

Konbini-Nation

The Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan

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Abstract

Convenience stores (*konbini*) are a common part of Japan's contemporary commercial landscape. The sheer concentration of stores, their long hours of operation, predictable offerings, and speedy service make them a popular daily destination for many people. A number of factors have contributed to the rise of the convenience store as an everyday institution. This chapter examines the development of the convenience store in Japan and its efflorescence beginning in the late 1990s. Rather than seeing these stores as a sign of global uniformity, this chapter argues that their expansion both reflects a process of 'structured differentiation' in Japanese society and the contradictions that are contributing to important social shifts within Japan's social arrangements.

Keywords: convenience store (*konbini*), waste (*haiki*), rubbish (*gomi*), globalization, recycling, Tokyo

Introduction

Convenience stores, or *konbini*, as they are popularly known in Japan, are so ubiquitous today that they can be forgettable, that is, until you need one. There are currently over 56,000 *konbini* operating nationwide. The sheer concentration of stores, their long hours of operation, predictable offerings, and speedy service make them a popular daily destination for many people. No matter the time of day or night, anyone can drop by a *konbini* to purchase an *obentō* (lunch box), pay a bill, read magazines, or use the toilet. Yet, before the early 1980s, relatively few Japanese even knew

what a konbini was. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1990s that the word 'konbini' entered the Japanese lexicon.

Details such as these help make konbini a reoccurring staple for glossy periodicals and business school case studies that laud the efficiency, competitiveness, and innovation these stores bring to Japan's commerce-scape. But the message imparted by such stories may ultimately be about the homogenizing tendencies of these stores and the part they play in consumer capitalism's incessant march towards global uniformity. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and over a decade of research, I argue for a different perspective, one that positions the konbini not as the agent of sameness, but as a metonym for a post-industrial Japan characterized as much by standardization as the transposition of difference (Kelly 1993; Gordon 2007). In the pages that follow, I trace the development of the convenience store in Japan and its beginnings in the late 1990s. By matching the rhythms and needs of various population segments – singles and families, farmers and salarymen, hostesses and housewives, toddlers and retirees, Japanese, foreigners, and even the occasional anthropologist – the konbini has not dissolved societal differences. Rather, these stores have come to reflect the process of 'structured differentiation' (Kelly 2002: 241) that has taken place within post-war Japanese society while highlighting the tensions and contradictions that are contributing to the denouement of its New Middle Class arrangements.

Coming of age with konbini

Since the category of convenience store came into being in the late 1960s, over a full generation of consumers has come of age with these stores (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Age cohorts and konbini expansion

	Number of konbini in Japan: 0	Number of konbini in Japan: 1,100	Number of konbini in Japan: 25,500	Number of konbini in Japan: 45,200	Number of konbini in Japan: 55,000
y.o.b.	1964	1974	1984	1994	2004
b. 1949	15 years old	25 years old	35 years old	45 years old	55 years old
b. 1959	5 years old	15 years old	25 years old	35 years old	45 years old
b. 1969	-	5 years old	15 years old	25 years old	35 years old
b. 1979	-	-	5 years old	15 years old	25 years old
b. 1989	-	-	-	5 years old	15 years old
b. 1999	-	-	-	-	5 years old

In the words of one Generation X informant, 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. Endō Eiji, a native of Tokyo, is one such example. Endō was in his late twenties when he quit his job with a Tokyo television company and spent a year and all his savings travelling around Europe and Africa. In an email to friends, he lamented that the one thing the countries he visited lacked were konbini like in Japan. He reported that in France and Hungary there were small shops to buy things, but that they were not open all hours, did not stock much for him to read, and lacked the kind of food he wanted to eat. What Endō longed for most was a konbini *onigiri* (rice ball). Well-known Japanese celebrities also have a fondness for konbini. Former Japanese football star Nakata Hidetoshi, aged 30, spent many years abroad playing for foreign football teams. In interviews, he admitted that the one difficult thing about living outside of Japan was the lack of konbini (Masujima 2007: 78). Newspapers and television programmes have documented Nakata's habit of visiting konbini to buy Japanese snacks immediately after touching down at Narita Airport (Nishimura 2004).

It is increasingly difficult to find areas in Japan without a major konbini chain. Japan's largest konbini chain, 7-Eleven, has yet to establish its franchises in Okinawa. As late as 2011 there were still no 7-Eleven in Aomori, Akita, Tottori, and the whole of Shikoku. More often than not Japan's remote but inhabited islands and mountain communities are disconnected from the convenience grid. This is largely due to the fact that populations are too small to support stores, or the distribution logistics too costly and complicated to attract companies. The proximity of a given location to a konbini is an accepted measure of geographical remoteness in Japan. In 2004, the *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper ran a story about the Olympic women's wrestling team and its preparation for world competition in a bucolic corner of Niigata Prefecture:

Deep in the mountains of Niigata, the sound of bodies slamming to the mat wafts through the nearby rice fields. It is here, nine kilometers from the nearest convenience store and well away from the hustle and bustle of city life, that a group of Japan's brightest hopes for gold medals in Athens are preparing for battle (Marantz 2004: 22).

This, too, is now changing as companies like Lawson and 7-Eleven experiment with mobile store units. Spurred on by rapidly ageing populations and relief efforts in the wake of natural disasters, larger chains have developed refrigerated vehicles that are reminiscent of the trucks (or *idohanbasha*)

long used by local shop owners to bring products and services to Japan's remote communities and less mobile populations.

Stories of convenience stores opening in remote parts of the Japanese archipelago make the news. Take, for example, Tokunoshima, one of the numerous isolated islands that lie between the southern tip of Kyushu and Okinawa. In October 2003, the island's first 24-hour konbini chain, Everyone, opened. Brought ashore by a local entrepreneur seeking to diversify his business holdings, the mainland chain's appearance has changed people's lives on the island (Umesawa 2004: 54). During its first three days of business, the konbini served roughly a quarter of the island's population. It sold 500 *onigiri* and 2,000 servings of *oden* (various ingredients stewed in soy-flavoured broth). Some customers even queued with their own bowls in hand. After three days in business the store grossed ¥6.3 million (approx. €49,330) in sales. Within a few months, competing shops and the local supermarkets lengthened their hours of operation (Umesawa 2004: 55). Kano Ayako, a clerk at the new store, remarked how children on the island began to greet her differently when they saw her on the street. 'They call out, "*Irasshaimase, konnichiwa*" [Welcome, good afternoon],' said Kano. She admitted she felt embarrassed saying the konbini's manual greeting at first: 'People are so familiar with each other that even going into a store you hardly ever hear "*irasshaimase*"' (Umesawa 2004: 59).

Other accounts of rural openings come from essayists. Tokyo-based writer Watanabe Rumi made an about-turn in her lifestyle and returned to her native Shikoku to live after 22 years of living as a Tokyoite. In *Inakagurashi wa tsurakatta* (Country living was tough), an autobiographical account of her 'U-turn' experience, Watanabe wrote that one of her first major adjustments to the countryside was adjusting to life without a konbini nearby. Watanabe, aged 45, admitted that 'fifty percent of her Tokyo existence had been supported by konbini' (Watanabe R. 2005: 80). On the first floor of her Tokyo residence there was a konbini, and within a two-minute walk of the front door there were another five stores (as well as a supermarket, discount shop, family restaurants, and small book shops). Watanabe was a heavy konbini user. When buying a meal, she went from konbini to konbini to get the products she liked: Lawson for milk, FamilyMart for side dishes (*sōzai*), 7-Eleven for baked bread, Sunkus for *onigiri*, and Ministop for ice cream (Watanabe R. 2005: 80). But, as integrated as the stores were in her life, they were also part of the reason she wanted to leave Tokyo. Five times a night, she could hear the sound of the konbini delivery vehicles parking below the window of her apartment. In the Shikoku countryside, Watanabe was shocked to find that when a konbini finally did come to her town, it was

a major municipal event. A line of customers snaked out the store's door on opening day. Her mother even rushed over for a look.

There are less visible ways in which konbini consumption also affects the livelihoods of people in rural areas. In June 2006, the regional, Yokohama-based konbini chain Three-F began a new line of *obentō* and *onigiri*, made with 'almost' organic' rice from Yamagata. An official from the Eastern Japan Rice Sales Division of the Japan Agriculture Association confirmed that Three-F had signed a contract with a small town's agricultural cooperative to purchase 1,000 tons of its rice harvest. The deal between Three-F and this regional farmers' cooperative underscores the gradual reduction of government support for local agriculture and the opening of once regulated markets to competitive bidding. As part of the deal, representatives of the rural cooperative visit Three-F headquarters several times per year and Three-F officials conduct a seasonal inspection of the fields in Yamagata. The cooperative hopes that this initial venture may lead to greater access to metropolitan consumer markets.

In Tokyo, it is not unusual to see the proximity of konbini printed on apartment rental advertisements. Real-estate agents, such as Kurihara Setsuko, who runs a small office near Waseda University, attest that when university students look for a place to rent, the proximity of an apartment to a konbini is one of the things they often take into consideration. Such consumer convenience-driven concerns are not unique to students, however. ANA, a Japanese national airline company servicing the small airport of Yamagata, changed its flight schedules as a cost-cutting measure. The company rearranged the flight schedule such that the plane would depart from Tokyo in the evening and return from Yamagata on the following morning. The change in schedule required the Tokyo-based flight crew – captain, co-pilot, and two stewardesses – to spend the night in a small city not far from the rural airport. The airline struggled for a time to find appropriate lodgings for its employees, however. According to a local taxi driver assigned to shuttle the crew from the airport to the hotel, the problem was not in locating a hotel, but in finding one where the flight crew would have easy late-night access to a konbini.

Access to konbini is not just a concern for flight attendants. For decades, bureaucrats, public servants, and researchers employed by the Japanese government in central Tokyo braved the crowded cafeterias of their office buildings or left the building and rushed to scrounge a meal from the paltry number of shops that serviced the area. But the sweeping reorganization of Japan's central bureaucracy in January 2001 brought about changes at many

1 The rice being sold is officially labelled as containing 'reduced pesticides, reduced chemical fertilizers' (*gennōyaku genkagaku hiryō*).

levels within Japan's ministries. One breakthrough welcomed by government employees was the appearance of am/pm konbini outlets inside the government office buildings. Shimizutani Satoshi, a visiting economist at the Ministry of Labour, led me to the basement of Central Joint Government Building No. 2 (Chuōgōdō Chōsha Dainigōkan) to show off the 'bureaucrats' konbini'. Shimizutani pointed to a wall of Kleenex boxes to the left of the magazine rack. 'These are one of the best-selling items in the store,' he told me. 'The Japanese government no longer subsidizes nose-blowing.'

Relocalizing konbini

Despite their growing role in daily life, konbini are not always warmly received wherever they appear. Residents of urban and suburban communities where the konbini is already a familiar presence question the need for more stores. The brightly lit, 24-hour stores are associated with shifts in town policy, local character, and community relations. In 2005, a Three-F konbini opened at the train station in the seaside town of Furuhama,² not far from Yokohama. Furuhama already had a number of konbini, including one Three-F, and the location of a new store with its bright signage and brick façade at the side of the town's century-old train station ignited protest and debate about the direction of development the town should take as it entered the new millennium.

'In truth, it is not that I hate that konbini. But I only wish they could change the store sign. I don't find it pleasant – the colour,' explained Satō Junko, a local resident and mother of three who sympathized with a group of residents who protested at the opening of the bright new store. The pressure group sent a series of emails to chain headquarters demanding that the store signage be modified. While the company did not change the store's banner, they did make concessions in other aspects of appearance and removed company logos at the back of the store facing the train platform. Satō said that she hoped the town and train line company would have considered other uses for the space, like a communication area where people could drink tea and talk:

I prefer inconvenience. It makes people think more. People may buy what they need before riding a train. But when there is inconvenience, perhaps they can find another method. So, I don't think it is necessary to have the store. I think that it is OK to have a place from where we can transmit our culture (*bunka hasshinchi*). Once the konbini opens, a need

2 Furuhama is a pseudonym.

is created. It can't be helped. My point is that it doesn't need to be there. Now that the store exists, everyone drops in before catching a train. And because everyone drops in, sales grow.³

The Hasedera family, who owned the konbini franchise, worked to adjust the store to the town from the inside. They reached out to local shops on the town's main road and offered them space in the store to stock a few of their products – locally made goods – that might interest tourists and commuters. Seven businesses, including a flower shop, tofu maker, and bakery, took them up on the offer. From the perspective of the Hasederas, their store was accommodating to local flavours and livelihoods.

For Satō, the presence of the new store opened her eyes to a different side of her community. She realized that the town had a large population of young people, for example, and she became aware of their habits and practices:

Three-F made me realize that there are so many young people in town. I see them eating ramen [outside the store], for example. I want to say something about their manners, but that's just a personal issue. Please understand, it is not that these kids are bad. I like seeing young people doing their best. They are taking a short break at the store on their way home. I have never seen them doing anything wrong. So, I don't have a bad image of them. When the konbini opened, I came to realize that there are so many young people like that.

Satō's comments reveal how the convenience store becomes a site where different arrangements of people and practices are made more visible to a local population. Konbini are cultural transmission stations, although not in the sense that Satō uses the term.

As konbini become more visible and heavily used institutions in local communities like Furuhamu, communities are asking more of these stores. Convenience store owners willingly allow their stores to be incorporated into educational programmes and municipal safety efforts. Three-F was on the list of businesses that teams of Furuhamu primary-school students visited in 2007 when collecting material for a school-wide project on their town. The students learned about what kinds of products the store offered, how products were ordered, and how the weather affects what is sold.

3 All translations from Japanese in this chapter have been carried out by the author.

Some school systems ask local konbini to provide even more elaborate educational services. Shiraishi Ward's Board of Education (Shiraishi-ku Kyōiku Iinkai), in the city of Sapporo, now teams up with local shops and businesses, including konbini, to give primary-school students the opportunity to experience work first-hand. The programme is an effort to stem the rising numbers of unemployed youth by exposing children to jobsites early on in their educational careers. Konbini clerkships are among several mini-apprenticeships that students are assigned. 'I thought konbini work was saying "*irasshaimase*" and scanning items at the till,' said a fifth-grade boy after mopping floors, picking up rubbish, and stocking shelves (Tsunashima 2006: 28).

Local approaches for reappropriating konbini as educational sites in the service economy are being expanded and even commercialized. On 19 January 2007, the Kyoto City Board of Education (Kyōto-shi Kyōiku Iinkai) opened the Kyoto City Learning Town 'Life Quest' Centre (Kyōto-shi Manabi no Machi Ikikata Tankyūkan). The centre is located in a former secondary school that fell into disuse in March 2002, when the city school board merged two secondary schools due to falling enrolment numbers. For fiscal and emotional reasons, schools were difficult to tear down, and, following the lead of other communities, the Kyoto City government sought out other uses for the space. Investing ¥166 million (approx. €1.4 million), the city refurbished the old school into a new style of educational centre where, according to an article in the *Asahi Shinbun*, primary- and secondary-school students learn how the economy operates and 'develop a feeling for work' (*shokugyōkan o yashinai*) (Shimizu and Hiraoka 2007: 5). Former classrooms on the third floor of the old school have been converted into twelve businesses, including a bank, a mobile phone company, an airline office, and a konbini. Primary- and secondary-school students learn to run these businesses and are also taught lessons in personal finance, such as how to obtain a loan, create a household spending budget, calculate food expenses, and pay utility bills. Two similar job theme parks currently exist in Tokyo. One of these, Kidzania, stands just blocks from Japan's first 7-Eleven and offers children the opportunity to sample work in its 50 different job pavilions. Kidzania is a global franchise business based in Mexico; it plans to open similar pavilions in Jakarta, Lisbon, and Dubai (Inda 2007).

Japanese artists have also collaborated on the indigenization of the konbini, using it both to comment on the relationship between mass consumption and art and to support their careers as artists. Murakami Takashi, for example, brought his Super Flat movement to the konbini shelves by designing and mass-distributing a limited series of figurines

under the title *Museum Superflat* in early 2000. Several years earlier, in 1997, Tokyo-based artist Majima Ryōichi received critical recognition for his one-person show, entitled *Majimart*. Playing with the boundaries between artist, art, museum, and mass consumer culture, Majima's exhibit transformed a traditional gallery space into a convenience store, complete with well-stocked shelves of the artist's work and obsequious gallery attendants dressed as konbini clerks. *Majimart* offered its own special service in which the artist would accept and 'repair' (*shūzen*) everyday artefacts and unfinished artworks that people brought to him. Once completed, the repaired goods were stocked on *Majimart*'s shelves for sale to the general public, with all profits being split equally between Majima, the gallery, and the original owner. While pleasing people with such unusual products and innovative practices, Majima's *Majimart* invited his audience to consider the boundaries that separate art and the everyday, industrialized standardization, and creativity. Even the title, *Majimart*, involved multiple readings. It was a probable chain name – 'Maji-Mart'. It was also a fusion of the artist's name and 'art' – 'Majima Art'. And it also hinted at being a joke. The word *maji* is a slang expression of disbelief similar to 'honestly?'. Was *Majimart* really a store? Was Majima truly an artist? Was Majima's art actually art?

Convenience becoming 'konbini'

While it is clear that people's lives have been affected by the konbini, the process works both ways. As konbini become more common, people use them in new ways and thus change the way that the stores are perceived and their possible future uses. One way in which the interaction between society and store can be traced is through language. The shift from 'convenience store' to 'konbini' speaks to the transformation that the store has undergone over time.

When 'convenience store' entered the Japanese language it appeared as *konbiniensu sutoa*, spelled in katakana, a phonetic writing system often used for non-Japanese words and names. Japan's national newspaper, the *Asahi Shinbun*, introduced its readership to the *konbiniensu sutoa* in August 1970 by running a short article on the new retail model in its evening business section:

'Small but highly productive', the words tingle like pepper, and so the *konbiniensu (benri) sutoa*, which our nation appreciates, is rapidly

increasing in number. These stores are of particular interest to food makers, large supermarkets and the head offices of voluntary chains.⁴

Over the next decade, references to convenience stores gradually increased in print. However, changes to the term were already visible. By the time the *Asahi* ran a short, two-sentence blurb about the Kansai superstore chain Daiei's plans to launch its own convenience store chain, called Lawson, the two words had fused into one: *konbiniensusutoa*. The definition for *konbiniensusutoa* was also condensed: 'a small store open long hours (*chōjikan eigyō*) that sells daily necessities (*seikatsu hitsuyōhin*)'. In July 1981 the *Asahi* announced that superstore chains Seiyū and Jusco aimed to extend their reach into the 'late hours' (*shinya*) with their own chains of *konbiniensusutoa* – FamilyMart and Ministop, respectively. It took another eight years before Imidas, an almanac of new business words, dropped the two-word spelling for convenience store and went with simply *konbiniensusutoa* (Wakana 1989: 217).

During the 1980s, other abbreviations for convenience store appeared in popular writing and speech. In some circles, convenience stores were known as *konbiniensu* (convenience). The term *konbiniensu* did not frequently appear in newspapers, but was prevalent in books, essays, songs, and on television. Izumi Asato, a popular essayist, teamed up with Itō Seikō to write a column about urban, late-night wandering, convenience store products, and people for *TVBros*, a popular tabloid. They called the series *Konbiniensu monogatari* (Convenience story) (1992). The column ran for nearly a year, before a publisher then put the articles together in a hardback book of the same title. TV Tokyo also produced a six-episode drama called *Konbiniensu monogatari*.

In the postscript of *Konbiniensu monogatari*'s 1990 reprinting, Izumi and co-author Itō discuss in greater detail the evolution of the word 'konbini'. Both writers mention first hearing the word used in a national television commercial featuring the actor Yanagiba Toshirō. Whether the word 'konbini' was the creation of a commercial scriptwriter, or was taken from a term that was beginning to circulate in urban areas at the time, is difficult to know. What is certain, however, is that as the word for convenience store shed syllables, the number of convenience stores in Japan was rapidly rising. Between 1981 and 1991, Japan's total number of convenience stores doubled to nearly 40,000 units. Convenience stores in the early 1990s were no longer a retail experiment, but a fully fledged industry of 24-hour outlets, equipped with new technology, eye-catching uniforms, and an always expanding

4 'Konbiniensu sutoa', *Asahi Shinbun*, 23 July 1970, p. 8.

horizon of products. The word 'konbini' (which in Japanese is written as ko-n-bi-ni) suited this breed of store, which was now coming into its own. The four syllables rolled off the tongue with the same uninhibited ease that customers entered these stores.

By 1993 the word 'konbini' was fully entrenched in the popular lexicon. Essayists used both 'konbiniensu' and 'konbini' in their writing. The popular writer Takahashi Genichiro, for example, wove a short essay around how convenience stores are actually *konbiniensu-kyokai* (literally, 'convenience churches'). He argued that the konbini was the church, and *konbiniensu* the religion of Japanese society.

Shifting perceptions

Starting in the latter half of the 1990s, konbini have been referred to as 'life infrastructure' (*seikatsu infura*), akin to critical public services such as water, gas, and electricity. They are also categorized as 'social infrastructure' (*shakai infura*) (Ōe 2003) alongside hospitals, banks, post offices, and neighbourhood police stations (*kōban*). A number of factors contribute to the rise of the konbini as an everyday institution. The stores themselves are marketed on the basis of their adaptability. They have fused mass-marketing and niche interests by being a little of everything to everyone – supermarket, entertainment centre, information hub, and public service '*madoguchi*' (window).

Many youth are outright *konbinisuto* (konbinists), who spend a significant amount of time working, resting, playing, and eating in or near these stores. Adults are also increasingly konbini-savvy. Konbini are equipped with fax machines, colour photocopiers, mobile-phone recharging units, and postal and package delivery services. A konbini can become a makeshift office centre when the need arises. Konbini also offer ATM services and are easier to get to than the bank. The elderly are adjusting to konbini, just as konbini are making adjustments for them by providing softer foods, lower shelves, eat-in areas, and home delivery services. A young employee at a 7-Eleven in a small town spoke to me about her store's most loyal customer, a man in his eighties who came to buy *oden*. Some days he came to the store in his indoor *yukata* (robe) and carried a small pot to take his single serving home in.

Indeed, konbini are no longer simply thought of as – or marketed towards – just young consumers. Paralleling Japan's large demographic trends, seniors are the industry's fastest-growing consumer segment. In 2005, 7-Eleven released figures showing continued decline in the percentage of customers under 20 and a steady increase in customers over the age of 50

(Baba, Toda and Takimoto 2005: 39). Factors of push and pull have helped these stores gain ground in the silver sector. As fewer babies are born in Japan, and the number of senior citizens grows, the stores are, like most other businesses, forced to accommodate an older demographic. At the same time, the thinning out of small retail due to ageing proprietors, increased competition, and the rationalization of the distribution system leaves the konbini as one of the small stores that remains. Deregulation of certain commodities and services, the weakening of merchant associations, and the willingness of the government to downsize its services and increase profitability contribute to the increasing number of services that konbini are able to offer. Elderly consumers have few choices but to go to konbini.

Konbini panics and convenience concerns

Konbini provide a standardized, nationally branded package of sales and services but on a small, local scale and in a recognizable format that feels anonymous yet somehow personalized. Proximity and accessibility combine with a constantly updated selection of products and services, which enable these stores to 'adhere' (*micchaku suru*) to people's lives. It is the konbini's convenience that customers appreciate and increasingly rely upon. In a magazine survey conducted in the summer of 2004, over 70 per cent of people polled said that their lives would be inconvenienced if they did not have access to a konbini (Yoshioka 2004). As convenience stores support an increasingly divergent range of lifestyles, their expansion generates new discourses and anxieties about the nature of this success and its wider social implications. 'Konbini panics' have arisen as the stores have grown more common.

Initial concern about convenience stores, particularly the chains associated with American companies, centred on whether this new type of retail was a convenient backdoor through which foreign products could infiltrate the Japanese market. But the convenience store did not end up offering very many foreign products. In fact, konbini marketers pursued lines of 'Japanese-style' fast-food products and everyday goods more common to small supermarkets and certain kinds of corner shops.

As konbini grew more numerous and were more heavily used, they were periodically admonished for their unhealthy food offerings, waste, round-the-clock noise, and for promoting poor manners and bad behaviour in young people. Konbini consumer practices are blamed for weak bodies and exhausted students. A national football coach said Japan's poor performance

in international competitions was because of all the konbini *obentō* that the team's players ate. Konbini are also blamed for overstimulating youth and encouraging them to stay up late at night. One study carried out by university researchers found a correlation between store lighting and poor work habits at school (Ayukawa 2003).

Some researchers argue that konbini have become a replacement for the mother and family. Miura Atsushi, a professor and marketing consultant, has gone as far as to declare the rise of 'konbini civilization' (*konbini bunmei*) in Japan. Miura makes the case these 24-hour institutions are raising children:

I call the konbini a 'mother'. If you leave the home and enter a konbini there will be food. Whenever and wherever you go there is always a mother looking after you. [Konbini] are [open] 24-hours [per day], in the worst-case scenario they are more convenient than a mother (*okaasan yori benri*). Food is lined up waiting. Saying 'thank you' is not necessary. Konbini are better than mothers. However, when this happens, when people can always get what they want, then people start to want things immediately. Thus, when something isn't available, it is easy for people to lose their tempers (*kireyasui*). This should be expected. For most people when hunger sets in their mood turns sour. In short, young people are only raised today within this mode of consumption (Miura 2005: 112).

Konbini are not just targets of consumer health groups and cultural pundits. Because of their late hours and the amount of cash that the stores often have on hand, konbini are the targets of robberies and other forms of assault. Television news reports about such attacks appear weekly on national and local news stations. Statistics about konbini robberies are difficult to find, but the problem is significant enough that the Japan Franchise Association (JFA) has held nationwide meetings on the issue.⁵

'Konbinize Me': Waste and want

Faced with looking at konbini as both a life support and a 'mode of consumption' that replaces parents, deforms anatomy, and contributes to insomnia,

5 One solution is for konbini and taxi companies to collaborate. Konbini lend their front parking spaces to taxis at night and allow the taxis to make the stores a temporary night base while waiting for calls.

I decided to throw myself into a month-long konbini embrace, and examine through lifestyle immersion the positive and negative sides of konbini culture.⁶ During preparatory research, I had spent a week getting most of my meals at a convenience store. It turned out that this sort of thing had been tried and written about several times, beginning in the mid-1990s. Week-long konbini dining testimonies appeared in konbini guidebooks starting as early as 1994 (Group 2001 2001: 207-21; Hyper Press 1998; Noguchi 1996: 42-9; NTV 1994). These stories gave me confidence that a month on a konbini diet would be more challenging and more revealing as to the selection, expense, and flavour that konbini had to offer. But restricting myself merely to food felt too simple a task and too narrow a focus considering all the functions these stores could and did fulfil in people's lives. The types of consumption taking place in and around konbini were more than just about eating food; rather, they involved services, killing time, and finding relaxation.

In 2005, living in downtown Tokyo, I was at the epicentre of konbini urbanization. Within a quarter of a mile of where I lived there were 23 konbini representing eleven chains. I did not need to wait for konbini to arrive; they came to me. Both am/pm and 7-Eleven offered delivery services. Despite the notion that all konbini are essentially the same, when I shifted into using only konbini, the differences between stores (even within the same chain) became stark. One store carried quartered heads of cabbage; the others did not. Another store stocked *Asia Newsweek* and the English-language version of the *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper. The rest did not. When there was a particular product I needed, all stores were not the same.

Although convenience store cuisine is often picked out for its negative effects on people's health,⁷ it simply has not garnered the sort of attention and vitriol received by other sectors of the fast-food industry. Certainly, part of this is the time, effort, marketing expense, and advertising weight that the companies invest into making their stores appear like small supermarkets, with a greater emphasis on prepared foods.

After two full weeks of konbinizing, I found that my refrigerator had flushed itself out and reached a steady state of near emptiness. Most of what I had fitted on the front shelf and I knew exactly what my refrigerator contained. But by the end of the second week, I was also feeling emotionally empty. Carting home plastic bags filled with plastic-wrapped food to reheat in the microwave, or to wolf down before they became cold, left me feeling bored and detached. I took greater pleasure in eating unsold lunch boxes

6 I draw here on early analyses of this experiment (see Whitelaw 2014).

7 TCMLI 1998; Watanabe N. 2001; Yamada 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2004; Yokokawa 1999.

(*obentō*) at the konbini where I worked. I lingered after my shifts to nibble and chat, simply because it was nourishing not to be alone. Contributing to the depression I was feeling back at the apartment was my attempt to clean, collect, and weigh as best I could all the rubbish that my konbini lifestyle was producing. In the course of just the first week, I had amassed 28 plastic bags, 6 plastic straws, 13 chopsticks, 11 plastic spoons of various sizes, a few plastic forks, and two 10-litre bin bags of plastic plates, covers, cellophane wrapping, and PET bottles. I initially thought it would be interesting to see the petrochemical footprint of a month of konbinization first-hand, but the resulting volume of waste was already clogging my apartment.

Feeling that I had proved to myself that plastic waste was indeed a significant by-product of the konbini, I decided to add another task to my konbinization list: 'returning' my rubbish to a konbini each day. This was morally not as simple as it sounded. Through the process of conducting participant observation at konbini as a clerk, I knew that owner franchises had to pay their own rubbish bills and that the cost of hauling away konbini rubbish was a considerable expenditure. I heard stories about people throwing away household rubbish in konbini rubbish bins when they were too late to bring their rubbish to the curb on rubbish pick-up day and listened to owners gripe about people who never came into the store but freely availed themselves of the store's rubbish bin. The compromise I came up with was to drop my rubbish at several *chokuei* konbini and some konbini that were owned by a 'mega-franchise' company. I felt that konbini headquarters and large companies had pockets deep enough that my waste would not be noticed.

By embarking on my ritual of rubbish return, I grew more aware of what rubbish bins held. In Tokyo, almost all konbini chains take part in municipal recycling programmes. Whereas in the United States one is lucky to find one rubbish bin outside a shop, in Japan there are four, even five: non-combustibles (plastic products, Styrofoam material), combustibles (newspapers, magazines, food products), cans and glass bottles, and PET bottles (recyclable plastic bottles). Whether a plastic bag is a combustible or non-combustible depends on the person who is doing the discarding, but I found that the non-combustible rubbish bin was usually brimming with konbini bags and many of the bags were from chains other than that of the store whose rubbish bin I was using.

On my daily visits to store rubbish bins, I also crossed paths with people, usually men, tugging shopping trolleys or suitcase dollies with boxes strapped to them with bungy cords. These people paid quick visits to the combustible rubbish bins and fished out magazines and comic books. On

one occasion, I followed one of these printed-matter gleaners on his rounds, starting at Daily. His pace wore me out, but thanks to him I learned the location of half a dozen new konbini. Japan's homeless (*rojō seikatsusha*, lit. 'people living on the street') earn part of their living by gleaning and recycling from konbini rubbish bins. In addition to magazines, *rojō seikatsusha* also collect cans that they redeem for money. Until 2006, one kilogram of cans earned the collector ¥116 (just under €1). The rate has since risen ¥10 (Sakaguchi 2007: 43). Can competition around konbini is fierce according to a *rojō seikatsusha* couple interviewed by architect and activist Sakaguchi Kyōhei. Many konbini, including Daily, lock their rubbish bins to prevent rubbish and recyclables from being easily taken. Some *rojō seikatsusha* form private agreements with shop owners to cart away cans.

Several studies have been conducted to examine the patterns of people living on the street. In 1995, the forced eviction of thousands of *rojō seikatsusha* from the several major parks around Osaka prior to the APEC Summit, and a similar round-up before the 2002 World Cup Football Tournament, prompted economists at Osaka University to study why *rojō seikatsusha* congregate in certain urban areas. The team members were surprised to find that convenience store density and access are statistically more important in street life settlement patterns than proximity to welfare offices or even public hospitals (Suzuki 2002). In 2005, members of the same team assisted with a survey of *rojō seikatsusha* in Tokyo's Sumida Ward (Mizuta et al. 2005). Of the 600 people surveyed, 8 per cent reported eating expired convenience store foods. In Shinjuku Ward, the number was 12 per cent. Much of this food may not have come from the rubbish, but may have reached the hands of *rojō seikatsusha* through the backdoor beneficence of konbini owners and store staff.

'Between' places

My Konbinize Me experiment made me think more about the blurred and shifting boundaries between consumer, customer, and acquaintance. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg developed the term 'third place' to describe places outside of home, work, and school where people come together to nurture bonds. In his book *The Great Good Place*, he defines third places as 'the core settings of informal public life [...] a generic destination for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work' (Oldenburg 1989: 16). Oldenburg admits the term is meant to be

neutral, brief, and facile, and it should be seen as the solution for what is increasingly missing in (American) community today. To support his claims, he visits beer gardens, main streets, pubs, cafés, coffeehouses, and post offices. Drawing on this fieldwork, he identifies commonalities that link these seemingly disparate spaces. Third places are where people can gather and interact. In contrast to ‘first places’ (home) and ‘second places’ (work), third places are social levellers that situate guests on more neutral ground and foster communication and open exchange. Third places are accessible and accommodating; they have ‘regulars’, but the preference for third spaces vary from person to person. Third places offer forms of psychological support and comfort similar to that of a ‘good home’. *A Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000), Riesmanian (1953) sense of community in the grips of decline informs Oldenburg’s mission to cultivate third-place awareness:

Without such place, the urban area fails to nourish the kinds of relationships and the diversity of human contact that are the essence of the city. Deprived of these settings, people remain lonely within their crowds (quoted in Schultz and Yang 1997: 120).

The relationship between nurturing profit and nourishing relationships has interested social theorists from Max Weber to Daniel Miller. Oldenburg’s view did not exclude commercial enterprises from being third places, but he felt the composition must prevent profit motives from swallowing affect and free association. In his study of a shopping district in England, Daniel Miller (1998, 2001) found that consumers who moved freely between a range of retail settings, the ‘third places’ in town – the local hair salon and hardware store – were not, however, the most financially successful. Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, embraced Oldenburg’s third-place concept and his charge that ‘the survival of the coffeehouse depends on its ability to [meet] present day needs and not those of the romanticized past’ (quoted in Pendergrast 1999: 375). He turned the third-place idea into a *raison d’etat* for making Starbucks an ‘extension of people’s front porch’ (Schultz and Yang 1997: 314) across America and throughout the world.

Using the konbini and observing how other consumers used them, I felt that the stores were a place between places. They were anonymous, silent, and distancing, but also close, comforting, and possessing a certain affect of their own. Konbini accommodated both faster and slower paces. In supermarkets and department stores the goal is to attract customers and keep them at the store as long as possible, because each additional minute of shopping increases the probability of further purchases. Such

rules do not apply to konbini. The amount of money a customer spends in a konbini rises sharply within the first five minutes of entering the store, then tumbles thereafter. Thus, customers who spend fifteen minutes in a konbini spend almost half as much as customers who only spend one minute in a konbini (MCR 1997).

Conclusion

Whether used intensively or just from time to time, the konbini embraces and reflects the lifestyles it supports. It has embedded itself in people's daily lives by supplying a little bit of the various things that people need: food, entertainment, money, shelter, anonymity, and, sometimes, intimacy. The pillars of the konbini model are speed, predictability, and convenience, but it is in the realm of 'convenience' where arguably the most change has occurred. The meaning of the term 'convenience store' has been transformed as the stores themselves have been retrofitted into the basements of government buildings and turned into classrooms for Kyoto school children.

As society becomes more familiar with these spaces, which seem to be unconcerned with customer cultivation or locking in long-term relations, the question arises as to what happens when a konbini disappears. Konbini are, after all, flexible institutions and the billboards of the rapid-service economy.

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