Culture and the Walkman

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In contemporary world of business and the economic culture has come to occupy an increasingly important position. Leading global corporations such as Disney Corporation and Sony produce many of the products we use in our everyday cultural lives. For example, the Walkman produced by Sony is an cultural artifact. Speaking of culture, identity and difference, globalization and regulation and power are also important aspects of society. The author examines how these four aspects are related to the Walkman.

Keywords: the Walkman, culture, identity and difference, globalization, regulation and power

I. Introduction

Today culture is regarded as being as constitutive of the social world as economic or political process (Paul du Gay 1997: p.2). Products with cultural meanings are welcomed by consumers in the world. The Walkman is a typical cultural object according to Paul du Gay. (ibid. p.45) To distribute a new product, the Walkman, to the world market, Sony succeeded in the marketing activities and its sales promotion based on the well-programmed policy with the four concepts, culture, identity and difference, globalization and regulation and power. We can examine how they are related to the Walkman, a Sony product.

II. Culture

The current definition of culture is “the production and circulation of meaning” (Judy Giles 1999: p.13) This means culture is composed of objects or circumstances created by some power and the process of circulating its meaning. We can think of many cultural things around us fitting the above definition today. Sony’s Walkman relates to culture because it involves the production and circulation of meanings.

The Walkman was invented by Sony. They produced quite a new product, the Walkman, by joining technologies from Japan and the U.S.A in which they created a new way of enjoying...
sounds (du Gay 1997: p.47). Before the Walkman was invented, we had to be confined to one place to enjoy music, in a place such as our own room, or a concert hall. Music was generally heard in a rather formal and quiet place. We never dreamed before that we could enjoy music moving around or doing other things at the same time. We can enjoy music anytime and anywhere due to the invention of the Walkman. Even in a public open space, we don’t have to bother other people when we listen to music coming from the Walkman with the help of headphones.

Sony succeeded in circulating its meaning through their own unique marketing activities. They promoted global advertising activities to let people of the world know of the product. Their marketing activities beyond the national border include the free distribution of products to socially distinguished people like famous musicians and other people in leading positions in society who may use it as a tool for their occupation. Based on their careful planning, first the company decided that one hundred sets of the new cassette-players would be given to the editors of various magazines, but the company mainly paid attention to musicians. Travelling musicians could understand the convenience of this handy machine. Therefore, the company gave away the sets to leading musicians in Japan and also visiting musicians from overseas. The Walkman was presented to journalists, and to the target group of mobile, young-listeners (ibid., p.57). Through these effective marketing activities, the company succeeded in distributing the product all over the world, and those who loved music and young people could share the meaning attached to the Walkman. Thus, the Walkman was made and the circulation of the meanings of the product was done.

The Walkman was originally targeted for a particular consumer grouping that consisted of mainly mobile and young music-listeners. However, the company soon became aware that many different classes of people were actually purchasing and using the Walkman in their own way. Thus, consumers changed the original purpose of using the Walkman and users’ classification. Responding to the consumers’ reaction to the product, Sony developed the consumer target from urban young people to lovers of outdoor pursuits in the country and others. Through the success of its wide range of marketing activities, the Walkman were purchased and used by many different types of consumers. They discovered new uses and meanings for the product (ibid., p.57). This means consumers changed the meaning of the product as the result.

III. Identity and Difference

When people buy a thing, people buy it because it has a meaning or an identity. According to Judy Giles, “Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others.” (Giles 1999: p.23) "Identity is the symbolic markers of
difference." (ibid., p.17) "Identity and difference are about inclusion and exclusion." (ibid., p.16)

We, Japanese, try to follow the way of western people's life in clothing or housing and so on. However we may try to imitate their way of living, no western people see us as westerners. They want to keep their own identity and we ourselves don't want to lose our identity as Japanese, either.

People buy Sony Walkman because it is different from other type of cassette tape recorders. It belongs to a Japanese company and is different from others due to its uniqueness like mobility, smallness, and convenience. Thus, the Walkman can also be used to illustrate identity and difference. And buying it can give identities, e.g. young, fun-loving, mobile person.

Then, let's think about why identity is so important and how the Walkman relates to this concept. It is important in the case of the Walkman because Sony has to induce consumers all over the world to buy the Walkman. The Walkman is a "typical cultural artifact (du Gay 1997: p.45)." But it does not speak and does not possess its own intrinsic meaning either. As a product, it should have identity to appeal to consumers. Usually, consumers buy products being influenced by the identities and meaning of the products presented to them. Then, we need means to present its significance to consumers using effective images speaking for the products. "Advertising is the cultural language which speaks on behalf of the product. Advertising makes commodities speak (ibid., p.25 )." That is why identity is so important and it must be presented through qualified and sophisticated ads.

Aiming at attracting a wide range of consumers, Sony presented the following identities for the Walkman through many different images: Japanese-ness, compactness, high-technology, youth, activity, mobility, outdoor life, sport, speed, freshness, freedom, healthy lifestyle, mobility, mobile privatization, individuality, gender equality, racial equality, national border-less, etc. They use models of different nationalities, situations and scenes, which work to create a variety of meanings of the Walkman. They attract consumers including a wide range of people differing in genders, generations, nationalities, races and so on. Sony is trying to create the feeling that unless you possess the Walkman you will be left behind the trends, do not belong to the contemporary society and lose a part of your happiness in life. Furthermore, they are trying to stir up consumers' desire to buy one.

Sony conveys these identities to consumers in using many images. For example, to appeal to gender equality, they use good looking female models and young women doing sports for their ads. This conveys that the Walkman is available and easy to handle even to women who are supposed to be inept in mechanics compared to men. They also use black people in their ads, which means there is no racial difference in using the Walkman. As far as the mobility is concerned, they use the ads with photos of swimming pools, outdoors or personified shoes or boots. To create its Japanese-ness, they emphasize its simplicity, small size, compactness and high quality functions using sophisticated
ads. To give the feeling of speed, freshness and youth, skating or cycling young boys and girls are used. To eliminate national borders, Italian models and a French car are used. Also there are some ads emphasizing individual pleasure presenting models enjoying the Walkman alone. As a whole, they are effectively trying to circulate the meaning of happiness with the Walkman through diversified ads.

IV. Globalization

Today, we live in the information society and can have easy access to different cultures with the help of high technologies. For example, *Karaoke* which is a typical part of Japanese culture is becoming a part of transnational culture now. We can see many examples of globalised culture such as this. And globalization is another concept that relates to the Walkman. This is a product of both Japan and the U.S.A because it was made with technology from both countries. The Walkman is sold all over the world today, which means it is moving around the world with increasing speed and in larger quantities. Globalization is both:

- a process: “the way in which people both as social groups and as individuals; commodities and products; cultures in the form of media texts (printed words, visual images, sounds); capital and wealth; technologies (media, transport, communications) appear to be moving across and around the world with increasing speed and in larger quantities than ever before.” (Giles 1999: p.28)
- a condition: “the idea that, wherever we are placed, we increasingly have access to common cultures and activities.” (ibid.)

To achieve its globalization Sony tried some innovative efforts. First, they chose the name “Sony” as their company name, which is easy to memorize for everybody in the world regardless of their native tongues instead of the original Japanese name. (du Gay 1997; p.48) Furthermore, the name “Walkman” given to the newly invented cassette tape recorder is not correct English but they dared to adopt it for their new product due to its simplicity. In addition they have business contracts with agents of many countries, so consumers can buy a Walkman without worrying about the malfunction of the product. This is called the international warranty system. Above all, they standardized the cassette-player’s electronics so that it would run on two dry-cell batteries. Thus they enabled the easy access of the Walkman to everybody in anyplace.

Globalization leads to hybridization and global-local nexus (Robins 1991). It’s necessary to consider how these two concepts relate to the Walkman. When different cultures interact,
hybridization sometimes occurs as a result. Hybridization means “a joining together of disparate elements to produce new forms.” (Giles 1999: p.29) The Walkman is a hybrid product between Japan and the United States using two nations’ technologies. It’s a combination of ear aid headphones in the U.S.A. and cassette tape recorders in Japan. As Sony’s globalization strategy advances, they have to build up a good relationship with local people where they want to develop their business contacts. Global-local nexus means “the relationship between the global and the local (Giles 1997: p.30).” Because of cost consciousness, Sony shifted manufacturing and marketing operations to various places around the world and set up local operations in various countries.(du Gay 1997: p.79) Sony employed local staff, which consequently helped to vitalize local declining industries and could take advantage of the available grants given to local industries. Nevertheless, the headquarters of Sony remained in Japan, and that is where strategic and policy decisions were made. By employing locals for supervising positions Sony could avoid direct friction with local staff at the same time (ibid., p.80).

V. Regulation and Power

When different cultures encounter each other, the more powerful culture conquers the weaker. The social rules, social regulations, are also decided by the people in powerful positions. Power is always in the hand of people who are wealthy and in modern society, most of the wealthiest people live in the First world and are pressing their regulations to the people living in the Third world. This has been repeated in our past history as we could see many examples around us such as the transition to democracy or new educational systems introduced from the U.S.A. to Japan after World War II. We also have seen the recent collapse of Asian economy. Even though the Third countries may try hard to catch up the First world, they are forced to lose their wealth easily by the power of the First countries, who are much wealthier than them.

As an example, one day in the U.K., a 21 year old student from North Yorkshire was fined £300 after a passenger on a British rail train from Leeds to York complained that his Walkman was too loud (Jackson quoted in du Gay 1997: p.144). This matter is related to regulation and power. The passenger could not stand the young man because he broke a social rule to make the distinction between public space and private space. Listening to music alone should be done in a private space and to indulge in a private pleasure in a public space means neglecting other people sharing the same space. Therefore this behavior is against “the way of producing order and preventing anarchy (Giles 1997; p.41).” Here we can see friction between the generations. The youth in the U.K. could admit the behavior of listening to music in public place as a new social regulation but the
elder passenger could not. The regulation made by the people in powerful position in society forced the youth in weaker position in society to follow it in this case.

Foucault, the French social theorist and historian, says that there are three types of power in society: institutional power, economic power, and self-regulation (Giles 1997: p.41). In the case of the man who was fined for listening to the Walkman on the subway, the passenger who was upset used institutional power by sending him to court to force him to pay the fine. And also the person may have resisted the economic power signified by the Walkman, a Japanese product, as a citizen in the United Kingdom. And the young man may have used his self-regulation in this case and followed his own decision regardless of the social conventional custom in the U.K. Disorder “symbolizes both danger and power (Douglas quoted in du Gay 1997: p.116).” The passenger may have felt the danger of a new power shown by the young man who broke the traditional social regulations. The Walkman blurred the boundaries between private space and public space. That means the regulation of the distinction for both spaces changes. Thus we can see how the complex conflict of different powers happened in this small affair in the U.K.

VI. Conclusion

As the author described above, we can see that the Walkman, a Sony product is an cultural object and deeply related to the four aspects of culture, identity and difference, globalization and power and regulation which constitute main factors of contemporary society. We can also see how today’s society is moving through the Walkman and that leading corporations in the world are developing their unique and innovative strategies along with the above four concepts.

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