A Chronicle of Marketing Practices and Consumer Culture in Japan

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses the marketing practices and consumer culture of Japan. After describing certain aspects of the history of Japan, as it relates to the Western influence of consumerism and marketing in Japan, we consider current Japanese consumer behavior and culture and how it has been influenced by the West, and how, in spite of this influence, how it is unique in several way. We then note how this behavior is changing, the reasons for this changing, and how these changes offer several challenges and opportunities to marketers wishing to participate in the Japanese market.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the world's continuous changing global market, the relationship between marketing and consumers has become more important than ever. Thus, it is key for successful marketing practices to research different cultures and understand what consumers truly want, and to implement marketing strategies based on consumers and society. The consumers are the focus point for marketing strategists, and as such, it is critical to understand their culture and behavior.

For several years, Japan had the second largest consumer market in the world (Haghirian, 2011); recently, it has become the third largest, behind the United States and China. Yet, despite its size and the importance it has in the global economy, it seems at times that the Western understanding of its dynamics is somewhat limited. This gap in knowledge may occur for many reasons, particularly because of language and geographical barriers, but most importantly, there is a cultural aspect to consider; Japanese consumer culture seems to have evolved in a different direction from the rest of the world. While the world has seemingly converged into a "Westernized" consumer behavior, Japan has seemed to be moving somewhere else. There undeniably has been *some* Westernization/Americanization of consumer preferences in Japan, but overall, it seems that the Japanese are moving in their own direction.

The objective of this paper is to delve into this phenomenon; we explore why Japanese consumer-culture has been able to deviate from the rest of the world, and what role marketing plays in shaping this deviation. Marketing, in this scenario, is both cause and effect; it both drives and is driven by the consumer culture. Given this, we will consider this phenomenon from the lens of "macromarketing."

Macromarketing is defined as the effect that marketing strategies have in shaping the economy and society as a whole, and thereby, the culture of a society. There are many examples of this phenomenon; marketing may incite trends in clothing, uses of products that affect lifestyles, and the entertainment that the population consumes. Macromarketing is generally used to explain the aggregate effect of many marketing strategies within an entire economy; however, it is possible that one single large marketing campaign, by itself, can shape a culture and consumer behavior (Usui, 2014). For example, Apple and Coca-Cola have taken substantial roles in pop culture in the United States with only one primary product, and this role has been spreading well beyond the United States, expanding to a global level.

One core objective is to analyze Japan's past, to form an understanding of its consumer behavior. A second core objective is to determine how consumer behavior in Japan has evolved into what it is now. To do this, we perform an analysis of the current consumer-culture, through a collection of prototypical examples. We look into the Japanese way of thinking in order to understand what this implies for consumer behavior.

We also consider likely possibilities for the future marketing and consumer culture in Japan. There are many challenges that Japan as a whole will face, such as the aging of society, economic uncertainty, and external influences. These challenges, particularly the aging of Japanese society, are affecting the country currently, and will become major issues in the coming years. At some point in the near future, there will be a demographic shift that will very likely significantly impact consumer culture in Japan. To alleviate the fallout from these changes, many cultural, social and economic aspects of society will likely need to change. Therefore, in the near future, we can expect drastic changes in Japanese society and the effects of these changes will reach consumer culture. The final objective of this paper is to understand what may change, what specific challenges will present themselves to Japanese consumer culture in the future, and what this implies in terms of the marketing discipline.

There have been, and are anticipated to be, great changes in marketing strategy and tactics, not only in Japan, but in most of Asia. Correspondingly, as the "globalness" of the economy continues to grow, there has been great interest in the West concerning these changes. An article by Lynn and Berger (2014) considered the rise of mobile marketing in Japan; another study considered mobile marketing in China, and the relatively new phenomenon of WeChat, and the latter's future (Kontsevaia and Berger, 2016); WeChat's cooperation with BMW of Japan was an important milestone in WeChat's evolving marketing strategy. Harris and Berger (2015) noted how marketing furniture in China differed substantially from how furniture is marketing in the United States, and that the core reason was the consumer culture; they also implied that these differences extended, to different degrees, to other Asian countries.

II.   A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WESTERN INFLUENCE IN JAPAN

Until not too long ago, Japanese culture was very hermetic. The shoguns, who were the ancient rulers of Japan, maintained a policy of closed borders, and permitted entry only to the Chinese and the Dutch solely for the purpose of trading goods. Because of this, Japanese society was not exposed in the same way as many other countries to outside cultural influences and evolved with little to no external pressures. At the time when the Dutch East India Company was trading in Japan in the 17th century, the process of cultural integration was beginning in most other parts of the developed and developing world. The British had already arrived in what would be the United States, India, and other territories. Spain had already colonized much of South and Central America, and other areas were colonized/controlled by France, Portugal, and other countries. Japanese rulers, however, created policies aimed at keeping foreign influence away from their society.

This lasted for many years, until 1868, when the Tokugawa Shogunate lost its power and the Emperor regained rule over Japan, during the beginning of an event known as the Meiji Restoration (Asia for Educators, 2009). This change in power was a turning point in Japanese history, as the Emperor was interested in modernizing Japan and making it a nation competitive with leading powers. It did this by adopting Western and European capitalist and political models. A key consequence of this is that the modernization process for Japan occurred much later than for many other countries. It was a process that lasted from the late 1800's to a great part of the early 1900's. The late start to the Westernization of Japan, along with the striving of the Japanese to maintain their culture, were key factors in the evolution of their consumer behavior.

Once the floodgates were open for Western influence to penetrate Japan, the country started seeing many products from America and the West. However, because of Japan's firm hold on their own traditions, not all of them were well accepted initially. The higher classes among the population were the first to adopt many Western practices, particularly in clothing and other fashion trends. These were widely accepted, and over time became pervasive across all levels of society. Some staples of the Western diet that were essentially unknown in Japan, such as bread, were also introduced; however, acceptance of the Western diet was not very readily adopted. Bread is not very popular among Japanese, and is used generally only as an ingredient for sweets. The Japanese diet, among a few other aspects of Japanese life, were never highly influenced by Western culture.

Another key turning point was Japan's period of *High Economic Growth*. After Japan's defeat in World War II, plans were set in motion for the country to recover from its destruction, and the result was a period in the late 1970's and 1980's, when the economy soared and was able to propel Japan into becoming a world leader in several products, especially those using higher technology (for its time). This period of high economic growth evolved from work after World War II by the quality control guru, W. Edwards Deming (1900-1993), an American engineer, statistician, professor, author, lecturer, and management consultant, and subsequently by Genichi Taguchi, a Japanese design engineer. This resulted in a major increase in living standards, and widespread adoption of technology and Western influences across all levels of Japanese society. In fact, the methodology of "Taguchi Methods" spread across the world, and is still often taught in courses in American and European universities. During this period, consumer electronics became mainstream, and households adopted televisions, electric appliances, rice cookers, and many more products that would transform, in general, the lifestyle of the Japanese.

Overall, Japanese have been very embracing and welcoming of Western technologies and novelties. This influence led to the birth of modern Japanese marketing and consumerism. Unlike other cultures however, Japan created a version of marketing and consumption behavior heavily reliant on their own historic tradition, with only certain influences of Western ideals. Therefore, modern Japanese consumption is a unique hybrid that holds firmly with their roots. It is evident that contemporary consumer behavior in Japan is heavily marked by their history of isolation; Western culture seems to be so distant from the Japanese, yet it is almost paradoxical to see at times how in Japan many Western products and concepts (such as convenience stores) have become widely adopted, indeed mainstream. This divide is believed to not exist in any other country in the world, and this is why Japanese consumer-culture has become such a relevant object for study (Usui, 2014).

III. THE ROLE OF MARKETING IN THE WESTERNIZATION OF JAPAN

Japan's consumer culture is said to have been born, in part, out of the influx of Western ideals into their society. As mentioned previously, the modernization of Japan brought many new products from Western civilization, and these were quick to change the lifestyles of the Japanese. Products such as refrigerators, televisions and other household appliances became commonplace in households all over Japan. However, adoption of these products would have been impossible if it were not for the *marketing efforts of their vendors*.

Although the initial phase of modernization in Japan began in the early 1900's, one can argue that the emergence of a Japanese consumer-culture was not significant until the late 1960's. Despite the introduction of Western goods and fashion trends before World War II, the innards of the consumption system were mainly unchanged from Japanese tradition. The main reason is that the early adopters of these new products were only a higher-class minority. For the majority of the population, consumer choice was almost non-existent, and Japan was mainly a production economy at the time (Synodinos and Kobayashi, 2008).

A distinctively-Japanese reason for consumer choice being limited was because retail channels were established mainly through the *keiretsu* system, a practice that started in the 17th century. *Keiretsu* holding companies originated from *zaibatsu* companies; *zaibatsu* means, in essence, "monopoly." *Zaibatsu* was a very loose term to define the Japanese practice of conglomerate enterprises in mining, industry, finance, commerce and other sectors, being under a single family's ownership and control. These *zaibatsu* were distinctive for having banks and trading companies at the top of the structure, generally controlling the rest of the network (Grabowiecki, 2012).

After World War II, laws and regulations resulted in the dissolution of the *zaibatsu* model; yet, at the time, the *keiretsu* system remained and took the former's place as the prevalent, uniquely national, organizational model. In general, the key difference between *zaibatsu* and *keiretsu* systems was that the former were controlled by a single family, while the latter were owned by stockholders. The *keiretsu* structure was focused on generating vertical and/or horizontal integration among firms. This is how *keiretsu* retailers came to be, and these were eventually the main influencers of consumer choice. Strong alliances were made throughout the whole business value-chain, from manufacturers to wholesalers to retailers who targeted the end consumer. Since all the firms in the value chain were unified, retailers sold goods provided only by the producers at the top of the *keiretsu* chain. Because this practice was widespread throughout Japan, consumers had few, if any, choices among competitors. The modern, Western system, with stores that provided an assortment of brands, styles and choices, was popular only among higher-class citizens in affluent areas such as the Ginza and Shibuya in Tokyo.

All this changed years after World War II, after Japan's defeat and reconstruction. During the period of *High Economic Growth*, the decade of the 1960's, GDP in the country grew at a rate of 9 to 10% year-over-year. This growth led Japan to become one of the world's largest economies, and had a direct impact on the Japanese middle-class. Because income increased greatly among middle-class families, they were now able to afford the items that higher-class Japanese already consumed. This was the key economic turning-point, since the majority of Japanese went from the point of poverty into now being able to consume imported foods, own appliances, consumer electronics, etc. Thus, the current Japanese consumer-culture was born, and mass marketing along with it. *Keiretsu* retailers lost their momentum, as consumer choice and branding became priorities throughout society. Today, *keiretsu* retailers are argued by experts to be obsolete.

Therefore, Japan became a much more attractive market to foreign marketers. Japanese people adopted consumption as a lifestyle. This generation was called *shinjinrui* by some, a term whose literal translation is "The New Breed." Unlike the previous status quo, the *shinjinrui* had become unpredictable, creating new trends. This group portrayed a consumer behavior more similar to Western society than the Japanese of old (Haghirian, 2011).

As mentioned previously, television was widely adopted, and this became a medium through which advertisements were shown. Television ads were introduced in Japan during the 1960's. This was a critical source from where Japanese heard about new brands and products. Advertising was, thus, a means of promoting the growing consumer-culture. In this sense, Japan became more similar to the United States and the Western world.

An aspect in the consumer culture of the time that was uniquely Japanese, however, was the perception of pricing. Japanese consumer-culture has been unique for showing a lack of price sensitivity. In a belief that is heavily influenced by Japanese tradition, price and quality were highly correlated in the consumer's mind. Therefore, consumers were not afraid to pay high prices, as they expected to get the best products by paying more. In fact, discounts and bargain prices were interpreted wrongfully in society because of this logic. The behavior mirrored the marketing adage (not always true, however,) that *price signals quality*. Spending more for products became relevant in order to maintain social status; this was a message by the buyer that they wanted only the very best. This mindset, plus the strengthening economy, led to the emergence of what is considered the world's first and only *mass luxury market*. The biggest and most exclusive brands, such as Louis Vuitton and

Cartier, became widely adopted. Japan was unique, in the sense that these brands became popular among middle-class citizens (Haghirian, 2011). Pricing strategy in marketing was shaped in a unique way in Japan, because discount tactics were not useful. Marketers had to find a way to appeal to the new Japanese consumer through product quality and reputation, instead of value.

Marketing overall was not widespread as a science or business application in Japan until the 1950's. Marketing research was a field that was essentially imported from Western management practices during this time. With the rise and unpredictability of the *shinjinrui*, marketing research was necessary to understand the different business segments and consumer groups in society. With the rapid increase in the living standards of the Japanese, businesses had to develop a more tactical approach to reach the consumers who were seeking to buy products that suited a more Western lifestyle.

In this sense, it is important to note the pivotal role that marketing played in the development of Japanese consumerism, by stimulating demand for innovative products. From the start to the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of the 21st century, marketing helped to drastically transform the lifestyle of the Japanese middle class, from the undeveloped, rural economy of the early 1900's to the modern, cosmopolitan-minded society of today. Marketing was not a driver initially, but rather, emerged as a result of the modernization of society. Once mass media and consumer choice became prevalent in Japan, marketing practices come to the forefront. It was then that the concept of macromarketing became "routine" in Japan. Marketing became the major driver of consumer culture. However, while Western influence came quickly and impacted Japanese society to its core, many traditional Japanese principles and ways of thinking were also maintained.

IV.   THE CURRENT STATE OF JAPANESE CONSUMER CULTURE

As noted earlier, Japanese consumer culture can be thought of as highly influenced by Western consumerism and modernism, yet at the same time, driven by Japanese tradition and principles. Aspects uniquely prominent in Japanese culture are clearly present, such as a group orientation and the high expectations for product quality.

Japanese culture shows signs of being heavily community-oriented. This does not mean that purchasing decisions are made in groups; however, it means that "fads" are an essential Japanese trait of their consumer behavior, thought to be more so than in Western countries. Historically, Japanese have had a predisposition to fit to the standards held by society. Falling out of the traditional "path" is seen in a negative light by society. Therefore, the masses tend to adopt a popular product quickly, as a means to fit in. In this sense, there is a *community demand*, so to speak, which explains the quick rise in popularity of certain products. This also works inversely, however. Japanese consumers are as quick to abandon new products as they are to adopt them. This point emphasizes the importance of macromarketing in Japan; societal behavior is shaped by the products they buy.

The importance of quality in products is also a key characteristic of Japanese consumer- culture, and is also linked to the community orientation mentioned previously. Japanese see high-quality products as a status symbol; if they don't own the best products, this reflects on their persona. And, they associate high price with quality; the best products are the most expensive. This is how luxury products in Japan have become not only aspirational, but essential, and therefore, adopted by the masses. This is reflected even in the design of their stores. In the Ginza, an upscale shopping district of Tokyo, the design and architecture is grandiose and even more luxurious than many similar areas in the United States, such as 5th Avenue in New York City. Mitsukoshi, a very popular department store, originally had a display format that was adopted in Japan by Japanese entrepreneurs who had visited Macy's and similar stores in the United States and the United Kingdom; however, the format evolved to suit the Japanese consumption-mindset. While department stores in the Western world showcase all types of brands, in Japan, there is a heavy emphasis on luxury brands such as Gucci and Swarovski, to the point of totally dominating the displays.

However, while these practices portray a combination of Western consumerism and the past traditions of Japanese consumer culture, in the present, there have been, and continue to be, many events that are changing tradition and will likely reshape consumer behavior in Japan in the years to come. Japanese consumers are rapidly changing over time and three factors can be considered to explain these shifts: first and foremost, the country's economic downturn; second and third, the emergence of a new generation, and the increase in channels to buy products (Salsberg, 2010).

The long-lasting economic downturn has lead Japanese consumers to increase savings and decrease spending. Japan's economy has been relatively weak for nearly two decades, primarily as a result of the "lost decade" of the 1990's and the global financial crisis of 2008. This economic downturn led to the disappearance of life-long jobs and the increase in part-time and temporary labor, resulting in the fueling of consumer anxiety. This was perceived as a crippling blow to the Japanese business model, as it was now considered a deep, but necessary, shift for Japan, in order to remain competitive in the global economy. This caused a shift in Japanese

consumer culture as well; price sensitivity lost its negative connotation and suddenly became an important factor. Japanese are starting to face the risk of economic uncertainty, and because of it, have changed their purchasing behavior accordingly. Many of the key traditional characteristics of Japanese consumer-behavior are shaped not only by macromarketing, but by *macroeconomic* aspects as well. Yet, ironically, the Japanese mass luxury market still exists today. It is said that Japanese spending has simply become more conservative than before, but their interest for high-end goods is still very lofty.

The overall consumer climate in Japan is still a strong mix of old and new practices. The strong changes in the country's economy and the emergence of a new generation have lead to changes in a culture that is tightly connected to its historic roots. Yet, at the same time, it seems that the Japanese population is not willing to abandon their traditions. This has resulted in a particular hybrid of global and local influences on consumer behavior. Examples of this are visible in the current consumer culture; consumers have been spending more conservatively, yet the mass luxury market that is distinctively Japanese still exists. While a new generation may be seeming to challenge the system, fads are still highly existent and group-oriented influences on purchasing behavior remain. Perhaps, in the future, this will become a challenge, with the unique demographic issues Japan is facing.

V. CHALLENGES IN MARKETING FOR JAPAN IN THE FUTURE

The Japanese business model has been highly tested during the past twenty years, due to many events that have made a deep impact at a socioeconomic level. During the second half of the 20th century, many changes and rapid economic development led Japan to develop a competitive market economy; yet, this growth halted during the 1990's. This period, known as the "lost decade," was a difficult time for Japan financially, and the country never truly recovered from it. The global financial crisis of 2008 hit Japan as well, and as a consequence, the Japanese economic model was heavily questioned. These crises also hit Japan socially and culturally. The succession of these events have brought upon Japanese society a financial burden, and thus, pressure for change in consumption habits.

Traditionally, Japanese culture pressures its population to be very consumption-oriented. There is a group orientation which pressures people to conform or fit in; also, high quality has always been associated with high prices. This is why Japanese, in essence as a matter of "principle," have been open to buying luxury products and spending conspicuously. It is argued that Japanese have a cultural predisposition to portray an image of well-being, success, and happiness, and not fitting the status quo is seen as a negative. Materialism is part of this way of thinking, fueling consumerism even further. When economic hardship hits, therefore, keeping this lifestyle has become a challenge. Yet, how easily and willing is society willing to change the norms that have existed for centuries?

It is said that pressures from these events have triggered changes in Japanese consumer behavior. Price sensitivity has necessarily become a factor, as consumers have been forced by the hardship of the times to spend less. The interesting aspect of this is that these changes are affecting the consumers' core set of beliefs.

It has been between twenty to thirty years since the "lost decade," and the economy, despite still being one of the strongest in the world, has not yet recovered from the crisis. This has been a sufficient time for a new generation to emerge. Children born in the midst of the "lost decade" are now young adults, and in the coming years, will be the generation that will drive the economy. This generation did not live during the period of *High Economic Growth* and did not experience the boom of the economy. With the advent of the Internet, the new generations receive more of a global influence, and are shunning away from the traditions and practices of the previous generations. Consumer behavior is shifting; according to a report from the Nikkei Asian Review (2015), consumers in Japan (especially in Tokyo) are looking for experiences rather than physical products; in marketing terminology this segment has been labeled "transumers." Transumers tend to spend more money on live spectacles and enjoy going out and consuming *experiences*; they shun TV and the radio, and are less likely to be glued to their mobile devices. They are turning away from the materialistic ideology of the past and changing the business landscape (Nikkei Asian Review, 2015). As a marketer, this means that Japanese consumer behavior is now more unpredictable than ever.

As such, Japan is at a pivotal moment in its history. Japanese society is walking away from their past behavior and closer to the practices of Western culture. However, when the rest of the world was becoming Westernized, Japanese always showed a resistance to the movement. With the new generations set to become the drivers of the economy and society, will the traditional mindset disappear completely, or will it noticeably remain? While Japan finds itself in this conflict, consumer culture is becoming more unpredictable. This is a challenge from a marketers' standpoint. The Japanese market is notorious among global markets for being "different;" now, it is also becoming unpredictable.

There are observable trends that stand out as evidence of this change in consumer behavior. There are well-known companies whose marketing strategy is focused on delivering value for price, and they are being successful in Japan. One example is Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing retailer that has become the biggest brand in

fast fashion in Asia. Founded in 1984, their success was propelled by the recession of the 1990's, when the Japanese were trying to cut back on spending. Over time, they were able to open stores not only in Japan but worldwide, becoming the first known success story of a value-based business model from Japan. Uniqlo competes in a market that became popular first in the Western world, through brands such as H&M, Benetton, and (the) Gap. One can argue that other Japanese industries (such as electronics and automobiles) are also adoptions of Western civilization, but for the first time, we are seeing the Japanese business model centered on offering value instead of quality (Durisin, 2013).

Another aspect affecting Japanese consumer-culture is the Internet. E-commerce is providing the world with a new retail format, and because of its virtual nature, as opposed to a physical nature, it provides a more individualistic approach to shopping. The Internet is also a "window" for globalization; some critics argue that these factors have oriented Japanese consumer behavior to different buying patterns, less influenced by the pressures of their society (which had been key drivers in consumer decision-making.) In other words, e-commerce in Japan is driven less by the group orientation than other buying formats.

These factors seem to imply that Japan's new generation is slowly moving to a more Westernized consumer behavior. This seems to be driven by the economic uncertainty the country has faced. Experts also argue that this economic hardship will continue due to the aging issue of Japan. Population fertility is declining, meaning that the Japanese workforce will shrink in the future, driving uncertainty and pessimism further. What will happen in the coming years? With these socioeconomic issues, will Japan change drastically, or will it resist as it has done before? What will remain once the generation who lived during the *High Economic Growth* is gone? And how can marketing strategists usefully react to this uncertainty?

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Since its inception, Japan has been known for its history of isolation and this was a major factor in how, and how quickly, the country has adopted Western influences, even in modern times. The 1960's were a turning point, with the economic boom. This boom was a major factor in the development of Japan's consumer culture, as the retail structure of the country changed and gave way to many new products and the advent of consumer choice. Modernization was a turning point, as Japanese began to embrace more Westernized ways of life and technologies. Japan's production economy became a market economy, and it is at this point when marketing, as the discipline we know today, became relevant.

Despite the influence of Western trends, business models, and products, the Japanese market economy still held many distinctive trademarks rooted in their set of beliefs. Price insensitivity was one of them, which led to the emergence of the world's first mass luxury market. Their traditional group-orientation mentality was also a large reason why "fad culture" was so prevalent in Japan.

Presently, Japan has been burdened by socioeconomic issues (a series of economic crises with no recovery in sight, and the continuous population decline) that have put Japanese consumer habits into question. For the first time, it seems that the Japanese are becoming more willing to abandon their traditional patterns of consumption and to adapt more fully to the "Western way," something that it seems to have been reluctant to do for more than a century.

The current panorama implies uncertainty and larger mountains to climb for marketing professionals interested in Japan. Dramatic changes are occurring in the world's third largest market economy; yet, it is uncertain how they will impact consumer behavior. Will Japanese society head completely into a Westernized consumer behavior as has been seen globally, or will their traditions be strong enough to, at least partially, resist this change? How deep are the marketing implications of the restructuring of Japanese society? The role of marketers in this uncertain climate should be to adapt, understand the needs of the segments they target, and most importantly, never lose sight of the underlying beliefs that are unique to the Japanese consumer culture. They are still what make Japanese people what they are, and after all, this is what marketing strategies must always focus on: the consumers.

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