

# Cultural Reconstruction from Function to Symbol: A Social History Study on the Changes of Vitasoy Brand Image in Hong Kong (1940-1997)

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## ABSTRACT

The image of modern food is diversifying, and Vitasoy, a Hong Kong-based brand, is a typical representative of this trend. This paper attempts to start with the advertisements of Vitasoy from 1940 to 1997, to investigate the shaping and changes of the brand image of Vitasoy during this period, as well as use these to ascertain the current state of Hong Kong society at the time. This paper is mainly divided into three stages. Before the early 1970s, due to the lack of material resources and limited consumption power, the image positioning of vitamin A in advertising was functional. From the middle and late 1970s to the late 1980s, the image positioning of Vitasoy in advertising experienced youth, fashion and leisure, and became a fashionable and enjoyable leisure beverage. Vitasoy reflects Hong Kong's economic take-off, the pursuit of life taste by Locals, the advancement of Hong Kong's globalization, the prevalence of Western pop culture, and the growth of Hong Kong's local culture. Since 1997, the image orientation of Vitasoy has experienced humanization, localization and classicalization. It reflects the rise of local consciousness and the local feelings and root seeking desire of Hong Kong citizens in these turbulent times. This paper combs the social history of Vitasoy consumption and discusses the transformation process of dietary culture or products from function to symbol, which will provide a new case for the study of dietary anthropology or social history, and also be beneficial to the study of regional culture in Hong Kong.

**Keywords:** *Vitasoy, Advertisement, Brand Image, Hong Kong Society.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-20th century, various brands and types of beverages emerged in Hong Kong, but due to the unique historical context and complex market climate, most of these brands eventually faded away. However, Vitasoy has been supported by Hong Kong residents for 80 years and has ultimately become an essential part of Hong Kong's local culture. This outcome was largely attributed to the active shaping of brand image by Vitasoy's advertisements [1]. Since advertising has both economic and cultural functions, it is not simply a promotional tool, but also a necessary means for enterprises to form their brand image [2], and can also be regarded as a societal economic and cultural guide [3].

As a result, this paper attempts to use relevant advertisements from 1940 to 1997 as an entrance, combined with the background of the times, to explore the evolution and changes of Vitasoy's brand image in

this period, as well as to ascertain the current state of Hong Kong society at the time.

## 2. VITASOY'S BRAND IMAGE ESTABLISHING

### 2.1. the 1940s to early 1970s

Vitasoy was born in Hong Kong in 1940. In the late 1930s, affected by the war circumstances in China and Asia, supplies were scarce in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong people suffered from malnutrition due to food shortages. Milk to boost people's nourishment had to be imported, which was both expensive and in short supply. However, a speech titled "Soybeans - China's Cow" made Vitasoy founder Dr. Luo Guixiang realized that cheap Chinese soybeans are comparable in nutritional value to milk. Therefore, to strengthen the physique of Locals, Luo Guixiang decided to develop a soy drink as an affordable alternative to milk, so that the poor can also

acquire enough nutrition [1]<sup>14-28</sup>. Vitasoy was a plant-based beverage, but its Chinese name used the concept of "milk" to emphasize its position as a "milk substitute," as well as the image of "Vitamin" to emphasize its high nutritional content [1]<sup>32</sup>. As a result, "a nutritious and economical present for the poor" was the original intention of Vitasoy and its product image when it first appeared [4].

From 1941 to 1945, Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese army, and Vitasoy was forced to halt production. Following Hong Kong's liberation, not only did the British Hong Kong government actively resuscitate the Hong Kong economy, but a considerable number of mainland immigrants also poured into Hong Kong as the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party broke out. This era background is undoubtedly a historic opportunity to expand sales. As a consequence, Vitasoy also followed the existing scenario to vigorously promote it. At first, it used "How can experience three products for only one price? Nutrition + hunger + thirst-quenching = Vitasoy" as the advertising slogan, and later used "Consistently drinking Vitasoy will make you taller, stronger, and more active" and "Reading diligently without neglecting nutrition" as propaganda slogans. It can be seen that Vitasoy's advertisements concentrated on its nutritional function, and Vitasoy's "affordable nutritional supplement" image positioning also reflects the economic status and the requirements of Locals in the post-war environment of Hong Kong [5].

However, with the gradual improvement of the post-war economy, the image of Vitasoy's as a present for the poor has gradually become monotonous and antiquated, and its attractiveness to customers has waned. So, the Vitasoy company despatched "Ms. Vitasoy" to wipe sweat and distribute towels to the Vitasoy-drinking sweaters, as well as "Mr. Vitasoy" to enter the school to deliver nutrition awards to Vitasoy-drinking pupils. In these ingenious publicity gift-giving activities, the youthful images, trendy clothes, and cordial services of "Ms. Vitasoy" and "Mr. Vitasoy" enriched the public's sensory impression of Vitasoy and enhanced the public's freshness and goodwill toward the brand. As a result, Vitasoy's image has been given new vitality.

However, the promotional poster for the towel-giving campaign plainly stated that the purpose of the campaign was to urge customers to choose Vitasoy for an energy boost and used bold and rapidly enlarged words to highlight Vitasoy's function of "fastest replenishment of physical strength". In the same way, Mr. Vitasoy's distribution of nutrition awards was also to demonstrate the nutritional function of Vitasoy. It can be shown that Vitasoy's image positioning was always strongly tied to "function" from the 1940s to the early 1970s. This demonstrates that "affordable" and "nutrition" are key needs in Hong Kong people's lives during this time,

reflecting the lack of material resources in Hong Kong and the poor consuming ability of Locals at the time [6]. On the other hand, Vitasoy's attempt to enrich its brand image reflects the gradual recovery of Hong Kong's social economy after the war [7].

## ***2.2. the Early 1970s to late 1980s***

Hong Kong's economy has grown significantly since 1970, and the quality of life for Locals has risen dramatically. Therefore, Vitasoy has also updated its brand image following the social situation to match the higher life aspirations of Hong Kong residents.

In 1974, Vitasoy coined the propaganda slogan "Vitasoy is not merely as simple as soda" to compete for the market with soda drinks that were becoming increasingly popular among young people at that time. The slogan adopts Cantonese, the everyday spoken language of Hong Kong. Compared to the previously utilized written languages, Cantonese was more conducive to the distribution of slogans, and it also made Vitasoy's image more lively and agile. It can also be seen from the selection of Cantonese that the status of Cantonese in Hong Kong society had improved, and the locality of Vitasoy had strengthened. It mirrored the progress of Hong Kong's native culture.

The slogan implied that Vitasoy was more nutritious and healthy than soda, but it didn't mention so directly. However, since Vitasoy had been in Hong Kong for almost 30 years at the time, Locals were familiar with the old brand and could grasp this meaning on their own [6]. It can be noted that Vitasoy advertising at this time began to choose more abstract and ambiguous terms, and no longer deliberately stressed product functions, but instead made the audience "subjective" understand the meaning of advertisements based on their own experience.

In the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy further developed vigorously, attracting a large number of foreigners to seek gold in Hong Kong. Western popular culture was also introduced to the area and was admired by Hong Kong people [8]<sup>487</sup>. With the increasing popularity of TV sets, Vitasoy also debuted its first TV commercial "Playground" in 1982. The kids in the commercial are having fun while drinking Vitasoy, and the entire commercial is packed with naive, playful, and joyous elements. Many pictures in the commercial reflect middle-class feelings and westernized aesthetics [8]<sup>465</sup>, such as a little girl in a bikini, lying on a rubber boat in a sexy posture, and drinking Vitasoy leisurely. The promotional lyrics emphasize the significance of Vitasoy in leisure life through a lovely depiction of childhood leisure life. The focus of commercial's focus is no longer on the basic life demands of nutritional function, but rather on the value of enjoyment in enhancing life's taste [5].

The 1983 Vitasoy commercial "The Only Realm" directly borrowed from the MTV of the popular American superstar Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" from the song melody to the visual effects. In the picture, a group of young people is dancing cheerful discos with a luminous Vitasoy in their hands, and the floor panels in the scene will also be lit up when the young people step on the dance steps. In the 1987 Vitasoy commercial "Shadow", the three young protagonists clothed in trendy western attire, their shadows went from grey to colorful and came alive while they were drinking Vitasoy, and then the protagonists and their shadows chased each other and danced joyously together. It can be seen that both advertisements cater to westernized aesthetics, and are full of youthful, bright, and trendy elements, and the themes are strongly tied to young people's trendy and colorful lives. The commercial lyrics of the two are "tastes good, feels good, unique tastes, unique beauty, Vitasoy, the only realm" and "enjoy Vitasoy, your world, tastes, good enough to cross the world, feels, good enough to cross the world, only by drinking Vitasoy, you can cross the world". They all emphasize drinking sensations such as "tasting" and "feeling", which are related to the level of enjoyment, and they all describe using imprecise or even symbolic language, allowing room for the audience's imagination [5].

To summarize, Vitasoy advertisements during this period share the following characteristics: linking Vitasoy with elements such as youth, fashion, and pleasure; emphasizing the drinking experience to promote the product value to the level of enjoyment; portraying middle-class feelings, displaying an exaggerated and westernized aesthetic orientation; and using abstract expressions to obscure product functions and advertising definitions. Vitasoy's image had evolved as a result of these ads, becoming younger, more fashionable, and more easygoing. It had re-entered the beverage market with a new image of a "delicious and trendy leisure drink". And it can also glimpse the current state of Hong Kong society during this period from these advertising characteristics, such as the take-off and globalization of Hong Kong's economic development, Hong Kong people's pursuit of quality and taste of life, the invasion and rampant of Western popular culture in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong people's desire to be further connected with the world [8]<sup>497</sup>.

### ***2.3. the late 1980s to late 1990s***

All industries in Hong Kong prospered from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, but the social condition remained unstable. Hong Kong was not only dealing with changes in geographical sovereignty, but it was also suffering from a flood of immigration, with a substantial number of residents leaving. And at this time, as an old local brand that had been planted in Hong Kong for a long time, Vitasoy had already had a solid emotional foundation

with Hong Kong people and had an irreplaceable psychological advantage and nostalgic value in the hearts of Hong Kong people [1]. However, under the impact of the social circumstances and the use of its sentimental value, Vitasoy's commercials in this period began to adopt the route of localization and humanization. The commercials' Western-style gradually faded, and the characters and scenes of the advertisements were replaced by local people and places in Hong Kong, and the narration's focus shifted to events that Hong Kong residents valued, as well as their lives and ideas [8]<sup>499</sup>.

The 1988-1991 Vitasoy commercials "Childhood Now" series (total of three parts) captured life scenes of Hong Kong people of various ages and groups accompanied by Vitasoy to describe the connection between Hong Kong people and Vitasoy. The series of advertisements no longer continued the flamboyant painting style of the 1980s, but instead utilized human feelings as the theme and injected warm elements of life, expressing the theme of "Vitasoy consistently accompanies the entire Hong Kong people, and can drink the taste of childhood regardless of age". Vitasoy in the commercial represented the increasing memories and life moments of Locals. It was an old buddy who had accompanied Hong Kong residents as they grew up. It had a strong human and local feeling to it. The humanization and localization of Vitasoy's image, as well as the de-Westernization of Vitasoy's advertising approach, reflect the rise of the local consciousness in Hong Kong society. It's just that there aren't many responders since the moment isn't quite right [8]<sup>465</sup>.

The advertisements "Study Abroad" in 1992 and "Hometown Love" in 1994 continued to portray Hong Kong people's tales and express their feelings and thoughts. "Study Abroad" was launched in Hong Kong at the peak of the immigration wave. It narrated the story of a Hong Kong international student who was homesick while studying in a faraway country and went to Chinatown to buy a box of Vitasoy to reminisce his familiar years in Hong Kong. Looking back on Hong Kong society at the time, this "borrowed time and place" had gradually become a solid home, but the negotiations between China and the United Kingdom over Hong Kong sovereignty began to tremble in the hearts of Hong Kong people. Because of their lack of familiarity with the mainland and their deep fear of the Communist Party, many Hong Kong residents had become despondent about the area's future and had decided to leave [8]<sup>493</sup>. However, the prospects after leaving Hong Kong are uncertain, and the familiar presence will be lost immediately, putting Hong Kong residents confused [8]<sup>465</sup>. And "Study Abroad" mirrored Hong Kong residents' ambivalence about wanting to leave but also being attached to the city [8]<sup>466</sup>, evoking tremendous emotional resonance among Locals.

The 1994 commercial "Hometown Love" depicted the story of a teenager who returned to his hometown for the holidays to visit his grandpa. The grandpa in the teenager's heart was initially solemn, but as the teenager interacted with him daily, he eventually discovered his grandpa's gentle and loving sides. When the grandpa sent the teenager back, he trembled over the railway platform of the train station just to buy him a box of Vitasoy, which greatly impacted the teenager once more. The plot of the advertisement is borrowed from Zhu Ziqing's "Back View", depicting a strong family affection and an irresistible nostalgia. Interpreting the advertisement based on the background of the times, the grandfather embodies the mainland and the past, while the teenager returning to his hometown to visit relatives symbolizes the Hong Kong people seeking their roots [8]<sup>466</sup>. The advertisement's projection of the mainland is apolitical; it separated the mainland from the contemporary Chinese state and depicted the strong and beautiful feelings of Hong Kong people toward the mainland. This explains the duality of Hong Kong people's "patriotism and fear of the Communist Party": while they are cautious of the CCP regime, they yet wish to reconnect with their roots [8]<sup>466</sup>.

"Study Abroad" and "Hometown Love" echoed before and after, and the two respectively told a story of Hong Kong people "leaving home" and "returning home". Both were deeply rooted in Hong Kong's social history, closely follow the lives of Hong Kong residents, and revealed the actual feelings of Locals. Vitasoy in "Study Abroad" carried the memories, nostalgia, and devotion of Locals to Hong Kong, while Vitasoy in "Hometown Love" carried the desire of Locals to find their roots and their deep feelings for the motherland. Vitasoy's locality and humaneness grew stronger and stronger during this period, symbolizing a sense of belonging in the hearts of Hong Kong people. Since then, Vitasoy had developed a reputation as a local classic brand that can stand by Hong Kong and Locals in the face of adversity and had become a symbol of Hong Kong people's emotions and life experiences [9].

The Vitasoy commercial "Wing" in 1996 and 1997 depicted a hilarious "online dating" narrative. Sandy, a high school boy, met Wing on the Internet, mistook him for a beautiful girl, and viewed him as a dream lover, not realizing until they met that Wing was a little boy. Vitasoy was featured as a sign that the two knew each other on an offline date. This commercial was extremely different from the previous ones in that it no longer showed a human touch or a local feeling, and it also didn't provide Vitasoy any profound or particular symbolic meaning [8]<sup>467</sup>. It can be said that "Wing" is just a lighthearted and humorous entertainment sketch, which is detached from Vitasoy's product characteristics and the historical context of Hong Kong, so it is superficial and shallow.

Although "Wing" no longer intentionally resonated with the audience as before, it remained hugely popular with the public. And even though Vitasoy had nothing to do with the ad's storyline, viewers didn't think Vitasoy's insertion was deliberate or abrupt. These occurrences just demonstrated that Vitasoy had been strongly ingrained in Hong Kong society at the time, and it had been able to emerge in practically any scene involving Hong Kong or Hong Kong people as a matter of course and without violation. Not only that, but everywhere Vitasoy went, it was automatically imbued with a Hong Kong flavor. Vitasoy had established itself as a "Hong Kong local classic drink", and had become a cultural symbol that symbolizes the whole of Hong Kong [10].

### 3. CONCLUSION

It can be seen that the elements buried in Vitasoy's advertisements and the dynamic changes in Vitasoy's image between 1940 and 1997 thoroughly mirrored the realities and changes of Hong Kong society at the time. Ads for Vitasoy from the 1940s to the early 1970s focused on "cheap" and "nutritious" as the brand's image. It expressed the main requirements of Hong Kong people at the time, reflecting the paucity of material resources and the limited consumption capacity of Hong Kong people in Hong Kong's post-war environment. Afterward, Vitasoy's attempt to enrich its brand image by creating alternative sensory experiences reflected the gradual recovery of Hong Kong's social economy after the war. From the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s, Vitasoy's ads stressed "fashionable" and "enjoyable" in shaping the brand image, which represented the booming economy of Hong Kong and the pursuit of lifestyle by Hong Kong people. At the same time, Vitasoy's ads began to use Cantonese, mirroring the intensification of Hong Kong's indigenous culture. The ads' westernized graphics and middle-class feelings reflected Hong Kong's growing globalization and the prevalence of Western pop culture in the region. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, Vitasoy's ads focused on "locality" and "humanity" to shape the image of Vitasoy. The ads have injected warm elements of life and are closely linked to the social background of Hong Kong and the actual life of Hong Kong people, expressing the authentic feelings of Hong Kong people at the moment. This demonstrates the awakening of local awareness in Hong Kong society, as well as the local sentiments and root-seeking desires among Hong Kong people in turbulent times.

By sorting out the changes in the image of Vitasoy in this period, it can find that while its image is far from before and after, it is progressively formed according to the times and social environment, as well as product qualities and historical characteristics. Before the early 1970s, Vitasoy was first introduced as a "the poor's milk", and then focused on functionalizing the image to become an "affordable nutritional supplement". Since then, until

the late 1980s, the image of Vitasoy has experienced rejuvenation, fashion, and leisure, and it faces the public with a new image of a "fashionable and enjoyable leisure drink". From then until 1997, Vitasoy's image has undergone humanization, localization, and classicization. It first evolved as a symbol of Hong Kong people's emotions and experiences, and finally became a cultural icon representing Hong Kong with the image of a "Hong Kong local classic drink". The establishment of Vitasoy's irreplaceable brand value is derived not only from its unique advantages as a traditional local time-honored brand but also from the meticulous dissemination of its commercials over time.

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