

AJ Forum 3

From Semi-private to Semi-public: Konbini, Change in Community and Consuming Space

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Convenience stores, called “konbini” in Japanese, were introduced to Japan in 1973. Before that time, there were no convenience stores in the Town of Matsuyama in Yamagata Prefecture where I lived. However, once the first store opened, the number of convenience stores started to increase rapidly. I felt that the increased number of convenience stores in cities and towns would have a great impact on the lives of the people who lived there, and this is what motivated me to research these stores.

The word “konbinity” was coined by combining the words “community” and “konbini”. There are about 30 kinds of convenience stores in Japan and each store fits in with its local community. I have also done research on retail stores and towns where convenience stores are located to acknowledge the influence of these stores. It is important to take into account the relationship between convenience stores and government or local shopping areas to understand the current retail industry from a wider viewpoint.

The customers and staff in convenience stores have a differing impression of the concept of convenience stores. For the staff, the store is represented by the back room, where they can take a rest and place orders for goods to be sold in the store. For this reason, it is not possible to do research on convenience stores by just observing the store as a customer. In other words, it is not possible to understand the system of convenience stores without delving into the “inside”. In addition, the public part of convenience stores where interaction with outside world is conducted should also be studied since these stores are located in a community. This has led me to conduct research on human behavior around convenience stores and the use of the surrounding space.

Convenience stores originated in the USA when it was experiencing an economic depression around 1928. They have their roots in the milk stores and ice companies that were already established in rural areas. Their initial target customers were working wives who had no time to go to supermarkets because they were working during the day. Early-period stores offered ice, milk, and daily necessities, which housewives were in the habit of buying every day. In Texas, convenience stores are called “icehouses” and stores that originally sold milk are often referred to as “dairy marts”, such as Lawson. Cumberland Farms, a convenience store chain in New England (USA) originally sold farming goods, as can be seen from its name.

Let’s look at the initial stages of Lawson’s development as an example. Lawson was founded by J.J. Lawson, who operated a milk business. He offered low-priced milk in his stores to lure customers, while offering other groceries at regular prices. Customers who came to the store

seeking low-priced milk also bought other groceries such as eggs and bread. Lawson also increased the size of the milk bottles to reduce costs. The first Lawson store was located near the milk factory and factory employees bought meals at the store. It was different from Japanese convenience stores in that it had a dining room.

In Japan, the government expected that the introduction of the convenience store system into the retail industry would help the industry to become more efficient and streamlined. During the 1970s, the retail industry had stronger political power than it has now, and as such, department stores and supermarkets had a hard time expanding their business. The government assumed that more solid relationships between retailers and manufacturers would lead to a variety of goods being delivered more smoothly to rural areas in Japan. In Japanese retail stores, customers traditionally bought goods after consulting salespersons, which provided customers with a feeling of security on the basis of mutual trust. In addition, the stores had monopolies on some products, such as alcoholic beverages and tobacco, which required licenses.

The system of convenience stores that combines the features of retail shops and franchised stores was introduced to Japan in 1973 by 7-Eleven (and by Lawson in 1974). Japan's convenience stores are defined administratively according to their area, business hours, and sales of both foods and miscellaneous goods. For additional convenience and smoother operation, the ordering system has become more efficient and computers have been placed in each store that connect the branch stores to the head office.

The basic policies for the operation of convenience stores are friendliness, cleanness, an assortment of products, and control of freshness. Another important policy is to have sales of 360,000 yen or more per day. Because each customer spends approximately 450 yen, the per-day sales targets can only be achieved with approximately 800 daily customers. It is not easy to achieve this goal. An important strategy for achieving the goal is to do business 24 hours a day every day of the year. Nowadays, people are active during all hours of the day. Police, students, and workers engaged in distribution are awake around the clock. That is why convenience stores stay open during the night. In addition, the sales per customer during the night are higher than that during the day.

Another important point is to ensure easy access to the store. Entryways and parking lots must be easy to find. It is also important not to have any religious associations. To attract the required 800 customers every day, it is important to keep all religious statues and symbols away from the store. In Japan, it is common for stores to have a small statue of "maneki-neko", or "beckoning cat", to encourage customers to enter. These statues are not used at convenience stores. Customers can also make use of postal services, laundry services, toilets, and ATMs. Certain self-service amenities, such as microwaves and hot water dispensers, serve to reduce the employees' labor time.

Convenience stores also provide safety, security and comfort. Food and beverages are offered at these stores, and you are assured to find at least one person in the store, so you can get a feeling of safety during an emergency. The police often ask night-shift clerks to cooperate with their investigations. Working at midnight enables the staff to see another side of society. If something

happens, people can seek refuge at convenience stores, so the presence of these stores gives us safety and security.

Almost 90 percent of convenience stores are family run. There are two types of contracts for managing stores: A and C. Type A contracts are for people who already own a retail shop. Type C contracts are for people who manage a store after the head office provides the land and building. The highest expenditure in operation is labor costs, which usually include wages for 10 to 20 employees. If sales do not reach the target of 360,000 yen per day, labor costs have to be reduced. Therefore, in some stores, the owners have to work day and night by rotation.

When you are employed at a convenience store, you are given training in customer service and using the cash register. It is important for employees to classify and input the type of customer at the end of each transaction. Detailed data on purchases are recorded and transmitted to the database at the head office, including type of customer, type of merchandise bought, and the time and weather conditions for each purchase. Employees also have to choose appropriate plastic bags for each purchase from among about ten different kinds. In addition, employees keep a store journal to foster better communication in the workplace.

When I arrived in Japan, I originally felt that convenience stores were a place for young people, but that has been changing. Recently, the aging population and decreasing birthrate have combined to become an issue, changing convenience stores to places where many middle-aged people gather. Since the number of other retail stores has decreased, convenience stores have now become the closest store to home for many people.

Various kinds of behavior are observed around convenience stores. Among them, “tamuro”, which means the gathering of people in one place, is common because customers want to have hot food such as “oden” as soon as possible. Not only young people but also businesspeople do tamuro. Quite a few convenience stores in Tokyo place ashtrays outside of the stores, and businesspeople enjoy drinking and smoking together with others on their way home from work. There are many cases where the surroundings of the convenience stores are utilized to attract customers.

In addition, the store lots are sometimes lent to people living in the neighborhood or the manager’s acquaintances to sell local vegetables and/or flowers for New Year’s or Obon festivals. These events allow convenience stores to form relationships with the local community. Also, convenience stores serve as a place to train people to be consumers. For example, in the Shonai Area, convenience stores offer shopping baskets for children, and it is common to see mothers teaching their children how to shop. That demonstrates the social education taking place at convenience stores. Furthermore, encounters between employees and customers happen at convenience stores, contributing to the enhancement of relationships between people.

At convenience stores, the habit of reading the store’s magazines (“tachiyomi”, or “reading while standing”) is significant. It could almost be called “machi-yomi”, or “reading while waiting”. Customers use convenience stores as a common point for meeting up with friends, since they are usually centrally located and easy to find. Convenience stores also serve as a shelter from the elements. Customers can be seen using mobile phones while reading the magazines. In the countryside, convenience stores can look like hotels for truckers. Long-distance truck drivers

coming from remote areas such as Hokkaido park their trucks in the parking lot to take a rest at night. Services such as toilets, fax, and dust bins are available at convenience stores. In particular, the dustbins are in high demand, especially since they were removed from train stations due to anti-terrorist activities.

A new trend in convenience stores is the provision of a sitting area. This concept was initiated by Mini Stop and has now been adopted by other stores, such as Lawson and Family Mart.

An other connection between convenience stores and society is waste. About 60 to 70 percent of sales at convenience stores come from take-out foods, and such take-out foods are regularly removed from the shelves two hours before the end of their shelf life. Legally, expired foods cannot be sold in the store. But the purchase of products by storeowners means that all delivered products are the property of the owners. Owners who believe that it is wasteful to throw this food away tend to give the food to their employees or take it home themselves. This causes a phenomenon that could be called “Konbini-ize Me”, in reference to the movie “Supersize Me”, indicating convenience store staff who eat expired food products every day.

Although convenience stores are very convenient for customers, they also invite risk, such as the possibility of being robbed. Thieves can deduce when large amounts of money might be kept in the store. In Japan, payday is generally on the 25th day of the month, and since it is possible to pay various bills at convenience stores, it is easy to guess that there might be a concentration of money at the store immediately after the 25th. Therefore, it is common for thieves to try to rob convenience stores at the end of month.

In the countryside, it is common to see abandoned convenience stores with their signboards removed. Owners might subcontract out all store operations such as the maintenance of the building and management of workers due to their advancing age, or the store might be turned into an other kind of business. In the case of a “transplant”, the head office might find a better site for a store following a new contract or relocate a store when competition with other chain stores becomes an issue.

Vacant buildings are sometimes used for other businesses such as dental clinics, gift shops, and coin-laundry services. Buildings used for convenience stores already have toilets, water supply, and electricity, so they can easily be adapted for new tenants. They have even been used as temporary offices during election campaigns. Occasionally, some stores are completely destroyed. It is possible that the owners were contractually obliged to return the site to its original state in these cases.

Convenience stores cope with various life styles. What if such convenience stores disappear from our lives? Now I think we must focus attention on “Konbini-ize” or the flip side of convenience given by convenience stores.