

# **JAPANESE ADVERTISING, THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE CELEBRITY SHOWCASE? A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF THE FREQUENCY OF CELEBRITY APPEARANCES IN TV ADVERTISING**

*Carolus L. C. Praet, Otaru University of Commerce, Otaru, Japan*

## **Introduction**

One of the characteristics of Japanese advertising that has received the most coverage is the description of Japanese advertising by the term 'soft sell'. This contrasts with the 'hard sell' approach common in the US (De Mooij, 1998; Herbig, 1995; Johansson, 1994; Johansson and Nonaka, 1996; Mueller, 1987; Mueller, 1992; Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994; Tanaka, 1993).

One example of the soft sell nature of Japanese advertising is its extensive reliance on celebrities (De Mooij, 1998; Di Benedetto *et. al*, 1992; Fields, 1989; Hall and Hall, 1987; Moeran, 1996; Mueller, 1992). According to Kilburn (1998), more than seventy percent of Japanese television ads feature celebrities. Skov and Moeran (1995) report that as early as 1907 celebrity endorsement was used in Japanese advertising. Japanese authors have also referred to this characteristic of Japanese advertising (Asahina, 1997; Nomura, 1997; Sato, 1997; Watanabe, 1997). Sato (1997) even calls the appearance of many celebrities and 'talents' in advertising a 'unique Japanese phenomenon'.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This paper seeks to contribute theoretically and empirically to an increased understanding of the characteristics of Japanese advertising by focusing on the use of celebrities. The paper has two objectives. First, it examines the phenomenon of the 'talent'. This type of celebrity, characteristic of Japanese advertising, has thus far only received scant attention in the academic literature. This paper stresses the importance of acknowledging the role of this type of celebrity in Japanese advertising. Second, it introduces the results of a cross-cultural content analysis to contribute to the small body of empirical evidence regarding celebrity appearances in Japanese advertising. Rather than limiting the comparison to the US, the use of celebrities in Japanese television advertising was also compared with advertising from a number of European countries, which have generally not been included in cross-cultural empirical studies involving Japan.

## **'Talents': a Special Type of Celebrity in Japanese Advertising**

The use of celebrities in advertising is a phenomenon that can be found across the world. Celebrities in advertising generally include famous people from the world of sports, movies, entertainment, arts, music, gourmet cuisine, and media. Celebrities typically are used to endorse a product, to act as a company's spokesperson, or to create a positive image for a company or its products through association with the positive image of the celebrity. Empirical evidence has demonstrated the existence of positive effects of using celebrity endorsers (Atkin and Block, 1983; Freiden, 1984).

Unlike the case in most countries celebrity appearances in Japanese advertising however, are not limited to famous actors, singers, sports stars, or comedians. Advertisements not only form a stage for

established celebrities to capitalize on their fame; they also are the *steppingstone* for models, aspiring actors, singers and other entertainers towards fame. ‘Talents’ or ‘*tarento*’ (as they are referred to in Japan) constitute an important type of celebrity that appears in advertising campaigns in large numbers. According to Moeran (1996), in Japan the word ‘talent’ is used to describe most personalities and celebrities in the entertainment world, and ‘star’ is reserved for those who are seen to have rather longer-lasting popularity among their fans. However, many Japanese authors do not seem to make this distinction and use the word ‘talent’ for any type of celebrity.

Many of these talents are young aspiring models, also often referred to as ‘idols’ or ‘*aidoru*’, are selected on basis of their cute looks (most of them are female) and are scouted in contests or auditions by talent agencies. Many of these young people start their careers by appearing in advertising, where they gain a lot of exposure and become well known and popular among the public. Consequently, they are cast in popular soap operas, so-called ‘*terebi dorama*’, which increases their exposure and popularity even more. They also usually appear in TV and quiz shows often produced by the big advertising agencies in order to ensure higher viewer ratings for these shows and the accompanying commercials (Moeran, 1996). In addition, these teenage ‘idols’ often start singing careers, with their popularity as idols virtually guaranteeing high record sales. Critics in Japan point out that many recent TV commercials seem to place more importance on the talent rather than on the product they are supposedly promoting, thus merely giving the talent exposure and a stage from which to launch their careers in the world of entertainment (Asahina, 1997).

In other words, whereas in other countries advertising merely hires the services of existing celebrities, Japanese advertising also *creates* its own celebrities. It can be argued that a tremendous synergy exists among the media, advertising, and entertainment world in Japan.

## **Explanations for the Use of Celebrities in Japanese Advertising**

Several explanations for Japanese advertising’s reliance on celebrities and talents have been suggested in the literature and can be categorized into the following three categories: (1) Marketing tactics- and media-related explanations; (2) Agency and client characteristics-based explanations; (3) Consumer characteristics-based explanations.

### ***Marketing tactics- and media-related explanations***

#### ***Celebrities’ ability to break through the commercial clutter***

Expensive commercial time on Japanese television is said to result in fifteen-second commercials forming the mainstream (Johansson, 1994; Moeran, 1996). Consequently, the communication clutter on Japanese TV tends to be enormous. Amidst this clutter, one of the best ways of attracting attention to a company’s products is thought to be through celebrity endorsement (Moeran, 1996; Sato, 1997).

Celebrities and talents are typically chosen on basis of their ability to generate ‘topicality’ (*wadasei*) (Moeran, 1996). Topicality means that people will talk about the commercial if a popular talent appears in it. One way of enhancing a campaign’s topicality is to combine a popular celebrity with one or more other popular celebrities, a trend that has been increasing in recent years (Matsui, 1996). Celebrities or talents are often chosen on basis of the impact they are able to generate (Asahina, 1997).

#### ***Celebrities’ ability to differentiate among similar products***

It is often argued that -especially in Japan- many products (brands) no longer possess clear attributes in terms of quality and functionality that could differentiate them from competing products (brand parity is high). While one of the main merits of using talents in commercials is their ability to give the brand a 'personality' or 'face' (Moeran, 1996; Sato, 1997), one of the demerits is that when these talents lose their popularity, it will negatively affect the product or the brand. It has been pointed out however, that popular celebrities and talents tend to appear in several commercials for different companies and brands at the same time, which tends to confuse the viewer as to what product or brand is advertised (Sato, 1997). In terms of product differentiation, the effectiveness of using talents in advertising appears at least questionable.

#### *Celebrities as the connecting link in Integrated Marketing Communication campaign*

Another reason for choosing a celebrity, is that the celebrity forms a recognizable link between the different media of an advertising campaign such as a television commercial, newspaper ad, magazine 'feature' article, transportation ad, shopping street hand-out, or POP ad (Moeran, 1996; Sato, 1997).

#### *Celebrities as sales enhancing tool*

In Japan it has been discovered over the years that by having a product endorsed by a celebrity sales may increase by up to 30 per cent over a limited period (Moeran, 1996). It has been pointed out however, that this is rather the exception than the rule, probably because so many celebrities and talents appear in advertising that they effectively compete with each other for consumers' liking and wallets.

#### ***Agency and client characteristics-based explanations***

##### *Celebrities replacing the product concept*

Moeran (1996) mentions the practice of advertising agencies' creative teams, when developing an advertising campaign, to choose a celebrity first, and to base the expression and style of the advertising campaign upon the choice of the celebrity (cf. Nomura, 1997). Japanese commentators often lament that creative people perhaps lack originality and creativeness and just choose the easy solution by completely relying on the strength of the celebrity or talent when designing an advertising campaign. This is the opposite way of how American and European advertising agencies supposedly work, where the product concept as a rule precedes the executional aspects of an advertising campaign.

##### *Celebrities as 'shared vocabulary' between agency and client*

Sato (1997) suggests that the use of a talent simplify communication between an advertising agency and its client. Rather than talking about abstract creative concepts, it is easier for a creative team to explain a proposed campaign by showing the client a popular talent around whom the campaign is to be built.

##### *Celebrities as risk avoidance*

It has even been suggested that celebrity advertising is used so often just because it is the mainstream in advertising. Advertisers are said to be afraid to fall behind the times (Asahina, 1997) and to merely follow the mainstream. It is a way of avoiding the risk of being criticized for not having used a celebrity or talent in case a campaign fails.

#### ***Consumer characteristics-based explanations***

##### *Celebrities as opinion leaders*

Hall and Hall (1987) have suggested that well-known personalities are opinion leaders in Japan and that the Japanese tend to imitate celebrities and buy the products they endorse. Moeran (1996) recounts of the reasoning of a Japanese creative team working on a campaign, that people would almost certainly accept a certain technical expression if it were put in the mouth of a famous celebrity endorsing the product. Fields argues that in the structured Japanese society, “where one’s status is fairly well defined, the use of a personal stereotype is the quickest way to communicate which product one is ‘expected’ to consume” (Fields 1989, p. 32-33). Advertising agencies appear to strongly recognize the influential power of talents, idols and other celebrities as opinion leaders on the diverse age and gender segments.

#### *Positive consumer attitude toward celebrity advertising*

Unlike in many other countries -where advertising is mostly considered a ‘necessary evil’ by the majority of consumers- advertising in Japan is fully integrated with the world of show business and society in general. Many Japanese consumers consider TV commercials enjoyable to watch and the appearance of popular talents, idols, and other celebrities seems to be the main reason for viewer’s favorable response towards these commercials. In fact, according to research conducted by Video Research -a Japanese marketing research company affiliated with advertising giant Dentsu- ninety percent of commercials rated as ‘likeable’ or ‘memorable’ by Japanese consumers featured a celebrity (Kilburn, 1998). The glossy consumer magazine ‘CM now’, dedicated to the world of advertising and advertising-related background stories, with an editorial focus on the talents and idols appearing in advertising, can be on one hand considered indicative of the special status of advertising in Japanese society and on the other hand indicative of the importance of talents to Japanese advertising.

### **Empirical Evidence of the Use of Celebrities in Japanese Advertising**

In spite of the frequently encountered anecdotal evidence suggesting that Japanese advertising is characterized by a large number of celebrity appearances, empirical studies in the literature comparing the use of celebrities in Japanese advertising to that of other countries have been few and far between. Two studies addressing the topic of celebrities in Japanese advertising have found evidence of a higher frequency of celebrity use in Japan as compared to US advertising. Belk and Bryce (1986) report that Japanese TV advertising uses high status spokespeople more often, whereas Lin (1993) found that Japanese advertising features more celebrities than US advertising. An additional finding of the latter study was that celebrities in Japanese advertising tend to be male rather than female and that US advertisements tend to use fewer male celebrities than Japanese advertisements.

However, one problem with the above studies is that the terms ‘celebrity’ and ‘high status spokesperson’ are not clearly defined. It appears that the above-mentioned studies used a limited definition of the term celebrity based on an American context and did not consider the special type of celebrities called talents found in Japan.

In addition to the above-mentioned empirical studies, research on the use of celebrities as a characteristic of Japanese advertising has also been published in the Japanese-language marketing literature. A study by Tanaka et al. (1998a) comparing Japanese, American, Singaporean, and Korean television advertising found Japanese advertising to be characterized by its use of talents. The authors call this evidence of a uniquely Japanese way of advertising. This empirical study adopted a broader definition of the term celebrity to include talents. Percentages of commercials featuring celebrities were

as follows: Japan 60.8%; US 13%; Singapore 12%; and Thailand 11.4% (Tanaka et al. 1998b). These findings suggest that Japanese advertisers use celebrities much more than their counterparts in other Asian countries and the US.

Cross-cultural empirical studies involving Japanese TV advertising have mostly failed to address the use of celebrities and have generally been limited to comparisons with US advertising (cf. Samiee and Jeong, 1994). Given the relative scarcity of empirical data concerning this topic more empirical evidence needs to be added to the existing body of literature.

## **Overview of the study**

In order to address this relative lack of empirical data, a cross-cultural study was conducted. TV advertising from five economically advanced countries was used for comparison with Japanese television advertising. The sample for this study was limited to industrialized countries with a similar level of economic development. The five countries were the US, France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands.

## **Hypotheses**

Based upon our literature review we formulated the following hypotheses:

- H1: Japanese television advertising will be characterized by a higher frequency of celebrity appearances than television advertising in other countries.
- H2: Japanese advertising will feature more male celebrities than advertising in other countries.
- H3: Japanese advertising will feature more female celebrities than advertising in other countries.

## **Methodology**

The study used content analysis to compare television advertising from the sample countries.

### ***Variables***

Commercials were coded for use of national celebrities, foreign celebrities, and unknown people. In this study, we define celebrity as “a famous or widely known person, domestic or foreign, including people who originally have become famous by appearing in commercials”. Coders were also asked to indicate the gender and number of character(s) and to distinguish among main, secondary, and background characters. Main characters were defined as “the person(s) on whom the focus of the commercial is placed, the dominant character; this is the character that the camera mainly focuses on”. Only the human characters that had been coded as main characters were included for analysis.

### ***Source of Data***

Commercials were randomly recorded from national television stations between April 1998 and December 1998, and between 6 P.M. and 11 P.M. in each of the sample countries. The sample from the Netherlands formed an exception as it was recorded in December 1997 from a special program on

national television, aimed at marketing professionals, introducing all new commercials broadcast on national TV during the week prior to the program's broadcast. Period of recording, time of day, source, and total number of sample commercials per country are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sampling Period, Time of Day, Source, and Total Number of Ads

Country	Recording period	Time of day	Source	Total Sample
France (FRA)	Oct-98	6 P.M.- 11 P.M.	National TV	148
Germany (GER)	Nov-98	6 P.M.- 11 P.M.	National TV	107
Japan (JAP)	Aug-98	6 P.M.- 11 P.M.	National TV	117
Netherlands (NET)	Dec-97	All time periods*	National TV	134
Spain (SPA)	Jul-98	6 P.M.- 11 P.M.	National TV	100
United States (USA)	Apr-98	6 P.M.- 11 P.M.	National TV	138

\*Difference in time of day of sampling was controlled for by removing ads targeting children

In order to assure that the Dutch sample was comparable to the samples from the other countries all commercials targeting children -such as those for toys and computer games- were removed from the Dutch sample. In addition, commercials for CD's, concerts, videos, and movies were removed from all samples. These product ads feature many celebrities, since musicians and actors generally can either be considered a part of the product advertised or as the product itself. By removing the above product categories we could concentrate on the use of celebrities in product categories other than entertainment related categories. Purely local commercials were also removed from the sample and only regional and national commercials were kept. The distribution of commercials for the various product categories across countries is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution Percentages by Product Category and Country for Total Sample

Product Category	FRA	GER	JPN	NET	SPA	USA	Total
Food, beverages (and tobacco)	34.1	33.7	27.6	25.5	37.9	14.9	29.1
Fashion and accessories	0.8	0	2.9	2.9	5.7	4.6	2.7
Body care and beauty products	17.9	8.4	10.5	8.8	14.9	5.7	11.4
Pharmaceutical products	5.7	7.2	18.1	6.9	1.1	3.4	7.3
Hi-tech products and home electronics	4.9	13.3	7.6	22.5	4.6	19.5	11.8
Household products and detergents	10.6	8.4	6.7	5.9	10.3	4.6	7.8
Cars, car accessories, other vehicles	9.8	8.4	7.6	4.9	10.3	11.5	8.7
Banking, credit, insurance	4.9	7.2	3.8	13.7	1.1	12.6	7.2
Entertainment and retail services	6.5	4.8	3.8	4.9	2.3	14.9	6.1
Media	0.8	4.8	0	0	3.4	2.3	1.7
Others	4.1	3.6	11.4	3.9	8	5.7	6.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Our goal was to obtain a sample of at least one hundred commercials per country. However, due to the differences in use of human characters among the country samples, the final sample size was less than the original target for some of the countries. The final sample size used for analysis is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics: Number and Percentage of Ads Featuring Main Character

Country	Total Sample	Number of ads with main character	Ads with main character (%)
France	148	122	82.4%
Germany	107	83	77.6%
Japan	117	105	89.7%
Netherlands	134	102	76.1%
Spain	100	87	87%
United States	138	87	63%

***Coders and Coders Reliability***

Coders were natives from the respective countries, enrolled at Otaru University of Commerce. Although our aim was to have more than one coder per country, this was not always possible. Inter-coder reliability could therefore not be established for all countries. For the US, Spain, France, and Japan two coders were available and for the Netherlands (the author) and Germany, only one coder was available. Two coders separately coded fifteen of the US, French and Japanese sample commercials, after which inter-coder agreement was calculated for each variable. For the Spanish sample, the two coders jointly performed the coding task and thus inter-coder reliability was not calculated. Inter-coder reliability was established by calculating the ratio of coding agreements to the total number of coding decisions (Kassarjian, 1977). The coefficients of reliability ranged from 93% to 100% (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Inter-coder Agreement for Dependent Measurements (Ratio of Agreement)

Country	Number of characters	Type of character	Gender of characters
France	100%	100%	100%
Japan	100%	93%	100%
United States	100%	93%	100%

\*Inter-coder agreement could not be calculated for Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands

Based on the recommendations for inter-judge reliability as suggested by Kassarjian (1977) and Nunnally (1978) these reliability coefficients were deemed satisfactory. Results of inter-coder agreement for the countries with two coders suggest that for the countries with one coder the relatively low complexity of the coding task can be assumed to have produced results comparable to those from the countries for which two coders were available.

**Results**

The empirical data show that Japanese television advertising tends to feature a much higher proportion of celebrities than the other countries in the sample. Of the commercials featuring a main character, 47.62% of Japanese ads feature a celebrity, as compared to 20.69% in the US, 15.57% in France, 9.64% in Germany, 6.90% in Spain, and 3.92% in the Netherlands. Concerning the use of male celebrities, the respective percentages in descending order were 20% for Japan, 19.54% for the US, 13.11% for France, 7.22% for Germany, 5.74% for Spain, and 1.96% for the Netherlands. Percentages for use of female celebrities ranged from 27.6% for Japan to 1.14% for Spain and the US (See Table 5).

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics: Use of Celebrities

Country	Total number of ads with main character	Ads with celebrity	Ads with celebrity (%)	Ads with male celebrity	Ads with male celebrity (%)	Ads with female celebrity	Ads with female celebrity (%)
France	122	19	15.57%	16	13.11%	3	2.45%
Germany	83	8	9.64%	6	7.22%	2	2.40%
Japan	105	50	47.62%	21	20.00%	29	27.61%
Netherlands	102	4	3.92%	2	1.96%	2	1.96%
Spain	87	6	6.90%	5	5.74%	1	1.14%
United States	87	18	20.69%	17	19.54%	1	1.14%

Hypotheses were tested using a Chi-square analysis for each of the country pairs (See Table 6). Japanese television advertising is characterized by significantly more celebrity appearances than television advertising in the other sample countries, thus supporting H1.

Comparisons between Japan and Germany, Japan and Spain, and Japan and the Netherlands show that male celebrities are significantly more often used in Japan as compared to these three other countries. However, comparisons between Japan and the US, and Japan and France show that the relative use of male celebrities is not significantly different. Consequently, H2 is only partly supported.

Japanese advertising significantly uses more female celebrities than advertising in other countries, thus confirming H3.

**Table 6.** Results of Chi-Square Tests for Hypotheses

Country pairs	H1 (Celebrities) Chi-Square	H2 (Male Celebrities) Chi-Square	H3 (Female Celebrities) Chi-Square
Japan/United States	15.482***	0.014 ns	25.868***
Japan/France	28.170***	2.114 ns	30.302***
Japan/Germany	31.840***	6.300*	21.962***
Japan/Spain	38.695***	8.420**	25.577***
Japan/Netherlands	51.237***	17.047***	26.751***

\* significant at 0.05 level      \*\* significant at 0.01 level      \*\*\* significant at 0.001 level  
ns: non-significant at 0.05 level

## Discussion

The results of our empirical research clearly show that one of the characteristics of Japanese advertising, as compared to advertising in a number of other advanced industrialized nations, is the significantly higher use of celebrities. Regarding the use of male celebrities, results show that Japanese advertising features significantly more male celebrities than advertising in Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. However, for comparisons with American and French advertising no such differences are found. In contrast, Japanese advertising tends to feature significantly more female celebrities than advertising in all the other countries in our sample.

Findings of this study as far as comparisons between Japanese and American advertising are concerned, are not strictly comparable with findings from prior studies due to the above-mentioned



potential definition problem regarding the term celebrity. Nevertheless, the findings from prior research (Belk and Bryce, 1986; Lin, 1993) concerning the use of celebrities are generally confirmed. More importantly, using a similar definition for the term celebrity as Tanaka *et al.* (1998b), our study finds comparable results for Japan and the US. Although the results of both studies differ in absolute terms, a similar phenomenon is observed. These differences must be attributed to sampling error. Findings from Lin (1993) concerning the gender of celebrities however, are not confirmed. While Lin found that Japanese advertising tends to feature more male celebrities than US advertising, our findings show no significant difference between the two countries. Another striking finding of our study is that the appearance of female celebrities sets Japanese ads apart from those of other countries. Although we did not statistically test for intra-country differences between male versus female celebrity use in Japan, our study contradicts Lin's findings that Japanese ads feature more male celebrities than female celebrities. We suspect a difference in definition of the term celebrity may be the reason for this, as most of the talents and idols tend to be female.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for further Research**

A number of limitations regarding our study have to be considered. Both the number of countries as well as the number of commercials per country in our sample was rather limited. Future studies should preferably use a larger sample in terms of number of countries and commercials in order to validate the findings of this study.

Variance in sample distribution of advertised product categories existed across the country samples but this is not assumed to be an issue concerning the use of celebrities. The objective of this study was to investigate the use of celebrities by comparing the relative proportions of use of celebrities in advertising at the country level rather than at the product category level. Nevertheless, the influence of product category on use of celebrities is a topic that needs to be explored further.

In addition, the fact that for some countries only one coder was available limited the possibility of calculating inter-coder reliability across all the samples. One obvious limitation of coding whether a character is a celebrity or not is a coder's knowledge of and familiarity with the national and international entertainment scenes. The results of this research are therefore dependent upon the common knowledge of the coders and form a cause of potential bias.

In this study, we have limited ourselves to a cross-cultural comparison of the frequency of celebrity appearances in television advertising, a quantitative measure. An issue not addressed here is that of qualitative differences. Celebrities may be used in different ways across countries. This topic deserves further exploration.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our results point towards a clear conclusion: Japanese advertising is characterized by its reliance on celebrities when compared to advertising in other countries.

The explanations for why Japanese ads feature so many celebrities as introduced at the beginning of this paper all appear to have some validity. Nevertheless, none of these explanations provides insights into the underlying or structural cause of the popularity of celebrity endorsement in Japan as compared to other countries. We suggest that differences in cultural values underlie cross-country differences in use of celebrities in advertising. These differences in cultural values are assumed to cause Japanese advertising agencies to propose the use of celebrities to their clients, the clients to accept these proposals, and consumers to not only accept but also enjoy the celebrity-featured campaigns targeting them.

By approaching culture at a more fundamental level (the value level), the expressions of culture at the more visible level (e.g. advertising) could be explained. Recent research shows that Hofstede's (1984, 1991) cultural framework can be used to explain and predict differences in advertising styles and appropriate advertising appeals across countries (Milner and Collins, 2000).

According to de Mooij (1998), celebrities are more appreciated in countries with a high score on Hofstede's masculinity dimension. In countries with a high masculinity score, people tend to feel affinity and admiration for successful people such as celebrities. Japan happens to be the country with the highest score on this dimension in Hofstede's research. The big difference of celebrity use in our sample between Japan (a masculine country) and the Netherlands and Spain (two relatively feminine countries), suggests a country's score on Hofstede's masculinity index may be the key to predict the success or failure of celebrity use in advertising. This issue needs to be addressed by future research.

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