

Konbini as Microcosms:

How Japanese Convenience Stores Both Shape and Are Shaped by Their Society

by

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Abstract

When you are starving at midnight, when you suddenly run out of toilet paper, when you have a sleepover at a friend's house but forget to bring your toothbrush, when you are craving sweets, and even when you are just bored: convenience stores, called *konbini* for short in Japanese romanization, can answer all these needs. It has been 45 years since *konbini* first appeared in Japan as shops providing food and daily sundries anytime, anywhere. Today, they have become an established part of people's lives. As Japan is currently facing some of the world's most severe problems with regard to the aging society, *konbini* as microcosms not only mirror these demographic changes, but also provide us with solutions. Based on analyses of national census data and work from previous scholars, this study uses *konbini* as a medium to investigate the changing needs of aging, single, and female populations in contemporary Japan. This study also explores how these changes are reflections of and reactions to *konbini*. Ultimately, this investigation helps us understand Japanese society from the perspective of social values and demographic changes. First, I introduce the history of convenience stores. Then, by presenting data from Japan's National Census regarding demographic changes, I illustrate the ways in which population statistics reflect the root causes of societal changes, such as how *konbini* tailor their services to cater to key demographics. Later, I discuss how *konbini* contribute to changes in Japanese eating habits and social values, as well as the ways in which these changes have been adapted and used in popular Japanese terms. In order to understand why and how *konbini* are shaping and being shaped by Japanese society, I analyse several examples of public discourse such as award-winning advertisements and surveys. Lastly, the results of this study reveal not only how *konbini* have become an indispensable aspect of Japanese society but also why *konbini*, as retail formats, are well-placed to react and respond to recent changes in contemporary Japan.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my maternal and paternal grandmothers: their homemade food, as memories, supported me during my long journey.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

More than 45 years have passed since *konbini*, Japanese convenience stores, first appeared in Japan. *Konbini* provide foods and daily sundries anytime, anywhere. Today, they have become an established part of people's lives. From residential to downtown areas, and from the fronts of train stations to office buildings, *konbini* are everywhere in Japan. Nowadays, one can even find them in hospitals, universities, and other places that one would not expect. According to the 2018 "Annual Convenience Store Statistics Survey"¹ published by the Japan Franchise Association (JFA), as of December 2018 there were 55,743 *konbini* stores (JFA, 2018). These are distributed from the northernmost tip of Japan, the Soya Cape, where there is a Seikomart Tomiiso Store, to the southernmost tip, where there is a FamilyMart Ishigaki Yashima Store located on the Island of Ishigaki, which is about 400 km southwest of Okinawa Main Island. This information corresponds with data on the major convenience stores from July 2015 (Takemoto, 2016). The convenience store network that was built around the country has now become an indispensable part of social infrastructure within Japanese daily life.

As such, convenience stores provide an opportunity to explore a variety of demographic and social changes affecting Japanese society, especially those with regard to the single, aging, and female populations who appear to be using convenience stores frequently. This project explores the question of how *konbini* are reacting to and reflecting the needs generated by contemporary Japanese social and demographic changes by analyzing Japanese National Census data and previous scholars' work. In the introduction that follows, I outline different

¹ All the translations in this thesis are mine unless indicated otherwise. In rendering Japanese, I have used the Hepburn style of romanization. Long vowels are indicated by macrons. In cases of commonly used words, such as Tokyo, the macrons are omitted.

aspects of *konbini*, addressing themes such as store networks, sales, and patronage.

Most *konbini* have similar layouts, involving multiple aisles of sweets, instant foods, and pre-packaged meals. Unique to *konbini*, one can always find an aisle for household goods, hygienic products, and even cosmetics. Unlike in North American convenience stores, one's first impression of a *konbini* upon entering it is that it offers a wide range of services. For example, a copy machine is strategically placed close to the cashier so that the store clerks can be easily alerted if help is needed. The copy machine can be used for printing or scanning documents; you can even print out your own photography.

Another frequently used device, usually located close to the copy machine, is called the multi-function machine. One can use this device to pay utility bills and make ticket reservations for different events. One can even purchase tickets directly at the multi-function machine, and what makes it even more convenient is the tickets can be printed immediately.

A *konbini* customer can mail letters and parcels at the cash register with direct assistance from staff. They can even send their luggage to destination airports before travel. Most *konbini* provide ATMs, and they accept most bank cards, even those from overseas. Some of the bigger *konbini* provide dine-in areas with chairs and tables, providing customers with a place to enjoy light meals or have a drink. Microwave ovens and electric kettles are available to warm up food and boil water for instant ramen, which gives consumers the feeling of being served in their own homes.

Background

The major convenience store companies opened their first stores in Japan in the 1970s as a result of the 1974 Large-Scale Retail Store Law (Usui, 2014). The company 7-Eleven opened their first store in Toyosu, an area of the Kōtō District, Tokyo in 1974 (Whang, 2004). In 1975, Lawson opened their first store in Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture (Marutschke, 2011). FamilyMart (est. 1981), a subsidiary company of Seiyu at the time, opened their first store in Sayama City, Saitama Prefecture in 1973 (Trieu, 2019). The Large-Scale Retail Store Law (1974) enforced stricter regulations for big commercial grocers such as supermarkets and department stores. While it was difficult to open comprehensive, big stores, relatively small grocery shops like convenience stores were not subject to regulation; thus, the number of individual stores grew with accompanying expanding networks.

Increasing number. The number of convenience stores increases every year, growing far more quickly than that of post offices and gas stations, even though people first think of the latter with regard to social or life infrastructure. In 1994, about 20 years after the major convenience store companies opened their first locations, the number of convenience stores in Japan was 26,522 (JFA, 2003): this greatly exceeded the number of post offices (24,583) at that time (Statistics Bureau Japan, 2002). In March 2009, the number of convenience stores reached 44,391 (Takemoto, 2016, p. 26), which surpassed the number of gas stations 40,357 (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [METI], 2018). In addition, by March 2015, the number of gas stations declined to 33,510 (METI, 2018). The number of post offices changed minimally during this time, with 24,470 nationwide (Japan Post, 2015), less than half of the number of convenience stores (53,544) in 2015 (JFA, 2015). On the other hand, the number

of convenience stores more than doubled in the 20 years from 1995 to 2015, and it appears likely that the public's recognition of their presence increased dramatically during these 20 years, especially following the economic collapse of 1991.

The increase in *konbini* has far exceeded that of other elements of Japanese social infrastructure. Furthermore, convenience stores have in some cases taken over functions that used to belong to other services. The post office, for example, is considered to be both a place for postal services and a provider of local social infrastructure, since it offers banking and insurance services to residents. The former Japan Post (*Nippon Yūsei Kōsha*) was a government-owned corporation, but after privatization in 2007, the Japan Post Holdings company (*Nippon Yūsei*) began to operate the postal business. In all municipalities, especially in less populated areas, the government is obliged to maintain certain levels of quality and presence for existing post office networks. However, due to the fact that the profitability of the postal service is not high, it is difficult to expand and increase the number of post offices further. Thus, the number of post offices has changed minimally during the past 20 years (Maclachlan, 2011). In comparison, according to Takemoto (2016), the number of gasoline stations has decreased because many young people are actually deciding to give up using cars, and more people are opting to use public transportation between local, smaller cities and large metropolitan areas. Given the background noted above, it is very hard to imagine that this trend of decline will be reversed in the future. Furthermore, as Japan has a rapidly aging population by global standards, and it is predicted that this will continue in the future, it seems likely that Japan will encourage walking or public transportation as methods of accessing social infrastructure as the elderly are less likely to drive (Takemoto, 2016).

In the early 2000s, when the number of convenience stores exceeded 40,000, some

scholars suggested that the convenience store market had reached saturation (Larke & Causton, 2005, p. 47; Ishibashi, 2010, pp. 14-17). However, the number of convenience stores continued to increase. According to the JFA annual report, starting in 2012, the number of stores increased by more than 2,000 each year. Looking at the number of newly opened stores within three major companies (i.e., 7-Eleven, Lawson, and FamilyMart), new stores continued to open at a rate of around 5% each year (JFA, 2012, 2013). From March 2014 to February 2015, 3,732 new stores were opened by the three major companies, which means that on average, about 10 stores per day were opened somewhere in Japan. In addition, only 2–4% of all stores were closed during the same time, and this rate included those closed due to relocation (Takemoto, 2016, pp. 30-31).

Even compared with other retail formats, the number of convenience stores is obviously growing disproportionately. As mentioned before, as of 2015 there were 54,229 convenience stores, 4,794 supermarkets, and 246 department stores. Even though each store is small, the number of convenience stores in different locations is noteworthy (METI, 2016). Furthermore, department stores and supermarkets have decreased in number by 40% and 30%, respectively, since November 2000. In the same time period, the number of convenience stores has increased by more than 50% (Takemoto, 2016, p. 28).

This trend is particularly striking given that after Japan's economic collapse in the 1990s, the country faced many social issues. Due to the long-term economic downturn, people's incomes deteriorated. Simultaneously, the low fertility rate directly contributed to population decline. Despite sluggish growth in retail overall, convenience stores' market shares, surprisingly, expanded. Looking at the opening times of supermarkets, department stores, and convenience stores, the differences stand out even further. According to the Census of

Commerce in 2007 (METI), it was reported that 80% of convenience stores were opened after 1995, as opposed to 50% of supermarkets and less than 30% of department stores. As such, convenience stores in Japan are a relatively new retail format. Convenience stores began to spread in the 1970s, but at that time there were larger proportions of supermarkets and department stores to contend with.

Based on the number of convenience stores by prefecture, as of November 2015 there were 6,858 stores in Tokyo, 13% of all the convenience stores in Japan. Following Tokyo, Kanagawa, Osaka, and Aichi prefectures each had 7% of all stores. Hokkaido, Saitama, and Chiba prefectures each accounted for 5%, with Fukuoka prefecture at 4%. In total, more than half of all Japanese convenience stores are located in these eight prefectures (Takemoto, 2016). Among the major convenience store companies, Lawson and FamilyMart had opened stores in all 47 prefectures by 1997 (Huuhka, Shimizu, & Laaksonen, 2010) and 2006 (Marutschke, 2011), respectively. In comparison, 7-Eleven, the largest convenience store brand in terms of store numbers in Japan, gives the public the impression that it has stores all over Japan. Surprisingly, until October 2015, 7-Eleven did not have a store in the Tottori Prefecture, and it has not yet expanded into the Okinawa Prefecture (Takemoto, 2016, p. 30).

Increasing sales. Japanese convenience store goods and services sales in the 2014 fiscal year amounted to 10.13 trillion yen (around 91.4 billion US dollars) (JFA, 2015). Since sales were about 7 trillion yen in 2000 (JFA, 2005), on average, sales have grown at an annual rate of over 2%. During the same period, Japan and the rest of the world experienced several economic crises, such as the dot-com bubble collapse from the end of 2000 to 2001 (Wollscheid, 2012). The famous “once in a century” economic crisis affected most countries

in the world from 2008 to 2009. In 2011, Japan experienced a tragic earthquake, the Great East Japan Earthquake. After the catastrophe, many Japanese put themselves into a state called *jishuku*, which means a mood of self-restraint (Brown, 2018). The tremendous loss of human life in the Tohoku area created an atmosphere of sadness and mourning across Japan. According to the *Kōjien* Dictionary, *jishuku* can also be called *jishuku mūdo*, and it means the tendency of people to suppress their desires so as to abstain from excessive entertainment and shopping, etc. (Shinmura, 1995). As a result of *jishuku*, many economic activities were severely affected (Immell, 2014).

Despite all of these economic setbacks, convenience store sales have continued to increase since 1987. As with the number of stores, the pace of market expansion and sales stands out in comparison with other retail formats such as department stores and supermarkets. Between 2000 and 2014, department stores continued to lose market shares by close to 3% every year. While supermarkets' market shares did not shrink, they barely grew (METI, 2015). Only convenience stores continue to grow in terms of the number of stores and sales each year, even after surpassing 10 trillion yen and facing those economic crises.

Increasing patronage. As the convenience store network expands, so too does the number of store visitors increase. The average monthly number of customers to the main convenience store chains in 2015 was 1.39 billion (JFA, 2015). Based on the census data, if we count the Japanese population roughly as 120 million, each person in the country visited a convenience store more than 10 times per month. Certainly, there are many opportunities to use convenience stores, such as when leaving home in the morning to grab a cup of coffee, searching for supper before returning home in the evening, or even shopping at midnight,

when one wants to kill time.

These high levels of patronage contribute to high levels of public recognition, according to *Nikkei* investor, consumer, employee, and society (NICES) rankings. NICES is a company evaluation system that uses the four categories of analysis contained in its name. The survey was conducted by *Nikkei* in order to evaluate major leading companies in Japan in a comprehensive way; the company evaluated different perspectives, including performance, growth potential, and mobility. The *Nikkei* assessed several famous Japanese companies, including Ajinomoto, Murata Manufacturing, and Toray. Among these companies, Seven & i Holdings, which is the mother company of 7-Eleven Japan, was ranked first place, Lawson 34th, and FamilyMart 173rd. Seven & i Holdings received high rankings with respect to evaluation items and topics such as growth potential as a company and diversity of human resources. In particular, however, it received the highest evaluation in the categories of “consumer” and “society,” which indicated that brand awareness was high among the public. In competition with brands such as Fast Retailing, the mother company of the famous Japanese casual wear brand “UNIQLO”; mobile carriers such as NTT DoCoMo and KDDI; and automobile manufacturer Toyota, Seven & i Holdings surpassed all of these companies and won first place (Nikkei, 2015). Most of these companies are well-known not only in Japan but throughout rest of the world, producing necessities, such as cars, clothing and automobile services that are used every day. It shows that people recognize the 7-Eleven brand, and that 7-Eleven is becoming part of Japanese everyday life.

According to the survey, Lawson and FamilyMart also received high evaluations in the categories of “consumer” and “society,” especially in the sub-categories of public awareness (Nikkei, 2015). With the development of convenience stores, consumers have access to one-

stop shopping, purchasing daily necessities, withdrawing cash, and using postal services. Based on the highly expanded network of over 50,000 stores across the country with 1.4 billion patrons per month, it is not hard to understand the resulting high public recognition of convenience stores in Japanese society.

Table 1 Nikkei NICES Ranking 2015	
Rank	Company
1	Seven & i Holdings
2	Ajinomoto
3	Murata Manufacturing Co., Ltd.
4	Toray Industries
5	Fast Retailing
6	NTT Docomo
7	KDDI
8	Kao
9	Toto
9	Mitsubishi Corporation
11	Toyota Automobile
34	Lawson
173	FamilyMart
<i>Note.</i> Adapted from “NICES 2015” by <i>Nikkei</i> , 2015. In the public domain.	

Changing customer base. In the past, convenience stores were frequently associated with the younger generation (Ishikawa & Nejo, 1998, p. 90); today, however, familiarity with convenience stores is also spreading to the middle-aged and elderly.

According to Table 2 from 7-Eleven Japan, in 1989, more than 60% of customers visiting

7-Eleven per day were young people who were under or in their 20s. After almost 25 years, the number of daily customers in their 20s and under visiting 7-Eleven has dramatically shrunk to comprise only a quarter of the whole customer population. On the other hand, the proportion of visitors in 1989 who were in their 50s was less than 10%, and the use by those in their 40s was also small. It seems that *konbini* were not familiar to the middle-aged and elderly. However, by 2015, the proportion of visitors who were in their 50s and over grew to 33%, and if we include those in their 40s, the middle-aged group of 7-Eleven visitors then became over half of the whole. Compared with 1989 (20%), the 2015 number (55%) had almost tripled.

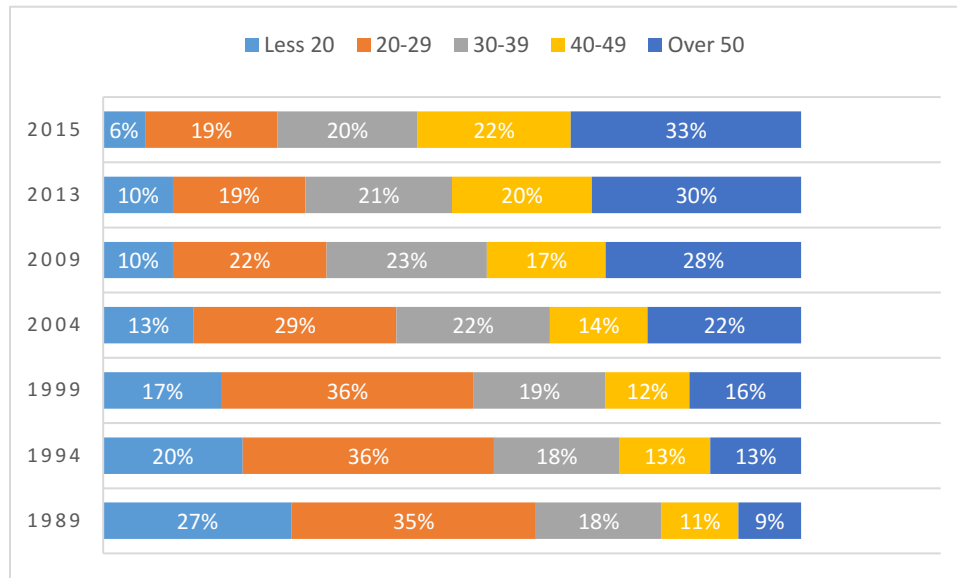
One may wonder how 7-Eleven Japan calculated the data found in Table 2. According to Whitelaw (2008), *konbini* are operated with “impersonal familiarity,” and he claimed that the ability to collect data is one of “the conveniences of convenience store” (p. 66). At the convenience store he worked in, “people were constantly observed, identified, monitored, and tracked” (Whitelaw, 2008, p. 66); interestingly, this data collection was done discretely, “in ways that did not disturb the impersonal dimensions of the store and its interactions” (p. 66). One example Whitelaw gave concerns a method for tracking customers’ ages. Customers can observe which age group clerks choose for them on the register keypad. Accordingly, *konbini* are not only tracking information for the customer, but also providing data to their own companies. This impersonal familiarity affected both *konbini* customers and clerks (Whitelaw, 2008, p. 67).

According to Takemoto, the number of *konbini* visitors who were over 50 years old was 5 million per day in 2013, which is 16 times more than in 1989 (Table 2). Meanwhile, the number of visitors under 20 in this period has only doubled. 7-Eleven's customer base does not greatly differ from that of other major convenience store chains. Takemoto also provided

figures for average number of 7-Eleven annual visits. For people over 50 in 2013, this is 32 times per year (2016, p. 47). Compared with the visit frequency in 1989, which was three times per year (Table 2) the number is 10 times greater. For those in their 40s, the annual visit frequency is almost tenfold, from seven in 1989 to 67 in 2013. In comparison, the visit frequency of those in their 20s in the same period has only tripled, and the visit frequency of those in their 30s has only been six-fold: as such, the growth in visits of those middle-aged and older is outstanding and noteworthy. In addition, the generations who were familiar with convenience stores in 1989 are now entering their middle and older years. Compared to the past, the services that are provided in today's convenience stores are more varied and target older groups.

From the above, we can see clearly that the demographic dynamics are changing in convenience stores usage. However, is this a simple story just happening in convenience stores? Due to the declining birthrate and aging population that Japan is experiencing now, it is not just a coincidence that *konbini* serve as mirrors reflecting changes in modern Japanese society.

Table 2 Number of Customers Visiting 7-Eleven Daily per Store by Age



Note. Adapted from “Sales Data of Major Companies” by 7-Eleven Japan, 2016.

As discussed above, due to the high performance and well-developed store network of *konbini*, more and more scholars in Japan consider *konbini* to be examples of *shakai-teki infura* or social infrastructure (Horiuchi 2016; Nogimura 2015; Lee 2013) and *raifu-rain* or lifelines (Nagata & Yamamoto 2004; Tsuchiya 2011).

In addition, government documents also indicate that convenience stores can play a significant role in today’s Japanese society. In 2014, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism (MLIT) published two documents, the “New Grand Design of the National Land,” (March 2014) and the “Grand Design 2050 of the National Land” (July 2014). According to Hara (2015), current land use policy in Japan is designed based on the precondition of an increasing population; however, Japan instead has a rapidly declining population, and as a result, regional populations are also decreasing. By 2050, Japan will have a population of approximately 97 million, around 60% of current regions will lose more than

half of their inhabitants, and almost one third of the country will be uninhabited (Hara, 2015). Thus, the number of customers at various service facilities will decrease as well, resulting in the withdrawal of different amenities such as department stores and supermarkets from local areas. In these documents, the government estimated the municipality population sizes that are considered necessary for each service facility (such as coffee shops, banks, and hospitals) to survive. According to these documents, for example, for an area with a population size from 3000 to 4000, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics businesses such as drugstores are considered viable. In the case of vegetable and fruit retailers, such as greengrocers, butchers, and fish shops, the local population generally needs to be between 10,000 and 15,000 people or more. Furthermore, shopping centres where the sales floor space is 15,000 square meters or more are normally located in areas where the population is between 90,000 and 95,000 at a minimum. When it comes to department stores, most are located within those municipalities that have a population of over 350,000. Areas with a population of less than 4000 people are expected to more than double from 2010 to 2050. In such areas, it is not surprising that not only supermarkets and department stores, but also grocery stores, fish shops, drug stores, and similar kinds of service facilities are withdrawing (MLIT, March & July 2014).

From the two documents that I mentioned above, many essential services are withdrawing from local areas due to declining populations; however, convenience stores with an essential business format have already opened their stores in 80% of those areas with a population of 1000 or less (Takemoto, 2016, pp. 52-54). There is still the opportunity to open more stores in similar areas, and *konbini* have become the de facto social infrastructure and lifeline of those areas with small populations. Convenience stores have continuously expanded their markets by incorporating other forms of business, offering financial services such as

ATMS with withdrawal and deposit functions, facilitating delivery and pick-up services from different postal couriers, and allowing payment of public utility charges. In 2016, a new program called “My Number,” which refers to the Social Security and Tax Numbering system, has been introduced by the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC) with the purpose of trying to digitalize government management. In order to expand the popularity of this system, the government collaborates with convenience stores to provide certain services such as issuing governmental certificates, including residency certificates and registration certificates of personal seals (Nakamura & Suzuki, 2019). The establishment of public wireless LAN and foreign language pamphlets including maps and tourist information, provided at convenience stores, are also considered to be examples of expanding services. Recently, several local governments collaborated with convenience stores to provide services for elders—*mimamori* activities—such as the Chiba municipal government’s collaboration with 7-Eleven to watch over elders (Nejo & Hiraki, 2015).

The JFA compiled the “Declaration of the Convenience Store as Social Infrastructure” in 2009, which shows how convenience stores as business models can react to social needs. This document describes some of the ways in which convenience stores aim to contribute to local communities, such as by increasing the safety and development of the local economy (JFA, 2011). In June 2015, 7-Eleven opened its first two stores in Aomori Prefecture, in Aomori city and Hachinohe city. At the opening of the Hachinohe Tanoya store, the Mayor of Hachinohe said that “convenience stores have become an inseparable part of citizens’ lives” in the grand opening and greeting speech to the guests (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2015). Indeed, convenience stores have become inseparable from Japanese society. Convenience stores are

providing a variety of services to assist with the daily lives of citizens. Convenience stores use local ingredients to make their foods, provide free WIFI service to tourists, and respond to local needs such as watching over the elderly and providing employment. *Konbini* also functioned as essential components of social infrastructure by extending a lifeline during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake: convenience stores provided services to the victims such as emergency relief supplies in affected areas, as well as drinkable water, food, and toilets for those who were unable to return home (Tsuchiya, 2016).

There is no doubt that convenience stores are already widely acknowledged by society as a substantial piece of social infrastructure and a lifeline in emergencies. Furthermore, the earthquake aftermath has shown that in the future, convenience stores can provide more services in times of disasters.

With this background, I argue that *konbini* have become microcosms: they dynamically reflect the changes occurring throughout modern Japanese society. Unlike gas stations or hospitals, which provide specific services to people with specific needs, *konbini* serve everyone in Japan; regardless of one's gender, race, nationality, occupation, or age, one most likely visits *konbini*. Meanwhile, the convenience store is considered to be one of the most dynamic retail forms in Japanese society, due to the fact that *konbini* are often open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With their store networks, sales, and patronage, *konbini* have become some of the most sensitive units in Japanese society, reacting quickly to social and commercial needs.

The ways in which convenience stores have evolved to reflect and react to new demographic changes and social trends in Japanese society is an understudied topic that merits attention. Thus, there is a pressing need to analyse and understand the changes seen in *konbini*.

In particular, researchers have yet to examine *konbini* from the perspective of public discourse in response to the aging, single, and female demographics within Japan. This study undertakes such an analysis. The purpose of this study is to investigate how *konbini* reflect certain demographic changes and shape social values by analyzing public discourses, including national census data, convenience stores' campaigns, award-winning advertisements, and even trendy phrases. In contrast to former scholars' studies, I will not focus on *konbini* as a commercial retail format; rather, more like the anthropologists Allison (1996), Ivy (1995), and Yano (2002), I will explore the ways in which *konbini* help the elderly and singles to shape their new lifestyles by adopting and changing the traditional ideology of the family—*ikka danran*. Simultaneously, I will also conduct my analysis by focusing on how *konbini* help Japanese women to change their roles as *ryōsai kenbo*, good wives and wise mothers, in modern Japanese society.

In chapter two, I begin by introducing the history of convenience stores. I explain the birth and development of convenience stores in the US, and I trace some key historical points such as operation hour changes and the famous Vanguard program to indicate that even in the past, convenience stores shaped themselves and reacted rapidly to both commercial and social needs. When it comes to Japan, government policies have major social influence. This time, *konbini* again showed a quick adaptation to social changes, and convenience stores shifted from being Americanized corporations to adopting Japanized business formats. Therefore, despite the fact that *konbini* were imported from the United States, this “foreign plant” has grown quickly in Japanese soil.

Chapter three starts by presenting data from Japan's National Census regarding demographic changes, such as households, marriage, and divorce from past decades. These

data serve to explain the population statistics that are the root causes of social changes. This chapter also discusses the changes in eating habits and societal values in Japanese society, by mainly focusing on two traditional Japanese ideologies—*ikka danran* (happy family) and *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother). The success of *konbini* came not without effort: the *konbini* business model went to great lengths to carve a place for itself in Japanese society. Convenience stores have used skillful location strategies and developed different services meant to improve ease of use, such as meal deliveries. These strategies are noticeable aspects of Japanese *konbini*; however, *konbini* have also made an impact and contributed to Japanese society in other, subtler ways. These subtle changes have become accepted to the point that they are now part of the Japanese language. To explain this, this paper discusses concepts related to eating habits, lifestyle, and social values: *gaishoku*, *nakashoku*, and *naishoku*, and the rise of different lifestyles such as *ohitorisama*, the culture of self-help and self-reliance that has dominated Japanese society in recent decades, and *koshoku*, a phenomenon and life style where family members eat separately for different reasons. This study will explain why these words and concepts are closely tied to *konbini*. If *konbini* are microcosms of Japanese society, then these concepts and phrases are nuanced evidence of this. In addition, these chapters also provide examples to discuss how *konbini* services have become tailored to the needs of Japan's aging society, targeting and catering to an older customer base.

In chapter four, I will shift our attention to a new group of people in society—women—by considering how *konbini* cater to mothers and wives with respect to their changing roles in families. I will choose several examples of terminology from different historical periods to demonstrate and analyze these changes. One of the major methods that I use in this chapter is to analyze an advertisement from a FamilyMart campaign. In doing so, I employ a concept,

konbini mama, to help us to understand how *konbini* have supported changes in values concerning women's roles in their families. In Japanese families, wives to husbands and mothers to children play significant and irreplaceable roles. Thus, in order to understand value changes through the lens of the family, I look at how Japanese women have changed their roles and values over the years.

I will conclude by discussing several topics for future research, such as *kaimono nanmin* (shopping accessibility issues), *konbini nanmin* (convenience store accessibility issues), issues. The purpose of this paper is not only to reveal and discuss the changes happening in Japan's society, but also to provide a better understanding of how *konbini* are the places wherein all these changes have been assembled and addressed.

In this study, I have used my personal experience and strong nostalgic feelings towards *konbini* as research motivations in order to understand what makes *konbini* unique and the root cause of my deep longing for them. My analysis simultaneously uses a combination of history, such as the traditional values propagated by the Meiji government in Japanese society and the history of *konbini*; economic descriptions, such as objective quantitative and qualitative data to show demographic and thus societal changes; an anthropological approach, including previous scholars' work; and an analysis of public discourse such as an award-winning pictures and *konbini* advertisements to shape my argument. I also integrate some social linguistic analysis, examining trendy words from different historical periods. All the words are considered to be various forms of old Japanese traditional values; however, the traditional values have not changed, what has changed is the different form of the public expression and societal perception.

In my previous role as a consumer, I understood *konbini* solely from an economic

perspective. After my research, my new understanding of *konbini* helped me to form a new identity as an observer. Now I see *konbini* not only as a retail format, but also a cultural phenomenon that shapes contemporary Japanese lifestyles. *Konbini* are not only places that assemble and reflect these changes; they also provide us with solutions. Finally, I used both economic and cultural perspectives to fully explore this topic and arrived at a comprehensive understanding of *konbini*.

Literature Review

Convenience stores. *Konbini* comes from convenience stores in the US and I am going over the history of *konbini* starting with convenience stores in the US. Convenience stores are now considered to be a global phenomenon, and more and more researchers have used them as a research focus. Thus far, there is no unified definition for what a convenience store is; different countries and companies may have different definitions. For example, Guberman (1971) described a convenience store as “a miniature supermarket” (pp. 36-37), and he also suggested that convenience stores should be mainly defined by their function and operation instead of by their size. Additionally, in Baron, Leaver, and Oldfield (2001), a convenience store is a store of less than 3,000 square feet in size (280 m²), is located close to residential area, and provides a range of products (p. 396). In Larson & Story (2009), a convenience store is compared to a supermarket as a small store with mostly ready-to-eat foods, staple groceries, and a limited supply of fresh food. Convenience stores have in general been found to serve less healthy food options than supermarkets (Larson & Story, 2009).

The “conveniences” of this kind of store are also interesting and attractive topics to

researchers, and studies have involved store history, distribution systems, data management, and consumer-oriented discussions. For example, according to Kunitomo (1997) and Sakata (1997), 7-Eleven Japan transferred and restructured itself from its original American counterpart into a modern retailing format, proving to be a remarkable success story in Japanese society. Ishikawa and Nejo (2014) describe how the Japanese convenience store distribution system and the point of sale (POS) system works, due to the fact that convenience stores normally need to utilize a very compact floor space and lack backyard or warehouse space. If the store wants to display various goods on the shelves, the distribution system thus requires numerous small deliveries. At the same time, the POS system plays a very important role in identifying the popularity of different goods. These two systems help convenience stores make every effort to meet diversified customer demands with a high level of service. According to Akinobu (1998), early studies of convenience stores are very hard to find in areas such as geography, economics, and business administration. This dearth is due to the rapid development of convenience stores, paired with insufficient data and statistics. Although many people have used convenience stores as a research focus, they rarely consider them in a cultural context or as part of cultural and social phenomena.

The topics of long hours of operation (Kotabe, 1995) has been discussed. Product range is also a popular research topic; for example, Kirby (1976) identified tobacco, alcoholic drinks, and dairy necessities as the most popular products sold in convenience stores. Jones (1986) and McLaughlin (2004) explored whether convenience stores also supply groceries, vegetables, fresh fruit, frozen goods, fast food, small household goods, and newspapers. For other scholars, like Popkowski et al. (2004) and Liese et al. (2007), the prices of convenience store products became the main topic, and both of these studies found that prices were higher

on average than in supermarkets and that there was also a limited variety of “healthy food.”

Why do people need convenience stores? The main conclusions from scholarly research papers included time-saving, convenience, and efficiency, among other suggestions (Kirby, 1976; Brown, 1989; Png & Reitman, 1994; Terasaka, 1998; Haans & Gijbrecchts, 2010). According to scholars and organizational reports, the estimated average time that a customer spends in convenience stores is between three and four minutes; this time includes walking in, purchasing, and departing (Brown, 1989; Fox, Postrel, & McLaughlin, 2007). According to National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS) Speed Metrics Research, “the breakdown for the time is 35 seconds to walk from the car to the store, 71 seconds to select item(s), 42 seconds to wait in line to pay, 21 seconds to pay and 44 seconds to leave a store” (2016). Another important factor is distance, especially the distance between the customers’ residences and convenience stores. Lorch and Smith (1993) conducted a case study regarding the pedestrian movement of patrons of a downtown mall in Thunder Bay, Ontario. They found out that one of the reasons for customers’ reluctance to shop there was the long travel distances. Kirby (1986) concluded that convenience stores not only meet the needs of well-organized small neighborhoods but also are considered to be supplements to large retail stores as they satisfy consumers’ basic needs.

Different countries’ convenience store histories are also well-explored topics when it comes to research regarding conveniences stores. Since convenience stores originated in Texas in 1927 (Kirby, 1976), numerous papers have discussed the history of convenience stores in the US (Morganosky, 1997). In the late 1960s, convenience stores rapidly expanded within the US market (Jones, 1986). Later on, due to urban development, residential neighborhoods started to be transferred to the outskirts of cities; as a result, the importance of

convenience stores became more and more obvious (Powell, Slater, Mirtcheva, Bao, & Chaloupka, 2007). Comparing the convenience stores in rural and urban American areas, Bodor et al. (2008) noted that rural areas had a small number of supermarkets and a larger number of convenience stores because of the lower population densities.

In Europe, and specifically in Britain, the growth of convenience stores occurred later than in the US, around the middle of the 1970s (Kirby, 1986, pp. 7-8). The success of UK convenience stores occurred because the majority of these stores were chain stores, either national or regional, and the franchise system helped the stores grow fast (Susilo, Hanks, & Ullah, 2013). Compared to the UK, Northern European countries such as Denmark had an increasing number of gas stations, which successfully contributed to an increasing number of convenience stores located in the same areas (Larson & Story, 2009). On the other hand, in Western European countries such as France, the growth of convenience stores was related directly to the food industry (Kirby, 1986).

Further studies have investigated the major development of convenience stores in Asia, especially in East Asian countries and regions, such as China, Taiwanese regions and Japan (Takeshi, 2006). Zhang (2017) stated that convenience stores are considered to be among the newest driving powers of the Chinese retail market, and most Chinese convenience store chains are imported from and associated with Japanese convenience store companies. In the Taiwanese region, convenience stores have been a new business arena, and many research projects have been already done by several scholars. For example, Chen and Ou (2009) claimed that the Taiwanese region had the greatest density of convenience stores, and the data showed there were over 9000 stores in the Taiwanese region; as a result, every 2600 people shared one convenience store (Chen & Ou, 2009, p. 7054). Furthermore, Chou, Chang, and

Hsu (2016) mentioned that convenience stores are considered to be some of the most important providers to Taiwanese consumers, offering a variety of high-quality and stable services.

When it comes to Japan, studies and papers regarding convenience stores have become more prevalent. Many researchers have discussed the role of *konbini* from different perspectives such as business and economics (Kotabe, 1995; Bernstein, 1997), history (Kunitomo, 1997; Ogawa, 1998, 2002; Sparks, 1995; Terasaka, 1998), sociology (Ritzer & Masaoka, 1999; Ritzer, 2015), and anthropology (Whitelaw, 2008).

According to Sparks (1995), starting with the POS system, the use of advanced technological systems has become an inseparable part of the success of Japanese convenience stores. Terasaka (1998) provides the interesting argument that the main difference between American convenience stores and Japanese convenience stores is the parking space rather than the business hours and products. The author argued that parking space is not considered to be necessary in Japan but is most likely needed in the US. In Ogawa's research (1998, 2002), Japanese convenience stores were compared with US ones. Even though convenience stores originated in the US, the share of convenience stores in the US market is shrinking, while Japanese convenience stores have played a vivid role in the Japanese retail market for more than 20 years.

Researchers in social sciences such as sociology and anthropology have attempted to explain Japanese convenience stores in different ways. Comparing convenience stores and fast food chains is a famous research method that has been used in this area (Reiter, 1996; Love, 1995; Watson, 2006; Ritzer, 2015). The concept of McDonaldization was originally created by Ritzer in his work "The McDonaldization of Society" (2015): he stated that fast food chains have formed a system using four core principles: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and

control. He also asserted that these four principles have been applied to other parts of social infrastructure such as motel chains, churches, and child care centers. Whitelaw (2018, p. 83) applied this theory to Japanese convenience stores and called this phenomenon “*konbinization*, コンビニ化.” Sato (2017) discussed the principle of efficiency: *konbini* normally set up their stores within walking distance of a residence or workplace. In addition, the store is normally compact, and it is possible to purchase necessary goods efficiently without walking around a large space like a supermarket or waiting in line at the cash register.

Watson (1997) concentrated on the history of the acceptance of McDonald’s and fast food as part of American culture’s introduction to East Asian countries and regions, such as Beijing. Many researchers are interested in this popular topic: the expansion of convenience stores overseas (Sato, 2009; Yahagi & Kar, 2009). Several authors have traced the history of how convenience stores as a business retail format have grown internationally and successfully adapted to local markets.

In anthropology, numerous studies have been conducted on different businesses in order to understand changes in Japanese society, such as factories (Roth, 2002), sweet shops (Kondo, 1990), white-collar offices (Ogasawara, 1998), and department stores (Matsunaga, 2000). However, *konbini* did not draw the attention of scholars until the late 2000s. Gavin Whitelaw, one of the most active anthropologists in the area of convenience stores, is interested in *konbini*’s daily functions in society (2008). For him, *konbini* are not only business formats but also a social and cultural formats. In his own words, he is interested in the importance of “an everyday zone of social activity, economic transaction, and cultural translation” (Whitelaw, 2008, p. 63). In his work, he also showed interest in how *konbini* as a model rapidly expanded nation-wide in the Japanese retail industry, as well as the localization

of *konbini* within Japan. One of his contributions was to conduct ethnographic research on convenience stores from an anthropological perspective, which currently influences my research. The method he used was to become a clerk in a convenience store called “Daily Yamazaki” in Tokyo. The experience of being a clerk provided him with a valuable opportunity to practice the method of participant observation, or observant participation as discussed by Loïc Wacquant (2010). For example, Whitelaw outlined concepts of *konbini keigo* and *konbini yogo*, “new patterns of erroneous polite speech and odd phrasings [that] were introduced purposefully to the Japanese lexicon when the concept of ‘friendliness’ was translated into Japanese from American service industry operations manuals...” (Whitelaw, 2008, p. 67). Interestingly, some of this same language, even though it is grammatically erroneous, has become an accepted routine in the setting of *konbini yogo*, such as “*Irrashaimase konnichiwa.*”

According to Whitelaw (2018), the convenience that *konbini* provide is the major reason why people increasingly rely on them. However, during the time he worked as a clerk in Daily Yamazaki, he also saw the problematic side of *konbini*: the topics he mentioned included unhealthy food offerings, waste, 24-hour noise, and promoting poor behaviour among young people. Since *konbini* support a wide range of lifestyles, the issues, social implications, and even anxieties created by and rising from *konbini* are referred to as “*konbini panics*” by Whitelaw. With regard to the subject of waste and food, he used himself as the research subject and began an experiment by “embracing himself” in a month-long *konbini* diet; in doing so, he examined the positive and negative sides of *konbini* culture. One of his major findings was that “plastic waste was indeed a significant by-product of the *konbini*” (Whitelaw, 2018, p. 82). The next issues he tackles is mainly around the rubbish cans in front of *konbini*. Some

people bring their own household garbage and throw it out at *konbini*. Through his participation observation as a clerk in *konbini*, he knew that the owner of *konbini* spent a significant amount of expenditure on the rubbish bill. He also mentioned issues regarding *rojō seikatsusha*, the homeless, and *konbini* in Japan. The *rojō seikatsusha* redeem money for their living expenditures by gathering recyclables, such as the beverage cans from *konbini* rubbish bins, and according to Whitelaw, the “can competition around *konbini* is fierce” (Whitelaw, 2018, p. 84).

Also, being an employee allowed him to access more insider, first-hand experiences, and he was able to understand how concepts of convenience are expressed in *konbini* by physically immersing himself in the particular population of customers and informants. As an ethnographer, he placed himself in the *konbini*, and provided us with a unique way to understand contemporary Japan (Whitelaw, 2008).

The Aging Society. This thesis also focuses on one of the most severe social challenges that Japanese society is facing: the aging society and declining birthrate. According to He et al. (2016), in 1970, for the first time in its history, Japan became an “Aging Society”; this concept was defined by the World Health Organization “as a society with more than 7% of its population 65 years or older.” Coincidentally, the first academic paper on Japan’s aging population was published in 1970 as well (Endo, 1970). By the end of the 1970s, a growing trend of discussing the consequences and implications of this aging society could be seen in government publications and scholarly literature (Japan City Center, 1975; Social Security Laboratory, 1976; Endo, 1976; Nagamachi, 1977; Kakuta et al., 1978; Mukaibou, 1979).

After the 1980s, however, the research regarding “aging” increased dramatically. The

number of papers that contained “Koureika (aging)” as a keyword in the CiNii database, a bibliographic database service for material in Japanese academic libraries focusing on Japanese works and English works published in Japan, was 315 in the 1970s, 1629 in the 1980s, and 3497 in the 1990s. Numerous papers made predictions about Japan’s aging society, particularly with regard to the social issues related to an aging population. For example, in Mitsui Jouhou Kaihatsu Inc. (1982), the authors discussed how to make senior-citizen-friendly cities in order to better suit the needs of elderly people. Other than issues of city design, pension and social security (Kuno, 1982), medical issues (Nasu, 1984), and living environments for the elderly (Kenchiku Shiryo Kenkyūjo, 1983; Yoshida, 1988) were well-discussed topics in aging literature. Additionally, the 1987 National Comprehensive Development Plan (National Land Agency, 1987) devoted a whole chapter to the issue of an aging society. The Japanese government has thus started to pay and draw attention to key related issues.

In the 1990s, the number of academic papers discussing aging-related issues more than tripled. In this time period, we see a rise in use of positive terminology such as “*Yutaka*” (affluent) and “golden age” etc. to describe the “aging stage” by scholars and the government in their writing (Okamoto, 1989; Yashiro, 1990; Ministry of International Trade and Industry [MITI], 1991; *Kahoku* Newspaper, 1996; *Yomiuri* Newspaper, 1997). The number of academic papers on aging issues nearly doubled again in the first 10 years of the 2000s, surpassing 8000. Though the positive attitude towards aging still remained, scholars focused on the other areas of aging such as the elderly’s wealth, leisure time, employment, etc.

In 2008, Sugita published on the concept “*Kaimono Nanmin*,” which directly translates as “shopping refugees.” Sugita used this concept to describe the issue of the increasing older

population in Japan who lack access to shopping facilities, such as department stores. This publication attracted significant attention in Japanese society.

The year of 2012 was a significant year in terms of aging in Japanese academia, since the baby boomer population, which is called *Dankai no Sēdai*, people who were born between 1947 and 1949, reached the age of 65. This cohort totals roughly 8 million, a much larger number than that of either previous or succeeding generations. This trend may be one important reason why the issues of aging are becoming more popular (Mita, 2004; Miura, 2005a; Takai, 2010).

Low birth rate. When we talk about an aging society, most people only think about the elderly; however, low fertility or declining birthrate is also part of an aging society. Next, I will review what has been discussed about low fertility in literature.

Compared with the aging issue, low fertility (*Shōshika*, the phenomenon of fewer children) came to the public's eyes a little bit later. The first academic paper that addressed low fertility issues appeared in 1987 (Okada, 1987). Two years later, in 1989, the terms “1.57 shock” and “*Hinoe Uma*” can be widely found in mass media reports and newspapers. The “1.57 shock” means that 1.57 was the lowest fertility rate in Japan since the country started collecting census data. *Hinoe Uma* or Fire Horse year occurs every 60 years in Japan. It is an old superstition that to give birth during a fire horse year is extremely unlucky. Consequently, birth rates during “Fire Horse” years are extremely low (Grech, 2016; Kenen, 1980). During the most recent “*Hinoe Uma*” year (1966), the birth rate was 1.58. Thus, to have a birth rate lower than 1.58 (1.57 in 1989), was at the very least, disquieting.

In the 1990s, attention to the nation's low fertility rate started growing. For example, in

1992, a National Lifestyle White Paper was published; in the first chapter, the Japanese government used the word *shōshika* to describe the trend for the first time (Watanabe, 1993). This fact shows that public awareness of the issue was growing at that time.

Other scholars also focus on this issue from different viewpoints; for example, Shibayama (1993) compared Japan's low fertility rates and social issues with those of five other European countries. At the same time, Kita (1993) discussed how *Shōshika* and *Bankonka* (the phenomenon of late marriage) affected Japanese society. Aoi (1998) outlined the crisis of the low fertility rate that Japan might face in the 21st century in 1995.

In 1994, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) initiated a program called the Angel Plan, which aimed to encourage more births and assist couples in raising children nation-wide. This program tried to make raising children less stressful by offering counselling to couples and encouraging fathers to take an equal role in childrearing. By 1999, the New Angel Plan was published as an amendment to the old plan (Goto, Yasumura, Yabe, & Reich, 2006). Around the end of the 1990s, aging and low birthrate issues became popular in economics, and economists also began to address them (Ōishi, 1998; Takahashi, 2000). These occurrences reflect the growing concern expressed about low fertility and aging in Japan.

In the 2000s, the number of academic papers published in Japan regarding the “low fertility rate” increased significantly. In the 1990s, by searching CiNii database, 787 papers included the key words “low fertility rate, *shōshika*” and this number dramatically grew to 3217 in 2000s. In this period of time, the low fertility issue was addressed extensively from a demographic perspective (Okumura, 2005; Matsuda, 2009), including issues essential to low fertility rates such as social security, health, and welfare (Tsushima, 2004), family relationships (Yamada, 2002), and female empowerment (Okifuji, 2004). At the same time,

drawing comparisons between Japan and other low-fertility-rate countries such as Sweden and Germany was also popular among scholars (Hayashi, 2005; Mizushima, 2005).

From the literature review above, we can see that few scholars consider examining *konbini* as a cultural phenomenon. In this thesis, I will use *konbini* as a microcosm through which to view the social changes described herein. Japan is famous for having one of the longest life expectancies in the world. Although it is easy for the rest of the world to envy this statistic, this longevity comes at a price. As a result of a myriad of factors as well as this extended life span, Japan is currently facing some of the most severe aging society problems in the world. There are already a number of academic papers discussing *konbini* from different fields' perspectives. The discourse surrounding this topic has contributions from anthropology, economics, and sociology, to name a few. There are also a plethora of papers and studies regarding Japan's aging society written not only in Japan, but also from academics worldwide. However, it is rare to see *konbini* and Japan's aging society discussed as interrelated topics.

Chapter 2. The History of Convenience Stores

Convenience stores, the newest retail format in the Japanese distribution system, emerged in the early 1960s, right after the Japanese High Economic Growth period (1955–1961). While convenience stores originated in the United States, by the 1970s, these small-scale shops with long hours of operation, no holiday closures, and popular, convenient locations became the dominant retail format in Japan. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the history of convenience stores, both their birth and development in the United States and their transfer to Japan, and to consider why they developed and grew more quickly in Japan than in their mother country. I analyse convenience stores' success in the United States from different perspectives, such as their innovative commodities and services (like Slurpee products and money orders) and their lifestyle-changing programs (like “keep food fresh” and the Vanguard Program). In the case of Japan, I demonstrate how government policies contributed to the success of convenience stores, how a unique location strategy helped convenience stores become dominant in the Japanese distribution system, and again how the convenience stores adapted Japanese marketing methods and transferred themselves from an Americanized corporation to a Japanized business format.

The American Origins

The origin of convenience stores can be credited to a small ice-selling shop named Southland Ice Company, located and established in Dallas, Texas in the 1920s (Liles, 1977). In the past, refrigeration was not a prominent part of family life, and in Texas's extreme climate, keeping food fresh was a major problem. These complications created a need and the right market for selling ice.

In 1927, when Claude S. Dawley purchased four separate ice companies with eight ice manufacturing plants and twenty-one retail stores, the Southland Ice Company opened its doors (Liles, 1977, pp. 8, 19).

After the company's opening in the summer of 1928, an initial investor, board member, and employee, Joe C. Thompson Sr., surveyed local residents and concluded that ice needed to be more readily available. Once the business got off the ground, the Southland Ice employees were working 16 hours a day at the height of operations to satisfy local demand. Joe C. Thompson Sr. relayed this to his manager, and the company's upper management accordingly increased the hours of operation, productivity, and ultimately, revenue (Liles, 1977). As Liles (1977) notes, the new enterprise capitalized on the icehouses remaining open later than food markets, and they began selling, in addition to ice, a few high-demand grocery items such as milk, bread, and eggs, in select places. At the same time, the stores began to use the totem pole as a trademark, which led to the name Tote'm Store (Liles, 1977, pp. 22-23).

Unfortunately, the company's success was not to be enjoyed for long. In 1931, the Great Depression severely affected the company, resulting in its eventual declaration of bankruptcy. By 1939, the company had 60 Tote'm Stores in the Dallas – Fort Worth area in Texas. As a consequence, it had to continue its operations through re-organization and receivership. A Dallas banker, W.W. Overton Jr., played a crucial role in reviving the company; he revamped the floundering finances by selling the company's bonds for seven cents on the dollar. This sale brought company ownership under the control of a board of directors (Hoover's Business Press, 2010, p. 209). Having survived that challenge, the company began to flourish again—largely thanks to its innovative approach. For instance, it adopted the name 7-Eleven in 1946 when all the store operators agreed to extend their hours of operation from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. seven days a week. By

that time, these stores sold ice, cold drinks, groceries, and drug sundries (Liles, 1977, pp. 55, 67).
As Liles (1977) comments,

The Tracy-Locke Company (ad agency) deliberated, brainstormed, and then came up with an idea. If all of the store operators involved in the co-op program would agree to stay open from 7am to 11pm seven days a week, the stores could be called “7-Eleven” stores. (p. 67)

By the late 1940s, Southland operations included 74 convenience stores, located mainly in Dallas. A number of ice production companies and Oak Farm Dairies were producing products for sale in the stores. These operations were all combined as one and the company changed its name to The Southland Corporation in 1948 (Sparks, 1995).

With the new name, more advertising and promotion was conducted, and the company decided to expand its operations. Laulajainen (1987) illustrates how the expansion and growth in the company’s home state was followed by an expansion into other states in 1950s. Florida was the first destination for the company, due to the fact that Florida and Texas have very similar climates. In 1957, however, 7-Eleven entered the new region of Washington, DC. From the success of this adventurous move, the management realized that the stores could be successful across the country in all climates (Laulajainen, 1987).

Business innovations: new services and products. The quick success of 7-Eleven emerged from the company’s knack for keeping abreast of consumer trends, as well as its willingness to experiment with innovative ideas. As the American population migrated from urban centers to the outskirts following World War II, 7-Eleven and other convenience store chains built and expanded

many of their stores in less-developed, outskirt residential areas. The company sooner discovered that selling daily consumable products, such as bread, milk, beer, and snacks in these areas would reduce people's need to travel long distances to purchase basic items from the supermarket (Perreault, McCarthy, & Cannon, 2006, p. 347). This proved to be most useful for families, who could not find time for daily supermarket trips. The stores attracted increasingly busy consumers in need of quick purchases. They were open for long hours, some even for 24 hours, to satisfy customer needs any time of the day or night. In contrast, supermarkets were open fewer hours, and sometimes it took several minutes just to park a car and reach the store entrance. The convenience factor gave these stores a clear competitive advantage over supermarkets and allowed them to charge premium prices on the limited items they stocked. Hugos (2011) compared the customer who visits 7-Eleven to the one who uses Sam's Club, a subsidiary of Wal-Mart. In his research, he found that the customers who choose to use 7-Eleven are looking for convenience, are often in a hurry, and prefer nearby stores with a variety of products so they can select a small number of common household items and foods that they need immediately. On the other hand, the customers of Sam's Club are most likely price-conscious and looking for the lowest price. This clearly stated the core strength and purpose of convenience stores (Hugos, 2011).

By 1952, 7-Eleven had opened 100 stores, spread across the United States (Drake & Ochowicz, 2011). Over the years, 7-Elevens added various services to attract customers. For example, they began to sell money orders in the mid-1950s (Bernstein, 1997). A money order is quite similar to a gift card, or gift certificate, in that one pays a desired amount and obtains a written record. Instead of a small plastic card, the customer receives a receipt for the money order. A money order cannot be spent on goods directly. Essentially, a money order is a piece of paper that can be redeemed for cash at any 7-Eleven store. The United States Postal Service (USPS) began selling money orders

as a means to send the currency through the postal system in order to minimize post office robberies (Blair 1883). Thereafter, money orders became very popular, and many third parties, such as convenience stores, grocery stores, and supermarkets start offering money orders. According to Waxler (1988), 7-Eleven was the largest retailer of money orders in the US. Today, money orders have become trusted financial instruments as means to pay bills and send money internationally, to places without reliable banking or postal systems.

In the mid-1960s, 7-Eleven began franchising outlets, leasing a fully equipped store in return for a percentage of the gross profits. Although it continued to operate its own stores—franchises always amounted to less than half of the number of 7-Eleven stores—the move freed up capital and thereby allowed the company to grow faster (Bernstein, 1997, p. 495). With regard to growth, 7-Eleven's extended hours arguably comprised their strongest advantage over their competitors. Liles (1977) records at least two experiments with 24-hour stores that were made before 7-Eleven moved on this policy as a company. The earliest one was in Las Vegas, where 24-hour activities were common, and the other one was an almost accidental occurrence at a store in Austin, Texas in 1963. This store was located in close proximity to the University of Texas campus. One Saturday night after a football game, the store was extremely busy, swamped with customers to the extent that it remained open all night and into the next morning. The manager seized the opportunity and decided to open the store 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The 24-hour move was quite successful. Soon afterwards, 7-Eleven opened and started expanding 24-hour stores in other states: these hours were rapidly adopted companywide, and from 1963 forward the stores began to use the new business hours on a consistent basis (Liles, 1977, pp. 192-195). By the end of 1969, 3,537 7-Eleven stores were opened in 31 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada, and among them, 1,286 or 36% were franchises (Liles, 1977, p. 188).

Today, most 7-Eleven stores around the world operate 24 hours a day. This is ironic with the retrospective knowledge that in 1946, Southland Ice renamed their stores “7-Eleven” in order to reflect the hours of operation from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. (Smith, 2013).

In addition to being open for extended hours, 7-Eleven brought another novel idea to the retailing industry. It provided standardized training to its employees, who were scattered all over America; as a result, 7-Eleven employees became accustomed to upholding quality service as a cultural norm. Training staff so that the customer would receive the same quality and service, regardless of which store he or she chose, allowed 7-Eleven to expand its business without worrying about internal difficulties or the onset of commercial fragmentation. In other words, 7-Eleven provided the same training to all employees regardless of their location to avoid the complication of each location developing its own style of training, disrupting continuity of company protocol. Guaranteeing quality was a high priority, and this stands as a commercial moral component of 7-Eleven stores to this day. One of the key decisions worth noting is the implementation of uniforms for the ice station service clerks by Southland Corporation, starting in 1928. This act was later widely recognized as one of the primary factors that led to the company's success as a retail convenience store (The Southland Corporation, 1990, pp. 660-661). Standard uniforms reinforced the idea of a collective consciousness being at the forefront of the code of conduct within the corporation's commercial engagement. From the consumer's point of view, a uniform represents professionalism, competence, and accountability. To put it another way, consumers trust uniformed workers; they believe that companies that implement the use of uniforms have employees who are capable of performing their tasks properly.

Drinks are another way in which 7-Eleven has been successful. At the beginning of 1964, 7-Eleven conceived of a new and popular product: it began selling coffee to go. Two years later, the

company began to carry one of the most famous syrup-and-ice drinks in American food history—the Slurpee. According to Smith (2013), this sensational semi-frozen carbonated beverage was originally introduced as “Icee” in 1965 and was later re-launched as Slurpee by 7-Eleven’s ad agency. In 1973, 7-Eleven became the first U.S. retailer to offer self-service fountain drinks. They introduced the 32-ounce Big Gulp in 1976, the 44-ounce Super Big Gulp in 1983, and the 64-ounce Double Big Gulp in 1988 (Drake & Ochowicz, 2011; Smith, 2013). Both the Slurpee and the Big Gulp gave the company powerful brand equity, which attracted the envy of many competitors. The Slurpee drink gave customers yet another reason to visit 7-Eleven. The drink’s appeal gave 7-Eleven the opportunity to advertise and promote the product like never before.

Slurpees and soda fountain drinks were only the beginning. As work routines and the place of leisure in life continued to change, self-service became the key to meeting the changing needs of time-pressed customers. Beginning in the 1970s, following the first oil shock, self-serve gasoline stations quickly became a permanent fixture at 7-Eleven convenience store locations. As more people were able to afford automobiles, gasoline sales skyrocketed alongside consumer demand for gasoline. Gasoline sales became a major source of revenue after 1970, rising from less than 3% of the total company sales in 1972 to over 25% in 1985. As a result, Southland became increasingly dependent on gasoline sales (Kawabe, 1994, p. 250).

As the company continued to generate revenue, it also expanded its locations. With the growing number of stores, there came a pressing need for a newer and more efficient inventory management and delivery systems. In 1969, Southland hired the head of the Army and Air Force Exchange System to create a new distribution system for the company so it could organize its inventory more efficiently. He quickly designed a network of distribution centers located throughout the country that used computerized methods of inventory control and merchandise handling. This substantially

reduced both the need for in-store inventories and the number of store deliveries through consolidated shipments. Many retailers praised the system as state-of-the-art, and it remained an industry model throughout the 1970s and early 1980s (Bernstein, 1997, p. 497).

Decline and takeover: the 1980s. In 1985, the 7-Eleven convenience store chain owned by Southland Corporation was the seventh largest retailer in the United States, with 8,000 stores, 13 billion dollars of total revenue, and 212 million dollars of net earnings (Bernstein, 1997, p. 520). However, during the 1980s, increasingly serious competition began to show itself.

Competition first emerged with other convenience store companies. This competition had existed since the late 1960s, but by the 1980s it had increased dramatically. During this decade, the number of convenience stores doubled (Nakahara, 1991, p. 96). Furthermore, the competition also expanded outside of the convenience store business. For example, supermarkets became a renewed threat. They began to stay open longer, sometimes around the clock, which reduced convenience stores' main advantage of having longer hours of operation. In 1979, only one percent of supermarkets were open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, by 1992, this percentage went up to 12 percent. In 1979, supermarkets were open for an average of 82 hours per week; by 1992, this had become 129 hours (Bernstein, 1997, p. 520).

Furthermore, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Southland had diversified into businesses with services as diverse as providing oil refining (Citgo), auto parts (Chief Auto Parts), and real estate development, leaving itself vulnerable to a hostile takeover (Bernstein, 1997, p. 522). According to Kotabe (1995) financial issues came up that made the Southland company face a wave of takeovers, restructurings, and leveraged buyouts. One of these was the Southland Corporation take-over bid

by a Canadian company. To thwart unfriendly investors, in 1987 Southland was forced to take out an expensive loan and plunge to pay for their leveraged buyout, but the heavy debt load forced Southland into bankruptcy in 1990 (Kotabe, 1995). As Kotabe noted (1995), in the 1970s and early 1980s, the convenience store industry in the United States was good. However, when the late 1980s and early 1990s arrived, due to the high competition from oil and other companies entering the market, 14 convenience store companies including Southland Corporation filed for bankruptcy.

As Southland's financial condition worsened, Ito-Yokado, the extremely successful licensee of 7-Eleven stores in Japan since 1973, agreed in 1988 to give the company a large loan in exchange for reduced monthly royalty payments. In 1989, Ito-Yokado purchased all 58 7-Eleven stores in Hawaii from Southland (Bernstein, 1997, p. 493). According to Bernstein, when Southland filed for bankruptcy the following year, Suzuki Toshifumi, then the president of 7-Eleven Japan, convinced Ito-Yokado to help rescue the company to keep the convenience store business intact (1997, p. 502). The deal meant that IYG Holding Co., which is wholly owned by Ito-Yokado Co. Ltd., purchased 70% of Southland. As a result, Ito-Yokado gained control of more than 7,000 US-based stores (Shibata & Takeuchi, 2006, p. 15). Suzuki strongly believed that the US company could be rebuilt by pursuing the strategy and management practices he had championed with great success in Japan. In 1992, Southland re-emerged from bankruptcy with the Japanese retailer owning 61% of the restructured company. The companies remained separate entities, with Masatoshi Ito serving as chairman and Suzuki as vice-chairman of the board of the US unit. In 2000, Southland Corp. changed its name to 7-Eleven, Inc. (Iwamoto, 2006, pp. 191-192).

New attention to customers' lifestyles: The Vanguard program. The Vanguard Program was an operational test program applied to 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. after Ito-Yokado's acquisition. The Austin, Texas, market was chosen as the first test area. As a result, during the first year, sales increased by 11.4%, and monthly sales have risen continuously since then (Kotaba, 1995). The main purpose of this program was to increase customer service, especially by responding to customers' needs (Narver & Slater, 1990). This program had two basic components: a new store concept (for example, store aesthetic, prices, and product diversity) and a new customer-driven operating system. This system perfectly matched the principle on which 7-Eleven was originally founded, to give customers what they want, when they want it.

According to Kotabe (1995), major changes were made in the stores in an effort to enhance the customer's shopping experience while meeting more of the customer's needs. For example, the choice of products in the Vanguard Program stores were specifically selected, adding more easy-to-prepare entrees, fresh products, and fruits. With respect to store operations, a double coverage system, which meant that at least two clerks were on duty, gave customers a quicker check-out experience; also, a stricter dress code and new employee training programs were imported. Cosmetic changes, such as lighting and layout improvements, also contributed to offering customers a favorable shopping experience.

The other significant change involved in Ito-Yokado's new customer-driven operating system was Accelerated Inventory Management (AIM). This system not only played a role in right-on-time store inventory, but it was also a perfect example of fulfilling customer's needs promptly and practicing a customer-oriented policy. For example, the items sold in different 7-Eleven stores were selected by the store managers to tailor them to the neighbourhoods in which the stores were

located. A store sold more candy if the neighbourhood had more children; however, if more single working people were in this neighbourhood, more premade fresh foods were available.

The key focus of the Vanguard Program, customer orientation and satisfaction, helped Ito-Yokado to acquire its former American parent company and successfully transfer an Americanized business to a Japanized style corporation. As we mentioned before with respect to *konbini*, as a retail form they do not only provide business, they also create hubs that reflect and respond to societal changes. The success of the Vanguard Program gives us a clear example of how the Japanese style convenience stores, *konbini*, have understood and reacted to social and customer needs even on “foreign,” American soil.

Convenience Stores Come to Japan

The success of convenience stores in Japan emerged within a complex context, including a stable and protected international political environment, a powerfully stimulated manufacturing sector, and growth mediated by a national desire for improvement. Under this burgeoning economy and beginning in the late 1950s, the distribution systems in Japan changed, leading to a consumer boom and the introduction of the supermarket. Different laws and regulations enacted by the government affected these larger-scale retailers, including wholesalers and supermarkets. As a result, the larger retailers became interested in the new business form of convenience stores. The top three convenience store brands, 7-Eleven, Lawson, and FamilyMart, rapidly expanded their businesses and established market dominance. We will consider each of these factors in turn.

Context: an expanding economy. In the late 19th century, Japan was rapidly and thoroughly industrializing. Textiles were a leading item, and vast quantities of light industry goods, such as utensils and papers, were also produced. In the 1920s and 1930s, heavy industries were greatly expanded, principally to support Japan's growing imperialistic ambitions. Japan's economy collapsed after its defeat in World War II, and its shipbuilding industry, one of the world's largest in the 1930s, was almost completely destroyed as a result of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Japan's postwar economy developed from the remnants of an industrial infrastructure that suffered widespread destruction during World War II (Spencer, 2014).

In 1952, Japan was an “undeveloped country” with a per capita consumption of 13%, equaling roughly one fifth of that of the United States (Fukao, Ma, & Yuan, 2007). By 1955, however, every economic index in Japan had reached or even exceeded its prewar level. There are numerous reasons for Japan's quick economic recovery, including foreign aid from the U.S. from 1946–1948 and the influx of wealth that was brought into Japan in the 1950s with the Korean War-related Special Procurement. The latter involved war supplies bought by the U.S. government, which used Japan as a military and supply base in the neighboring Korean War (Sadahiro, 1991). Another reason was the Treaty of San Francisco, signed in 1952 by Japan and the USA, which provided Japan with American military protection. This facilitated long-term international peace, allowing Japan to recover from World War II. Lastly, the USA partially reduced and ultimately cancelled Japan's war reparation debts, lightening the burden on Japan's economic recovery (Lachenmann & Wolfrum, 2016, pp. 1087-1088).

These factors stimulated Japan's manufacturing sector. This can be seen in the time period between 1952 and 1971, where Japan's gross national product grew at an annual average rate of 9.6 percent, much faster than that of any other industrial economy in the world (Wu Yüan-li, 1978, p.

61). From the mid-1950s to the beginning of the 1970s, Japan officially entered an era of high economic growth. In this era, Japan secured its position as the most industrialized country in Asia. By 1968, Japan's GNP had surpassed that of West Germany and it became the second greatest economic power in the world after the United States (Hamada, 1996). In the meantime, the entire world economy was expanding during this recovery period; however, Japan's unparalleled success seemed to be nothing short of an economic miracle. In the beginning of the 1970s, Japan appeared to be doing very well: Japan's average growth rate was over 8% annually for three years except in 1971 (Mihut & Daniel, 2012). The economic growth abruptly stopped in 1974, when Japan experienced the economic setback known as "the 1973 Oil Crisis." This was the first post-war decline in industrial production that Japan had experienced, and this crisis, according to Mihut and Daniel (2012), led the Japanese economy into recession.

The role of the Japanese distribution system. According to Kuribayashi (1991), before World War II, the Japanese distribution system was mostly dominated by small-scale stores, and the only large-scale retail stores were department stores. Right after World War II, the Japanese government took over the power to regulate the economy and prices due to the fact that excessive demand and lack of supply was causing vicious inflation. As a result, the distribution systems were put directly under the government's control (Kuribayashi, 1991, p. 41).

As Kuribayashi noted, the Japanese economy was recovered from scratch, and department stores, as the only large-scale retail operations of the time, started to grow and enjoyed steady sales until 1956 in an uncompetitive and non-restrictive environment. While department stores experienced climbing sales, other retailers voiced their concern and requested restriction on

department stores from the government. As a result, the Second Department Stores Law (May, 1956) was enforced. As a part of this law, department store activities, such as openings, store expansion, and business hours, were stringently restricted. Since department stores had been restricted, one of the other modern retail formats, the supermarket, was favorably accepted by consumers and many stores started opening. Inevitably, regulations were demanded again from other retailers due to concerns and complaints regarding price competition; however, this time a policy mainly advocating free competition among retail industries was published by the government in 1964. As a result, there were no specific restrictions for supermarkets, and supermarket sales caught up with those of department stores around 1974.

As supermarkets grew continuously, medium and small-sized stores again voiced concerns about price competition. This time, department stores also joined the battle, claiming that they were disadvantaged due to the Second Department Stores Law while competing with supermarkets. In 1974, under pressure from different retailers, the Large-Scale Retail Stores Law was enacted and introduced as a replacement of the Second Department Stores Law. Consequently, department stores and supermarkets were treated the same. Compared to the Second Department Stores Law, the new law was relaxed, and some of the former regulations partially lifted (Stobart & Howard, 2018).

However, the new law was not able to save the Japanese distribution system, especially for the medium-scale retailers. After the 1973 Oil Crisis, the Japanese economy went to recession. The economic setback had a significant impact on small-scale retailers, which led the governments to reconsider their regulations for large-scale retailers again. According to Kuribayashi (1991), the Large-Scale Retail Store Law was revised in 1979, and the major amendment expanded the definition of large-scale retail stores to include medium-scale retail stores with floor areas of 500

square meters or more. Thus, it was clear that the government's policies were intended to protect small-scale retail stores by restricting internal competition in the distribution system.

From the history of the Japanese distribution system above, we can clearly see that, firstly, historical government policies have had an extraordinary influence on the development of small-scale retail stores, and the most common representative of small-scale retail stores, *konbini*, is a typical example. Secondly, these same policies also contributed to more innovative development strategies on the part of large-scale retail stores. For example, in order to avoid government restrictions and increase sales, large-scale retailers such as supermarkets were incentivized to focus their attention on developing small-scale businesses. As a result, it is not hard for us to understand why the major *konbini* began their successful businesses from larger groups of companies, like 7-Eleven from Ito-Yokado.

Yen appreciation. Another important event that contributed to the spread of convenience stores in Japan was known as “Yen Appreciation.” With industrial development, the production and sale of goods experienced significant expansion, promoting an unprecedented consumer boom. At the same time, massive profits and the large and rapid appreciation of yen finally gave entrepreneurs and Japanese people the golden opportunity to travel the world. It is not a coincidence that the concept of convenience stores was first introduced to Japan around the 1970s. Many Japanese businessmen, including large-scale retailers, began paying attention to the convenience store format in the USA and were trying very hard to transfer this convenience store “foreign plant” to Japanese soil.

For instance, Yusuke Inagaki, the founder of the Myshop Chain, a Japanese convenience store brand, became very interested in the convenience store format when he visited the suburbs of Los Angeles in 1962 and purchased a soft drink in a 7-Eleven (Kawabe, 2006, pp. 88-89). Another example is Yukio Abe, who worked for a very famous dairy company in Japan, called Snow Brand Milk Products Co., Ltd. He became interested in convenience stores when he visited 7-Eleven for the first time in suburban Chicago. According to businessman himself, when he tried to introduce the convenience store back to Japan, “no one [was] interested at all” (Abe, 1971, pp. 42-45).

In 1968, a few companies and government organizations showed interest in convenience stores as a format. The Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Junior Chamber International Japan sent a joint business group to the USA to observe and research convenience stores. The group visited more than 4,000 stores across the country, gathering over hundreds of operating handbooks, which ultimately led them to discover 7-Eleven in Texas. The leader of this group, Shigeo Kitano, later published a report showing that the new form of retail was not suitable for Japan, since it would provide competition to pre-existing local stores (Kitano, 1969, pp. 19-22). As a result, another government branch, the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency (SMEA) showed interest in this new form of retail, and later on, SMEA formed and commissioned a group to write a manual for convenience stores in order to support small- and medium-sized retailers. The Convenience Stores Manual was published in 1972. Some other organizations, such as the Japan Voluntary Chain Association and the Japan Management Association, also started researching convenience stores in the 1970s (Abe, 1971, p. 3; Takebayashi, 1973, pp. 29-30).

At the same time, several predecessors of convenience stores emerged, mostly supported by large-scale retailers such as chain wholesalers (Sugioka, 1977, p. 28; Deie, 1990, p. 172; Kawabe, 2003, pp. 9-10). For example, Kmart was a convenience store sponsored by a wholesaler named

Kittaka, a sweets vendor in Osaka in 1967. Myshop Chain, another predecessor of convenience stores, was supported by a wholesaler cooperative in Amagasaki, Hyogo starting in 1968. Also, one of the most famous local convenience stores, Seiko Mart, was originally sponsored by a liquor wholesaler, Nishio, located in Hokkaido Prefecture in 1971 (Usui, 2014, p.181)

Konbini as supermarket subsidiaries. After the fast-growing phase of convenience stores that were supported by wholesalers, convenience stores started instead being subsidiaries of supermarkets.

The leading company in this arena was Ito Yokado. We have arrived at an important bend in the road: 7-Eleven's journey to Japan. As mentioned in previous sections, by the early 1970s, The Southland Corporation was a very successful company, and the expansion of overseas business had grown significantly. According to Sparks (1995), the expansion was largely contiguous, reaching Canada (75 stores), Mexico (4 stores), and even some operations in the United Kingdom. However, the first true international expansion came in 1973 with the licensing of the 7-Eleven name and concept to Japan. This also demonstrates the increasing confidence of the company.

From 1970, Ito Yokado's high-level management team made two observation trips to the USA, and found that 7-Eleven is everywhere in America. Then, they visited the head office of Southland Corporation and made a proposal in 1972; however, the proposal was declined. In 1973, almost a year later, the second-attempt proposal seemed more appealing to the Southland Corporation, and they sent an observation team to Japan in order to better understand the Japanese market and the conditions of Ito Yokado. The Southland Corporation made an announcement regarding this event; Liles (1977) in his book also documents an announcement of December 1973:

We are extremely pleased that Southland will be participating in the modernization of Japan's retail food distribution system. Agreements were finalized in December for the introduction of the 7-Eleven concepts into Japan through an area license granted to Ito-Yokado Co Ltd., one of that nation's largest and most successful retailers. We are extremely optimistic about the future of this venture. (p. 221)

In the above announcement, we can see a very successful American company trying to expand its business in this "foreign soil." After their trip, the observation team made a very positive report on their impressions to headquarters. In 1973, the international license was signed to 7-Eleven, at that time; the company was called York Seven Co., Ltd., which was considered to be a fully owned subsidiary of Ito Yokado. In the same year, as a result, the first 7-Eleven store in Japan, named *Toyosiekimae*, opened its doors to the public. The year of 1974 is considered "the first year of the convenience store," which in Japanese is "コンビニ元年 *konbini gannen*." (Nihon Chushokigyo Gakkai, 1990, p. 173) In 1978, the name of the company changed from York Seven Co., Ltd., to Seven Eleven Japan.

Some of the other top supermarkets also saw opportunity in this new retail form. For example, Daiei, one of Japan's famous supermarkets, followed the same routine as Ito Yokado. In 1974, Daiei signed an agreement with Lawson Milk Company, Ohio, a famous milk shop established in 1939 (then taken over by Consolidated Food Corp in 1959, now called Sara Lee Corp.) and developed convenience stores (Lawson, Inc. Website). Daiei-Lawson Co., Ltd. was established by Daiei in 1975 as its own subsidiary, and the name was changed to Lawson Japan in 1979.

Not all the big supermarkets followed this path. Sueaki Takaoka was the executive of another famous supermarket named Seiyu in Japan, and he was one of the people involved in writing *The Convenience Store Manual* for SMEA mentioned earlier (Tanouchi & Takaoka, 1975, p. 1). Seiyu tried to introduce the new retail form of convenience stores to Japan before Ito Yokado; however, the President, Seiji Tsutsumi, did not support this decision and the proposal was not approved at that time. Only in 1977, after seeing the astonishing success of 7-Eleven Japan, did Seiyu finally decide to enter the convenience store business with the name FamilyMart. In 1981, FamilyMart Co., Ltd was established as a subsidiary of Seiyu (The Seiyu Ltd., 2001, p. 418).

Thus, 7-Eleven, Lawson, and FamilyMart are considered to be the “big three” in the convenience store industry in Japan. Other convenience stores in Japan included Circle K, established under a contract with Circle K Inc., USA by Uni in 1979. SunKus was launched by Nagasakiya in 1980. In 2001, both of them eventually merged into Circle K SunKus. Another convenience store named Ministop was started around 1980 by Jusco. Jusco’s name was changed to Aeon on March 1, 2011 (Usui, 2014, p. 182). Thus, most of the famous convenience stores in modern Japanese society are actually tied historically to big supermarkets. However, not all of them survived until now due to the high competition in this industry. For example, Myshop Chain went down due to bankruptcy in 1986 (Abe, 1993A). Kmart had success before 1979 (Deie, 1995, pp. 77-78); however, in 1993, due to the failure of its sponsor Kittaka, Kmart had to close its business at the same time. Most of the early convenience stores that we mentioned before that were supported by wholesalers did not survive, except for Seiko Mart in Hokkaido.

The Emergence of Japanese and American Convenience Stores: A Comparison

Convenience stores in Japan were successful compared to the USA for two primary reasons: the first one concerns laws and regulations, and the second involves location strategy. Therefore, this section will mainly discuss how these two factors contributed to the success of Japanese convenience stores.

Like we mentioned in previous sections, most modern Japanese convenience store business was supported by large-scale retailers, especially supermarkets. In 1974, the Japanese government enacted a regulation called the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, which later became a turning point for convenience stores. The First (1937–1947) and Second (1956–1974) Department Store Laws, the initial editions of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law (1974–2000), all involved different perspectives on the Japanese distribution and retail system. For example, the First Department Store Laws (August, 1937) defined the minimum number of closing dates a store could have per year and its latest closing hour, while setting limitations on opening up new stores and expanding old stores, such as limiting the permissible size of sales floor space. In the Second Department Store Law (May, 1956), the enforcement required even stricter regulations, such as four days' closure per month in big cities, two days per month in other areas, and closure by 6:00 p.m. (Izumida, 1996, p. 7).

In the 1970s, the regulations expanded the definition of a large-scale store. Originally, a sales floor space was “large” if it was 1,500 m² or more (in big cities such as Tokyo, the size limitation was 3,000 m² or more). However, the Large-Scale Retail Store Law became even stricter by adding a “type II large-scale retail store,” which included any store with a sales floor between 500 m² and 1500 m² (or 3,000 m² in designated cities) in 1978; as a result, medium-scale retailers were included

in this law. The Large-Scale Retail Store Law originally required the stores to close at 6:00 p.m. and had 44 closing days per year. This regulation was later relaxed, with closing days changed to 24 days per year and closure time extended to 7:00 p.m. in 1990 and 8:00 p.m. in 1994 (World Trade Organization, 2000, p. 1322). If the store wanted to have longer business hours or to open on the defined closing dates, permission from MITI was required, and normally the evaluation and processing time were long.

However, convenience stores normally have around 100–200 m² floor space, which is far below the regulation’s definition of “large-scale.” Convenience stores could thus extend their operation time freely and without regulated closure time during the year, and store expansion was also free from the regulations. This motivated supermarkets to invest in the convenience store business. According to *Asahi Newspaper* (1972), Daiei, one of the biggest supermarkets in Japan, openly announced the adjustment to their strategy to focus more on smaller sized stores during the time of the amendment of the Second Department Store Law.

Regardless of which country they are in, convenience stores are generally famous for their convenience. There are a couple of factors comprising this convenience. As mentioned above, “time” is one: long operation hours and no closing dates make convenience stores outstanding compared with other retail formats. “Closeness,” how easily the customer can access the convenience store, is another factor. However, the definition of “closeness” greatly differs for American and Japanese consumers.

Many American convenience stores have a gas station attached. Close to 80% or approximately 124,000 of the 154,535 convenience stores in the USA sold fuel in 2016 (NACS, 2016). Southland Corporation also began to sell gasoline after the oil crisis in 1973, and their gasoline sales, as a

portion of their total sales, grew from 2.7% in 1974 to 21.6% in 1991, nearly one fifth of their growth (Kawabe, 2003, p. 5). Consequently, due to the fact that convenience stores are close to gas stations, driving was included in most of the convenience store patronage in the US. At the same time, from a legal point of view, during urbanization, most of the states in the US had adopted certain land-use laws that often forbade retailing stores from being located in residential areas.

This situation regarding gas stations was quite different in Japan. Japanese convenience stores faced very little competition from gas stations. First, according to the Fire Service Law (July, 1948), any type of retail store could not be set in a gas station or self-service fuel seller until 1998, when this regulation was lifted. Also, compared with the US, Japanese land-use regulations were not as strict; as a result, many traditional neighborhood retailers, mostly known as mom-and-pop stores, are located in residential areas due to the densely packed population. In addition, convenience stores are commonly found surrounding transit lines, mainly trains and buses, taking advantage of the huge population using the public transportation system. This allowed Japanese convenience stores to adopt a unique location strategy that assumes that customers come mainly on foot, rather than by car. Accordingly, many commentators believed in the early days that convenience stores did not need parking lots, due to the well-designed land use, developed public transportation system, and existing neighborhood stores (Yomiuri Newspaper, 1971). *The Convenience Store Manual* published by SMEA also stated, “there is no need to consider preparing a parking lot because almost all customers will come on foot” (1972, p. 59). According to Usui (2014, p. 187), 7-Eleven Japan published a theory called “集中出店戦略 *shuchu shutten senryaku*,” translated as “the strategy of densely opening stores,” which meant that convenience stores were encouraged to be set close to each other in order to become nearer to customers’ residences. This strategy can normally be seen in certain areas, such as Japan Railway (JR) stations. The company defined the term “primary

trading area,” a circle with a radius of 500 meters from where the store is located. The customer who lives within this distance considered to be the major consumer for this store. The 500-meter radius indicates that the company assumes that its major consumer will visit on foot.

This very famous strategy helped 7-Eleven Japan to build market dominance. Even though this method could lead convenience stores’ serving areas to overlap with each other, it achieved several outcomes: maximizing the efficiency of the distribution system, creating better brand awareness, improving advertising effectiveness, and blocking the entry of competitors. The other advantages of “the strategy of densely opening stores” included stores’ presence near many consumers’ homes compared to other brands. This also enhanced brand recognition for certain convenience stores, since the same banner kept showing up. From the perspective of management and cost, there are also a few advantages: stores were easier to maintain because most of them were located in the same areas, and product delivery time from the warehouses to the stores was greatly reduced, which was a good way to save human power (Usui, 2014, pp. 186-188).

From the regulations and location strategies discussed above, we can see why Japanese convenience stores are more successful than their American equivalents. In America, there are clearly strict zoning regulations on land use but no direct limitations on business hours and closing days. In fact, according to Kawabe, more than 30% of US supermarkets operated 24 hours a day in the 1980s (2003, p. 11). Even though convenience stores are located in local areas, it is not very hard for the customers, who come to the gas station to fill up their cars, to drive further to the supermarkets, which provide greater selections of brands and categories with generally cheaper prices. It is harder for convenience stores in the US to be able to compete with supermarkets.

On the other hand, Japan's lower regulation of locations but greater restrictions on retail operations led to customers going by foot to the nearest community convenience stores, where there were no supermarkets available due to the Large-Scale Retail Store Law. Although the small local neighbourhood stores already existed and were not regulated by the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, they usually did not have the will to operate with longer hours and without closing dates. Therefore, convenience stores became a unique retail form, which were able to display several features that neither supermarkets nor local neighbourhood stores had. By using this form of retail, other forms could barely compete with convenience stores.

As the "*shuchu shutten senryaku*" illustrated, Japanese convenience stores are now everywhere in Japan. As discussed in this chapter, from the small ice shop in Texas to the successful business empire of Ito Yokado in Japan, convenience stores demonstrated how a "foreign plant" became ubiquitous on Japanese soil. The success of convenience stores transferred from the US and then assimilated dynamically in Japan, exemplifying how *konbini* as a medium both shape and are shaped by the Japanese societal changes and trends.

Chapter 3. Value Changes (1): *Ohitorisama*, Singles, and the Elderly

In this chapter, I mainly examine the traditional ideology *ikka danran*, which, as discussed earlier, refers to a happy family, and how it has developed and changed in order to cater the needs and changes happening in Japan. Several trendy phrases, words, and other types of discourse that have become part of these value changes will be focused on for analysis. For example, the rise of *ohitorisama*—the culture of self-help and self-reliance that has dominated Japanese society in recent decades—will be discussed with regard to its relationship with *konbini*. We will explore how household size, marriage, aging, and population trends built the stage that allowed this lifestyle to flourish and bloom in popularity, and discuss the juxtaposition in different eating habits or styles, *koshoku* versus *ikka danran*, in the context of this lifestyle. We will consider how the meaning of *ohitorisama* has changed, and how this has impacted the practices of *naishoku*, *nakashoku*, and *gaishoku*. We will also examine how and why more of the elderly are becoming part of the *ohitorisama* lifestyle, and how this lifestyle is reflected in their eating habits. This chapter concludes with a discussion detailing how convenience stores reflect these changes in Japanese society by looking at, for example, services that are tailored and provided to certain demographics.

Trendy words

Ikka danran. The Meiji Restoration (1868) brought numerous changes to Japan, from political and bureaucratic structures to judicial and economic systems. At the same time, social changes, such as ideologies and family structures, were also transformed while Japan transitioned from being a preindustrial country, at the end of the Edo period, to an industrial country, at the beginning of the Showa period. The ideology of *ikka danran*, family happiness, was considered to be the foundation of modern Japanese family relations and was accelerated and propagated by the government during this time. *Ikka danran* as an ideology also played a significant role in building the state: according to Cwiertka (1998) “healthy and happy families form healthy and happy towns and villages... create a healthy and happy state” (p. 43).

Interestingly, the well-known fundamental Japanese ideology for families, according to Cwiertka (1998), originally came from the West and was introduced to Japan by numerous Protestant missionaries. Coincidentally, the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology, considered to be the basis for women’s behaviour in Japan and discussed in the next chapter, evolved at approximately the same time as *ikka danran*. Therefore, *ryōsai kenbo* provided a perfect role for women in helping to build a happy atmosphere in a new family, *ikka danran*. As we mentioned above, the *ikka danran* ideology was widely propagated by the government, and the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* was similarly distributed by the government (Cwiertka, 1998, p. 43). According to the 1899 *Koto Jogakko Rei* (Order of Women’s High Schools), at that time, *ryōsai kenbo* was recognized as the only educational goal for all women high school students in Japan (Oki, 1987, p. 208). Under the *ikka danran*, a woman was appointed by *ryōsai kenbo* as the key figure responsible for the happiness of her family: “the matters of house are under the control of the wife” (Cwiertka, 1998, p. 43). As will

be discussed in the next chapter, the residue of this old ideology still affects Japanese women and shapes their contemporary identities.

Koshoku. Japanese has a substantial amount of heterography, including variations on *Koshoku*. *Koshoku* is a neologism that is created when one combines different Chinese characters, and it has different variations and meanings. In this section I will mainly talk about two of them: 孤 (*ko*) 食 (*shoku*) and 個 (*ko*) 食 (*shoku*). When one combines the Chinese character of “alone” 孤 (*ko*) with “food” 食 (*shoku*), it means to eat alone, and it describes the phenomenon of family members eating separately. Furthermore, if one replaces the “alone” 孤 (*ko*) with a different Chinese character that has the same pronunciation, “individual” 個 (*ko*), the meaning changes to “eat individually,” a phenomenon that is widely criticized in Japanese society. Eating individually is a behaviour wherein family members do not share the same food at the dinner table but rather eat individual plates, most likely because they are consuming pre-packaged store-cooked food, such as food from *konbini*. This is considered to be bad behaviour in Japan since it is against the traditional ideology of *ikka danran*, in which families eat together. According to Kimura (2017), “family members sharing the same table and home cooked meals are depicted as the cornerstone of a healthy diet, familial happiness and the proper disciplining of children” (p. 457).

Here I would like to point out an interesting fact related to the next chapter. Men generally contribute minimally to domesticity in Japan, like the old aphorism goes, “*otoko wa soto, onna wa uchi*” (man outside, women inside), and this interesting phenomenon has been reflected in *koshoku* as well. According to Kimura (2017), the absence of a father who cannot eat dinner with his family is not the *koshoku*-related social problem; rather, a mother’s absence is the center of attention in the

problematic issue of *koshoku*. A mother's attendance at the dinner table is not the only social criticism regarding *koshoku*: the actual meal that is eaten on the dinner table is another dramatic focus of criticism. For example, a mother is blamed if food is not home-cooked but brought in from the outside, such as from *konbini* or department stores. Therefore, *koshoku* is seen as a social issue because it is against the *ikka danran* ideology, but behind the scenes, it is also seen as a threat to the traditional family structure, or more explicitly, a women's "ryōsai kenbo" role in the family.

Ohitorisama. The term *ohitorisama* was originally coined by a journalist, Iwashita Kumiko, in 1999 (Iwashita, 2001). *Ohitorisama*'s popularity in use is due to Ueno Chizuko, a famous female author and sociologist in Japan. In her book *ohitorisama no rogo* (2007) she discusses the single status of middle-aged to older women, which she considers to be an experience that Japanese women can not avoid especially at the end of life, due to widowhood and divorce. *Ohitorisama* has been adopted as one of the trendy phrases, normally pejorative, to describe single women in Japan; for example, "Christmas Cake" describes a woman who has not married by 25 and thus is like the Christmas Cake: after the 25th, its value starts to diminish (Yoshida, 2016, p. 20). The term *ohitorisama*, according to Dale (2014), is less pejorative and is generally translated as "single" or "singleton" (2014, p. 23). Iwashita (2001) defined *ohitorisama* as an adult woman with an established individual personality. She also mentioned that *ohitorisama* is not only limited to unmarried women; for example, someone married like herself could also be an *ohitorisama* (Iwashita, 2001). *Ohitorisama* is used to refer to women who dine alone, go on holidays alone, or otherwise act independently. The term *ohitorisama* was originally used exclusively for women; however, Ueno later developed the concept of the male form of *ohitorisama* in her book *Otoko no ohitorisama michi* (2009). The *ohitorisama* image has been widely used in Japanese society. For

example, in 2009, the show *Ohitorisama* aired on Tokyo Broadcasting System from October to December (Kan & Ueda, 2009). The popular TV drama features Akiyama Satomi (played by Mizuki Arisa), a 33-year-old history teacher in a private high school, who is capable of doing things by herself and who happily and passionately pursues her career. Due to her work ethic and perfectionist tendencies, her colleagues view her as an *ohitorisama*. In the shows, Satomi discusses the pleasure she takes in dining out alone and in joining classes for her own development. All of these details suggest a woman who explores her own lifestyle preferences and who lives comfortably on her own. In recent years, numerous businesses, including *konbini*, have emerged that target the *ohitorisama* lifestyle by providing comfortable environments for such women to dine in restaurants, go to the movies, or even attend karaoke bars alone. In both TV shows and in reality, these facts perfectly echo the ideas and tendencies in Japan that Iwashita and Ueno discuss in their books.

Nakashoku. According to a report published by the Food and Agriculture Policy Research Center (1997), the Japanese food market can be divided into three categories: *Uchishoku* (or *Naishoku*), which are meals cooked at home from ingredients purchased at grocery stores; *Nakashoku*, prepared meals sold at retail outlets including supermarkets, convenience stores, and specialized food outlets; and *Gaishoku*, meals eaten away from home such as fast food or restaurant fare. In the past, Japanese either cooked at home or they ate out at restaurants. However, in recent years, *nakashoku* has begun to rival both *uchishoku* and *gaishoku*—now, in addition to “eating out” and “making dinner,” one can choose to get some take-out and dine in at home. Pre-cooked food like croquettes, *karaage* (Japanese style fried chicken), simmered side dishes, and salad that can be purchased in stores like *konbini* are extremely popular amongst *nakashoku* options.

In the coming section, I will use the terms introduced above to demonstrate how values are changing in modern Japanese society. Japan has experienced significant demographic changes over the years. Several social phenomena and trends have attracted the attention of academics and social researchers. For example, the trends of marriage delay, increasing divorce rate, and widowhood due to the long life-expectancy of the Japanese all contribute to an increase in the number of single adults. As Dales (2017) noted, “singlehood is an increasingly common and long-term experience for Japanese adults” (p. 61). In this section, I will examine different perspectives such as changes in household types, marriage, and divorce in order to understand the reasons for the increase in *ohitorisama* in Japan.

Background

Households. A key demographic variable contributing to new patterns and cultural phenomena in Japanese society is changes in household size. In 1970, the initiation of the Japanese national census, there were 30.30 million private households. A consistent increase in private households over 45 years resulted in the 2015 population census showing that Japan had 51.88 million private households, excluding "institutional households" such as students in school dormitories. Of the 2015 total, 57.3 percent were nuclear-family households, and significantly, 32.6 percent were one-person households (Statistics Bureau of Japan [SBJ] & MIC, 2016, pp. 10-11).

From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, the average number of household members was approximately five. In the 1960s, there was an increase in the number of one-person households and a decrease in number of nuclear families, and as a result, the average household size fell

significantly in 1970 to 3.41 members. The average number of household members has since continued to decline, dropping to 2.39 in 2015. Although the Japanese population has continued declining, the number of households is expected to continue to increase for years to come, and the size of the average household is predicted to shrink further. The number of households is projected to peak in 2023 and then decrease thereafter (SBJ & MIC, 2018, p. 12).

Elderly households. Another important demographic group significantly contributing to the rise of the *ohitorisama* lifestyle is the elderly population, which is growing dramatically and consistently in Japan. The number of elderly households in 2015 was 21.52 million. Elderly households are defined as private households including at least one member of 65 years of age or over. These accounted for 41.5 percent of total private households. There were 5.63 million elderly households that consisted of only one person. Among the almost six million one-person elderly households, there were approximately twice as many women as men (SBJ & MIC, 2016, p. 12).

Bizarrely, the number of households nation-wide is increasing even though Japan's whole population is steadily declining. Specifically, this is due to the fact that one-person households are increasing; as a result, the number of people per household is decreasing. In the 2015 national census, the nationwide average per household was 2.39 people. It was 2.42 in the 2010 national census and 2.55 in 2005 (SBJ & MIC, 2016, p. 11).

Impacts of changing household size. In general, these changes directly influence the forms of consumption in Japanese society. The increase in the number of one-person households and the simultaneous decrease in average household size, according to Kumagai (2014, p. 16), directly

contributed to the emergence of the modern family in Japan. Kumagai also pointed out a few regional patterns for Japanese households. Japan has 47 prefectures and provinces. The Tokyo metropolitan area has the smallest number of size of household: the average was three people per household 20 years ago, and this will have diminished to 1.90 by 2025. Therefore, a large portion of the households in the Tokyo metropolitan area are comprised of people who are living by themselves. On the other hand, Yamagata prefecture and those in the Tohoku and Hokuriku regions have and will remain larger in household size (Kumagai, 2014, pp. 16-17). Another interesting point that Kumagai mentioned is that divorce rates and household sizes are closely related to each other. In other words, the large-household areas such as Yamagata, Tohoku, and Hokuriku seem to have lower divorce rates; in contrast, Tokyo and Osaka, which tend to have smaller household sizes, show relatively higher divorce rates (Kumagai, 2014, pp. 16-17). Looking at family composition, ironically, the “couple + child” households have always been known as the “standard households” or “standard families” as the most common family structure once consisted of a married couple and children (Nagao & Japanese National Council of Social Welfare, 1994, p. 33). By the 2010 national census, however, the dominating household type had changed to single-person, and the number of single-person households is expected to increase while the average household size in Japan continues to decrease (Yeung & Hu, 2018).

Marriages and divorces. Other demographic contributors to the rise of the *ohitorisama* lifestyle are reduced marriage rates and climbing divorce rates, which have both contributed to the rise of single households. In the early 1970s, the number of marriages in Japan per year exceeded one million couples (O'Halloran, 2015, p. 642). This, in combination with the marriage rate (per 1,000 population) hovering over 10.0%, created an apparent marriage boom (SBJ & MIC, 2008,

p.16). However, both the number of couples and the marriage rate started declining thereafter. The number of couples and marriage rate rose again in the late 1980s, but in recent years, they have been on a declining trend in general again. In 2011, 661,895 couples were married, marking the first time this number fell below 700,000. In 2016, 620,523 couples were married, and the marriage rate was 5.0% (SBJ & MIC, 2011, p. 476).

In 2016, the average age of first marriage was 31.1 for men and 29.4 for women, the same ages for both genders as in the previous year. Over the past 20 years, the mean age of first marriage for men rose by 2.6 years, while that of women rose by 3.0 years (in 1996: grooms, 28.5; brides, 26.4). Meanwhile, there has been an increasing upward trend in the percentage of people who never marry, reaching 23.4 percent for males and 14.1 percent for females in 2015, the highest percentages ever (SEB & MIC, 2017, p. 18). The declining marriage rate, rising marrying age, and increasing choice of unmarried life in recent years as described above is considered to be one explanation for the increase in singlehood in Japan (Htun, 2014, p.202).

In contrast, divorces have shown an upward trend since the late 1960s, hitting a peak of 289,836 couples in 2002. Subsequently, both the number of divorces and the divorce rate have been declining since 2003 (Kumigai, 2014, p. 119). In 2016, the number of divorces totaled 216,805 couples, and the divorce rate (per 1,000 population) was 1.73 (SEB & MIC, 2017, p. 19).

The Rise of Elderly *Ohitorisama*

We have explored how the elderly population has increased in both household number and social significance, and here we will continue this discussion by examining their growing participation in the *ohitorisama* lifestyle.

In the 2000 National Census, single households made up 27.6% of all households. Over the last 15 years, this percentage has increased by 7%; in the 2015 National Census, single households made up 34.6% of all private households (SBJ & MIC, 2017, p. 11). The proportion of elderly households (households with members 65 years and over) has also increased. In 1995, the percentage of elderly households was 29.1%, and 20 years later in 2015, it was accounting for 40.7% of all households (SBJ & MIC, 2017, p. 12).

Some trends have been found in the elderly population in the context of one-person households, or those living the *ohitorisama* lifestyle. First, the total number elderly households in 2015 was 21,713,000 and, of those, single households of elderly people are overwhelmingly made up of women. The percentage of elderly *ohitorisama* in the population aged 65 years old and over has risen; there were 460,000 males and 1,742,000 females in 1995, and in 2015, the numbers have changed significantly to 1,924,000 men and 4,003,000 women. As a result, one out of 10 males and one out of five females over 65 were living alone (SBJ & MIC, 2017 p. 12). In addition, in *Japan in the 21st century: Environment, economy, and society*, Karan (2010) notes that Japanese women are facing more severe consequences than men with regard to the aging society. One way to explain why women who live alone outnumber men who live alone is by looking at life expectancies: women tend to live longer. Women outnumber men who are 65 and older by 2.91 million in 1990,

and by 2025, this number is projected to reach 4.6 million. The percentage of women 65 and older living alone was 1.47% in 1990, and will sharply increase to 21.8% in 2025 (Karen, 2010, p. 173).

The life expectancy for Japanese women is 87.05 and 80.70 for men as of the 2015 National Census (SBJ & MIC, 2017, p. 16). Women live six to seven years longer than men, and as a result, there are more women left living alone once their partners die. This is compounded by the fact that the life expectancy of people in Japan is continuing to lengthen. Accordingly, it used to be that the first image that came to mind when talking about people who lived alone was that of an older healthy single woman. Today, there is a growing number of older men living alone; the percentage of such men has increased from 20% to 30% over the past 20 years, with an estimated increase to 40% by roughly 2030 (Kato, 2012, p. 144).

Another reason for the rise in of elderly *ohitorisama*, especially for males, is the “lifelong unmarried rate.” In the National Census, there is a section that outlines the percentage of people at the age of 50 who have never been married. The lifelong unmarried rate was greater in women than in men until the 1980s. In the latter half of the 1980s, the proportion of lifelong unmarried men advanced rapidly, surpassing the lifelong unmarried rate of women in the 1990s. Analysts predict that in another 10 years, more than 20% of men will be unmarried by the age of 50, and women will fall closely behind with a lifelong unmarried rate close to 20% (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research [NIPSSR], 2016). Therefore, for men, a sharp rise in the lifelong unmarried rate is believed to be a contributing factor to the increase in elderly males falling into the *ohitorisama* lifestyle.

Koshoku and Ohitorisama

The word for an individual meal is “*koshoku*,” meaning literally “single meal,” but this word also describes a person who eats alone. “*Koshoku*” is the opposite of “*ikka danran*,” which is the act of a “family eating together, enjoying the mood.” *Ikka danran* is not simply the act of eating together. It is about more than food: it describes an atmosphere of family bonding and enjoying the experience of making memories. More and more people are enjoying “*koshoku*,” and this phenomenon has previously been considered problematic in Japanese society. Despite this sentiment, the practice of *koshoku* has become more widespread due to the fundamental changes in Japanese demographics.

The connotations of single-serving foods have shifted to become less negative. In Kato’s *Konbini to Nihonjin* (2012), a consumer survey that assessed public perception of *koshoku* asked “what does *koshoku* mean to you?” People tended to choose positive phrases such as “feeling free” or “comfortable” as opposed to negative answers such as “individual food,” “boring,” or “lonely.” Almost half of survey respondents agreed with the statement “I would like to eat alone,” some elaborating with the sentiment that eating alone is a feeling of freedom rather than boredom, and that it feels quiet and peaceful rather than lonely (Kato, 2012, p. 141). Notably, most respondents also mentioned that this does not imply a dislike for gathering people together to eat. Some discussed that both eating with others and eating alone have advantages. For example, eating with family and friends promotes communication and understanding. Yet, eating alone allows one to relax, removing the need to cater to the needs of another person’s desires or requirements. Housewives, for instance, are often tasked with preparing a meal for the entire family. From that perspective, eating alone without the burden of cooking for others can be an appealing choice.

Choosing to eat alone may also reflect the desire to take control of one's diet and balance nutrition with the aim of pursuing health or self-image outcomes (Kato, 2012, p. 140-142).

The changing overtones in meaning for *koshoku* have culminated in the increased usage and popularity of the word "*ohitorisama*," which is like the positive version of "*koshoku*." "*O ... sama*" is considered to be a Japanese honorific title, which is generally provided to people who have a more respectful elegant and positive image. However, unlike *koshoku*, it describes a lifestyle and all the associated facets of a lifestyle including recreation, eating, and travelling, and it does not exclusively pertain to eating. As discussed above, originally "*ohitorisama*" described a single woman in her thirties enjoying a solitary lifestyle and filling her time with activities such as travelling and eating out alone. Today, *ohitorisama* is no longer limited by age or gender. This word is now used positively to describe someone who enjoys spending time by themselves throughout the daily activities of life: not only while eating, but also in terms of recreation, socializing, and self-expression, such as blogging or using chat rooms instead of attending in-person gatherings. *Ohitorisama* is close in meaning to "self-help" and "self-reliance" in contemporary Japanese society.

I argue that convenience stores reflect the value changes from *ikka danran* to *koshoku* and *ohitorisama* by promoting solo eating, since most convenience stores are packaged as single serving vendors, ideal for those eating alone. For example, those who live far away from their families due to school and work are limited to spending time together only on special occasions such as holidays and birthdays.

Osechi cuisine is an example of the kinds of changes that have been reflected in *konbini*. For example, *osechi* cuisine is a food to be eaten over the period from January 1 to January 3 and

enjoyed by families during New Year celebrations, the most important holiday period in Japan (Kiritani, Richie, & Kiritani, 1995, p. 152). *Osechi* cuisine symbolizes the unity of families. Gathering to eat food together strengthens ties among people. Family get-togethers, celebrations, festivals, and events serve to unite families, as the act of family members and relatives sitting around the table creates an important opportunity for communication, allowing groups to discuss what they felt or what happened each day. This setting is the perfect foundation for *ikka danran*. *Osechi* cuisine is considered to play a significant and irreplaceable role in uniting people with their family. In a survey conducted by JA Zenchu (November 27, 2015), people were asked what they thought of *osechi* cuisine. One of the questions was, “Do you think that eating *osechi* cuisine is an event done with your family? Furthermore, does *osechi* cuisine make you think of your family and *ikka danran*?” In this survey, 38% of respondents chose “I agree,” and 38% chose “I slightly agree.” Therefore, about 80% of survey respondents found that *osechi* cuisine evokes images of spending time with family (JA Zenchū, 2015). However due to the rise of singlehood in Japan, *konbini* caught on to this trend and have begun to promote a *koshoku*-style personal *osechi* cuisine. The dishes in *osechi* cuisine have symbolism: each dish and ingredient has its own unique meaning. For example, *nishime* is a dish that involves simmering some sort of meat, which varies depending on area, and large chunks of root vegetables in a saucepan full of broth until the ingredients have absorbed the broth. *Nishime* symbolizes the bonding of families. This simple dish can be found both in homemade *Osechi* cuisine and sold in ready-to-eat convenience store *Osechi* cuisine (Takeichi, 2018).

Thus, I argue that in essence, convenience stores are both *koshoku*- and *ohitorisama*-friendly. In fact, some people have come to regard convenience stores as their surrogate kitchens, a source of not only food but also home comforts. Convenience stores have realized this sentiment

and have capitalized on the desire of customers to feel at home by placing slogans on food packages and promotional advertisements. As we will explore in the next chapter, these advertisements evoke feelings of home with sayings such as “the taste will remind you of mom’s cooking.” Therefore, in yet another way, convenience stores have managed to capture a trend in Japanese society: the rise of singlehood. Depending on how one prefers to frame it, convenience stores not only support individual meals as “*koshoku*,” but also the bigger picture of the independent, one-person lifestyle as “*ohitorisama*.”

Naishoku (Uchishoku), Nakashoku, and Gaishoku

Another new social value that is both reflected in and reinforced by *konbini* is a non-traditional mode of food consumption, *nakashoku*, which is a middle way between two traditional ways in which Japanese people consume their food. *Gaishoku* in Japanese means to go out and eat in a dining room or restaurant. *Naishoku (uchishoku)* means to eat home-cooked food made from scratch with ingredients at home. *Naishoku* is considered the opposite of *gaishoku*. As a convenient middle way, *nakashoku* fits in well with the *ohitorisama* life style; indeed, as noted in the introduction, I myself lived in Japan as an *ohitorisama* and enjoyed my *koshoku* by using *nakashoku* frequently.

As one third of convenience store sales in Japan come from food products (Bird, 2002, p. 268), it is not difficult to imagine that convenience store food trends deeply reflect everyday Japanese eating habits. With the increasing adoption of the *ohitorisama* lifestyle, one may picture many people eating out. After all, it is troublesome to prepare a dinner for one at home, and it may

be easier and cheaper to simply eat outside. Surprisingly, according to Kato (2012, p. 146), the restaurant and eating-out market peaked in 1997 and has been in gradual decline since then. After the Great East Earthquake, the desire to eat out fell out of popularity even more dramatically. In the aftermath of the earthquake, Japanese society valued “*kizuna*” or “bonds” even more than before (Cann, 2018). As a result, people were more likely to come together to cherish the opportunity to eat dinner with family and friends, partaking in *ikka danran*. Another event that punctuated the trend of decline in eating out was the economic bubble’s collapse in the 1980s. Since the collapse, the number of high-priced and high-quality chain restaurants appealing to those who want to eat out has decreased, as has the number of low-priced fast-food restaurants and Japanese taverns (*izakaya*). Despite the widespread availability of opportunities to eat out, few people choose to do so because of decreases in household income (Japan International Agricultural Council, 1992, p. 7). According to the Family Income and Expenditure survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the average household spent approximately 15,000 yen per month on eating out in 2000. This fell to 13,300 yen per month in 2005 and 12,600 in 2010 (Kato, 2012, p. 146).

Recall that *naishoku* refers to meals prepared at home. Many households prefer *naishoku*, as eating at home is cheaper than spending money eating out. However, the problem with *naishoku* is that it is time-consuming; no one likes to cook from scratch and deal with the hassle of cleaning up a mess afterwards. On the other hand, *gaishoku* is expensive, so it is on the decline. The middle ground between these two styles of eating is *nakashoku*: this is the concept of buying food like side dishes or *bento* boxes from a store and bringing it home to eat. Since the desire to have *gaishoku* is low due to cost, and true *naishoku* is too bothersome, the rising trend of *nakashoku* allows consumers to combine these two: buy food outside, but eat it in the comfort of your home.

Nakashoku products have long been the mainstay of *konbini*. Examples of *nakashoku* include *bento* boxes, rice balls, *oden*, *karaage* chicken, and prepared dishes that are ready-to-eat. *Nakashoku* items are a perfect match for the *ohitorisama* lifestyle. In fact, according to the Family Income and Expenditure Survey conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the average one-person household uses approximately 20% of expenditure on *nakashoku*, regardless of age and gender (Kato, 2012, p. 147). This reflects the *ohitorisama* lifestyle's adoption by a wide variety of people.

Ohitorisama is evident in economic trends as well. The proportion that the average household spends on "outside food" is termed the "rate of externalization of food expenditure." This proportion encompasses *gaishoku* and *nakashoku*, and it has shown an overall increase every year (Kato, 2012, p. 147). This rising rate demonstrates the ease of using *nakashoku*, since it is much like *gaishoku* in that it is convenient, avoids the mess of cooking, and doesn't need to be warmed up or re-cooked when brought home. Unlike *gaishoku*, though, *nakashoku* is relatively cheap, and more and more people are accordingly embracing this style of eating. *Nakashoku* presents a viable alternative for those who wish to keep both convenience and affordability. The decline of *naishoku* has prompted a prediction that the rate of externalization of food expenditure for the people in Japan will exceed 70% in 2040 (U.S. Grain Council, 2011, pp. 7, 57). In other words, Japanese people will continue to choose *nakashoku* and *gaishoku* over *naishoku*.

Services for the Elderly in *Konbini*

ATM-silver-cellphone scam. Noticeably, convenience stores have put special emphasis on finance-related operations, especially by creating collaborations with major Japanese banks in recent years. The installation of automated teller machines (ATMs) can be considered evidence of this. ATMs in convenience stores can take advantage of the 24-hour operations by allowing customers to make deposits and withdrawals around the clock. According to Marutschke (2011), the number of ATMs installed in convenience stores surpassed 10,000 nationwide in March 2002 (p. 45). In addition, the financial component means that *konbini* act like mini-banks as a result of government-initiated reforms to create liberalized competition in the Japanese financial sector. Due to the encouragement from the government, 7-Eleven has gone so far as to fully equip its store network with ATMs (Marutschke, 2011, p. 45).

While enjoying the convenience that the mini-banks bring to us, inconveniences occur as well. According to Kato (2012, pp. 132-134), an example of this inconvenience is the increasing need for elder-related fraud prevention. In recent years, many fraud schemes have targeted the nation's growing vulnerable elderly population. A typical scheme involves a fraudster making a phone call to a senior citizen, posing as a relative in need, and asking for money to be transferred by ATM or mailed to an address. Since ATM machines are not as closely monitored as bank institutions, and they are available 24/7 at convenience stores, these fraud schemes specifically direct elderly people to convenience store ATMs. To prevent the elderly from succumbing to these fraud schemes, convenience stores encourage training their staff to recognize suspicious behaviours. For example, if an elderly person is slowly and confusedly using an ATM while talking

on a cellphone, the convenience store staff are trained to intervene with friendly conversation or offer to help when appropriate (Kato, 2012, p. 134).

Debut of Seven Meal Service. According to a survey that Toshiyuki Yahagi, a professor from Hosei University, conducted in 2009, Seven & i Holdings ranked first in terms of “continuous response to change”; indeed, some argue that one of the most important management skills exhibited throughout the company is the continual development of products that reflect current customer needs (Marutschke, 2011, p. 141). A good example of this is the home-delivery service created from a collaboration between 7-Eleven and Yamato Transport’s Takkyubin. This new service for food products was developed to cater to and attract the elderly as a new target group, adapting to the aging society and demographic changes. Yamamoto Transport’s Takkyubin had already started its home delivery service in the 1970s as a successful component of the business. According to Kase, Sáez-Martinez, and Riquelme, (2005, p. 139) Yamamoto Transport’s Takkyubin was a successful enough delivery service company that the parcels it handled surpassed the Japanese postal system, the country-owned postal service.

After 7-Eleven and Yamamoto Transport’s Takkyubin became business partners, a new subsidiary company called Seven Meal Service Co., Ltd. started a new service named Seven Meal Service. Seven Meal Service’s main agenda was to deliver regular meals to the elderly. Seven Meal Services for the elderly are different from the original lunch boxes sold at the normal 7-Elevens; the meals provided by Seven Meal Service incorporate healthier elements in order to cater to the older population’s desire to be health conscious, such as tofu and vegetables instead of fried chicken as sides. Seven Meal Service gave users flexibility in choosing the delivery method: the consumer

could pick up the meal at the convenience store, or request a home delivery. Home deliveries necessitated a meticulous distribution system and delivery network. At the same time, mail-order and online shopping had become hugely popular, constructing a thriving market for delivery services: home delivery was attracting great attention. According to Kato, many different service providers began to compete for control of the “last one mile.” The “last one mile” describes the distance from the store to the house, the last bridge closing the gap between consumers and providers (Kato, 2012, p. 157).

Seven Meal Service Co., Ltd. gained access to 7-Eleven products and distribution systems as well as Yamamoto Transport’s Takkyubin’s delivery service network. As a result, by September 2007, Seven Meal Service was able to provide deliveries to all areas occupied by 7-Eleven convenience stores. According to Reinmoeller (2008, p. 165), both 7-Eleven and Yamamoto Transport’s Takkyubin successfully noticed and responded to a key opportunity to cater to new target consumers, developing new capabilities and adapting to social change in the form of the rising number of the elderly.

It cannot be denied that the need to service seniors fostered massive growth and change in convenience stores and delivery systems. In their attempt to provide services to seniors, convenience stores increased their capacity to serve all age groups of Japanese society. This is just one of the numerous ways in which convenience stores reflect and react to Japanese society changes.

The success of elderly convenience store owners. From the perspective of the ATM-silver-cellphone frauds, elderly people are considered vulnerable, in need of support or assistance.

In contrast, many older convenience store owners defy this stereotype. The problem of an aging society also raises the question of businesses' futures. Many convenience store owners belong to the baby-boom generation, are over the age of 65, yet remain active, and demonstrate that they are both mentally and physically capable of operating a convenience store (Marutschke, 2011, p. 65). According to the 7-Eleven Japan profile for 2018–2019, the average age of the active storeowner is 53 years old. Despite the average age of storeowners being around 50, the true age distribution of storeowners is quite wide, with owners ranging from their twenties to over sixty (7-Eleven Japan, 2018, p. 31). Additionally, according to the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (2016), company policies have been changing, and age limitations on storeowners have become more relaxed. Until the 1990s, many convenience chains had an employee age limit. These days, more and more chains, such as Lawson and FamilyMart, still have minimum age requirements but do not impose upper limits. According to 7-Eleven Japan (2018), the age limit to sign a contract is 60, but an employee who passes the age of 60 on the job may stay indefinitely. Only 1% of the current active storeowners are in their 20s; in contrast, 29.5% of the current active storeowners are 60 and over. If we include storeowners who are in their 50s, the figure becomes 62.4%. This age group for owners (older than 50) is the most rapidly expanding cohort of all (7-Eleven Japan, 2018, p. 31).

One way in which *konbini* are shaping and shaped by Japanese society is the fact that *konbini* both cater to and employ the elderly, as the elderly population is growing in both size and social impact. Based on the above discussion, *konbini* represent Japanese society's need to satisfy both the old and young generations. Thus, I argue that not only do convenience stores provide products and services that satisfy both young and old populations, they also provide a social construct, a meaningful legacy that is passed down from one generation to another. This is seen in the way that franchises are passed down from an older generation to a younger generation. Many

decades have passed since convenience stores started as a business in Japan, and it is not hard to find some owners who have been with their company for 10, 15, or even 20 years. People who were in their 40s or 50s at the time of joining the franchise are now in their 60s and 70s. Often, ownership is passed on to a family member. All the hardware and business aspects, such as supply connections, are passed down, and the relationships, reputation, loyal customer satisfaction, and local expectations, are inherited as well. In this way, convenience stores bridge the gap between older and younger generations, creating a retail experience that tailors its services to its region and customer base, shaping and being shaped by what Japanese society is at the time.

Debut of Seniors-Friendly Lawson. I have discussed 7-Eleven's history, services, and policies extensively by this point, and I will now shift the attention to Lawson, a different convenience store chain that has also managed to creatively change in response to the needs of the elderly. This time, the store did not only change the goods and services provided: it also changed the layout and setting.

According to Kato (2012), the first Seniors-Friendly Lawson opened in Hyogo Prefecture, Awajishima city in July 2006. Visitors recounting the grand opening remember an entrance passageway wider than those of normal convenience stores, miscellaneous goods not found at regular Lawsons, including hair styling products popular with young people of former years, some local souvenirs, and a unique setting: a resting space populated with massage chairs (Lawson, 2006c). Even though the arrangement of products and aisles as well as the resting space seemed different or even unusual for a convenience store, these elements are what make "Seniors-Friendly Lawsons" especially senior-friendly (Kato, 2012, pp. 161-162). Lawson took this approach of

tailoring itself to elderly needs even further as new Senior-Friendly Lawsons opened, one after another. When Lawson opened new senior-friendly stores, they considered not only the needs of the elderly but also regional popular trends and elements. For example, Awajishima Seniors-Friendly Lawson installed massage chairs and LCD TVs in a wide resting space, taking advantage of the fact that Awajishima's Seniors-Friendly Lawson was approximately twice the size of regular Lawson convenience stores (Lawson, 2006c). Meanwhile, Lawson in Shinjo City has card games, and Lawson in Asahikawa City has card games and capsule toys. While these features of Lawsons were originally intended for seniors, it is plain that some features appear to appeal to children too. As a result, the purpose of creating this setting is actually for seniors to enjoy their time with grandchildren (Lawson, 2006a, 2006b).

In order to test the success of this kind of layout, Lawson needed feedback. They did so by making a membership system. The Lawsons in Awajishima and Asahikawa City recruited customers aged 60 and up. Members can place telephone orders and receive product deliveries from the convenience stores. In return, members discuss improvements to products and services, allowing the convenience store to discover ways to improve their business (Lawson, 2006c). Another notable aspect of Seniors-Friendly Lawson is its magazine selection. Most magazines at these stores are called "*Sōnen Zasshi*," which translates as "senior magazine." The contents of these magazines reflect their audience: most of them are interest-related, discussing topics such as gardening, fishing, and travelling—a huge market for senior citizens (Lawson, 2006b).

Above, I have discussed some specific examples of how Lawson has tailored their stores to the elderly. Here, with reference to Onishi (2006) and Lawson (2006a), I will conclude this section with a summary of some of the broader common themes seen in each Senior-Friendly Lawson.

1. **Fresh produce:** All Senior-Friendly Lawson stores have a wide selection of fresh vegetables, prepared dishes, and daily items. This concept was never part of regular Lawson stores. This store type can be considered to be a small version of a supermarket, targeting the elderly in particular.
2. **Lightweight shopping carts:** In regular Lawson convenience stores, it would be unnecessary to have shopping carts since store areas are narrower. However, in Senior-Friendly Lawsons, sales aisles are wider as the stores have more space, allowing lightweight shopping carts to be used for the convenience and comfort of seniors. As these shopping carts have become quite popular among seniors, store designers have had to widen the passageways at store entrances and throughout the store. This practice of making shopping easier and more accessible has been termed “*Baari-furi Shoppingu*,” which translates to barrier-free shopping.
3. **Larger price tags and easy-to-read signage:** To make prices easier to read, Lawson made their price tags bigger at senior-friendly locations. At normal Lawson convenience stores, the price tag is much smaller since the shelf upon which it rests is too thin fit a larger card: this creates price cards tags that are difficult to discern, even for those who are not elderly.
4. **Rest space:** The original intention of the rest space was for it to serve a community function, bringing people together, promoting this purpose through places to sit. No matter who you are, as long as you want to take a break from shopping, this space is welcoming and useful. One may encounter an acquaintance or catch up with neighbours and friends while taking a rest.

- 5. Location:** Most Senior-Friendly Lawson stores are located in areas where the aging rate is relatively high.

The evolution of Lawson stores to cater to the elderly reinforces the theory that *konbini* are shaped by Japanese society. In fact, the concept of Senior-Friendly Lawson began as a project of the Tohoku branch of Lawson stores: in the Tohoku region, there were a greater number of older people than younger people. While this may have triggered a sense of crisis, since younger people were seen as the main consumers of convenience stores at the time, Lawson saw this as an opportunity to pilot a project, opening new stores in this area to target older people. This is another example of how Japanese society is shaping *konbini* today.

Evidence of Value Changes



Figure 1. Ikka Danran (Nakashima Shiro, 2007)

Nihon Shinbun Kyokai Website, https://www.pressnet.or.jp/adarc/adc/2007/no1_b.html. Accessed on November 29, 2018.

In this section, I will discuss evidence demonstrating that these changes mentioned above are widespread and publicly accepted. Figure 1 is titled “*Ikka Danran*.” In 2007, a popular national newspaper group, *Nihon Shinbun Kyokai* (or NSK)—the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association—conducted its annual journalism contest. The winning entry that year highlighted the changes evident in Japanese society. Before we get to this winning submission, it is important to understand the implications of winning this contest. NSK is an entirely independent and autonomous organization funded and operated by daily newspapers, news agencies, and broadcasters. NSK was once a part of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), a division of the Japanese national government. Some of the most prominent Japanese newspapers, such as *Yomiuri*, the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the *Mainichi Shimbun*, are members of NSK. Besides the organization’s objective to maintain ethics in publishing, research and study, education, interchange, public relations, and publishing activities, it also has a number of its own publications: a weekly newspaper, a monthly magazine, a quarterly, and books related to mass media. Accordingly, winning this contest meant having a submission published in a number of widely distributed newspapers. Directly translated from Japanese, the contest was called a newspaper advertisement creative contest, calling for readers to submit a picture: the theme of this picture submission was “family” in 2007. Out of 1502 submissions, this was the winning entry: “*Ikka Danran*.”

Similar to in spoken and written Chinese, it is common to see four-character idioms in Japanese. These idioms have a great deal of additional meaning to them, including but not limited to the literal meaning of the phrase. While such idioms have surface-level meanings, they also carry connotations that reflect societal values. In *kanji*, *ikka danran* is written in four characters (一家団樂). Directly translated, it means “one family getting together.” Yet it is more than just the idea of

a family getting together, this phrase conjures the image of a family eating together, providing company to each other, creating a community, and establishing connections and social bonds. This idiom is emblematic of some very fundamental Japanese social values: filial piety, putting family first, and fulfilling social responsibility by uniting with family. Notice though that in the picture, there are more than four characters in each line. This is because the submission is written in *hiragana*, a phonetic lettering system, instead of *kanji* characters. The purpose of this is to highlight the second *hiragana* character. In this line, “いっかだんらん,” “っ,” or “*tsu*” would not appear if the idiom *ikka danran* were written in *kanji*. Linguistically, this “*tsu*” represents a double consonant and consonants can be elongated in Japanese. Whenever double consonants occur (i.e., pp, tt, kk, or ss) the first of the pair is always written with a “half size っ (*tsu*),” which looks like this: っ. Observe the example: いっかだんらん *ikka danran*. The distinction between the English double consonant and the Japanese double consonant is that the double consonant in Japanese has meaning. Changing the “*tsu*” size completely changes the consonant pronunciation as well as the entire word’s meaning.

It is vital to understand that the meaning of “っ” changes depending on its size relative to the height of neighbouring hiragana. “っ” is a *sokuon*, a Japanese symbol that changes in pronunciation. When っ is small, it is pronounced as a pause: “i (pause) *kka danran*.” When っ is large, it is pronounced as “*tsu*”: “*itsuka danran*.”

To illustrate this, いっかだんらん, where っ is shorter and smaller than the other *hiragana*, the meaning of *ikka danran* is as described as above, the idea of a family coming together and eating together. In いつかだんらん, where っ is as tall as the other characters, the meaning of this term becomes: “one day we will get together,” or “someday we will get together” or is even close to the

English expression “until we meet again.” The two *hiragana* together: いつ means “when,” and when one adds the suffix, か, it means, “in the future, or an uncertain time.” いつか can be used neutrally, for example, “いつか会うね (*itsuka au ne*)” as in “I’ll see you sometime.” In this context, however, I argue that いつかだんらん “*itsuka danran*” implies sadness, because the uncertainty of being able to meet entails being unable to meet.

This submission is a graphic representation of how life is changing in Japan. People are realizing that fewer families are getting together, or perhaps even more simply, fewer people are getting together. In this picture, the size of the “*tsu*” in each line does not change, while the heights of the *hiraganas* surrounding it change. I suggest that this symbolizes that the individual and his or her responsibilities to family may not have changed, but factors such as economic limitations requiring more working hours, creating a rising cost of living, and highlighting the convenience of eating alone, surround the individual and have formed a barrier to participation in and eating with one’s family.

Chapter 4. Value Changes (2): *Konbini Mama*, Mothers and Wives

The previous chapters reviewed how value changes among singles and elderly people's needs are reflected in *konbini*. In this chapter, we will shift our attention to a new group of people in society—women—by considering how *konbini* cater to mothers and wives with respect to their changing roles in families. As mentioned above, Japanese is a very dynamic language, and one of its features is that it reveals social trends quickly; thus, in this chapter I will choose several examples of terminology from different historical periods to demonstrate and analyze these changes. One of the major methods that I use in this study is to analyze an advertisement from a FamilyMart campaign. In doing so, I employ a concept, *konbini mama*, to help us to understand how *konbini* have supported changes in values concerning women's roles in their families.

In this section, we are mainly looking at value changes from the perspective of the Japanese family. In Japanese families, wives to husbands and mothers to children play significant and irreplaceable roles. Thus, in order to understand value changes through the lens of the family, let us look at how Japanese women have changed their roles and values over the years. Trendy words and phrases that have been created in society have become part of the popular discourse regarding family changes. There are a few Japanese terms that I would like to analyze: *ryōsai kenbo*—which, as we know from earlier chapters, means “good wife, wise mother”; *kyōiku mama*; *tenuki okusan*; and *konbini mama*.

Trendy words

Ryōsai kenbo. From the late 19th to the beginning of the 20th century, concepts of family and women's roles within it were unlike those of today. Before the Meiji Restoration, the concept of “*ie*” was dominant: according to Lebra (1984), *ie* was a family lifestyle among the rich class, and it typically included the head of a family, his wife and children, his parents and unmarried relatives, and servants. Most of the marriages between husbands and wives in *ie*, compared with modern marriages, served as tools for gaining social and economic status, rather than pursuing romantic relationships.

After the Meiji Restoration, the Ministry of Education established *ryōsai kenbo* as a governmental ideology in 1899. This ideology became the solid foundation of girls' education, which was considered the cornerstone of producing the quality of “*kenbo*,” or “wise mother.” The goal of educating women, in particular, was to help them fulfill their roles as wives to support the *ie* by performing domestic tasks like housework, childrearing, and assisting their husbands. Before the war, the ideology suited the nation's policies—to reproduce more male offspring and go to the war. This ideology became the “official discourse on women in Japan” until the Second World War (Uno, 1993, p. 294). During the post-war period, women were still encouraged to remain in domestic roles and were obligated to pursue their roles as mothers and wives by reproducing because of the shortage of labour after the war.

Ryōsai kenbo, a now-old term, seems to be irrelevant to today's Japanese life. However, this old ideology from the Meiji Restoration period is the foundation for many contemporary social issues, such as gender inequality in the workplace and educational system. This is due to the fact that the primary domestic duties for women in contemporary Japanese society are still to pursue

marriage, motherhood, and to take care of the household. Undeniably, *ryōsai kenbo* still affects how women pursue their identities, choose their life goals, and even shape their life trajectories (Brinton, 1993). In addition, as an expectation this is still widely encouraged and accepted not only by Japanese women themselves, but also by the entire Japanese society. *Akusai*, which means “bad wife,” is generally used to describe a woman who cannot handle domestic duties properly. Ironically, this term is not limited to use by men, but is also frequently used by women to describe themselves. Koyama in *Ryōsai Kenbo* (2013) uses *akusai* as evidence of how much *ryōsai kenbo* ideology has penetrated Japanese society. The words analysed below are considered to reflect the various forms of *ryōsai kenbo*, as this traditional ideology continues to affect Japanese society in new ways.

M-shaped trajectory. An M-shaped trajectory or M-shaped curve is an index showing the female labour force participation rate by age. In Japan, these are known as “M-shaped curves,” since the pattern of two peaks with a base between them resembles the letter M. The M-shaped curve is considered to be a very important index in studies of Japanese women and families. The right-hand peak of the M is the peak of re-entry into the labour force after raising a family, and this always has been considered to be a sign that women’s participation in Japanese society has increased since the war (Raz, 2002, p. 138) However, what happens at the bottom of the curve requires more attention. This is directly related to Japanese working practice: generally, after women get married, they leave their jobs and become full-time housewives. Then, when they decide to go back to work, they will most likely be employed part-time (Shimada, 1980, p. 25). In the 1960s, families in Japan were very similar to their American counterparts; to be specific, husbands and wives had very clear gender-specific roles and tasks in the home. In Japan, due to the old value

of *ryōsai kenbo*, Japanese women as *kenbo* were supposed to take care of “the in” (domestic tasks) while they supported their husbands as salarymen so they could take care of “the out” (the workplace). *Ryōsai kenbo* affected women ideologically and practically by restricting their ability to re-enter society.

Kyōiku Mama. From the late 1960s to the 1970s, the “unisex” value of sharing domestic tasks and child-rearing became a new tendency in the US. However, taking the gender out of the home did not translate well in Japanese society. Men were still in charge of income as the breadwinners for the whole family. On the other hand, women, continuously under the influence of *ryōsai kenbo*, were playing service-oriented roles as planners, organizers, cooks, and all-round supporters of their children’s success. “*Kyōiku Mama*” is a famous and pejorative term that was used in Japanese society from the 1960s to the 1970s; it indicates a stereotypical mother who forces her children to study, which causes damage to the child's social and physical development, and even to their emotional well-being. The popular usage of *kyōiku mama* indicates that the “unisexization” of sharing domestic tasks and child-rearing in Japan was not as successful as in the US, since no term has yet emerged for “*kyōiku papa*”—education father. It is the “mama” who becomes the infamous social phenomenon. According to Vogel (1979), the former MITI was called “*kyōiku mama*” for its approach and initiatives in guiding the industrial growth of Japanese society (p. 70). This is an example of the wide use of *kyōiku mama* as a term.

Kagikko. After the 1973 Oil Shock, the Japanese economy went into recession; as a result, women started to go back to work to support family expenditures. In the mid-1980s, the Japanese

government published a few acts in order to expand female employment and career opportunities, and one of the most important acts among them was Japan's Equal Employment Opportunity Law (April, 1986). The government also formed a committee in the Prime Minister's Office named "Planning and Promotion of Policies for Women" in 1975 (Creighton, 1996, p. 192). Among all these economic and political factors, we can see that women were strongly encouraged to go back to work. Subsequently, more and more families became *tomobataraki kazoku*, a household in which both husband and wife work. In the 1980s, another popularly used term in Japanese society emerged: *kagikko*, "latch-key kid." *Kagikko* is normally used to describe children who come back to an empty home from school earlier than their working parents.

Tenuki Okusan and Depaato Mama. In the 1970s, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. They worked either full time or during their children's school time. Simultaneously, they had to maintain their households. These mothers normally became "*tenuki okusan*," or "no-hand housewives": they had "no hands" because they have to take care of their family and at the same time work part or full time. As a result, multiservice stores, such as department stores near train terminals, became lifesavers for plenty of busy working women. *Depaato mama* is a term used to describe mothers who use and visit department stores frequently. Department stores can be dated back to the small shops popular for Tokugawa Era (1600s to 1800s) merchants, and they have been part of the Japanese urban life since the 1920s (Creighton, 1992, p. 43). With the growth of the middle class, department stores became the main hubs for families to meet their needs for goods and services, and more and more housewives went to these one-stop shopping centers. Department stores provide housewares, clothing, and even hairdressing services, but most importantly, they provide supreme food services for women, especially for working

women. In department store basements, women can find expensive, high-quality food selections, such as brand-name *sushi*, *okatsu*, or even wine, they can also find affordable *obento* boxes. These department stores serve as both shopping centers and as take-out kitchens for *tenuki okusan*. According to a survey from 1992, 57 percent of housewives had the experience of buying prepared food, such as *karaage*, or grilled fish, from a department store; furthermore, 50 percent of the housewives had bought entire prepared meals (White, 2002, p. 198).

Konbini Mama. In Anne Allison's book (1996), she employs the term "mother-imprinted labour" to describe the gender-divided domestic duties that Japanese women perform (1996, p. 103). Eric Funabashi (2016, p. 32) also used this term to define duties that stay-at-home women performed, including cooking, housework, and child-rearing. I will be using the term "*konbini mama*," which has similar connotations to "*depaato mama*" and "*tenuki okusan*" to argue that, based on social value changes, *konbini* are taking over the traditional role of women in the home. Domestic labour, instead of being "mother-imprinted," is now more "*konbini*-imprinted." Therefore, the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* still persists in Japanese society, like it always did, but working women perform "*konbini*-imprinted" labour. As an example, Creighton (1996), a noted anthropologist interested in department stores in Japan, mentions that the functions that used to be the exclusive domain of *depaato* are now served by convenience stores.

Miura (2005b), a famous marketing analyst and professor in Japan, argues that *konbini* have become substitutes or even replacements for mothers. Miura calls *konbini* "mothers" and suggest that these 24-hour stores could raise children (2005b, p. 112). He provides several pieces of evidence to support his argument. For example, when you go to the *konbini*, there will be food. No matter where you go and no matter when you go, there is always a surrogate mother—*konbini*—to look after you. Most *konbini* are open 24 hours, and in this situation, *konbini* are more convenient

than observing your mother's schedule. When you go to *konbini*, since the food is prepared and ready, you can take it and leave, you do not even need to say "thank you"; in as much as this is the case, convenience stores may seem to be even better than your mother.

Konbini offer a nice variety of ready-to-eat and side dishes that tend to be more processed for occasions where there is not enough time to prepare a simple or full meal. In my own experience, the only thing you need to do is warm them up; however, some *konbini* even do this for you while you are paying at the register. Thus, this is not only helpful for me, but also for Japanese housewives who are responsible for making food for their entire family every day. According to White (2013), buying food in *konbini* results in the labour of cooking, serving, and presentation being provided outside the home, and *konbini* takes care of this component of women's roles inside the home. At the same time, the guilt a woman may feel from buying prepared foods at *konbini* depends on the degree of labour added to the food, corresponding to the labour she saves herself (White, 2013, p. 72). In other words, the food prepared by *konbini* provides a middle way for women, which we called "*nakashoku*" in the previous chapter. I believe this middle way should make women less guilty, since they can still feel themselves being engaged in the "mother-imprinted labour," while they actually perform the "*konbini*-imprinted labour" in producing food for their families.

Konbini are where all these social values changes assemble. *Konbini* reflect social needs by providing more options for women to perform their "mother-imprinted labour," which allows Japanese women to be able to validate their traditional roles and expectations. At the same time, *konbini* are also reacting to social needs by supporting "de-womanized" lifestyles and behaviours; for example, the traditional mother serving the happy supper table has been reformed. Men have started learning to cook due to demographic and social changes, especially if they are away from home due to their work. Today, both husband and wife are increasingly learning to share

domesticity by doing “*konbini*-imprinted labour” such as preparing food with the support of the outside-house-helper of the convenience store.

FamilyMart—the “*Okāsan no Shokudō*” Campaign

In this section, I mainly analyse a particular FamilyMart advertisement campaign. In doing so, I argue that *konbini* are helping women not only to complete domestic duties but also to form new identities with their traditional values by being *konbini mama*.

On September 18, 2018, FamilyMart released an advertisement called “Mother’s Kitchen” for its side dish series. Akiyama (1993) noted that TV personalities, especially actresses, pop singers, movie stars, and TV talents frequently appear in Japanese advertisements. In this FamilyMart advertisement, a woman is portrayed by a famous male celebrity named Shingo Katori, a former member of the best-selling boy band SMAP. This is not the first time Shingo Katori played a role of a “mother.” Shingo Katori is known for playing androgynous roles in TV shows and dramas. In one of his most successful characters, he dressed as “Shingo Mama,” wearing heavy makeup and a short skirt (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Shingo Mama is a drag character from a Japanese TV program “*Sata Smap*.” This character is not only cute and popular, but more importantly, motherly. Katori deployed a traditional performance technique *josō*, literally “women’s dressing,” commonly used to refer to a practice of men dressing in women’s attire. It is close to the Western concept of cross-dressing. In order to understand this interesting phenomenon, I would like to look into the gender norms in Japanese society.

As Romit Dasgupta notes, after the war, in order to develop the economy, the dominant discourse on the masculine ideal shifted its focus on the soldier in the war to the warrior in the corporate world, the “salaryman warrior - the white-collar male worker” (2003, p. 122). The catch phrase “*daikokubashira*” (literally “main pillar”) indicates that men are expected to serve their own country’s economic growth, develop the companies that they work in, and lastly become the breadwinners of their own families. In terms of femininity, women on the other hand are expected to be a “*sengyo shufu*,” a full-time housewife in the home. *Sengyo shufu* is considered to be one of the various forms that the traditional ideology *ryōsai kenbo* can take, and in this role a woman is responsible for taking care of the family and the household so that the salaryman husband can be free from housework and remain fully committed to his work. Even though *sengyo shufu* and *ryōsai kenbo* are no longer being propagated by the government today, the residue of the ideology continues to influence modern constructions of femininity in Japan.

Throughout Japanese history, gender expectations have been propagated and administered by the government and educational institutions, and as a result, these expectations are perpetuated in society. However, individuals have lived lives and developed identities that differ from or even challenge what Uno and Molony called the “unitary constrictions of gender” (2005, p. 8). Recently, the term “*famio-kun*” has become more and more popular, this term is used to describe effeminate young males. Ito Kimio (2003), a social activist, mentioned that while men are being “feminized” and women “masculinized,” notions of masculinity and femininity are socially and culturally constructed and can be changed over time. As with *famio-kun*, unconventional voices have always existed in Japanese society. According to McLelland and Dasgupta, however, even with the rising visibility of individuals with non-conventional gender and sexual identities, social pressures to

conform to conventional gender ideologies are still very strong in contemporary Japan (2005, p. 10).

As a result, with respect to the advertisement below, I propose that in order to be emblematic of *ryōsai kenbo*, the ideology of traditional Japanese women, Katori needed to *josō* himself in order to conform the conventional gender ideology.

Image removed due to copyright
restrictions

Figure 2. Okāsan no Shokudō (FamilyMart, 2018)

FamilyMart Website, <https://www.cinra.net/news/gallery/146902/0/> Accessed on
December 3, 2018.

Shingo Mama is famous in different genres, for example, the character released a quickly popular single in 2000—“*Shingo mama no oha rokku*.” From the lyrics, Shingo Katori portrays a very amiable motherly figure, Shingo Mama, who is talented in cooking and is the incarnation of caring and efficiency, which are features commonly found in Japanese mothers. Another example is “*Shingo mama no kossori asagohan*” (Secret Breakfast of Shingo Mama), a famous reality show. Audience members can request Shingo Mama to go to their house and take their mother’s role so that their mother can have an opportunity to sleep in. In one of the episodes, Shingo Mama arrived at the Atarashis’ household, as requested by Mrs. Atarashi. She prepared breakfast and woke everyone except Mrs. Atarashi up on time, Mr. Atarashi and the four children. After the breakfast, she saw Mr. Atarashi off to work and then woke up Mrs. Atarashi (Arai & Harada, 2002). In that episode, one of the children commented that Shingo Mama “*okasan mirai*” (looks like a mother). From taking care of chores to looking after family members, Shingo Mama always portrays herself as an efficient mother, the maternal image reflected in the traditional ideology in Japanese society, *ryōsai konbo*.

Men generally contribute minimally to child-rearing in Japanese society; thus, I believe that an effeminate male image in advertisements is more easily accepted, socially, in terms of the gender stereotype that binds Japanese females to the roles of the wife and the mother. This advertisement is effective due to the fact that the groups targeted both directly and indirectly, such as husbands, boyfriends, and even children, gravitate towards the image of female caretakers. This notion is ingrained in the societal norms established in Japanese culture, which emphasize the traditional concept of *ryōsai kenbo*, the role of women in society as caretakers in the family.

In the advertisement, Shingo Katori uses a big and confident smile under the *noren*, a traditional cloth that is usually displayed at the entrance of shops or family-own restaurants to

indicate they are open. Smiling is a very important part of Japanese commercials, a smile in an advertisement generally expresses happiness and satisfaction. The commercial hopes to appeal to the audience with smiles by indicating that a happy family life has resulted from the use of its products or services. The main figure of this advertisement is also wearing a *kabbougi*, a traditional Japanese cooking garment worn by female figures, especially mothers, which has similar functions to those of the western apron. This might indicate that the concept of the family is a central concept in the advertisement. The very inviting waving hand gesture in this advertisement also appears, an effective nonverbal means of communication. There are a few traditional objects displayed in this advertisement, such as the *noren* and *kabbougi*; these two traditional items also contribute to the “Japaneseness” of the image. This advertisement successfully combines the traditional visual aspects of motherhood with those of modernity, such as a popular TV personality and a newer concept of womanhood. The beautiful contrast resulting from this combination is commonly used by Japanese commercials (Akiyama, 1993, p. 91).

Finally, the script of this advertisement is a catchphrase, “*Su go ku oishii, ka na ri tsu ka e ru*” (“very tasty, very useful!”), which is also a semantically inspiring and grammatically common phrase that people use every day. It sounds convincing because it sounds like an everyday comment from a mother, a major consumer target for this advertisement. Vestergard & Schroder (1985) comment that the task of commercial makers is to attract attention, to arouse interest, to stimulate desire, to create conviction, and to get action (p. 49). This catchphrase also creates nostalgic feelings in a potentially potent marketing target—people who live away from their families, such as students and singles.

Undoubtedly, this picture represents female figures with Japanese traditional values, like *kenbo*, indicating that conventional mothers are one of its target audiences. Japanese mothers, as

we discussed earlier, are normally responsible for child-rearing; however, this trend often seems to continue even after their children enter adulthood. It is common to see a Japanese mother not only doing the chores for her young family, but also for her adult children, such as washing their laundry, cleaning their rooms, helping them to find spouses, or even taking care of their children. Due to the existing residue of traditional women's values in contemporary society, fathers have minimized their role in child-rearing. Thus, Japanese children, especially boys, have a strong tendency to bond with their mothers (Allison, 1996).

Japanese men use the word *ofukuro*, an informal term of endearment for a mother. According to *Sanseidō Daijirin* Dictionary (Matsumura, 1989), this term is marked as *danseigo*, which means a term that is generally used by men. Compared with the term *ofukuro*, which is used exclusively by men, the phrase “*ofukuro no aji*” or “*okasan no aji*,” literally meaning “the taste of mother,” is widely used by both women and men in their adulthood to describe meals that taste similar to what their mothers used to make. This term is especially used when you are an adult and you miss the home-cooked meals that you grew up eating during your childhood years. Consequently, when people use this phrase, nostalgic feelings are involved. Several scholars have argued that food has become one of the central causes of nostalgia (Ashkenazi, Jacob, & Ashkenazi, 2013; Cwiertka, 2006; Yano, 2003). For example, miso paste is a commonly used material in the Japanese diet. Miso paste can be easily used in a simmered broth with *konbu* (seaweed), *iriko* (dried baby sardines), or *katuso* (dried and smoked skipjack tuna) with vegetables to make the quintessential dish in most Japanese daily home cooked meals—miso soup. Miso soup is often associated with the making of the famous *ofukuro no aji* and mothers, the bearers of traditions, keepers of the household, and most importantly, the soup makers. Thus, miso soup has become a medium of the taste of a mother and the warm feeling of home; it also has become emblematic of

home and mother with regard to Japanese history. This can also be found in the Japanese ballad genre, *enka*. Several *enka* songs speak nostalgically of a mother, and in fact, a mother and mother's cooking are closely linked in many *enka* songs. For example, a popular *enka* called "*Miso Shiru no Uta*" is referring to a mother's cooking. According to Yano (2002, pp. 3-4), the older generations are considered to be the major and primary audience for *enka*, and the major topics for *enka* are "parted lovers," "long unseen rural hometowns," and "self-sacrificing mothers." In *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (2002), Yano mentions different types of longing based on gender, primarily women's longing for absent lovers, and men's longing for mothers and *furusato* (generally defined as "hometown," though this translation is currently being debated and refined among scholars) (p. 174). However, *enka* is not the only public discourse that has its attention on homemade cooking, cookbooks and magazines, for preparing *obento* are also strongly related to *ofukuro no aji*. *Obento* is the food mothers cooked and prepared for their children's school lives. To prepare *obento* in a manner that is not only nutritious but also visually and aesthetically pleasing is considered to be one of the most significant domestic tasks for Japanese mothers to show their commitment and diligence to their children (Allison, 1996). Therefore, *obento* is nostalgic for the Japanese since it reminds them of their *ofukuro no aji* and mothers, generation by generation. According to Cherry, the phrases *ofukuro no aji* or *okasan no aji* have been used in advertisements by restaurants and shops in order to target customers who long for home-cooked meals (2016, p. 111).

According to Ito, Adachi, and Stanlaw (2008), the food that we used to call "home-made cooking" or "*ofukuro no aji*" is now found not in the home but outside of it, in this case, in *konbini*. Compared with traditional housewives, modern Japanese housewives would rather rely on fast or pre-cooked foods these days than cooking by themselves, as their husband's *ofukuro* did. Thus, it

seems that many people, especially men, who have strong bonds with their mothers, are now more willing to look for “home cooking” outside the home. In order to get the taste of their own mothers’ real *ofukuro*-style home-cooked meals, they must go out to find more authentic home-made cooking (Ito, Adachi, & Stanlaw, 2008). Ivy (1995) discussed how the Japan National Railway was targeting young women who have the time and flexibility to travel as their potential customers, as women are also considered to be “hidden manipulators” (p. 38) at home: they make decisions for their husbands and control their husbands’ consumer choices by doing so. Therefore, by targeting young women, companies have access to a larger market, their significant others (Ivy, 1995, p. 38).

The advertisement in Figure 2 above highlights the paradoxical and bizarre cycle that stems from contradictory expectations established by both genders: the more women rely on *konbini* food, such as side dishes, the more men are encouraged to find authentic “*ofukuro no aji*” outside the home, incidentally also from *konbini*. Thus, I follow Ivy’s logic and argue that *konbini* advertisements only need to specifically target working women, through this, and because of nostalgia, men follow. The FamilyMart Katori Shingo “Mother’s Kitchen” campaign use mothers’ cooking as a main theme and a medium, showing how the concept of a traditional mother has become not only a physical presence but also a sentimental taste through everyday food, which is now provided by *konbini*, the replacement of a mother. This advertisement targets potent customer bases: working women and men with nostalgia.

Another concept that is always associated with nostalgia, other than *ofukuro no aji*, is *urusato*. Coincidentally, several scholars argued that *urusato* is strongly associated with the concept of mother. As Yano mentioned, “ties of kinship connect *urusato* to family, but more specifically, to a mother, one’s ‘biological *urusato*’” (2002, p. 174). According to Creighton, “to Japanese, *urusato* evokes affective images of an area where one’s childhood memories or emotional

memories are strongest” (1997, p. 242). At the same time, Creighton also argued that the affective images that Japanese people have regarding *furusato* are strongly associated with motherly love (1997, p. 242). Both Matsumoto (1980) and Buruma (1984, p. 213) mentioned that the rural life that *furusato* provided is synonymous with motherhood. In Robertson’s analysis (1988), *furusato* is temporal and spatial, temporal because of the prefix “*furu*” (derived from the Japanese word “*furui*,” which literally means old, but can also refer to the quality of being in the past, or historicity) and spatial because “*furu(i)* signifies the patina of familiarity and naturalness that objects and human relationships acquired with age, use and interaction” (p. 495). Also, as Tuan noted, for young children, “mother” does not just mean a person but also a “place,” where “fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss,” creating a “haven of stability” (1977, pp. 177-78). Therefore, mother or “*ofukuro*” and *furusato* are interchangeable.

Amae is also a popular topic regarding nostalgia in Japanese studies. Takeo Doi, a Japanese psychiatrist, is well known as the author of *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1988), in which he tried to explain the Japanese concept of *amae*. According to Doi’s definition, *amae* is “to depend and presume upon another’s benevolence” (1988, pp. 20-25). *Amae* is an individual’s desire to depend on another, to presume on another’s good will, and to feel sheltered and secure through a sense of boding with others. Doi also noted that *amae* represents a Japanese tendency to reaffirm a sense of interdependency among people. In this sense, *furusato* and mother can be considered synonymous due to the fact that they both provide someone with a place where they can find a dependable person to fulfil their needs for *amae*. In addition, Yano (2002) points out the *amae* relationship between a mother and a child is similar to the lover–lover relationship. Using Dennis Wrong’s “power over” and “power to” theory, Yano explains that men are placed in the position of children and women in the position of mothers, and both sides hold certain powers in this interdependent relationship. The

child manipulates power by being helpless since things are done for him, while the mother holds power by doing these things (Yano, 2002, p. 177).

Based on Doi's (1988) theory of Japanese *amae* dependency psychology and Yano's (2002) theory, I argue that *konbini*, similar to *furusato*, are not only trying to provide a place for their customers to depend on but also trying to build a mother-child *amae* relationship with their customer by providing "konbini-imprinted labour," such as being a surrogate kitchen. In doing so, *konbini* can create an atmosphere of bringing the primal and sensory memories of a mother back to their customer. As a result, I argue *konbini amae*, a dependence on *konbini*, will become more and more popular in Japanese society. For example, Whitelaw once noted that "konbini are 'like the air you breathe' and for certain generations of Japanese, it is difficult to imagine life without access to these 24-hour stores" (2018, p. 71).

I have to admit that I am a heavy *konbini* user. When I was living in Japan, I would go to different *konbini* chains daily to gather the ingredients to make just one meal: for example, I would go to 7-Eleven for dairy products, such as milk and yogurt; I would go to FamilyMart for side dishes, such as deep fried chicken (*karaage*); Sunkus for grilled goods such as *yakitori* (grilled chicken); Lawson for *onigiri* (rice balls); and lastly, before I went home, I would go to Secomart located inside my residential building on the first floor in Sapporo for my favorite ice cream as my desert. I considered myself to be a *konbini izon shou*, a part of the syndrome of dependency on *konbini*.

The one important thing that Canada and many other countries that I have visited or lived in have lacked is *konbini*—Japanese-style convenience stores. After I came to Canada, it took me a long time to adjust myself to a *konbini*-less lifestyle. The convenience stores here in Canada, even

though most of them are open all hours like in Japan, do not stock much for me to “*tachiyomi*” (standing-reading), a famous social phenomenon in Japan where people stand and read in a bookshop or convenience store to kill time. Most importantly, however, they lack the kind of food I want to eat. I have never considered convenience stores in Canada to be my surrogate kitchen, nor do they make me feel nostalgia or long for my Japanese *furusato*. What I long for the most is a *konbini onigiri*, and this makes me very homesick for Japan. Similar to what Ivy (1995) called in her book “the vanishing”—the nostalgia—*konbini* have literally vanished in my life. Apparently, I am not the only one who is suffering from *konbini izon shou*. Well-known Japanese celebrities also have a thing for *konbini*. According to Masujima (2007), Nakata Hidetoshi, a 30-year-old famous former Japanese football star who played for foreign football teams for years, also admitted in an interview that during the years that he spent abroad, one of the most difficult things he experienced was the lack of *konbini* outside of Japan. Interestingly, a couple of newspapers and television shows have documented his habit of visiting *konbini* to buy Japanese snacks right after touching down in the Narita Airport (Nishimura, 2004, pp. 46-48).

Yano (2002) argued that due to the “*kazoku kokka*” or nation-as-family ideology, the mother has become part of not only personal but also national identity. *Enka* as media have established a sensual link between all Japanese citizens, particularly men, as children of mothers. Through one’s mother, especially the foods she cooks, a child learns what it means to be a Japanese. In evoking motherhood, *enka* establishes a biological definition of national identity. It is clear that *enka* is sometimes invoked or promoted as a national symbol and is sometimes used as a medium for the expression of ideas or feelings about Japanese national identity (Yano, 2002, p. 177). Therefore, I argue that similarly, *konbini* have become a surrogate kitchen and a substitute or even a replacement for mothers in modern Japanese society; furthermore, using *konbini* in this way has created a new

definition of national identity: just as a man will always love and yearn for his mother, so too theoretically will Japanese people always love and yearn for *konbini*. Like the examples I mentioned above regarding myself and Nakata Hidetoshi, *konbini* is not only a commercial retail format; more accurately, *konbini* assures my connection to and nostalgia for Japan, and at the same time, makes me feel more Japanese.

Conclusion

In this study, I have discussed how *konbini*, as social microcosms, are shaping Japanese society. Simultaneously, *konbini* are being shaped by the demographic and societal needs of Japanese society. This thesis begins with an explanation of why I chose *konbini* as a research topic by showing their high performance from the perspective of sales, patronage, and customer base. The introductory chapter compares *konbini*, as the youngest Japanese retail format to post offices, gas stations, department stores and supermarkets. Accordingly, the history of convenience stores begins the next chapter. As the Japanese population is decreasing, the importance of *konbini* as components of social infrastructure and lifelines have also been discussed. The implications of this are not only academic, the topic also has relevance to daily life: from the government to the victims of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, more and more people are recognizing the significant role that *konbini* play in modern Japanese society.

In the second chapter, the discussion focused on the main topic of the history of convenience stores. From the small ice shop in Texas to the successful business empire of 7-Eleven Japan, *konbini* demonstrated how a “foreign plant” became ubiquitous on Japanese soil. Convenience stores’ dynamic assimilation in Japan exemplifies how *konbini* both reflect and respond to societal changes and trends. From the beginning of their presence in the country, convenience stores quickly sensed societal needs and successfully reacted to them by transforming from small ice shops to neighbourhood stores that provided essentials. After Ito Yokado took over 7-Eleven from Southland Corporation, the Vanguard Program provided a platform for collecting and reacting to consumer needs, and the store was successfully shaped into a Japanized business in order to cater to and reflect social trends by choosing more tailored food for local neighbourhoods. Later on, the strict

regulations towards large-scale stores enacted by the government helped Japanese convenience stores develop rapidly. Subsequently, *konbini* became a representative retail format, and they have lasted in this way since the 1970s in Japan. *Konbini* capitalized on their advantages of being able to provide different services than their competitors, responding and reacting to the needs of society with long opening hours and no holiday closures. At the same time, convenience stores adapted their location strategies in order to respond to the specific Japanese market. Thus, the development of *konbini* and their emergence as subsidiaries of supermarkets can be considered a reaction to societal and economic needs.

In the third chapter, the traditional ideology of “*ikka danran*” and its changes due to demographic shifts are discussed. The *ohitorisama* and *koshoku* lifestyle has emerged, while at the same time, Japanese eating habits have changed. With regard to *nakashoku*, one of the arenas that all food providers fight for, *konbini* won its own place by providing convenient services and foods. *Konbini* provide personal *osechi* cuisine to cater the rising needs of the *ohitorisama* and *koshoku* lifestyles, as well as the increasing needs of singles. At the same time, some of the famous *konbini* chain brands such as 7-Eleven and Lawson actively changed not only their services, but also their store layouts to respond to new demands.

To better understand the connection between Japanese women and *konbini*, the fourth chapter of this study uses previous works from scholars to illustrate how the traditional ideology called “*ryōsai kenbo*” influences Japanese women’s duties at home as they perform mother-imprinted labour in order to support their husbands at work and children at school. Even with as many working women as there are today, taking care of the household and fulfilling the role of wife and mother continues to be seen as a woman’s primary duty. Thus, whether women stay home to do domestic tasks and child-rearing or go back to the workplace, certain social values continue to

shape their identities. This chapter also provides the new concept of *konbini mama*. By doing *konbini*-imprinted labour, *konbini* help women to form new identities. More and more women rely on *konbini*-provided foods. A *konbini mama*, by doing “*konbini*-imprinted labour,” maintains her capacity and desire to be the main provider of food, while doing other jobs to support her family. This helps women to re-create new images from the older *ryōsai kenbo*.

However, here I would like to mention what Ivy (1995) calls “the vanishing”—pre-modern cultural features, such as nostalgia and traditional values like *ryōsai kenbo* and *ikka danran*, are usually ignored and even excluded in contemporary Japanese daily lives. From my study, I believe that they have not vanished completely but may take on new forms, such as *kyōiku mama* and now *konbini mama*, or even the totally opposite terms like *ohitorisama* and *koshoku* versus *ikka danran*. Traditional values, like what the small “*tsu*” represents in “*ikka danran*,” are valued as irreplaceable. The near-vanishing in contemporary Japan is the remainder of pre-modernity or the past, sometimes called “traditional.”

For future studies, I would suggest a closer approach to topics related to men. The analysis in this study is dedicated to and focuses considerably on women; however, men, the husbands and fathers, are not well-considered and discussed. Therefore, this topic invites further study that can develop similar questions by providing a different perspective, understanding and focusing on social changes due men by age and occupation.

The second suggestion for future studies is a concept I mentioned before, called “*kaimono nanmin*,” and its derived term *konbini nanmin*. *Kaimono nanmin* can be directly translated as “shopping handicap.” The METI published this definition in its 2010 report: “the shopping-handicapped are people who are in a situation where it is difficult to do everyday shopping such as

grocery shopping, due to a lack of distribution of stores and transportation networks” (METI, 2010). In the definition from METI’s report, the shopping handicap is not restricted to the elderly. However, the elderly, as a major topic in this thesis, do comprise a big part of this cohort. In recent years, the shopping-handicapped are increasing in number in Japan. In this thesis, we predominantly examine the high performance that *konbini* have, such as increasing sales, high patronage, and a highly developed store network and coverage. Takemoto (2016) defined “*konbini nanmin*” based on the concept of “*kaimono nanmin*,” “people who feel inconvenienced by access to convenience stores within walking distance” (p. 8). Following this definition, the elderly easily fall into this category. This information shows us that even though the number of *konbini* is skyrocketing, their distribution is uneven. The dearth of convenience stores is not often seriously discussed because its urgency is relatively low compared with medical treatment issues, such as the lack of hospitals and medical doctors. However, there is the potential for people without access to convenience stores to become social issues that cause living standards in the broad sense of the word to decline, mainly in provincial areas where population size is small compared with urban districts. Furthermore, population is predicted to decrease rapidly as convenience stores rise in importance as a form of social infrastructure.

Konbini as retail formats retain much of the heritage of their American counterparts, while having grown remarkably in Japanese soil. As a cultural phenomenon, *konbini* have a new and special function of reflecting and reacting to the needs of and changes in modern Japanese society. *Konbini* play an important role as a social hub within modern Japanese society. A wide range of people use them. At the same time, *konbini* are still developing. Stores are offering increasingly complex services, not only targeting elderly people, but also the rest of Japanese society. The image of the typical *konbini* is experiencing significant shifts, and patterns of ownership are changing in

order to cater more social and commercial needs. There is no doubt that the relationship between *konbini* and the rest of the society will continue change and develop as well. Convenience stores in Japan are considered to be not only a retail form but also a cultural phenomenon. They are similar and yet different from the convenience stores that you can across the world. As we all know, Tokyo will host the 2020 Olympics. Many foreigners will visit Japan at that time, and I think most of them will likely visit *konbini* to meet their different needs. The dramatic differences between *konbini* and the small shops they have in their home countries will make *konbini* a great global interest, and I believe this interest will only continue to grow and deepen as a result. By doing this research, I hope to help *konbini* become a component of Japanese cultural power: in the future, when people talk about Japan, they will not only think about *sushi* and *sumo*, but also *konbini*—the Japanese-style convenience stores.

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