

# The Transfer Of Power In Japanese Advertising Discourse

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Having as a starting point the idea of power exercised through symbols and taking into account sociocultural factors in the Era of Globalization, this paper will try to answer to an important question regarding advertising discourse construction and power relations: How does the transfer of power occur in this particular type of discourse? We are interested mainly in offering insights on how Japanese advertising discourse is constructed and which are the factors that contribute to the creation of global meaning and to observe how specific signs create cultural symbols, according to various aspects such as context, timeframe and culture. Also, considering the multitude of discourse types which have the capacity to exert power through language as a tool, we argue that the advertising discourse that we encounter on a daily basis has the most significant impact on all masses. Through the creation of advertising discourse one manages to attain a position of power over the society it belongs to and furthermore, at macro level it enhances the idea of supremacy of one society over another. The results indicate that advertising discourse can be perceived at a certain level as a fine line between the dominant and the submissive entity thus, discourse power manifests through manipulation or seduction, but we should perceive power as intensity, not as force.

Keywords: advertising discourse, power discourse, Japanese, semiotics, culture model

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## I. Introduction

The study of advertising can be approached from different perspective, thus making it a transdisciplinary field of study. The term “discourse” can denote and refer to different aspects accordingly and due to the intersection with various fields of study it has enhanced its ambiguous nature. Although “traditional” linguistics perspectives separate the use of language *per se* from the interference with other science (sociolinguistics) this connection that arises has a better potential in explaining language use and relevance within social interactions. The polysemy of the term “discourse” appears from the interference with other fields and in common speech the interpretation of a certain discourse as being a “political”, “feminist”

or “religious” one is due to the common features it shares with a certain area or subject. In Saussurian terms, “discourse” refers to a systematic and relational sequence of meaningful statements and semiotic elements (signs and symbols). In the present paper, the use of the term “discourse” is seen strongly connected to context and socio-cultural factors because we believe that a relationship-based analysis could not be possible otherwise. A study on discourse construction implies two primordial aspects: history and culture. Furthermore, “discourse” in the French framework refers to a system of constraints that governs the production of an infinite number of statements, starting from a certain social and ideological position. This system of constraints should not be perceived at a linguistic level, but at an ideological one. Moreover,



when discussing advertising discourse these constraints gain even more importance due to the interconnection between discourse construction and society. Admitting that no discourse can be considered 'original' because it is inevitably constructed on former models, any type of discourse can be seen as a trace, a footprint marking the evolution of a language, culture and society at a wider scale. The present paper follows up the idea of power and ideology expressed through symbols in Japanese advertising discourse by taking into account discourse interferences in the globalized world.

## II. Methodology

The dichotomy between "langue" and "parole" proposed by Saussure explains the concept by stating that it's "elements are arranged in sequence on the chain of speaking" (Saussure, 1966, 123) and therefore, word coordination formed outside discourse does not depend on linearity. Through this specter, these associations are called "syntagms" and are always formed through two or more consecutive units (Saussure, 1966, 123). In common speech, it refers to any structured argument about a particular theme, thus we can discuss about "feminist discourse", "Islamic discourse", "political discourse", "advertising discourse" etc.

Advertising discourse, a multimodal, multi-spatial discourse, having both intertextual and interdiscursive features engages the receiver into a "decoding" process influenced by personal experiences and background history. Persuasiveness and the use of poetic and rhetorical devices mark the basic principle in discourse construction through which meaning is constructed according to cultural norms. Advertising discourse reflects ideological constraints by simply being a construction of an individual (or group of individuals) also guided by certain values and norms which may or may not correspond to society's overall perspective. At this point, the concept of "power" and "power relations" can be defined in numerous ways considering the field of research, but there is always a constant element: the interdependence between entities and a hierarchical scale which places one above the other. By simplifying, in the case of advertising discourse construction, we can refer to two scenarios: first, the position of power of the creator (dominant) vs. the submissive entity (the receiver) who is exposed to it and second, the same ratio applied at macro level, between societies, that is the struggle between competitors. We consider that in the latter case we can discuss about a trend in showing supremacy of one culture over another through advertising discourse. Nonetheless, in both scenarios we are considering the

existence of a relation which automatically implies interdependence and constant, mutual change. For a power relation to exist it is necessary to have an implicit "agreement" between the implicated parties, either an approval or disapproval stance. "Power" or "manifestations of power" bring to discussion mainly the authority of one entity over another and thus, implies intensity. In the case of advertising discourse construction we can regard this intensity through the specter of ideology because it overpasses its solely function of transmitting information and becomes a vehicle for carrying values, norms, ideals, standards etc. Thus, the desired effect of an advertisement could be measured through the capacity of stirring emotions that eventually lead to restructure or simple awareness, depending on its purpose.

Discourse construction will vary in terms of scope and effect and this phenomena can be noticed at linguistic level through the analysis of signs. The difference between manifestations of power in advertising discourse and other types is directly linked to manipulation, or subliminal seduction. We use the term "manipulation" referring to "to handle, especially with skill" (The Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1993, 539) a perspective that supports the idea of advertising discourse as a stimuli for certain needs or an instrument that facilitates making use of already existing habits, not of totalitarianism, imposed power (Dâncu, 2009, 36). Advertising discourse has high intensity, but its power is possible through the projection of socio-cultural-political-economic dynamics in a certain context. By "transfer of power" we refer in the first phase to a relation guided by mutual exchange between society and individuals (discourse construction *per se*) and in the second one to a receiver in the position of choosing.

In the present paper we will analyze a pair of Shiseidō Japanese beauty print advertisements, one from the 1960s (Shōwa Era of Japan, 1926–1989) featuring post-war influences and the other one marked by modern trends and wider perspectives in the context of 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995). The analysis and comparison of the two will help in identifying instances of power expressed through *kawaii* symbolism in advertising discourse construction in the selected context. Our goal is to interpret and analyze two Shiseidō print advertisements created for the beauty industry from a culture dimension point of view, applying Hofstede's 6D model in order to observe instances of power in Japanese advertising discourse construction. The selection of these particular advertisements has created the context of exposing different facets of *kawaii* aesthetics modeled by cultural, social and economic variables. The corpora was selected based on search engines results and online database, corresponding to the characteristics

previously mentioned.

### III.1. Hofstede's cultural model. Japanese society: case study

Discourse construction seen as a collective good can offer insights on the culture and society it belongs to, thus through the analysis of Japanese discourse one can observe (if overpassing language barrier) the Japanese view of the world and its values. According to Hofstede's cultural model, the way the "self" is perceived differs considerably from one society to another, thus by extrapolating, discourse construction will differ as well. Through the six levels proposed by this theory, Japanese society is described statistically and empirically as: moderate power-distance, with moderate collectivism, very high masculinity, very high uncertainty avoidance, with high long term orientation and restrained by social norms. Power-distance dimension is associated with "different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality" (Hofstede, 2001, 29), individualism is perceived as opposed to collectivism, masculinity to femininity, uncertainty avoidance is related to the way in which the future is perceived, long term orientation in contrast to short term orientation and a new dimension that was recently added to the scale refers to indulgence vs. restraint. The analysis of national culture differences emerged into these six dimensions which emphasize on the way each analyzed society copes with certain matters.

In the case of Japan, hierarchical positions still play an important role, fact that can be observed by the careful use of language in respect to social position and status, role differentiation according to age, gender (even in the household). This result can be extrapolated to the constant struggle between meritocracy and seniority in the Japanese society. Paradoxically, when discussing individualism vs. collectivism dimension, data presents Japanese society as one with moderate collectivism, even though the global perception tends to classify it as high. Following up this idea, according to Western standards Japanese are perceived as highly collectivistic, whereas through Asian specter they are considered much closer to the individualistic dimension. Also, societies guided by masculinity tend to promote competitiveness, constant self-improvement, but in the case of Japan, we would argue that this constant effort towards bettering is discussed in terms of "we", not "I", as in Western culture patterns. At linguistic level, this fact can be observed in the omission of personal pronouns without altering the discourse flow. Because of this lack of explicit subject and being a pro-drop language, Japanese tends to have an ambiguous aura around it,

making it difficult for an "outsider" to understand it fully (Frențiu, 2017, 17). According to Hofstede, collectivist societies tend to think in terms of "we", rather than "I", thus a *spiritual* power figure is needed (the "Father" figure – the Emperor), harmony must prevail (和 – *wa*) and context is extremely important (Hofstede, 2010, 113). Power-distance dimension describes "the degree of centralization of the control and decision-making structure" (Hofstede, 2010, 400), therefore, in the case of Japan the results reflect the multilayered structure of the society if we take into account that decision making process is not a one-man task. In terms of spirituality and "Japaneseness", the figure of the Emperor is the *axis mundi*, being a symbol for constant reflection and return to the origins preserved in harmony by Amaterasu (the Sun goddess).

It is important to mention that these dimension are analyzed as a whole, not individually, thus, in the case of Japanese society, a high masculinity type with moderate collectivism will result in fierce competition at group level, not at individual one, as mentioned earlier. Regarding the collectivistic vs. individualistic dimension, standards and perspectives vary significantly, that is why perceptions over one particular society can be sometimes even in opposition. An expression of masculinity can be observed in the perfectionism encountered at work, in services, product display and presentation. Classified as one of the societies with the highest uncertainty avoidance mainly because of geographical position, the multitude of ceremonies all celebrating the ephemerality of life, not life itself, are a statement sustaining the results. This dimension could explain why changes or exerts of power as a tyrannical act have minimum to low chances of success in the Japanese society. Long-term orientation dimension describes the virtues and values of Japanese companies which aim towards constant development in the name of future generations, not of individuals. Another correlation can be made between the two previously discussed dimensions in terms of enhancing a perfectly balanced relationship between the new (modern) and the old (tradition), without viewing societal change with suspicion. This precise constant opening towards the unknown, described by Roland Barthes and prof. Kawai Hayao as „hollow-center" is the source of constant revival and reinvention of the Japanese society. We will discuss this matter in the present paper as "Japanization process" as opposed to "central-power" guided societies which tend to prioritize differently. The 6<sup>th</sup> dimension refers to control over feelings and desires and according to Hofstede's analysis scale, Japan is classified as a restraint society based on the way the children are raised. Japan is called a "water abundant" culture, as opposed to "water deprived" societies (Seward, 1986,



62). “Water” metaphors also contribute to the essence of being Japanese, to the capacity of adapting foreign elements to traditional values and norms, to perfectly internalize all concepts that accept coexistence. It is not about imitation of empty figures and forms, but of ‘Japanizing’ them in order to fit society order.

We will further develop our analysis based on Hofstede’s 6-D Model with implications on advertising discourse construction in order to observe power relationships at micro and macro level in the context of globalization, or more specific, “glocalization” (Robertson, 1995, 28).

### III.2. Hollow-center-balanced model vs Central-power-ruled model

The main difference between the structure of societies is reflected through the collective view of the world which can be traced from language use and semiotic interpretation. At discourse construction level, especially when discussing advertising discourse, it is important to understand the cultural and social mechanism in order to actively interpret or to “decode” (if we discuss in Saussurian terms) the message. This dichotomy between hollow-center societies and central-power societies can be perceived as a justification for different ideology and value systems. The need for constant division between Japanese and the “outside people” with reference to foreigners (*gaikokujin*) has always been a concern at society level, fact visible from the analysis of discourse construction. Especially after the Second World War, many Japanese theoreticians have formulated and advocated the idea of uniqueness at every level through a series of texts (*nihonjinron* genre) on national and cultural identity arguing that it would be impossible for a foreigner to internalize sensitive concepts and structures: “I have come to feel that the psychology of Westerners differs from that of Japanese” (Kawai, 1986, 72). Following up this idea of opposed worlds in opposed mindsets, Kawai Hayao (1986) synthesizes the existing theories and finds an explanation in the structure of the center, namely, the “emptiness”, the “nothingness” exercised in the construction of Japanese mythology which can be extrapolated to Japanese society as a whole. The theory of the “hollow-center” pleads for perpetual balance between signs and symbols possible through coexistence, opposed to the “central-power” model which does not permit fair positions, on the contrary, it favors exertions of power in the battle for the central position. The first model “does not imply that one or the other represents absolute good, or occupies the central position” (Kawai, 1986, 75) as it happens in Western discourse construction with respect to

divinity for example, where the roles are clearly stated. Thus, “central-power-ruled” societies tend to be less flexible in adapting, thus when change is imposed an immediate reaction is expected to occur. However, in the case of Japanese culture and society, antagonistic interactions (such as white vs. black, good vs. bad) are not common, therefore the mechanism is based on adaptation and integration of current trends with an important gain: preserving traditional forms of culture (ex. *ikebana*, *sumo*, *shodō*, *sadō*) alongside constant reinvention. Another relevant example for this phenomena is the adaptation of the syntagm “Three Sacred Treasures”, strongly related to the Imperial House, symbolizing Japan’s dieties. A sword, a mirror and a jewel, traditionally known as amulets, were adapted in the context of globalization referring to everyday products such as washing machines, refrigerators and black and white televisions (’60s) or to automobiles, air conditioners and color televisions (’70s). This chameleonic capacity can be perceived as if “a number of principles circle around the center without one ever really occupying it” (Kawai, 1986, 76). In the case of the latter, the central-power-ruled model, power determines who/what stands in the position of the center, thus making it impossible for “coexistence of opposing forces” (Kawai, 1986, 76). The “emptiness” or “hollowness” can be understood as a vulnerability in the face of foreign elements invasion, but the capacity of constant revitalization and reposition of the center diminishes the danger successfully.

This parallel between “nothingness” and exertions of power in society structures can prove the flexibility of the center in Japanese culture and society reflected in discourse construction, as well. That is, by extrapolating, advertising discourse construction must be analyzed taking into account the constant reshaping of the center which explains the fast pace at which foreign elements are introduced and filtered through the Japanese specter (Kawai, 1986, 77).

### IV. Case study – *Kawaii* semiotics

Trying to define the concept of *kawaii* implies a great variety of Japanese cultural and social understanding and the ambiguity arises also from the multitude of interpretations possible due to its manifestations in different areas of interest. Etimologically, the word has its roots from the word *kaohayushi* (顔映し) which literally means “one’s face is radiant/glowing” and it was used to denote feelings of compassionate sorrow towards the weak and vulnerable, sometimes bearing negative connotation to the extent of expressing an unbearable feeling of pity.

However, parts of the initial meaning were preserved by the adjective *kawaii* in daily usage (especially after WWII) but with the opposite effect, being attributed to describe children, young women, small animals and anything else which might be included in the category of dependent (*amae*) and fragile. Through semantic shift, the word has come to transcend its primary meaning of ‘feeling sorrow for the misfortunes’ and to imply innocence, child-like behaviour, embedding cute charisma and attributing human characteristics to mundane objects, thus exerting power over a specific category which possess these traits. Both words *kaohayushi* and *kawaii* imply a superior-inferior relationship in the sense of disregarding something or someone by positioning oneself on a higher scale. Through the observation of word meaning shift we can conclude that the dominant-submissive relationship is still visible in the contemporary use of *kawaii*, although the context has significantly changed and it manifests more implicitly than explicitly. These observations applied to Japanese advertising discourse construction will result in the idea of reinforcement of hierarchical positions which regard women position as vulnerable and highly dependent (*amae*). The ideal image of Japanese women has been constantly shaped and guided by *kawaii* aesthetics which imply cute clothes and hairstyle, childish, playful behavior, natural-like make-up, big round eyes *etc.* These characteristics correlated with the need for ‘keeping up’ with the globalized world resulted in making *kawaii* aesthetics a perpetual symbol of youth and beauty. Based on our observations so far, we believe that this particular aesthetics has managed to transform immaturity in an indispensable Japanese social feature and at macro level into a “globalized culture” (Koma, 2013, 5). *Kawaii* must be perceived as a power word, more precisely, it’s meaning and symbolism has the capacity to trigger emotions and combine historical background with contemporary expectations at social and cultural level. In the discussion of Japanese advertising discourse, *kawaii* power can be observed both in language and paralinguage.

If we consider the switch from an explicit to an implicit meaning in the construction of an advertising discourse, *kawaii* aesthetics diffused and created a counterpart for rigidness in the shape of pop culture phenomena. Considering historical, social and cultural background, a signifier carries different meanings in different contexts, therefore the concept of ‘cuteness’ is also relative. “While the visual signal of cuteness has an almost universal effect on humanity, people’s reactions to, and definitions of, cuteness greatly differ across cultural borders.” (Sato, 2009, 38). The reality shaped by this term differs considerably from its Western counterpart and although barriers between different cultures and societies are diminished

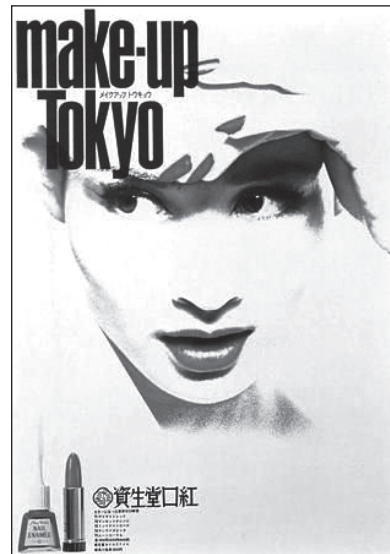


Figure 1: Shiseidō, “Make-up Tokyo” campaign, 1964.

in the age of globalization, in this case we can not find evidence for the dissolution of semiotic barriers. Thus, the concept of *kawaii* cannot simply be equated with “cute”, “adorable” and so forth due to its importance and influence on society and culture likewise.

Due to its ambiguity, *kawaii* allows multiple interpretations, thus the print advertisements chosen for this case study present only one facet of its symbolism, not necessarily the conventional one, filtered through a particular brand’s spectrum, Shiseidō. *Kawaii* aesthetics in Japanese advertising discourse has not only been a mirror of society’s rapid change, but also an influencer. In this scenario we can refer to instances of power in matters of influencer (advertiser) vs. follower (consumer, who ultimately has the ability to subjectively adapt and interpret what he/she is exposed to). As seen in Figure 1, the aesthetics in this 1964 print advertisement is constructed around nude tones and white shades with red accents on the lips and nails directly linking it to the advertised beauty goods. The advertisements created for this campaign, „make-up Tokyo” feature white and red tones, an index for Japan’s flag, part of the national colours which symbolize team spirit and support for the national team. The selected print advertisement was released during the same year with the Tokyo Olympics, thus it is important to notice the manifestations of

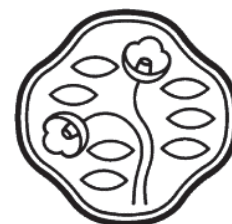




Figure 2: Shiseidō, “This moment. This life. Beautifully” campaign, 2010

Western beauty values mixed with *kawaii* aesthetics. At first glance, the focus in this particular ad is on an expressive, V-line white face of a Western-looking woman having her eyes fixed on something outside the frame. An Audrey Hepburn inspired look, the ultimate symbol of womanhood in the U.S features in a far-reaching Shiseidō advertisement in the context of the Summer Olympics. This bold, emancipated face expression is an index for Western beauty ideals and norms and overall it conveys the shift from traditional, rigorous standards towards opening to the new. The proposed shift in beauty standards is noticeable in both aesthetics, imaginary and graphics, being tightly related to women beauty standards and perceptions in the West. The context and historical background play a major role in this particular advertisement (viable for the whole campaign) due to the association between Shiseidō as a path breaker between the West and the East, strongly related to the honor of being the first Asian country to hold the Olympics. This particular context has ensured a privileged place for Japan in the world. Also, due to technology development we can notice a shift in terms of imagery too, that is, the use of photographs instead of drawings and illustrations. Another interesting feature comes from analyzing typography features: bold roman characters instead of *kanji* (Japanese logographs imported from Chinese) which also mark Japan's opening towards the West, making it readable for 'outsiders' (*gaikokujin*). The power of typography is not to be neglected because it encloses the global idea of the advertisement, highlighting the theme. The *hanatsubaki* (*Camellia japonica*, see Figure 2) logo, visible in the bottom left of the advertisement marks the connection between modernity (implicitly Western values and aesthetics)

and traditional (aboriginal). The symbolism encountered in this particular advertisement triggers the idea of renewing *kawaii* imagery and aesthetics influenced and guided by Western standards and through seduction, rather than manipulation, power is exercised firstly from the perspective of the brand (in this case, Shiseidō) towards its intended audience and secondly, at macro level, from the society as a whole, as a representative of a community, to 'outside' perimeters, in this case other countries.

In Figure 2 and 2.1, featuring a 2010 Shiseidō print advertisement marking the beginning of a new year, we encounter a totally different perspective guided by modern values and innovative ideas, sending a rather globally, than locally oriented message. The corporate message 「一瞬も一生も美しく」, “This moment. This life. Beautifully”, has emerged from the company's mission, that is to make anyone live beautifully and at maximum pace. This motto perfectly combines Japanese Shintō beliefs of cherishing the moment, loving the transience of life (*mono no aware*), thus it can be perceived as a constant reminder of returning back to the roots (the cycle of life). The same idea is continued through visual signs: a portrait of a short haired woman with innocent looks and delicate traits, looking directly to the viewer is like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, an index for rebirth and renewal. The position of the hand under the chin symbolize sensuality and femininity, the main features of contemporary *kawaii*. Chromatically simplistic, with soft nudes accents on the lips and dress, connected with the logo. The *hanatsubaki* logo, positioned on the top right, next to the motto (see Figure 2 and 2.1) due to its long history is an index for tradition, high standards and *omotenashi* (courtesy and respect towards the other). In this case, the combination of signs supports the idea of globalization and intercultural exchange, working as a unifying tool for peace in the world. The perspective is significantly different, bringing into discussion sensitive matters such as world peace and introspection in a society based on conformity within the group: “I am changing. I change the world” (私が変わる。世界を変える). The insertion of two short English words written with capital letters alongside *kanji*, carry the primordial choice, “yes” or “no” and work as tool for conveying a more “exotic”, foreign image. The global meaning is constructed around unconventional beauty signs which reveal *kawaii* metamorphosis.

Through comparison of the first with the latter, we encounter another facet of *kawaii* aesthetics governed more by Western visual symbols, but with focus on traditional values such as protection, harmony, peace, sensibility. This is a combination between atypical Japanese beauty symbols and traditional values represented in a Western paradigm.

## V. Conclusions

As opposed to the West, in Japanese society, social and cultural paradigm shifts do not occur because of a riot or by imposing values by force, thus, power exertion must be perceived as a smooth and peaceful process which does not involve a dominant-submissive relationship in the traditional way. Applying Hofstede's dimension for uncertainty avoidance to Japanese advertising discourse construction has confirmed that there is a certain mechanism which perfects the cyclical movement of the center within the society ("Hollow center" theory) in order to preserve traditional values, as well as to internalize and adapt new (outside, foreign) elements. The concept of *kawaii* is a very versatile one, somehow chameleonic because it can refer to different categories simultaneously and it works as a coping strategy for dealing with globalization. The concept of power receives different values according to cultural and social norms, constraints and ideology, thus in the case of Japanese society power will denote intensity, not force, in order to preserve group harmony (*wa*), the essence of being Japanese. Power exerted through *kawaii* symbols in advertising discourse is intended to shape and guide the image of Japanese women (in the present case study) in the context of globalization, but in return, *kawaii* aesthetics is influenced by the target group (receiver) through the process of decoding the implied message. When discussing instances of power within Japanese advertising discourse we refer to the shift of power position between the advertiser (the creator) and the receiver who ultimately has the capacity to subjectively interpret and thus, to contribute to the evolution of a phenomena, in this case, *kawaii*.

By analyzing these advertisements and by defining the position of power within Japanese context, we conclude that at micro level, the transfer is possible due to the existence of the hollow center which allows repositioning of the power spot and at macro level it has the capacity to maintain a neutral position by adapting foreign elements through "Japanization" process while balancing traditional and modern patterns. We conclude by stating that *kawaii* must be perceived as a driving force towards liberation from the stiff norms and standardized behavior within the Japanese society.

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