

Chapter 13

Marketing Convenience Stores Symbolically: 7-Eleven and Its Spokes- Characters in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The spokes-character Open-Chan was conceived in early 2000 and a diverse menagerie of other animal characters was introduced to promote 7-eleven in Taiwan. Over the subsequent decade, 7-Eleven has launched a wide range of campaigns and life narratives involving these spokes-characters to enhance the metaphorical image of the brand. This study aims to explicate the semiotic and linguistic texts launched in a series of campaigns between 2005 and 2015 and so to unpack their sociological and marketing implications. As suggested, visual narratives of cartoon spokes-characters perform a representative function that propagates the metaphoric image of the dominant powers as part of the broader concept of brand culture. In Schroeder's seminal studies on semiotic theory and brand culture, he suggests that physical attributes are important in projecting a proper image. The sign value of a proper spokes-character represents a significant asset in branding a retailing space.

INTRODUCTION

The creation and maintenance of symbolic trusts are imperative in the service sector to differentiate competitors and create brand salience (Bargenda, 2013). The 5,000th 7-Eleven convenience store in Taiwan opened in 2014 in the south of the country (Hsu & Wu, 2014), this extraordinary performance being achieved within just 35 years since the brand first entered Taiwan's saturated, hypercompetitive domestic retail market. This case study delineates the shift in the convenience store business toward

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high-involvement, content-based marketing communication to build sustainable, long-term brand affinity (Gilboa & Rafaeli 2003; Hoffman & Turley, 2002).

Against this background, which mirrors the ideological transitions in consumer behavior, the communication repertoires and venues have become increasingly attuned to shifting perceptions of identity, culture, place and empowerment that demarcate culturally relevant value systems (Bargenda, 2013). As Shiau (2013) suggested, visual narratives of cartoon spokes-characters perform a representative function that propagates the metaphoric image of the dominant powers as part of the broader concept of brand culture. In Schroeder's seminal studies (2007, 2010) on semiotic theory and brand culture, it is suggested that physical attributes are important in projecting a proper image. The sign value of a proper spokes-character represents a significant asset in branding a retailing space. In this context, this case study examines how 7-Eleven employs Open-Chan (Chinese: Open 小將) in its brandscapes in Taiwan.

The Open-Chan spokes-character was conceived in the early 2000s. Detsu, a Japanese advertising agency, announced its birthday as of July 11, 2005, in order to symbolically celebrate the iconic 7-Eleven. Besides Open-Chan, a diverse menagerie of other animal characters has been introduced to promote 7-Eleven in Taiwan. Over the subsequent decade, 7-Eleven has launched a wide range of campaigns and life narratives involving these spokes-characters so as to enhance the metaphorical image of the brand. This study aims to explicate the spokes-characters and their semiotic connotations in a series of campaigns which were launched between 2005 and 2015, and so to unpack their sociological and marketing implications.

Western branding history offers numerous examples of the employment of anthropomorphic brand characters. For example, Kraft Peanut Butter launched a line of toy bears, and simultaneously changed its product labels to feature bears. The animals wore a red bow tie for crunchy, and a green bow tie for smoothie. By using anthropomorphic characters for their brands, these symbols have the power to connect differently to people based on simple emotions. Anthropomorphic characters do not carry any definitive meaning similar to what slogans may do. Consequently, Kraft Peanut Butter has a greater affective impact than a peanut butter without a bear. While the banking industry is commonly viewed as intimidating or even worse — a kind of a loan shark that may ransack your belongings — TD Canada Trust connects with consumers via a cushy green chair anthropomorphic character that embraces its customers with a “comfort zone” where lovely bears are seated. The green chair is presented as a comfortable symbol in an industry many consumers find daunting, and attempts to offer a new perspective on the banking industry.

Given the fierce competition among convenience stores and the popularity of cartoon spokes-characters, anthropomorphic characters are useful mnemonics for many brands in Taiwan, and, more broadly, across East Asia. Cute and innocent anthropomorphic characters with big baby-like heads are ubiquitous in brand marketing. However, convenience stores typically carry numerous items across different brands and product categories. Convenience stores chains, thus, face an odd predicament in developing and implementing their own spokes-characters. This case study tries to explore what 7-Eleven has planned and implemented, and how this has impacted its brandscape. While studies have attempted to examine the use of spokes-characters for brand promotion, little research exists on how to build and sustain brand characters (Lloyd & Woodside, 2013). Adopting a case-study approach, this chapter explores the symbolic marketing and brand management strategies of Open-Chan — 7-Eleven's Taiwan mascot, in the shape of a cork opener, now a celebrity in its own right. It has a music album and a dedicated theme park. Prior to the emergence of Open-Chan, Sanrio — a Japanese corporation that owns and licenses Hello Kitty, a cat epitomizing cuteness and innocence — was employed to promote products in 7-Eleven. The use of coupons or credit point lotteries to obtain 7-Eleven's Hello Kitty mascots dressed in different ethnic

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