

Convenience Stores and the Japanese Community

Since the first convenience store opened in Japan in 1971, they have come a very long way. They have evolved constantly to cater to the ever-shifting tastes and lifestyles of Japanese people, and continue to do so. Their colorful signs with big logos seem to adorn every block. They are just about everywhere in Japan and sell everything from magazines to milk cartons. In simple terms, convenience stores have become such a staple in Japanese people's lives that it can be difficult to imagine life without them.

Some believe that convenience stores are real-life heavens, with their bright fluorescent lights shining even during the night and selling goodies at every hour. Others believe that they are "simply treacherous intersection[s] of consumerist hedonism and lifestyle desperation" that only benefit those too lazy to cook their own meals (CNNGo Staff). From whichever perspective, it is indisputable that convenience stores are now a mainstay and have a profound influence on the Japanese community. Convenience stores have had a tremendous effect on the Japanese community, and those effects have been both positive and negative.

The Positive Aspects

In recent years, so much emphasis has been put on the negative effects of convenience stores that it can be hard to remember the positive ones. Nonetheless, there are plenty of ways that convenience stores actually do benefit our society.

To begin with, convenience stores play a crucial role in maintaining a safe neighborhood. In the late of night, convenience stores are often the only bright buildings and can “serve an essential role as a refuge for potential crime victims or simply for people in need of help” (Kumamoto). In present times, a brightly-lit convenience store can serve as the modern *kakekomi-dera* in the middle of an otherwise pitch-black road. In 2007, for example, more than 13,000 women took refuge in a convenience store, half of which were due to stalkers and other criminals (Sakaguchi). In addition to that, 6,000 lost children fled to a convenience store for assistance and 12,000 elderly people were taken under protective custody after being found wandering the streets alone.

Convenience stores are also capable of being the difference between life or death in an emergency, since they “let government agencies take advantage of their ubiquity for the delivery of emergency water and other supplies” (Harden). This was clearly proved in 2004, when the Niigata Chuetsu earthquake struck Japan. In the midst of confusion and a lack of provisions, companies that were part of the JFA provided 170,000 rice balls, 11,000 bottles of water, and other basic life necessities to victims of the quake (Kumamoto). Also, after the devastating earthquake shook eastern Japan last year, many chains such as Family Mart launched mobile convenience shops that could travel on wheels. Since access to basic necessities, especially food, was still sluggish, the mobile trucks “brought foods, beverages, confectionery, and a few household commodities” into the worst-hit areas (Aviles).

Aside from safety, another positive effect that convenience stores bring is that they are simply convenient for the society as a whole. This does seem obvious, since the whole point of a convenience store is to be convenient; however, convenience stores are revolutionizing the central concept of “convenience” even further.

The typical modern convenience store sells not only products, but also various services, many of which can be purchased with just a few taps on a digital screen. An article in the Washington Post gives a descriptive example of this:

Inside these tight quarters, stores pack a galaxy of carefully calibrated services. At FamilyMart, customers can make appointments for someone to vacuum their home. At 7-Eleven (now run by a Japanese-owned company), there's a drop-off laundry service. . . . Nearly any bill in Japan -- utility, phone, cable or tax -- can be paid at a convenience store. About \$80 billion worth were paid that way last year (Harden).

Not all convenience stores in Japan may offer this much, but many offer some kinds of practical services. For example, 100% of Seven-Elevens, 80% of Family Marts, and 66% of Lawsons all over Japan had ATMs in 2008, and those percentages continue to grow rapidly (Sakaguchi). Besides these “basic” services such as copy machines and fax machines, stores offer a huge variety of other services. These include travel bookings, the sale of concert tickets, camera prints, exam applications, and postal services, just to name a few. New services are introduced regularly, especially because the elderly population is increasing

rapidly. Thanks to all these new services that convenience stores offer, it has become possible for even the elderly, who often live alone, to simply take a stroll to the nearest convenience store to send a package or two, pay their bills, deposit money to the bank, etc. instead of having to go somewhere from their homes. This is especially significant in rural areas, where going to the nearest bank, post office, etc. can be even more challenging.

...and the Negatives

Up until this point I have only discussed the good things about having a convenience store in the community; however, there are some drawbacks. The biggest issue being debated about these days is that many people believe that convenience stores have a negative effect on the environment—both in the global sense and the local sense.

Let's discuss first the global point of view. Every day, convenience stores throw away heaps of leftovers for the sake of keeping food and drinks at the freshest. This may be inevitable for store owners, but the amount of garbage is so large that it simply cannot be ignored when talking in a global perspective. For example, over the course of a year, around 20,000 tons of leftover riceballs, sandwiches, bentos, and other perishables are thrown away. To put that into perspective, 20,000 tons of garbage is around the same as the total weight of grapes that are harvested in Japan in a year. Japan's food self-sufficiency rate is less than 50%; yet, this vast amount of perfectly edible food is heaved away in a dump, never to be eaten (Sakaguchi). Isn't that ironic?

Another problem is that many convenience stores are open 24 hours a day, which means that they eat up more and more electricity and are ultimately wasting energy, as some believe. In 2004, 80.6% of stores nationwide were open round the clock and several prefectures such as Saitama and Kanagawa were already beginning to consider restricting operation times for the sake of the environment (Sakaguchi). Others say, however, that closing convenience stores during the night wouldn't actually save much energy. A representative at the Japan Franchise Association (JFA) says that "it would mean losing 20% of our business for an energy saving of 4%" ("Plan"). Therefore, it is hard to say which is the right decision, but it is at least true that there is an ongoing dispute concerning convenience stores' late-night operations.

Moving on the local point of view, some insist that convenience stores actually do harm to the surrounding neighborhood instead of helping them. According to a survey by the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, the thing citizens are most worried about concerning 24-hour stores is "bad effects on the young generation" (41.4%), followed by "noise pollution" (28.4%) and "the surrounding environment becoming less safe" (26.7%). Interestingly enough, however, it should also be noted that 29.9% of respondents answered that they had no fears about stores that operate late at night.

One of the examples most often introduced is that when a new convenience store is built, it not only brings customers, but also more traffic, which often leads to noise pollution

and other side effects such as smoke.

In addition, some believe that convenience stores actually increase crime around the surrounding area, which is completely opposite to what others believe, as stated in the previous section. Unfortunately, it is true that convenience stores also attract customers who aren't as well-mannered as others. Chains all over Japan are faced with shoplifters stealing everything from cigarettes to cosmetics, street gangs parking their enormous motorcycles in the middle of the parking lot, and even people who seem normal, but chuck their garbage in the surrounding area of the convenience store where they shouldn't. The problems seem endless, but convenience stores are at least trying their best to keep their stores and their surrounding environments as clean and orderly as possible. Aside from making full use of surveillance cameras and other tools, many stores are cooperating with the local police in order to maintain order around the area. One major example of this is the "Safety Station" campaigns that were introduced by the JFA (Japan Franchise Organization). Through this campaign, the JFA aims to take advantage of convenience stores' accessibility to make the surrounding area safer place to live (Kasai).

Looking Into the Future

Despite all these harmful effects that some believe convenience stores cause, their momentum shows no sign of stopping, nor of slowing down. According to a survey by Myvoice, 60% of the Japanese population heads to a convenience store at least once a week

("Konbiniensu"). Moreover, there are now over 42,000 convenience stores in Japan and that means on average, there is one for around every 11 square kilometers of land. The fact that a convenience store is always nearby anywhere, anytime has now become something we take for granted. Indeed, there is always considerable demand for convenience stores and it never dwindles. No matter how much people argue about their negative qualities, convenience stores will never disappear from Japan; they have become so common and so, well, "convenient", that we, the Japanese people, probably just can't live without them.

As if to accompany the Japanese people's ever-growing attachment to them, the total number of convenience stores is also rapidly increasing. According to The Daily Yomiuri, over 3000 new stores will open in fiscal 2012 ("Record"). So what should we do? Convenience stores will never disappear... hooray! Three cheers for their ubiquity. But does that mean that we can ignore the negative effects that convenience stores carry with them?

Unfortunately, we can't. We can, however, focus on the positive effects of there being a convenience store in the community and try to expand on them. If they are always going to be part of our community no matter what, why not take full advantage of them? Since there is no possibility of them fading from our nation, we may as well make use of them to the fullest. That does not necessarily mean we should go to them more; rather, it means that communities should get together to make convenience stores a better influence for them and their community. Likewise, convenience stores themselves must also make an effort to become part

of the community and do what they can to support its citizens. This includes helping to make the area a safer place, as discussed in the previous section, and also to sell products that are both convenient and helpful for customers.

It is not only convenience stores' responsibility, nor is it the sole responsibility of customers, to make convenience stores a positive spot for the entire community. Consumers and stores alike must cooperate together in order to broaden convenience stores' potential and make them have a positive effect on everyone. While convenience stores are believed to have both positive and negative effects on the society, they are essential for the modern Japanese lifestyle and have the potential to be a valuable member of the community.

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