

Celebrity Advertising in Japan: Tommy Lee Jones as an alien investigator in Suntory TV commercials

Jeongsoo PARK¹

Abstract

Celebrity advertising has a long history, and is recognized as one of the most effective marketing communication strategies in Japan. Celebrity advertising attracts the audience's attention and establishes a positive brand equity that links strong, favorable, and unique brand associations. Building brand equity by such celebrity advertisements can increase sales volume and generate additional profit.

Since celebrity advertising may be defined as one of the characteristics of Japanese advertising, this study focuses on one of the most popular celebrity advertising series in Japan. This paper seeks to explore effective celebrity advertising strategies in Japan by focusing on one of the most successful Japanese commercial campaigns.

Key words: Celebrity Advertising, Creative Strategy, Japanese Advertising

1. Introduction

A persona used in an advertising campaign is recognized as a part of the company and the product brand. There are many discussions on the appointment of persona in advertising campaigns: “Will advertising become more effective if a popular celebrity (*talent*) is used?”; “In order to raise brand equity, what kind of persona should be appointed?”; “Is there any correlation between an advertisement budget and the ways of appointment and utilization of the personnel?”; “Which is better, to appoint existing celebrities, or to make their own newcomers' debut?” However, these methods and processes are not established in the advertising industry. In this article, I will focus on a Japanese hit advertisement, Suntory ‘BOSS’, and consider effective celebrity communication strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical base for the effect of celebrity advertising is thought to be source studies on attitude change caused by persuasive communication in social psychology.

A source credibility model study by Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University was founded on his experience during World War II, participating in research² on the effective use of movies as mass media in military training of the army. After this wartime experience, Hovland aimed to experimentally elucidate fundamental issues related to attitude change and influence processes caused by communication, and organized a study group, which became the origin of the source studies.

Previous studies on source credibility models analyzing mainly the sender attributes can be classified into a source credibility model and a source attractiveness model. The source credibility model focuses on the

¹ Associate Professor, Faculty of Global Media Studies, Komazawa University

² Propaganda

authenticity of the sender to judge effectiveness of communication. In other words, effectiveness of communication depends on the credibility of the source (Hovland & Weiss 1951; Ohanian 1990; Pornpitakpan 2003).

On the other hand, the source attractiveness model is that consumers can form positive stereotypes and tend to change their beliefs more easily when the source is more attractive (Baker & Churchill 1977; Debevec & Kernan 1984).

Integrated models³ have been developed by further refined communication studies on celebrities that originate from the above source credibility models. The main examples of integrated models include a celebrity-product match-up model and a meaning transfer model.

A match-up hypothesis, one of the integrated models, is that celebrities can enhance the evaluation of products and brands if the product's characteristics "match-up" with the image conveyed by the celebrity (Baker & Churchill 1977; Friedman & Friedman 1979; Kahle & Homer 1985).

For example, when the physical attractiveness of a celebrity endorser relates and matches the product of the advertisement (e.g. attractive female talent and cosmetics) the product and brand will be evaluated more positively. However, if the product is not relevant to the physical attractiveness of the celebrity, the effect of such advertisements may be quite limited. Thus, depending on the relevancy between the attractiveness of a celebrity endorser and an advertised product and brand, the evaluations of the advertising, and of the product, may be different. In particular, there has been much research on the relevance of physical attractiveness to products (Kahle & Homer 1985; Lynch & Schuler 1994; Kamins & Gupta 1994).

But then, McCracken proposed a meaning transfer model focusing on the limits of the source credibility model and the source attractiveness model, which were the mainstream of celebrity advertising research (1989). According to the meaning transfer model proposed by McCracken, the effectiveness of celebrity advertising comes from the cultural meanings⁴ already owned by that celebrity. For example, the cultural meanings of a talent will be created by his/her role in a drama and held by the viewers of a drama.

According to a description of a meaning transfer and endorsement process, a meaning transfer process is divided into three stages; Culture, Endorsement and Consumption. Through these 3 stages, it becomes clear that the meaning is transferred. Stage of Culture forms the meaning (image) of celebrities, then at the stage of Endorsement, its meaning will be transferred from celebrities to products, and finally it is transferred from products to consumers.

In addition to the source credibility models and integrated models discussed above, numerous research on celebrities as a theme was conducted. Among others, key research by contents are as follows: Types of endorsers (Friedman, Termini, & Washington 1976; Freiden 1984); Impact of ethnic characteristics of celebrities (Deshpandé & Stayman 1994); Survey targeting advertisement practitioners (Miciak & Shanklin 1994; Erdogan, Baker & Tagg 2001); Impact of celebrity advertising on stock prices (Agrawal & Kamakura 1995); Celebrity scandals (Louie, Kulik, & Jacobson 2001); Relationship with country -of-origin (Chao, Wührer, & Werani 2005); Celebrity-Product Incongruence (Lee & Thorson 2008).

3. Non-alcoholic Beverage Business

Suntory Holdings Limited (based in Kita-ku, Osaka City, headed by President Takeshi Niinami, and chairman Nobutada Saji) is among the world's leading consumer products companies. They offer a diverse port-

³ The author defines that integrated models of celebrity advertising are studies that consider celebrity effects through synergy effects among multiple sources or effect processes due to the limit of source credibility models. Match-up hypothesis and a meaning transfer model are the representative models.

⁴ Image of celebrities conceived by consumers.

folio of beverage products from alcoholic liquor including *Old* whisky and *The Premium Malt's* beer to non-alcoholic beverage including *BOSS* coffee, *DAKARA* functional drink and *Iyemon* tea.

Suntory is a leading Japanese beverage company that has performed its business with a focus on imported alcoholic beverages such as whisky. However, along with changes in the market environment and consumer needs since 1980, their soft drinks business grew vigorously, and now the soft drinks business has overtaken the alcoholic liquor business. We would like to analyze the creativity of Suntory focusing on the advertising campaign of *BOSS* coffee, one of their main brands.

According to Suntory, their sales volume of canned coffee in 2008 numbered 386 million cases: a 101% increase compared to the previous year. Suntory's *BOSS* coffee captured 18% of market share in 2008, which was a 105% increase. As for distribution channels, vending machines consist of about 60-70% of total sales. Posters on vending machines play an important role in the advertising media.

While Suntory's expertise in advertising can be traced back to the time of establishment, the *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series of *BOSS* advertisements have reinforced their power of creativity. The *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series have been awarded several advertising prizes such as the TCC Grand Prix in 2007, the grand prize at the Fujisankei Communications Group advertisement competition. Moreover, this advertising series should have contributed to the increase of its sales volume in the competitive canned coffee market. Also, a blog site devoted to the *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series has been launched on a popular SNS and subscribed by over some thousand members. This clearly proves the popularity of *Alien Jones Investigating Earth*, especially among the young generation.

In this paper, we will study the significance of empathy and topicality, induced by brand communication, mainly through TV commercials, focusing on the *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series of *BOSS*.

4. Introduction of the *Alien series* and the reason for featuring Tommy Lee Jones

Let's take a look at the history of the *BOSS* brand. Suntory used to gain more than 70% of their sales from imported alcoholic beverages including whisky. However, since 1980, they have noticed the importance of other business divisions to respond to the changes in the market and consumers' needs.

Particularly, canned coffee came more into demand in the beverage market. *BOSS* canned coffee was produced after thorough research and market investigation in the early 1990s.

The sales volume of canned coffee in Japan is the largest in the world. According to *The Cultural History of Vending Machine*, Japan had the most vending machines per person in the world as of 2001. The number of vending machines per thousand then in Japan was 43.7, while it was 26.6 in the United States (Washizu 2003). A vending machine should be an attractive distribution channel for soft drink manufacturers because they can sell products without discounting.

Suntory chose the color blue for their vending machines, which provided a clear contrast to those of Coca cola, in red. Blue also happened to be the package color of *BOSS* canned coffee in its initial stages. Moreover, they put the logo of *BOSS* on the sides of vending machines, which indicates that *BOSS* was positioned as the core drink brand sold through vending machines for Suntory.

BOSS brands have subcategories, including *Rainbow Mountain* brand, *Sugarless Black* brand, *Luxurious Trace-sugar (ZEITAKU-BITO)*, *Afterglow of Meal (SHOKUGO-NO-YOIN)*, etc. At the planning stage of the *Alien Jones* series, Suntory planned to create advertising for the *Rainbow Mountain* brand subcategory and *BOSS*.

The *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series was designed in order to create a brand image as a 'partner of working people' and differentiating its brand from other canned coffee brands through advertising campaigns.

From the planning stage, the concept of *BOSS* coffee was defined to depict the real lives of working people

to cheer up them. In this way, *BOSS* aims at eliciting an empathetic feeling from working people, leading to them drinking their canned coffee.

Such a brand concept, as a brand to support working people, does not directly deliver cheering messages, but it portrays the daily lives of working people affirmatively. Suntory thought it would be better to deliver messages from the perspective of an Alien, representing a foreigner rather than the perspective of an Earthman, which represents Japanese, in order to positively depict the lives of working people. This is the reason why Suntory used a foreign actor in the creation of the *Alien* series.

In other words, Suntory aimed at accepting the real lives of working people from the outsider's perspective of an alien. Also, Suntory planned the advertising campaign with the ideas that an alien (a foreigner) would be a better spokesperson than an earth man (a Japanese).

Alien Jones started with the concept mentioned above. They wanted a foreign actor with good acting skills. After reviewing some famous Hollywood stars, Tommy Lee Jones, who starred in a movie titled *Men In Black*, was casted.

Mr. Jones was not all that famous in Japan when the advertisement was firstly telecasted. Lots of audiences wondered who the new star on the TV commercial was. However, as he gradually became well-known, this TV commercial series attracted more attention from consumers. The image of *BOSS* is strongly tied to Mr. Jones now in Japan, and consequently, at video rental shops, you will find sales copy saying, "Jones from that *Alien series* appears!" on movies in which he had starred before.

5. The *Alien Jones Investigating Earth* series

The series of *Alien Jones* depicts the status quo of Japan from the perspective of an alien humorously. In the series, Alien Jones came to Earth, in a human form, to learn about human culture and investigate the Earth. "Alien Jones" experiences various professions from a karaoke bar waiter, a carpenter, ranch stable keeper, airport screener, and cook, to a Prefectural Governor.

In the TV commercials, the contents are based on following ideas: This planet means Japan, Alien means Foreigner, Earth investigation means Japan investigation. At the end of each commercial, a brief report on investigation is always inserted. Here are some examples:

'On this planet, men of few words are popular'; 'On this planet, a sense of achievement becomes a habit'; 'On this planet, young people nowadays are harshly criticized'; 'On this planet, you have to know how to read between the lines'; 'On this planet, life is still hard after the retirement'; 'On this planet, tanning salons are great'; 'Table tennis at hot springs is fun'; 'Coffee on this planet is addictive', etc.

As you can see, the creativity of *BOSS* caricatures modern Japanese society.

Specifically, The *Alien Jones* series started from 4th April 2006 with the 'Appearance of Alien Jones' skit. It has been followed by lots of skits: 'Alien Jones at a discount store'; 'Delivery service'; 'Karaoke'; 'Competitive society'; 'Quality appeal'; 'Ranch'; 'Park'; 'Airport'; 'Land back'; 'Hot spring'; 'Akihabara'; 'Farmer'; 'Samurai drama'; 'Carpenter'; 'Earthly stars'; 'Ramen stall'; 'Governor'.

Among the above skits, 'Earthly stars' received the greatest feedback from consumers. This skit was known also as 'Project X' on the Internet. It referred to a famous NHK program titled *Project X* mainly because of its theme song, *Earthly Stars* by Miyuki Nakajima, and the manner of presentation.

'Earthly stars', which was released from 23rd August 2008, begins with a scene inside a tunnel under construction. Jones, as a construction worker, looked back on the past while he was drilling a hole on the wall for a rock bolt: his site supervisor's pep talk, catching a falling rock to rescue the supervisor and co-workers, etc.

At the tunnel launch ceremony, the supervisor of the construction site let Jones push the switch button of explosion. When he did that, the wall broke down and a beautiful clear sky came in sight. All the construction

workers, including Jones, cried out with joy shouting, “Hooray!” The commercial ended with the scene of Jones saying, “On this planet, a sense of achievement becomes a habit”. The Rainbow Mountain brand coffee was shown at the end of the commercial.

The ‘*Ramen stall*’ skit, which was on air from 6th December 2008, also enjoyed great popularity and won the grand prize in the beverage division for the popularity rating conducted by CM Soken Consulting (TOKYO KIKAKU Co., Ltd.).

This series depicts the Japanese habit of eating ramen after drinking. Jones, the master of a ramen stall, quietly cooked Ramen saying that “On this planet, people are impelled to eat ramen after drinking.” Then, a beautiful woman came to the stall, and men eating Ramen tried to hit her on. At that moment, some ingredient jumped out from the ramen and stuck around their eyes. After the stall was closed, the woman was waiting for Jones while he cleaned up. When Jones started moving the stall, drinking *BOSS*, she said that she had missed her last train, and asked if she could stay at his place. Jones blushed bright red and smoke came out from his ears. At the ending, Jones was drinking *BOSS* coffee with the narration saying, “On this planet, men of few words are popular.”

6. Others

According to Suntory, their current main target is adult males while their communication target is working males and females in their 20s to 50s, with focus on people in their 20s to 30s. By gender, men account for 80% of the supporting group. According to research by CM Soken Consulting (TOKYO KIKAKU Co., Ltd.), the *BOSS* campaign gets most support from middle-aged men. Back in the days when the concept of *BOSS* was developed, blue-collar workers like truck drivers and construction workers used to be the primary buyers of canned coffee, and it was quite natural for Suntory to originate their marketing concept as being the ‘partner of working people’. The Alien Jones persona experiences different occupations for investigation, and the image of blue-collar jobs such as a carpenter, is still quite strong now. However, blue-collar workers are not necessarily the main target of *BOSS* any longer. They wanted to depict the various daily lives of working people without limiting the image only to one occupation. As office workers do not have much variety to their outfits, more blue-collar occupations were used for the commercial skits.

As for the media, television, newspaper, radio, comic books, outdoor billboards and posters on stations are used to enhance contact points with consumers. For drivers, who as noted are frequent buyers of canned coffee, there are lots of traffic advertisements such as radio and outdoor billboards. Also, cross-media strategies are tailored to fit local characteristics: for instance, radio plus television and television plus traffic are combined. Suntory have put a lot of effort into internet/mobile, and the special site for *BOSS* enjoys popularity among consumers.

In terms of distribution channels, the impact of vending machines on the canned coffee market is huge. The growth of the canned coffee market is attributed to vending machines. Vending machines are widely available in Japan, and form unique distribution channels. Because their competitor, Coca-Cola, owns a dominant number of vending machines, Suntory remains as the number two in market share.

Vending machines are available nationwide and play the role of a national network medium. Since 1993, Suntory have tried to make their vending machines reminiscent of *BOSS* coffee. They matched the color of their vending machines with the color of *BOSS* and put the logo of *BOSS* on their vending machines. Posters on vending machines also play significant role as a medium. New poster advertising on vending machines for *BOSS* usually starts from September every year.

Since the *Jones* series feature a foreign actor, some skits are filmed simultaneously cost-wise. They plan to continue *Jones* as a series as long as consumers continue to like the series.

7. Evaluation of the *Jones* series

The following are some crucial factors for the success of the *Jones* series. First, each series of *Alien Jones* evoked sympathy and topicality among consumers by its great creativity, which enriched the brand association of *BOSS*.

The *BOSS* advertising campaign appeals to consumers' various feelings. For example, the 'Earthly stars' skit reflects the sense of achievement in clearing a tunnel, and the 'Ramens stall' skit reflects the desire of men to be hit on by a woman such as the actress, Kyoka Suzuki. It is believed that creativity contributed to build a strong, unique and favorable brand association toward *BOSS*. The increase in sales volume resulted from inducing consumers to think of the humorous commercials of *BOSS* whenever they saw Suntory vending machines.

Secondly, Suntory's internal organization should be explained as a successful factor in the *BOSS* campaigns. The creativity of Suntory is performed under a triangular system. Under this system, three managers work together to create a powerful advertisement: managers in charge of producing goods, advertisements and creativity.

Thanks to the triangular system, Suntory was able to keep various brands and make advertising campaigns that match with the manner and tone of each brand, taking advantage of their creativity.

In the case of competitors, a product manager often plays the role of planner as well, unlike with Suntory. This difference characterizes the creative system of Suntory.

Specifically, a product manager and an advertising manager cooperate and plan the campaign together. For instances, the campaign will only focus on the quality of products if a product manager solely works on campaign planning. On the other hand, campaigns might only focus on interesting/funny elements, if the campaign is solely created by an advertising manager.

In the case of Suntory, a product manager and an advertising manager play two important roles from the different perspectives to plan an advertisement. From the orientation stage, a product manager and an advertising manager cooperate and work on campaign planning together. Cooperation on campaign planning by a product manager and an advertising manager is significant.

The advertising department is divided into three parts: 'business expert advertising', 'food advertising' and 'liquor advertising'. Among these three sectors, food and liquor advertising employ the brand manager system.

Brand managers oversee the entire process of advertising varying from creativity to media. Also, there are some functional managers for advertisements. For example, there is a creativity manager and a media manager. A creativity manager supervises all creativity for every product from food to liquor. In other words, Suntory utilizes a matrix-like system in the creation of its advertisements.

Under this triangular system, all managers deliver their opinions so that they will make special, not ordinary commercials, rich in creativity. They put in their best efforts to deliver creativity in TV commercials.

The *Alien* series was created with the concept of 'partner of working people'. In other words, *BOSS* coffee excluded functionality and product elements, like country of origin, production method, etc. of canned coffee in its advertisements in order to depict the lives of working people. In this way, Suntory have developed advertising campaigns with a consistent tone and manner to build a long-lasting brand. A long-lasting consumer attachment to the *BOSS* brand has been more valued, rather than one-shot promotion. Suntory's triangular system shows how companies with many brands can manage their brand portfolio.

The third factor of their success is that they have cooperated with the independent creative director, Mr. Hiroshi Sasaki since their first campaign in 1992. He is one of the top creators in Japan, and supervised the total creation of the *BOSS* campaign.

Mr. Sasaki and Suntory's advertising department trust each other, and have worked together to find a fresh

Celebrity Advertising in Japan: Tommy Lee Jones as an alien investigator in Suntory TV commercials (Jeongsoo PARK)

approach in their marketing promotion, resulting in the great skits of the *Alien Jones* series. In other words, a trusting relationship between creative talents contributed to making smash hits one after another.

Note) This paper is based on Park, Jeongsoo (2018) *Celebrity Communication Strategy*, HAKUTO-SHO-BO. (Japanese).

Reference

- Agrawal, J. & W. A. Kamakura (1995) , “The Economic Worth of Celebrity Endorsers: An Event Study Analysis,” *Journal of Marketing*, 59 (3), pp.56-62.
- Baker, M.J. & Churchill, G.A. Jr. (1977), “The Impact of Physically Attractive Models on Advertising Evaluations,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14(4), pp.538-555.
- Chao, P.G. Wührer & T. Werani(2005), “Celebrity and Foreign Brand Name as Moderators of Country-of-origin Effects,” *International Journal of Advertising*, 24(2), pp.173-192.
- Debevec, K.& J. B. Kernan (1984), “More Evidence on the Effects of a Presenter’s Physical Attractiveness: *Some Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Consequences*,” *Advances in Consumer Research*, pp.127-132.
- Deshpandé, R.& D.M. Stayman (1994), “A Tale of Two Cities: Distinctiveness Theory and Advertising Effectiveness,” *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31(1), pp.57-64.
- Erdogan, B.Z., M.J. Baker & S. Tagg (2001), “Selecting Celebrity Endorsers: The Practitioner’s Perspective,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, 41(3), pp.39-48.
- Freiden, J.B. (1984), “Advertising Spokesperson Effects: An Examination of Endorser Type and Gender on Two Audiences,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, 24(5), pp.33-41
- Friedman, H.H. & L. Friedman (1979), “Endorser Effectiveness by Product Type,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, 19(5), pp.63-71.
- Friedman, H.H., S. Termini & R. Washington (1976), “The Effectiveness of Advertisements Utilizing Four Types of Endorsers,” *Journal of Advertising*, 5 (3), pp.22-24.
- Hovland, C.I. & W. Weiss (1951), “The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15(4), pp.635-650.
- Kahle, L.R. & P.M. Homer (1985), “Physical Attractiveness of the Celebrity Endorser: A Social Adaptation Perspective,” *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 11(4), pp. 954-961.
- Kamins, M.A. & K. Gupta (1994), “Congruence between Spokesperson and Product Type: A Matchup Hypothesis Perspective,” *Psychology & Marketing*, 11(6), pp. 569-586.
- Lee, J.G. & E. Thorson (2008), “The Impact of Celebrity-Product Incongruence on the Effectiveness of Product Endorsement,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, 48(3), pp. 433-449.
- Louie, T. A., R.L. Kulik & R. Jacobson (2001), “When Bad Things Happen to the Endorsers of Good Products,” *Marketing Letters*, 12(1), pp.13-23.
- Lynch, J. & D. Schuler (1994), “The Matchup Effect of Spokesperson and Product Congruency: A Schema Theory Interpretation,” *Psychology & Marketing*, 11(5), pp. 417-445.
- McCracken, G. (1989), “Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), pp.310-321.
- Miciak, A.R. & W.L. Shanklin (1994), “Choosing Celebrity Endorsers,” *Marketing Management*, 3(3), pp.51-59.
- Ohanian, R. (1990), “Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness,” *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), pp.39-52.
- Pornpitakpan, C. (2003), “Validation of the Celebrity Endorser’ Credibility Scale: Evidence From Asians,” *Journal of Marketing Management*, 19(1-2), pp.179-195.
- Washizu, Tsutomu (2003), *The Cultural History of Vending Machine*, Shueisha (Japanese).