an insurance company. However, father and child are not in motion here, but displayed in a memory photo that is part of the narrative. At the end of the commercial when there are moving images, it is the woman who carries the baby. Interestingly, there are two versions of this commercial, one told from the father's point of view and one from the mother's. The father says that he purchased the insurance because he has to take responsibility for his family, while the mother in her story emphasizes her contentment with her husband's purchasing decision. The roles and the relationship between father and mother are unmistakably clear.

Parent(s) and daughter

Quantitatively speaking, there is a higher number of mothers alone with daughters (13.4%, N=17; 25.0%, N=33) than fathers alone with daughters (5.5%, N=7; 6.1%, N=8). As to the father-daughter pattern, the daughter, in most cases, is already an adult and the father is at grandfather age. In one case, for instance, an adult daughter encourages her father to use a certain cream to prevent the decay of dentures. In another case, a time-lapse narrative depicts the growing-up of a girl into a woman. It shows a father being picked up by his daughter from the station over the course of many years. The first time, the daughter is still a small child accompanied by her mother. At all other times, she is alone with her father. Although there is a seemingly good relationship between the two, it is reminiscent of what Yoshida (1998: 229) wrote about the father-daughter relationships in Japanese commercials, namely, that a daughter is often used as a replacement for the wife. Accordingly, in this commercial, the wife disap-

pears, and in the last frame, the daughter is even depicted as a possible young girlfriend of the father.

There is only one real exception to these cases of grown-up daughters in my samples. It is a commercial in which a father takes his daughter to the hospital but forgets to bring the money for her medical treatment. He solves this problem by paying by credit card, the product advertised in this commercial. Showing that the father forgot the money indicates that this is not really the part of everyday life which he is normally responsible for. A commercial depicting a mother in a similar situation would hardly be conceivable.

In contrast to the relatively low number of commercials with daughters and fathers, commercials with daughters and mothers are abundant. They tend to be set in the home and are preferably related to cooking or other household activities. Two major themes in these commercials are the mother's instructing her daughter for her future and the image of being the perfect mother. Examples of the former theme are mothers instructing their daughters about cooking or grooming. They wash together in the bath, use face creams, or decide on the most hand-friendly detergent. The theme of the perfect mother is taken up in commercials where she teaches her daughter English, prepares her lunch box, or takes her to school. In either case, the females depicted are unmistakably connected with home-making.

There are also commercials showing fathers together with mothers and daughters (12.6%, N=16; 13.6%, N=18). These commercials use a mix of traits, including the two themes just described. Usually the mother is shown engaged in some kind of housework, frequently supported by the daughter, while the father is not. The mother instructs the daughter on how to separate the father's dirty clothes or the daughter helps the mother clean the room or prepare food. The role of the father in all these cases is that of a mere observer who is not directly involved in the activities going on around him. In one example, he is even taking a nap while the mother is cleaning the room. In all of the 34 parent(s)-daughter constellations, there is only one commercial that shows the father as the active person in the household: he is depicted as an expert cook and his food is called delicious. There is no ridicule going on, as is often the case when men are shown performing household activities. This example must be considered a clear exception from the common role assignment in this type of constellation.

Finally, there are commercials where father, mother and daughter are sitting at the table or standing beside each other without any clear indication of hierarchical relations. In these commercials, the members of the family are, first of all, representing an image of *the* family. This trait is even

more salient in the constellation of father, mother, son, and daughter, which will be discussed further below.

Parent(s) and son

Concerning the appearance of a son with one parent, there is again a higher frequency of mothers (11.8%, N=15; 20.5%, N=27) than of fathers (10.2%, N=13; 7.6%, N=10), particularly in Sample 2. This is most likely due to the more frequent appearance of mothers than fathers in general. Fathers and sons are normally not doing anything in the household. They are often shown during leisure time, as in one commercial where they are seemingly lying on a beach in the sun. The son imitates the father by wearing the same Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses. In another commercial, father and son, again wearing sunglasses, are shown standing stylishly in front of a car, which is the advertised product. Just as mothers in the commercials show their daughters how a woman should behave, fathers show their sons how to look like a man – including not becoming involved in household matters.

One commercial deviating from this pattern shows the father telling the son that they are responsible for cleaning the toilet in front of which they are standing. When the toilet is actually cleaned, it can be assumed that they have done the work, but the actual action of cleaning is not explicitly shown. This is clearly different from corresponding commercials with women, where the performance most likely would have been visible.

When sons appear with their mothers, they are portrayed in two main types of situations. One shows the mother cleaning things for the boy, for instance, his lunchbox or his dirty clothes. The other depicts how the mother teaches the son new things such as Japanese writing styles or English. Like in the commercials with mother and daughter, the common theme here is that of being the perfect mother.

In addition, there is a certain number of commercials featuring the son with both parents (11.0%, N=14; 12.9%, N=17). These commercials particularly focus on the (mostly outside) activities of the son. Examples include a boy coming home from soccer, taking a bath, and meeting his father at the dinner table; father and son playing in a river (afterwards the mother washes the boy's hair); and father and son taking a bath, watching TV, or lying around in the room (with the mother in the background hanging the laundry to dry). The gender roles in these scenes are clear: while the mother is working, the father and the son are having fun or taking a rest.

Just as in the parents-daughter constellation, father, mother, and son in some commercials mainly serve to represent the family as a whole. This

strategy is particularly common in commercials for food or beverages, where the three are frequently shown sitting around the dining table consuming the advertised product. This theme is even more salient in family constellations featuring both a son and a daughter.

Father, mother, son, and daughter

While there are very few commercials that portray a single parent with both a son and a daughter (mothers 1.6%, N=2; 3.8%, N=5; fathers 2.4%, N=3; 2.3%, N=3), the appearance of both parents with son and daughter is strongly represented in Sample 1 (21.3%, N=27) and, to some extent, also in Sample 2 (8.3%, N=11). Around half the commercials of this type show the family at the dining table eating some kind of food, usually the advertised product. Another frequent theme is the mother cooking or serving the dish. In all these cases, the main task of the four family members depicted is to represent the family as a whole.

The image of a complete family is also frequently employed in commercials for family cars, real estate businesses, and housing loans. Since there is usually not much action taking place, most of these types of commercials do not show any role relationships between the family members. In a few cases, however, some of the aforementioned features can be observed. Thus we see daughters helping their mother cook or drying their father's hair, while sons are shown running around with a ball.

Grandparent(s) with other family members

Family commercials with grandparents are rather scarce (10.2%, N=13; 6.0%, N=8). They can be categorized into two main types. In one, the grandparents have no special role apart from representing the traditional Japanese three-generation household. This image is used especially in commercials for traditional Japanese products, including food. A recurring theme in these types of commercials is the use or consumption of a certain product by all three generations. Thus, all family members eat the same food, go to the same supermarket, use the same toothpaste, or have the same mobile phone provider. As in this latter case, the inclusion of elderly people as a potential target group can also be used to highlight the user-friendliness of the advertised product or service.

The second type of commercial with elderly family members shows the grandparents as the center of the narrative. Three generations are not necessarily shown, rather at most times there are only grandparents and

grandchildren. This pattern is frequent among advertising medical products. For instance, in one commercial a woman is shown playing with her grandchild after taking a medicine that cured her knee pain. In another commercial, a grandmother takes vitamins and the positive results allow her to maintain an active role in her family.

Another product frequently portraying older people is insurance. In one commercial, two grandfathers are shown relaxing in a garden when their children and grandchildren enter the stage. As we are told, it is their insurance that allows them to lead such an idyllic life in their later years. Another commercial is more explicit: the grandfather says that he does not want to cause problems for his son and his family, so he purchases insurance. The commercial then shows how proud the son is of his father for taking responsibility for himself. This feature is reminiscent of the commercial in which the wife is proud of her husband when he purchased insurance, which has been discussed before.

DISCUSSION

Summarizing the findings of my study about family representations in Japanese TV commercials, some overall patterns can be identified. First, it is the women who play the most important part in the Japanese advertising family's life (cf. also Shinkai and Gössmann 1998). In an overwhelming number of commercials, mothers are cooking, cleaning, or busy with some other type of housework. They are sometimes supported by their daughters: the mothers and wives of the future. The daughters do not merely help their mothers but are also instructed by them about grooming, cooking, cleaning, and accomplishing everything necessary to fulfill the traditional role of the perfect Japanese mother and housewife.

The fact that women are mostly shown in the kitchen or are in some other way directly connected with the household is in accordance with previous studies (Yoshida 1998, Sakamoto *et al.* 1999, Holden 2000, Bresnahan *et al.* 2001, Arima 2003). Nonetheless, it is interesting that in a country where nearly 50% of the mothers work (MHLW 2006), not a single commercial depicts a mother coming home from work. The commercials thus reproduce stereotypical role models that do not correspond with the life style of most Japanese women.

In contrast to females, fathers and sons are hardly ever shown doing anything in the household. There were only two deviations from this pattern, which cannot be regarded as an indicator of change in Japanese commercials' gender role representations. As in the case of mothers and daughters, fathers also seem to provide their sons with a model about

what is proper household behavior, which largely consists of not getting involved in any form of housework. The stylistic device of representing father and son as doubles of each other even more strongly emphasizes this connection. Contrary to Yoshida's (1998) observations, a trend of husbands being depicted as taking a more active part in household activities was not seen.

The clear differences between men and women in Japanese commercials become most obvious when comparing their differing representations in the same environment. In the bathroom, for instance, males tend to be taking baths and relaxing, whereas females are shown cleaning or improving their physical image. There is also more physical contact between mothers and daughters than between fathers and sons. Mothers tend to be near their children and "in touch" with them, whereas fathers are often shown standing slightly away from their family, almost as though they are not really part of it. This depiction of men as mere bystanders in a way reflects the overall situation in Japan, where the home, even today, is not regarded as a man's place (Holden 2000). Yoshida's (1998) observation of counterexamples could not be confirmed in the present study.

The fact that there is not much interaction between mothers and sons or between fathers and daughters suggests that Japanese commercials seem to prepare their audience for a life segregated between the sexes. The prevalent appearance of same-sex constellations in Japanese commercials has also been identified in previous studies (Holden 2000). These findings can be understood against Hofstede's (1984: 191, 194) rating of Japan as highly masculine and his observation that masculine cultures have a high sex role differentiation. As Sugimoto (2003: 172) has pointed out, "generally, husband and wife in Japan tend to have separate life spheres."

Regarding the quickly increasing population of elderly people, grandparents are only scarcely part of the Japanese advertising family. This is in line with a general reluctance in commercials worldwide to depict people of an older age (Yamaki 1994: 67). This trend seems to overrule the traditionally positive perception of older people in Japan, but may also be related to the shrinking number of three-generation households. Whether Japan's recent demographic developments will make elderly people a more frequently addressed target group in commercials remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

Although Japanese commercials tell us much about the Japanese family, it would be a mistake to consider them reliable real-life reflections. As my data suggests, the representation of the Japanese family is rather outdated, considerably narrow, and highly selective. There are no working mothers, no crying babies, and hardly any elderly people. On the whole, the Japanese family as represented in commercials thus seems to revolve around the gender role ideals of Japanese men rather than women, which is strange, given the fact that it is the women who are the most important target group for most advertised products, since they make the purchasing decisions. The reason for this may lie in the fact that Japan is a male dominated society and its interest is in keeping traditional family roles alive.

Pollay (1986) was right when he characterized advertising as a "distorted mirror." Advertising does not simply reflect reality, but plays a crucial role in shaping it (Williamson 1978: 11, Waters and Ellis 1996: 91). Commercials depicting the Japanese family influence common assumptions about the organization of family life, the allocation of household tasks, and the relationships between the sexes. The Japanese advertising family conveys a highly conservative image of family life. This distorted image is something that should make us think.

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