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## Problems of Messaging in New TV Commercials



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### ABSTRACT

This study considered the contents of TV Commercial Messages (CMs) to advertise products (new products, services, movies, books) that are promoted toward purchases by consumers. CMs convey the appeal of products by using famous personalities in media such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines. In recent years, some of the CMs have had novel compositions and expressions, which may be suspected of stealth marketing or fraudulent activities. This article focuses on CMs that have recently been seen on Japanese TV and discusses their problems and drawbacks. It was found that there were complex expressions, such as indirectly conveying the content and making viewers guess.



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## INTRODUCTION

A Commercial Message (CM) is intended to advertise a product (new product, service, movie, book) for which one wants to encourage purchase, using mass media such as TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and famous personalities to convey the appeal of products. The basic structure of CMs is to convey the characteristics of the product, such as its delicious taste and appearance, through characters such as telops and statements by celebrities. In recent years, there have been some CMs that had novel compositions and expressions, and they may be suspected of stealth marketing<sup>1)</sup>. Stealth marketing is a marketing technique that spreads or attracts attention toward a product without being noticed by the viewers as an advertisement.

CMs are clearly structured to advertise products. At least in conventional CMs, it was commonplace and easy for viewers to understand what was being said to promote the product. In some of the recent CMs, there are sections where it is ambiguous whether celebrities are speaking for the purpose of advertising. Some CMs contain remarks that the product is good as an impression of the personalities themselves. In such cases, it is extremely difficult to judge whether the personalities are really saying what they want to say or whether they are making such statements as commercial gains or personal benefit. People who watch CMs are influenced by it, and it affects the purchase of products<sup>2),3)</sup>. If the remarks are actually based on the thoughts of the personalities themselves, purchasing behavior is unavoidable. However, the situation is different if CM appearances generate income or lead to some kind of business convenience for people endorsing the products. If one changes the content of one's statement to promote a product, or if the meaning may be understood differently due to editing, it may be recognized as fraud. This is because it is believed that TV CMs deceive viewers and that personalities and companies are profiting from them. In this study, we will introduce the composition and expression of new CMs that have recently been seen on Japanese television, and discuss the problems of such CMs.

Case 1 (A performer's statement in a CM is incorrect)

This case is based on statements that are thought to be lies by celebrities who appear in CMs, a method frequently seen in recent years<sup>2)</sup>. This is aimed at conveying the goodness of the product one wants to promote in the CM from the standpoint that the celebrity who appears in it has already used it or has been using it for many years. The CM viewers have no way of confirming whether the celebrity's usage record is a lie. The situation is such that only CM creators and product sellers know the truth in advance. It is not a problem for celebrities to promote the positive aspects of a product as long as it is factually based on their personal opinions<sup>3)</sup>. However, if they get a performance fee and say something different from their own thoughts, this can be regarded as betraying the viewers<sup>2)</sup>. Logically, if it is an advertisement for a new product, it is hard to imagine that celebrities have been using it for many years. If the performer speaks of the drawbacks of the product, and the contents are edited in the CM, it will be considered disguise by the producer, not the performer. From the celebrities' perspective, it may be said that they were just acting and doing their job. In particular, fans of celebrities want products that celebrities like, and they may take celebrities' statements trustingly without questioning them, and we believe that the content of such statements entails great responsibility.

Case 2 (Images and sounds in commercials do not necessarily explain the product)

A more recent method than outlined in Case 1, is one that does not directly advertise the product<sup>4)</sup>. Though such indirect messaging has existed in the past, such as a CM is composed in a manner where the product is reflected on the same screen where the idol is playing or enjoying at a beach or a park<sup>5)</sup>, recent CMs are clever with scenes that clearly praise similar products and describe its good features. It is not stated in the CM whether or not it is about the target product itself; viewers think that the product is good by linking it arbitrarily and thinking about it<sup>4)</sup>. Examples of such CMs are shown in Table 1. A performer drinks a drink and remarks that it tastes good and is good for the body. The products are reflected in the background, but the performer does not take the product's name. What is different here from Case 1 is that it cannot be strictly said that the performer is stating false characteristics about the advertised product. Detailed explanations are displayed only in small letters, and the content cannot be understood unless the TV screen is frozen or enlarged to carefully check it.

From our perspective, this is one of the new methods that does not fall under fraud (difficult to prove) because they simply mention that the products used on the spot are good, without explicitly stating that these are CMs for the products<sup>4</sup>). Considering that viewers are being misled, it seems that there are aspects that are inappropriate as expressions in CMs.

#### Case 3 (Taking advantage of the scientific ignorance of the viewer)

Although some CMs are conventionally structured, there are cases where the content is misleading using technical terms that the viewers do not understand. Some examples are shown in Table 1. An active ingredient is considered to refer to a compound that serves as a basis for expressing its effects. Original ingredients and new ingredients are meant as substances that are not normally included in other similar products, and that their inclusion will produce good effects. Even if it is stated in the CM that a unique ingredient is prescribed, it cannot be said that it is effective or that the effect is enhanced.

In addition, there are cases where there are doubts about the ingredients and the method of intake, or where it is advertised that the product is good because it contains many amino acids and minerals and is easy to use because it can be taken at any time. For the former, however, it is not enough just to have a large variety, but it is also important to have a balanced quantity required by humans. In the case of the latter, it is acceptable to have a determined dosage, since there is a risk of side effects if the drug is potent. There are cases where it is wrong to say that something is good for the body because it is a component of the human body, and it is also considered an error in current scientific knowledge to think that taking it orally will only reach specific affected areas. This is because many components undergo metabolism, such as decomposition in the gastrointestinal tract, and are thought to diffuse throughout the body. In addition, it is incorrect to say that a product is safe because it contains natural ingredients. This is obvious when considering natural toxins. Such messaging can be considered to be advertising that exploits viewers' lack of scientific knowledge.

#### Case 4 (CM exploits the fact that a lot of information cannot be entered in a short time)

There is no extreme difference in the composition of CM. A CM may be for a few seconds or a few minutes, and the advertisement of the product is included in that short time. Even if the

explanation is supplemented by inserting text on the screen, it narrows the field of vision and interferes with watching the video. As a countermeasure, the characters of the text are extremely small and displayed for a short time period. This is one way to make the video easy to watch; however, it is also unethical to not show the content of the CM appropriately. For example, the length of CMs is used to express results, such as the short time required for washing or cooking. It does not matter if the viewer clearly knows in advance how long the action takes. If the content is new or unusual and difficult to understand, showing it in a short time period in the CM may lead to changing the characteristics, such as allowing the action to occur quickly, which may lead to misunderstandings. Some points are difficult to understand about this content. If it is clear that anyone can wash and cook in the same amount of time, it would be false content to make it appear shorter due to the expression in the CM. If the time varies depending on the person or situation, it may not be said to be false. In a case where a 15-min video is shortened to 1 min and used as a commercial video, and it is suggested that the required time may be 1 min depending on the person, even if there are doubts about the editing of the video, the content of the CM is not considered fraudulent. It cannot be said that there is no problem, but as long as the time is not fixed, even if viewers use the product and feel it is longer than the CM, it is unlikely to be a problem. Examples are shown in Table 1. In a CM currently on air, a video is used in which the lines written with a marker pen on a face are erased by a shower. In response, viewers have commented that it does not disappear as quickly as in the CM or that it does not disappear at all<sup>6)</sup>. The fact that skin type (moisture and lipid contents), the condition of the makeup, the type of marker pen, and how many seconds it took to disappear are not clearly stated. The CM video is only showing one successful example. As the length of the CM is short, the viewer automatically recognizes that it will disappear quickly.

#### Case 5 (Using vague expressions)

Even if the viewer receives all the information conveyed in the CM, it may be difficult to judge whether the content is correct or not. In this case, the content is not based on scientific knowledge. For example, in some cases, the fact that the product is cheap is strongly appealed (Table 1). This is thought to convey the meaning that the product is cheap despite its high effectiveness and cost of material and labor, even in large quantities. The manufacturing process and the degree of effect are unknown to many ordinary people. In cases of direct messaging, the

product may be explicitly describes as free or cheap. However, in this case, there is a latent condition that only the first item sent is free of charge, or that a regular purchase is promised. In the former case, it is difficult to say that one is deceiving, and the reviewer can judge whether the content is legitimate or not by acquiring that knowledge, but in the latter case, depending on how it is displayed, it may be perceived as deceiving.

The conditions for trust in a product or company include the fact that the origin of the materials is the capital (Tokyo in Japan), that it is in a historically significant place or special production area, or that the company is located in the capital. These considerations sometimes make people think that the quality of the product will be good or the effect will be high because it is made in a place with clean air on the plateau. There are times when it seems that the company is decent because it is doing TV CMs, or that the celebrity and the president of the company are acquaintances and hence can be trusted. A product may even gain credibility if a commercial spot is incorporated into a long-running TV program.

How to avoid being confused by the contents of the CM?

When choosing and purchasing a product, it is common to use information from TV CMs as a reference. As mentioned thus far, the content of the CM may be ambiguous or may contain content that may be misinterpreted. If the information obtained is incorrect or proper information cannot be obtained, it may lead to the wrong selection of products to purchase. There are several possible ways to prevent this.

The first is to accurately understand the meaning of the Japanese used in the CM. For example, as in Case 3, viewers should know the original meanings of active ingredients, unique ingredients, new ingredients, biological ingredients, supporting ingredients, and natural ingredients. If viewers do not overinterpret it, they would know that it has only limited meaning. This kind of content is related to viewers' Japanese ability.

Second, while watching CMs, viewers should not assume relations between two aspects. This method is unlikely to be used much in the future, as it may be fraudulent to induce viewers. At present, it is better not to overthink or make assumptions to avoid being deceived. Third, viewers should not let meaningless vagueness mislead them. It is common for companies to have their

headquarters or a small office at an address in Tokyo to maintain their status, even if it is not a proper company.

Finally, if there is anything that viewers do not understand or are ambiguous about, they should check the product's credibility through other sources of information or sites. Presently, the Internet is easily accessible in many countries where product reviews are readily available, particularly on social media. However, some of these reviews may be sponsored or may be a part of a negative campaign, and hence may not always be accurate, but one can get closer to the truth by checking on multiple sites as much as possible.

## CONCLUSION

The composition of CMs in product advertising is becoming increasingly complex. Particularly in Japan, TV CMs continue to use expressions that may deceive viewers, partly because the legal system is outdated, and partly because of the relationship between TV stations and commercial sponsors. This still shows no sign of resolution<sup>2)</sup>. Even if the content is clearly fraudulent and cannot be used in other countries, it is sometimes allowed on Japanese television. It is largely because product sales companies, commercial production companies, TV stations, and performers benefit from such CMs. However, it is the consumer who directly purchases and uses the product, and suffers the disadvantages of such CMs. Viewers who are potential consumers need to acquire appropriate product information. At present, it is often difficult to restrict the composition of CMs, hence, it seems that the only option is for viewers to become smarter and use the information in CMs well. As this takes considerable time and effort, viewers should not rely on the information projected in a CM. It is simply a method of treating it as one of the viewing video contents, not obtaining information from it, and not immediately thinking about purchasing products based on that information. This may be one of the smarter choices these days. Nevertheless, not all CMs are committing fraudulent acts. We believe that with a little more ingenuity, the obvious facts can be conveyed in good faith. By adjusting the arrangement of characters displayed on the screen and the display time, it should be possible to devise ways to make the content easier to understand, and carried out with the intention to inform the viewers rather than confuse them.



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**Table 1 Examples of CM expressions that mislead the viewers**

Type of CM	Expression example	Problem	Case No. in text
(Often exist from the past)	Advertise the product directly (state the goodness).	If the viewers can properly recognize that it is a commercial, it will not be a problem.	—
(Recent past)	Show the experience. Experienced people give their personal impressions.	There is no problem if the impression is actually stated based on the will of the individual.	1
(Recently used method being employed increasingly)	A series of short stories (no direct product promotion).	No particular problems.	2
Shampoo	People with good hair color and luster and products are reflected together	Just by showing the product in the CM, viewers are forced to imagine that it is the effect of the product.	2
Shampoo	Proprietary ingredients are formulated.	It is mistakenly perceived as being highly effective just because it contains an ingredient different from the others.	3
Vitamin preparation	Contains many types and amounts of	As people also get vitamins from other foods, they can lead to overdose.	3

	vitamins		
Healthy food	Formulated with naturally derived ingredients or natural ingredients	Even though it is a natural ingredient, it is not without side effects.	3
Healthy food	Removes wrinkles and tightens the skin	Temporarily caused by treatments such as massage and vasodilators, regardless of the effects of food.	3,5
Shower	Dirt comes off immediately (within CM time)	It's understated, even though it actually takes longer (it's clearly not a false claim, as it doesn't say how many seconds it takes to get the dirt off).	4
Lawnmower	It can be harvested immediately (within CM time)	The CM expresses that it does not take time and effort, but if that expression becomes ambiguous, it loses its appeal.	2,4
Instant food	Registered dietitians are paying attention	Just because they are paying attention doesn't mean it's good.	5
All products	Inexpensive (despite their high effectiveness)	If the price is the same as general products, there is no problem at all, but it is difficult to evaluate the consideration for added value in terms of price.	5

Based on references 1), 4), and 6), and the content of TV commercials currently being broadcast in Japan.