

MAKING AND CONSUMING CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper shall introduce a new phenomenon about consumption. This is related to consumption of characters like Mickey Mouse and Hello, Kitty. The phenomenon appears prominently in Japan. In order to examine consumption of characters and the strategies for creating characters, we conducted a case study on a set of marketing strategies of a toy manufacturer in Japan.

Traditionally, consumption research is asserted using the uni-methodological paradigm. The uni-methodological paradigm here means that researchers have a methodological exclusiveness stance to any other research approaches. Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) distinguish five non-interchangeable research approaches on consumer research. For instance, from an economic point of view, consumption could be assumed as a problem solving method to increase utility. Baudrillard (1968, 1970) criticized this type of functional consumption. Researchers have often denied the other approaches competitive to their own approaches rather than incorporating them.

Character consumption cannot be revealed by such an insulated research stance because consumers would like to consume characters for multidimensional reasons. They consume characters to enhance their utilities. In addition, characters stimulate consumers' sentiments. The possession desire is satisfied by consuming characters. Possessing character goods can create small interest groups and stimulate communication among the group members. Consuming characters is assumed to involve multidimensional aspects: functional, conspicuous, and semiotic consumption. As a result, once we try to understand character consumption, we have to employ the multi-disciplinary approach in contrast to the uni-methodological paradigm.

Through our case study, we revealed the distinctive marketing strategies in the business of characters. It is necessary for marketers of character goods to regard character consumption as having functional, conspicuous, and semiotic aspects. We can find distinctive characteristics in the market research, product development, advertising, and communication strategies in the process of creating characters.

KEYWORDS: Characters, Character universe, Multidimensional Consumptions, Character Development

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show, still unusual phenomena except in Japan or somewhere in Asia countries, on character consumption. Before our definition of the character, it must be useful that we give some example to understand what character is. They are Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Hello, Kitty, Angry Birds, and Pokemon, and so on. Character is defined as an imaginary entity which has specific traits. Character consumption is defined as a buying behavior which tends to buy a specific theme of characters as well. These characters can be transformed into anything, animations, books, dolls (figures), moppets,

stationaries, T-shirts, fashion goods, and so on. This trait is very important to understand character business practice. Certain estimation for these products was JPY 2,307.5 billion (2012, EUR 17.48billion). Compared to the other industries, for instance, beer has around JPY 3 trillion, utility (Gas) has JPY 3.8 trillion, restaurants have JPY 4 trillion, and housing has JPY 6 trillion, character consumption is not a small industry in Japan.

To understand character consumption must influence to the marketing thoughts. The reason why we focus on character consumption is that there are several interesting characteristics of character consumption. Some consumer

sometimes buys character goods as a functional something. Some consumer sometimes buys a character with the memory. In other case, a consumer bought it as collection goods. We can analyze this by conventional marketing methods, modern consumer research techniques (Aaker et al. 2009), and even postmodern consumer research ways (Holbrook 1995). To understand this type of consumption, we do know that it is difficult to understand, but we do not hesitate to use any type of analyzing methods, which is multidisciplinary approach.

This paper is consisted by following organizations. First, we will briefly introduce character and character businesses. Specifically, as we will discuss the case of "Capibara-san" later, we show it in detail. Capibara-san is a character which is originated from Capibara. Capibara is a mammal belonged to the mouse species. Second, we will briefly review on character and its business. In this work, we set our discussion background. Third we show our case study. Indeed, it is not based on a rigorous research methodology, but case study tells us a lot of important points on character business. Forth and it will be main body of our paper, we introduce character consumption and development. This case study is mainly based on semi-structured interview of the late project leader of "Capibara-san". Fifth and the last, we will discuss a meaning of the case and derive some conclusion of character consumption.

2. CHARACTER AND ITS BUSINESS

In this section, we will introduce character and its business. An abstract thought is very important in academic studies. But in this case, an example or actual picture is helpful to understand character.

2.1. Character

Character is one of the most meaningful concepts. It is literally and fundamentally defined as special something which can be identified by itself and distinguish from something else. Its main meaning refers to features and traits of something; it can describe what that something it is. Character sometimes refers to figures. For example, Japanese language has three ideograms, two Japanese syllabaries (hiragana and katakana) and Chinese characters (kanji). All of them have own unique figures, which can discriminate from the other ideograms. And two Japanese syllabaries do not have meanings by themselves, just sounds, but Chinese character has meanings.

Compared to above literal meanings, Foster (1927) explained character in the novel. In general, a novelist tried to pursuit the value of human experiences by developing the characters in the story. Against this kind of understandings, Forster (1927) emphasized that characters were not necessarily the existing real people; rather they are like real people. Characters' lives were not only different from

real lives, but also no need to be similar. Rather sometimes character is described as a person who has overwhelmingly biased traits.

There have been a lot of characters in novels. Chandler (1939) created a toughness detective, Philip Marlowe; Fitzgerald (1925) fostered Gatsby and expressed his world; and Salinger (1951) described Holden Caulfield as an icon for teenage rebellion in "Cather in the Rye." These were all characters. As Foster (1927) indicated, characters sometimes could seem to be more real than the people around us, and this was because a novelist was able to reveal the character's hidden life. In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. We cannot understand each other in real lives. But in the novel we can perfectly know character in detail.

For example, Chandler (1939) made Philip Marlowe, a toughness detective. Chandler left many notes about Philip. Philip was 33 years old, when he investigated elderly General Sternwood's case in *The Big Sleep* in 1936. He was born in Santa Rosa, California. He had a couple of years at college and some experience as an investigator for an insurance company and the district attorney's office of Los Angeles County. Marlowe was slightly over 6 feet (180 cm) tall and weighed about 190 pounds (86 kg). He first lived at the Hobart Arms, on Franklin Avenue near North Kenmore Avenue (in *The Big Sleep*), but then moved to the Bristol Hotel, where he stayed for about ten years. By 1950 (in *The Long Goodbye*) he had rented a house on Yucca Avenue and continued at the same place till early 1952 in *Playback*. His office, originally on the 7th floor of an unnamed building in 1936, was at #615 on the sixth floor of the Cahuenga Building by March/April 1939 (in *Farewell, My Lovely*), which was on Hollywood Boulevard near Ivar. Even he was a detective, but he generally refused to take divorce cases. He smoked and preferred Camels. At home he sometimes smoked a pipe. A chess adept, he almost exclusively played against himself, or played games from books. He drank whiskey or brandy frequently and in relatively large quantities.

In psychological effect, this detail, and somewhat unusual setting around the characters, makes us to have sympathies to the character. This sympathy sometimes played important role in our interpretations of the novel and story. Once we had sympathy to character, we often complemented even there were several lacks in terms of characters' settings. This effect is sometimes called atmosphere, or universe. The atmosphere affects our understanding for the reality of characters, as if they are real human beings. Once a novelist could create this atmosphere or universe well, characters drove their realities by themselves. At that time, the novelists may not tell us all they know, but they will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained, it is explicable.

We define character as a morpheme with an imaginary entity which can be metamorphosed into any media. Now, we understood a character and its effect; character affects our understandings and sympathetic understanding his/her environment. And then, we shall show character business in next section.

2.2. Character Business

In this section, we will briefly review character business in several aspects. Character business is, actually not unusual, rather cliché. That is to say, companies sometimes develop, it sometimes is called a mascot, characters. For instance, Michelin Tire has Bibendum. Uncle Sams Foods has Uncle Sam. Planters, a division of Kraft Foods, has Mr. Peanut as a mascot. Some companies have characters, however, these character cannot be character business. Character business means to sell character itself, not use characters for promotion or advertising tools. In character business, character shall be sold as a product. Consumers buy characters as products which have utilities, functions, qualities, and meanings and so on. Then, we are going to look up character business.

2.2.1 Character Business

As we indicated, something that can be sold as goods is needed in character business. And this "something" must have figure, meanings, atmosphere and universe. Indeed brand is a kind of characters. It has meanings, atmosphere, and even universe, and consumer rather buys brand. So, we have said character business is unusual. Even though, character business is not easy because it is difficult to establish characters. Philip Marlowe is the character, but few tried to sell him as the character, except in the books.

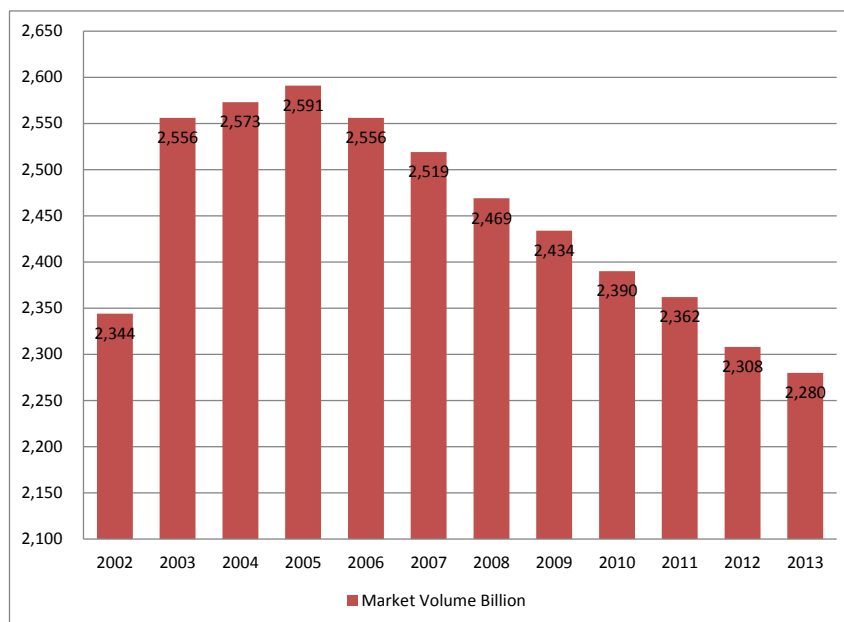
Some example of successful character businesses can be indicated as follows. They are Walt Disney and Sanrio.

Without any doubt, Mickey Mouse and his friends are most successful characters in the world and ever. They are actually everywhere. Mickey Mouse appears not only in the movie, theme park, books, and animations, but also products of T-shirts, dishes, cups, and even cookies and candies. Compared to Mickey Mouse, Hello, Kitty (by Sanrio) is not so famous globally, but she is going to invade into everything. Walt Disney and Sanrio definitely have characters. They develop, sell, and maintain their characters for their businesses.

2.2.2. Character Business in Japan

As Mickey Mouse can be found all around the world, character business literally can be developed by anyone who once wanted. Even though there are some unique aspects in Japanese character consumptions.

There are many characters in Japan. Some of them can be business, the others cannot be that. Japanese character business is around JPY 2,307.5 billion (2012, EUR 17.48 billion). Figure 1 indicates market volume of character market in Japan. It is lesser compared to the last year, but it is still negligible size. The revenues of The Walt Disney Company resulted over USD 42,278 million (42billion278million). From the company financial report 2012, we can conjecture the sales revenue of character business mainly from licensing. It stated "Our Consumer Products segment generates revenue from licensing characters from our film, television and other properties to third parties for use on consumer merchandise, publishing children's books and magazines and comic books, and operating retail stores, English language learning centers and internet shopping sites." It resulted 3,252 million, in 2012. The sales performance of Sanrio, Hello, Kitty, is over JPY 46.6 billion (2012, EUR 358 million). There are tremendously many characters in Japan. Japanese manufactures often generate characters. Even local governments sometimes own original characters.

Figure 1. Market Volume of Character Market in Japan

(Source: Yano Research Institute, 2013)

3. RESERACH QUESTION AND THE CASE

We have briefly review definition of character and character business in Japan. Compare to the organization of orthodox research paper, the reason why we choose this format was to share knowledge about character and character business in Japan. We supposed there was little recognition in terms of character business in Japan. And then, we will take a new turn on our research question as follows.

3.1. Research Question in Our Study

In our paper, not only we would like to introduce Japanese character business, development and consumption, but also develop some analytical framework to understand them. In this section, we will state to Capibara-san case on both development and consumption. Before in detail of the case, we confirm brief history of the case.

Capibara-san is developed by Banpresto Co. LTD (Banpresto, hereafter). The company was established in 2008. Before 2008, it was a subsidiary of Bandai Co. LTD (Bandai, hereafter). It is one of the largest toy manufactures in Japan. Sales of Bandai in 2012 was JPY 132.35 billion (EUR 1.02 billion). Number of employees is 1,188. As Banpresto is not public company, little information was disclosed.

This project started in 2002. The project was first organized by two full-time workers and nine part-time workers. It was called Try Team. Ms. Hinako Endo became a project leader. Our information in terms of development and consumption of Capibara-san were from her. The purpose of Try Team was to do something new and market research. The team was expected to investigate and grasp the consumer

behavior of Japanese high school girls. Because, Japanese high school girls influence trend and were constructed with a big character market in Japan. They are main customers, indeed.

Parent company of Banpresto was Bandai, which had no character of their own, whereas it was good at product commercialization by licensing other companies' characters. Then, Banpresto was given the issue to clear the problem to have characters of their own company's, and the team preceded it. As for an original character development, one member in the team was good at drawing, so she drew more than 100 characters and the team did consumer preference research of them. Capibara-san was one of them.

From the early stage, Capibara-san got great popularity, so the team tried to make some limited trial products such as stuffed animal. Such trial products got great popularity, so the team got to convince that it would be assured to commercialize them. The first product of Capibara-san was small stuffed toy. They were sold out in an instant, so the members of the team gradually got to convince the success of the character-Capibara-san. Now, Capibara-san has 10 categories of the products; consumer merchandising, sundries, stationeries, puppets and moppets, toys, snacks and treaties, lottorey, Gacha-Gacha, and magazines and books. From upper left side to clockwise, they are iPhone cover, porch, swimming bag, notebooks and stickers, mechanical pencils, and paper clips.

Our research question is focused upon character marketing; character development and consumption. Some character can be goods, but some cannot be that. What is crucial to making and consuming character? We will consider them through our interview of project leader.

3.2. Character Development

As we indicated before, Capibara-san received highly reputation at the consumer research in the early stage around 2003. Surprisingly, first drawing of Capibara-san was just doodle. A designer drawn many drafts, including Capibara-san, but she did not know real Capibara well. Ambiguous drawing made a roundish gentle character at this time. Then, Capibara-san was born. Ms. Endo and her team made a concept of Capibara-san.

However at that time, Capibara-san was not a formal product of Banpresto. It was just prototype and limited item. There was still a long way to go to commercialization because Bandai was good at licensed commercialization, not original character development. It was difficult to decide what type of toy might be suited to first character goods.

After two years later, Try Team decided to develop first items of Capibara-san. They were book and moving stuffed doll. Try Team had successful experience introducing book. In 2005, Try Team contracted test marketing opportunity with 11 stores in Tokyo. Capibara-san was sold out every store within only two weeks.

Ms. Endo had strong confidence on Capibara-san business at that time. Even though she and Try Team deliberated carefully about next product developments. As first introduction of Capibara-san was succeeded, many licensees asked Try Team to develop new products by own. Ms. Endo, however, did not accept with these offerings. She stickled to design and develop Capibara-san items by own, for not only quality control, but also maintaining Capibara-san universe.

Ms. Endo confessed retrospectively about successful of this character business. First, character must have universe, and its story, then, commercialization. Second, she and Try Team banned to develop Capibara-san goods freely. They limited the number and amount of quantity of Capibara-san goods. Once she refused to make Capibara-san mules because they were not suited to Capibara-san universe. She could not imagine that Capibara-san was under the foot. And third, she did not have any commitment of revenue. Her mission was to make something new, not manage new products. So she and Try Team were not assigned any obligation in terms of financial performances.

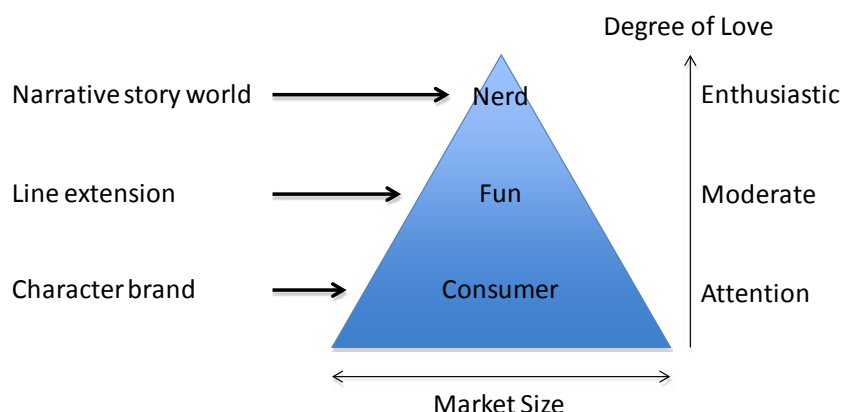
3.3. Character Consumption

In consumer research at the early stage of Capibara-san, it received the highest evaluation in Japan. It was "kawaii (so cute and pretty)." Capibara-san always got such applauses well. Ms. Endo suggested tow more important points of character consumption.

First, consumers have several expectations to buy and own characters. In this paper, we know that consumers find at least three factors in their expectations; role, intrinsic, and figure (Odagiri 2010). Role refers to a function which generates a reason by which consumer to connect with characters. Some consumer would like to make character as a friend. Another would like to make character as a father. A good character can morpheme anything consumer wants. Intrinsic is sometimes called core of character. It is a kind of identifiers. Intrinsic figures out character identity. This factor influences consumer's attitude to characters. Figure is a shape of character. Some character in comic books does not have three-dimensional figure, it is drawn on the papers as a two-dimensional shape. This factor is very important for character business. Rather figure is a crucial for the business because this figure essentially becomes many products of characters. Consumer prefers to the figure first, anything else.

Ms. Endo told us one impressive episode. One day, Try Team planned a picnic to watch real Capibara at the zoo with Capibara-san. A young lady who was anthropophobia attended this picnic with her mother. Ms. Endo did not know that. And a young lady enjoyed the picnic. After picnic, her mother sent a letter to Ms. Endo with deeply appreciation. She said that her daughter had such a kind of sick, but she knew this picnic through Capibara-san website, and she asked her mother to take to the picnic with Capibara-san. A young lady could open her mind just to Capibara-san, but anything else.

Second, consumer can be classified at least three categories in character consumption. Figure 2 describes these categories. This figure 3 is implicitly constructed with two dimensions. First dimension is referred to degree of love to characters. There may be three categories. There is an enthusiastic customer at the top of the level. These kinds of customers are sometimes called "Nerd" and buy every goods and comprehends character's universe very well. Against top of the level, there are consumers who pay small attention to character goods at the bottom of the level. Although they sometimes bought character goods, they had never collected them. This attention customer buys character goods because they are fad. We can label them as just "Consumer." Between Nerd and Consumer, there is a moderate customer. It can be called "Fun." Fun often buys character goods, and sometimes collects them. In contrast, horizontal axis means size of the market. Of course, this market size has not been evaluated quantitatively and statistically in any way. This figure is just notification, but this figure is not nonsense, we have some confidence that this roughly represents distribution of the character customers. In Figure 3, there are still some legends, but we will explain them later.

Figure 2. Classification of Character Customers

4. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Character development and consumption somewhat different from conventional marketing, that prevailingly means 4P marketing (Kotler, P. and Keller, K.L. 2011). So, we believe that it is better to develop another way of though for understanding character marketing.

4.1. Previous Studies on Consumer Behavior

Traditionally, consumer behavior research has been conducted by taking interdisciplinary approaches composed of economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology although economic approach was taken for the research at first. Katona (1951), a precursor of an interdisciplinary approach to consumer behavior, took the economic psychological approach. Bourne's (1957) study on reference groups, Martineau's (1958) study on social classes, and Lazarsfeld's (1959) study on personal influence can be classified into the economic sociological approach. After the 1960s, a lot of studies on the relationships between consumers' behavior and their life styles were developed. Howard and Sheth's (1969) work significantly contributed on building a comprehensive model for decision making of consumers. Bettman's (1977) model of consumers' information processing had a meaningful contribution on the development of consumer behavior theory.

In the 1980s, a competitive approach against the traditional approach was introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), and Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). They focused on the experiential aspect of consumption and hedonic consumption. They also criticized the traditional consumer research perspective based on positivism, and took an interpretivist approach. Hedonic consumption is defined as those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

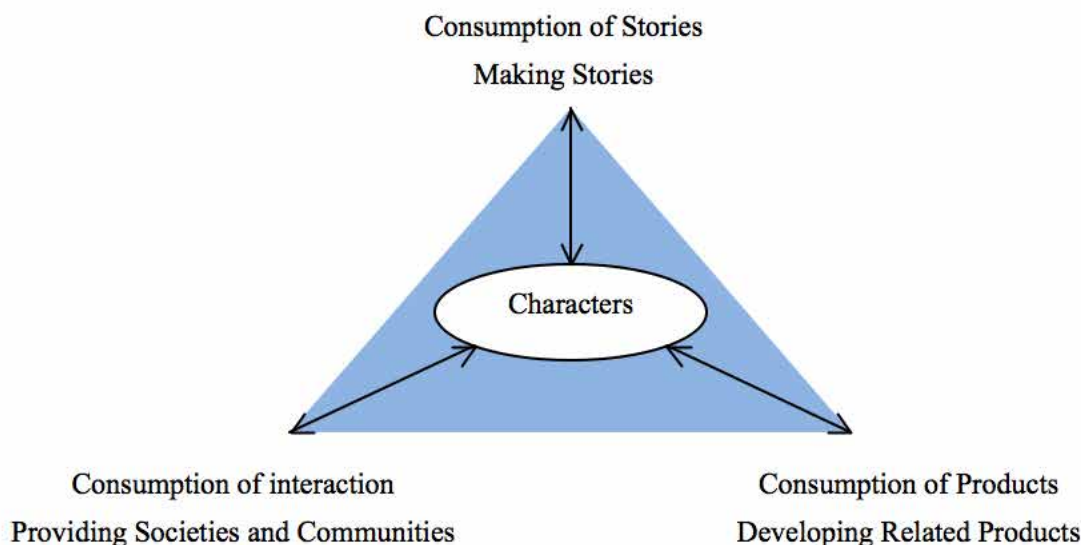
In traditional consumer behavior theory, consumers are assumed to satisfy their needs and wants and to improve their utilities by consuming products and services. Products and services are objective entities regardless of whether they are tangible or intangible in the traditional consumer behavior perspective. In the hedonic consumption perspective, however, products are viewed as subjective symbols (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). In addition, while traditional consumer research tends to focus on package goods and durables as research objects, hedonic consumer research's objectives are many kinds of arts (e.g., opera, ballet, modern dance, painting, photography, movies, rock concerts, fashion apparel) (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

Consumer behavior perspectives have tended to be mutually exclusive. The researchers have had a kind of methodological exclusiveness stance against other methodology. Character consumption, however, cannot be revealed by such a methodological exclusiveness stance because it means consumption of tangible goods while containing the aspect of hedonic consumption.

4.2. Character Consumption as multidimensional Consumption

Focusing on character consumption, we would recognize that we should have an integrated perspective to investigate character consumption. The previous perspectives of consumer behavior research are not mutually exclusive but complementary each other.

Figure 3 illustrates a tentative conceptual framework to investigate character consumption. Consumers improve their utilities through consumption of character products; interact with each other and express themselves by possessing and carrying on the goods; and experience the stories where the characters are living. We consider that character consumption should be observed from multidimensional views. In the conceptual framework, characters play a significant role as symbols.

Figure 3. Analytical Framework of Character Consumption

5. CONCLUSION

We have worked some tasks on character marketing; making and consuming character. In this section, we will summarize our findings and opinions from our case study and analysis. First, we will unfold some discussion points and some research topics now we are doing. And then, second, we will suggest managerial and theoretical implications.

5.1. Discussions

In this case study, we would like to suggest that character marketing is not unusual, but it is not easy. There are several notifications to develop characters. First, the figure is the most important factor for making characters because consumers buy figure, not anything else. Second, however, character universe must be needed. Enthusiastic consumer tried to comprehend characters' background. This background told us what the character is and why they exist and are beside consumers. The case of Capibara-san, the consumer who had anthropophobia found friendship with them. Capibara-san story can be derived when characters had universe.

From this case, and from utility school perhaps, a causal relation can be derived. That is to say, Capibara-san had such factor to solve anthropophobia problems. So, include such a kind of factors into the character when a company makes a certain character. Against this type of utility perspectives, interpretation school suggests that no one can find any influential factor before consumer encountered characters. Rather consumer proactively gives meanings on characters. In this case, there is an interaction between consumer and character universe rather causal relation. It is easily recognized that which school could give us better understanding of consumer behavior. Just we can say both can be useful.

In regard to making characters, one important thing was narrow focus on character marketing. Ms. Endo strongly emphasized to limit the number of products when her project team introducing per a year. From this case, one implication can be derived, that is to say, to stimulate consumer desires. So, character goods which were produced in limited numbers can be useful marketing method. Unfortunately, this is a contradicted implication. Why limited number can stimulate consumer desire? Any product can stimulate consumer desires. If so, it is natural thought that many product introductions stimulate consumer desire much. But we do not decide which a better marketing technique is so far.

5.2. Implications

In this paper, we explored character business in Japan. Our main claim is that it had better to employ multidisciplinary approach for understanding character business. Especially, consumer research should employ multidisciplinary approach. According to this consumer research, as we illustrated in Figure 3, marketing might be changed. At least, there are three categories of character consumers. Then, we can suggest different marketing practices to these different consumers.

Indeed, we do not have an appropriate analytical method so far. We continue to explore character business in the future. In this paper, we have just introduced to develop and consume characters. There is still long way to go. We know it is not easy, but we will do it, not because it is easy, but because it is hard.

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