From a Word to a Commercial Power - A Brief Introduction to the *Kawaii* Aesthetic in Contemporary Japan [1]

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Introduction: *Kawaii*, From a Linguistic and Cultural Term to a Trend

Kawaii is one of the most popular words in contemporary Japan and one which reflects an important aspect of contemporary Japanese material culture (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010; Kinsella 1995). Although the word is often translated as '"cute and pretty," the Japanese concept of *kawaii* actually encompasses several additional meanings. The following, for example, is a translation of the definition of *kawaii* in the *Shōgakukan Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (second edition) (the most comprehensive, unabridged monolingual Japanese dictionary) (2000):

1) Looks miserable and raises sympathy, pitiable.

2) Attractive, cherished. Beloved.

3) Has a sweet nature. Lovely. Adorable, innocence (of faces and figures of young women and children).

4) (Objects) attractively small and beautiful.

5) Trivial. Pitiful.

The modern concept of *kawaii/*cuteness dates back to the eleventh-century masterpiece *The Pillow Book* (*Makuranosōshi*) (Endo 2016; Yomota 2006), where author Sei Shōnagon (ca. 1000) reveals her deepest thoughts, desires, and opinions relating to the aristocratic world. More specifically, one of the book's chapters, "Adorable Things" (*Utsukushiki Mono*), is used for illustrating the things that are appealing to her, as exemplified in the following translation of the text by Ivan Morris (1967):

The face of a child drawn on a melon.

A baby sparrow that comes hopping up when one imitates the squeak of a mouse, or again, when one has tied it with a thread round its leg and its parents bring insects or worms and pop them in its mouth—delightful!

A baby of two or so is crawling rapidly along the ground. With his sharp eyes he catches sight of a tiny object and, picking it up with his pretty little fingers, takes it to show to a grown-up person.

A child, whose hair has been cut like a nun's, is examining something; the hair falls over his eyes, but instead of brushing it away he holds his head to the side. The pretty white cords of his trouser-skirt are tied round his shoulders, and this too is most adorable.

(Morris 1967, 168-169)

As we can see, Sei Shōnagon provides a glimpse of the attributes that she considers sweet and lovely, such as a face of a child, a baby, a small object, and little girl. We can further infer that her description of *utsukushi* relates to the modern meaning of *kawaii* and to "infantile" characteristics. In this respect, Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010) suggest

that an historical relationship exists between the words *utsukushi* and *kawaii* where *kawaii* derived the primary meanings associated with *utsukushi* and expanded them to other areas.

However, while the meaning of *kawaii* developed from the notion of *utsukushi*, the two terms are currently far from alike. Indeed, *utsukushi* currently suggests the admiration of ideal beauty, while *kawaii* characterizes an endearing imperfection that attracts affection and a desire to protect it and bring it closer (Granot, Alejandro, and Russell 2014; Nguyen 2016; Yomota 2006). The word *kawaii* itself is thought to have originated from the word *kawahayushi,* a compound of "face" (*kao*) and "flushing or to be illuminated" (*hayushi*), which was used to describe a sense of shame. In time, however, the word *kawaii* came to express a sense of sympathy, pity, or affection towards weaker members of society, such as women and children (Nittono 2016). In this respect, Figure 1 below traces the evolution of the word *kawaii*. As can be seen, the connotations of "pity" and "shame" almost completely vanished during the Edo period (17 to 19th centuries), while the other two meanings, "love" and "affection," remained (Nittono 2016; Yomota 2006). Furthermore, and although the Japanese adjectives *kawaii* and *kawaisō* (meaning "pity") derive from the same origin, "pity" no longer forms part of the modern meaning of *kawaii*. As a matter of fact, the word *kawaii* presently has almost no negative connotations (Dale 2017; Nittono 2016).
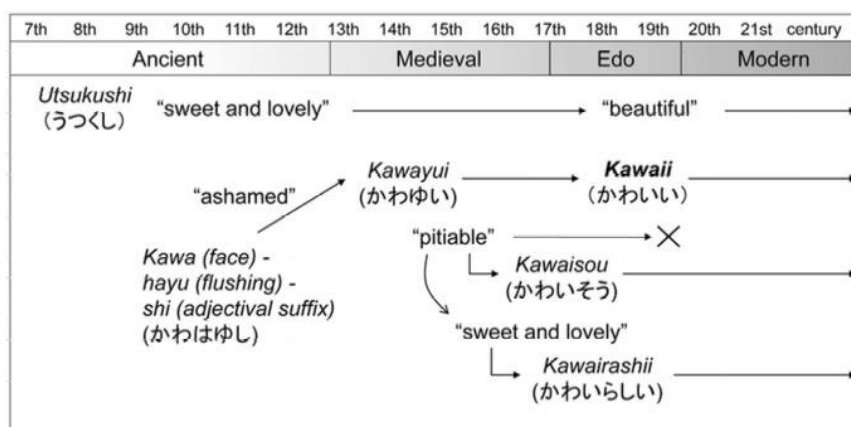
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Figure 1 The evolution of the word *kawaii* (Nittono 2016, 81).

With this in mind, Shiri Lieber-Milo created and delivered[2] a survey to a total of 692 women aged 18 to 29 who resided in Japan (and specifically in the Kansai area) at the time of the survey with a view to examining Japanese women's attitudes toward *kawaii* (Lieber-Milo 2017). More specifically, this survey included a range of 11 questions meant for examining the respondent's knowledge of, approach to, and attitude toward the *kawaii* fad and customs.

The results of this survey, in turn, can be seen as presenting the significance of the *kawaii* term and trend among Japanese women. More specifically, the respondents were able to define the word *kawaii* and give a deeper interpretation, in their own words, of *kawaii* culture and its trends as well as determine its everyday uses.

For example, the findings pertaining to the question "Please describe your thoughts on *kawaii* style and behavior"[3] (*"Kawaii" fasshon ya kōdō ni tsuite anata wa*

donoyō ni kangaete imasu ka) showed that the majority of respondents (*n* = 411, 59%) claimed to use the word *kawaii* when describing such small things as animals and infants. In addition, the survey's findings also revealed that the sight of *kawaii* items arouses a positive reaction towards the observed object. Accordingly, a significant amount of respondents (*n* = 375, 54%) stated that they tend to behave in a friendlier fashion when observing *kawaii* items.

Lieber-Milo (2017) also offered an open-ended question for those who wished to express their own personal opinions regarding *kawaii*. Since the open-ended question was optional, it was only completed by 66% of the survey participants (*n* = 460) answered the inquiry "Please describe how you would define *kawaii* words and behaviors in your own words" (*Anata ga kangaeru 'kawaii' kotoba ya kōdō towa donoyōna monodesu ka? Anata jishin no kotoba de okikase kudasai*) (Lieber-Milo 2017, 175 and 179).

During the analysis stage of her study, Lieber-Milo (2017) created an affinity diagram in order to arrange the various ideas and opinions submitted by respondents into categorized groups. To this end, she gathered five participants between the ages of 20 and 60 for a brainstorming session, where they were given a table and asked to sort the survey-submitted ideas into categories. This work was then followed by a short discussion where the participants were asked to explain their choices. The results of this discussion eventually led to the creation of five categories: gender (*seibetsu*), appearance (*gaikan*), positive qualities (*pojitibu na tokusei*), negative qualities (*negatibu na tokusei*), and neither positive nor negative (*pojitibu demo negatibudemo nai*)*.

As can be seen in **Figure 1** below, this affinity diagram helped in determining women's own definitions of and opinions on *kawaii* words and behaviors.
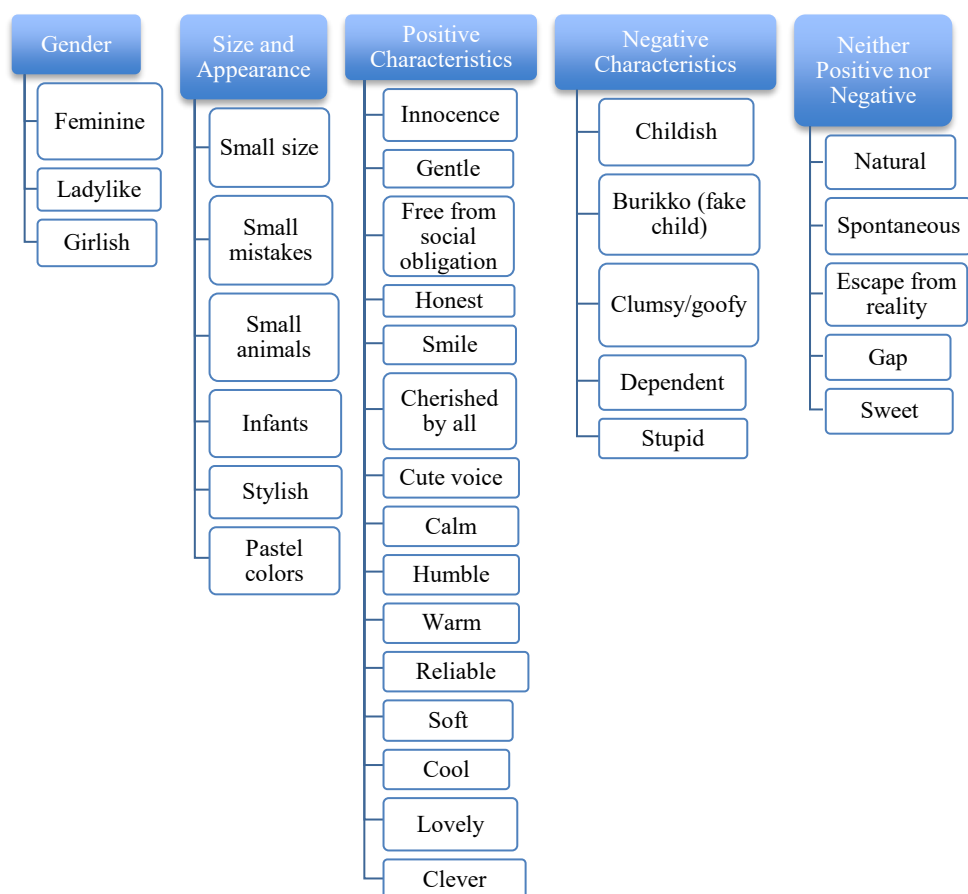
Figure 1 An affinity diagram of Japanese women's responses (*n* = 460) to the question "Please describe how you would define *kawaii* words and behaviors in your own words" (Lieber-Milo 2017)

According to the survey respondents such small things as infants, animals, and even small mistakes, fall under the description of *kawaii* as used in daily conversation. In addition to size, particular colors are also part of *kawaii* style, with pastel colors considered as both fashionable and *kawaii*. Participants also portrayed *kawaii* as being part of women's culture, where a *kawaii* persona is viewed as feminine (*josei*), maiden (*shōjo*), and even girlish (*joshi*). The following are examples of some of the respondent's answers:

"A kawaii person is someone who possesses a cute personality, wears cute clothes, and behaves like an innocent and honest person.

(*Kawaii hito towa, kawaii seikaku to kawaii fuku wo kite, muku de sunaona furi wo suru hitodearu.*)"

"A person who has a feminine charm and innocence, and is likable by both men and women. (*Josei-tekina miryoku to sunaosa wo mochi, dansei nimo josei nimo konomareru hito.*)"

(Lieber-Milo 2017, 123-124)

The results of the qualitative analysis set above allowed Lieber-Milo (2017) to eventually acknowledge that about half of the definitions of *kawaii* were categorized as "positive" with affirmative illustrations in which a *kawaii* object or person can be seen as conveying innocence, honesty, and purity and is seen as someone who smiles frequently and is friendly to everyone. While the respondents did in fact note several negative characteristics of *kawaii*, its positive virtues prevail and the mere sight of *kawaii* objects can be seen as clearly evoking such affirmative responses as warmth, smiling, and compassion from the observer.

While the word *kawaii* has long been part of the Japanese lexicon, the modern concept of *kawaii* originates from youth sub-cultures, and those of teenage girls in particular (Decatur 2012; Kinsella 1995; Monden 2015; Yomota 2006). These young women are situated between early puberty and marriage, are economically dependent on their parents, go to school, and do not have to work for living, all circumstances that allow them to act and dress in a girly-cute manner. The *kawaii* culture is thus closely affiliated with young women; these girls display a sweet, innocent, pure, and infantile nature, and

therefore exhibit the same qualities conveyed through the term *kawaii* (Anan 2016; Masubuchi 1994).

More specifically, the association between young Japanese women and *kawaii* evolved in the 1970s through the "schoolgirls handwriting" trend, which has also been referred to as *burikko-ji* (fake-child writing). This style is characterized by its rounded letters along with the use of randomly selected English lettering and cartoon images (Anan 2016; Kinsella 1995). Its subsequent success and popularity allowed it to expand to other channels, and this cursive handwriting is currently used extensively in media that focus on a younger audience such as manga, magazines, and advertisements (Decatur 2012).

The rise of *kawaii* as a subculture in the 1970s can also be seen as a rebellion against the traditional stereotypical gender roles that perceive women as the parties responsible for managing the household and for childcare (Botz-Bornstein 2016; Kinsella 1995). This resistance against social pressure and stereotypes was thus often expressed by young women's unique fashion and lifestyle choices, choices that allowed them to withdraw into a fantasy world of cuteness that was frozen in time and to isolate themselves from reality and social obligations (Anan 2016; Iseri 2015). As a result, many Japanese adults were initially displeased with the *kawaii* subculture.

While criticized in the 1970s, the *kawaii* subculture became increasingly more accepted with the course of time to the extent that *kawaii* culture and aesthetics can currently be observed in almost every facet of Japanese society, from anime characters (e.g., Hello Kitty and Pokémon), through television shows and magazines and even election campaigns and government representatives.

The Psychological Aspects of *Kawaii/*Cuteness

It is generally acknowledged that the scientific study of cuteness began with Konrad Lorenz's (1943) idea of *Kindchenschema* ("baby schema" or "babyishness"). As an ethologist, he argued that certain types of stimuli induce instinctive behaviors in animals. His "baby schema" refers to a set of physical features, such as a large head relative to body size, a high and protruding forehead, large eyes below the horizontal midline of the skull, and so forth, which are often observed in the babies of humans and certain other species. These features, Lorenz suggested, triggered a sense of cuteness and induced nurturance and protection behaviors in humans. Although this idea started as speculation, subsequent empirical studies have shown that an object presenting a "baby schema" is perceived as cute (e.g., Glocker et al. 2009). In other words, it is by and large due to Lorenz's seminal work that the scientific conception cuteness has been strongly associated with infants and parental care (Kringelbach et al. 2016).

However, recent studies have begun to question this traditional view. Sherman and Haidt (2011), for example, suggested that cuteness is a cue that elicits affiliative social interactions rather than an innate trigger of behaviors associated with parental care. Among other things, they supported their arguments by citing a study that suggested that newborn babies who need more care and protection were rated as being less cute than 9 to 11 month-old babies (Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald 1979). Another study they cited suggested that babies were rated as being cuter when they presented positive facial expressions than when they presented more negative expressions (Hildebrandt 1983). All in all, their findings suggest that cuteness is more related to sociality (e.g., playing with or talking to the object) than to neonatal caregiving.

In another study, Nittono (2016) summarized the findings of surveys he conducted among Japanese undergraduate students as follows: First, the degree of *kawaii* correlated only moderately with the degree of infantility. Second, there were types of stimuli (e.g., a

smile) that were rated as high in *kawaii* but as low in infantility. Third, the analysis of psychological reactions to various *kawaii* objects either with or without baby schema features suggested that the sensation of *kawaii* was not directly associated with protection and nurturance but rather driven by the desire to approach and stay with the object. These findings, in turn, accord with Sherman and Haidt's (2011) sociality hypothesis concerning cuteness. Nittono further proposed that *kawaii* is better understood as one's affective feelings towards an object rather than as one of that object's attributes, and argued that "as an emotion", kawaii may be characterized as: positive, unthreatened (in that the subject does not feel under threat), moderately aroused, approach-motivated and socially oriented" (2016, 89). By reviewing relevant findings, he also listed the psychological and behavioral effects of *kawaii* as follows: draws attention and interest (e.g., voluntarily viewed for a long time), induces positive feelings (including smiling), increases carefulness, narrows the focus of attention, and improves interpersonal relationships. In short, *kawaii* can be seen as characterized by positive and affiliative feelings.

From a linguistic perspective, the extent to which the meanings of the words *kawaii* and cuteness overlap is unclear. In contemporary Japanese, *kawaii* is a general adjective that describes a variety of living and nonliving objects that elicit a certain type of positive feeling (Nittono and Ihara 2017). On the other hand, Dale (2017) pointed out that the English word "cute" is also associated with a negative connotation as a synonym for "cunning," which reflects its history as derived from the word "acute," which means "clever and sharp-witted." However, the meaning of the English word "cuteness," as well as the Japanese word *kawaii*, seems to be expanding. Nenkov and Scott (2014), for example, proposed a different type or dimension of cuteness that is not related to the Lorenzian baby schema. They called it "whimsical cuteness" and argued that it is

associated with fun and playfulness and can lead to self-rewarding and indulgent behavior rather than the careful and restrained behaviors that are thought to be associated with 'baby schema' cuteness. Another example is *kimokawa* (creepy-cute) and *busakawa* (ugly-cute). These are compounds made up of *kawaii* (and its shorted form *kawa*) and other adjectives that are seemingly unrelated to or even contradict *kawaii*'s positive connotations. These kinds of coinages have been popularly used in Japan since around 2000 in order to express a person's positive attitude toward objects that are usually thought to be creepy or ugly (such as roach-like giant isopods or blobfish). These weird animals, in turn, may also be perceived as cute in English-speaking countries (Langley 2017).

Buckley (2016), in turn, proposed English term "aww" as a formal name for the emotion of perceiving cuteness (cute-emotion). The word *kawaii* itself is also used as an exclamation, particularly among young Japanese women.

All in all, and despite some etymological and cultural differences, most recent studies agree that both *kawaii* and cuteness are associated with positive and affiliative feelings that promote social interaction.

The feeling of *kawaii* and cuteness is probably a universal psychological experience. However, it has also been widely recognized that the Japanese society has accepted and ascribed a high value to this feeling ahead of other counties. In this respect, and although the historical source of *kawaii*'s success among the Japanese remains unclear, this special appreciation could potentially be seen as associated with Japan's national characteristics, such as its ethnic homogeneity, its island topography, and its abundance of agricultural and fishery products (Nittono 2016).

The Commercial Power of the *Kawaii* Aesthetic

The aesthetic qualities of *kawaii*, that include such physical characteristics as a rounded face and body, large eyes, and a petite body, convey a certain kind of helplessness and neediness that appeal to consumers' vulnerabilities. These characteristics then stimulate warm, cheerful, and nurturing feelings in the observer and trigger their sense of nostalgia (Anan 2016; Granot et al. 2014; McVeigh 2000).

These qualities and others have established the *kawaii* genre as central to the consumer culture and marketplace, especially in Japan, where marketers have learned that consumers will embrace products that create an atmosphere of warmth and neediness (Granot et al. 2014). This insight, in turn, has motivated many public and private corporations to invest in the creation of cute figures and goods that are based on *kawaii/*cute aesthetic qualities, such as small size, bright colors, and soft textures. In fact, the application of the *kawaii* design aesthetic to characters and mascots has become so common that it currently appears in almost every aspect of Japanese culture, and is used in the branding of companies, banks, universities, and even governmental agencies. For example, each of Japan's 47 prefectural police departments has designed its own original mascot character. These characters—that all convey a *kawaii* aesthetic—are utilized to promote civilian cooperation, to give rise to a closer relationship between the observer and the brand, and to attract potential customers (Allison 2004; Madge 1997).

Another example of the use of *kawaii* aesthetics by a governmental body can be seen in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games' closing ceremony, which included a brief, two-minute announcement clip for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Alongside the appearance of athletes and such iconic Japanese monuments as the Shibuya Crossing, Tokyo Tower, and others, it was hard to ignore the inclusion of the cute images of Hello Kitty, Doraemon, and Pac-Man, which have attained a near-global ubiquity over the course of the past 30 years (Borggreen 2011). The announcement ended with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who,

as an animated version of the video-game mascot Super Mario, "jumped" through a tunnel connecting Tokyo with the Rio Olympics closing ceremony stage (NHK Japan Broadcasting Corporation 2016). This morphing of Abe into the "cute" Mario character, in turn, can be seen as expressing the "coolness" of Japan and its "attractiveness" as the place to be seen in 2020.

However, the Japanese government's efforts to adopt the concept of "Gross National Cool" or "Cool Japan" and to employ it as a form of soft power did not originate in the 2016 Olympic Games but several years earlier. In 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced three new *Kawaii Tashi* (*Kawaii* Ambassadors) as the main representatives of Japanese pop culture in the field of fashion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2009). These three young women epitomize a different style of cool *kawaii*—wearing cute high school uniforms, pink *lolitas*[4], and multilayered *gyaru*[5]. This effort arose from a desire to attract more non-Japanese tourists to Japan and to instill a positive attitude towards the country (Borggreen 2011). Put differently, this cooperation between *kawaii* and governmental offices, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, can also be seen as expressing the fundamental impact and importance of *kawaii/*cute culture in Japan.

Beyond Japanese governmental offices, however, the *kawaii* characters' success in Japan also prompted foreign governments attempting to increase their country's popularity and improve its public image in Japan to create their own unique characters. One of these is the character-mascot named Shalo-um chan[6], whose design was the result of a public competition and which was selected by popular vote as the mascot character

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[4] Lolita fashion: (*rorīta fasshon*): A fashion subculture that is inspired by Victorian and Edwardian clothing and which developed during the 1990s. This style is popular in Japan's urban cities like Tokyo, where it is also possible to observe many of its sub-genres, such as "Gothic", "sweet", and "classic" Lolitas.
[5] *Gyaru* style: (young-girl style): *Gyaru* fashion is a type of Japanese street-fashion subculture that originated in the 1970s, and which is characterized by dyed hair, excessively decorated nails, makeup, and more.
[6] *Chan* is a Japanese name suffix that is used for addressing a baby or an endearing person.

for Israel's embassy in Japan (2013). Unsurprisingly, the selected character was designed according to the *kawaii* aesthetic and anatomy—small, round, and fragile. While expressing a certain similarity to the traditional Israeli-Jewish icon of the white dove, as can be seen in Figure 2 below, the two characters are in fact quite dissimilar. For example, Shalo-um is a pun on shalom (a Hebrew greeting) and *oum* (parrot in Japanese) and is intended to sound funny. Furthermore, and while the image of Shalo-um chan is made up of the same basic iconic elements as the traditional Israeli-Jewish white dove—such as the olive branch—, the new *kawaii* character has a more *kawaii* and cuter look. These *kawaii* characteristics include its size, round shape, the addition of a pink flush to the cheeks, and the Jewish Star of David, which correlates to the dove, Judaism, and Israel.
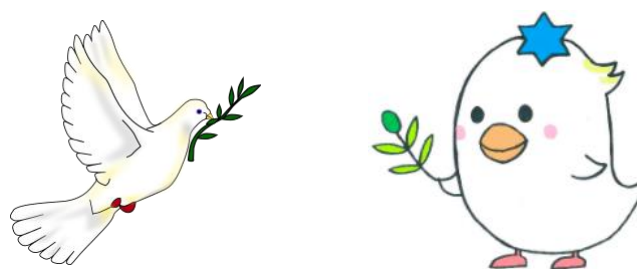

Figure 2 The traditional Israeli dove icon (on the left) (Wikipedia 2017) and the new *kawaii* parrot character of Shalo-um chan, created in 2013 (on the right) (courtesy of the Embassy of Israel in Japan)

According to Nir Tork, an Israeli employee in the Culture and Science Affairs section of the Embassy of Israel in Tokyo, Shalo-um chan, along with an animated television show that was broadcast online, was created with the intention of "promoting awareness and softening the image of Israel in the eyes of the Japanese, as well as raising the number of Japanese tourists in Israel" (Tork personal communication April 15, 2015).

Similarly, many Japanese corporations and government offices have also invested in the creation of commercially successful cute icons and merchandise based on the *kawaii* aesthetic characteristics (Anan 2016; Botz-Bornstein 2016; Yano 2013). Since

*kawaii/*cute visual characteristics are commonly used by government offices and the mass media for promoting ideas and civilian cooperation, *kawaii* is largely considered to be a successful strategic tool for manipulating and controlling individual consumption and decision-making behaviors (Dale 2017). In other words, the *kawaii* aesthetic can be seen as a dominant attribute in contemporary Japan and a useful tool for*:*

- Encouraging people to cooperate with the law and regulations.

- Transmitting a certain kind of sincerity, softness, and even innocence.

- Introducing emotional closeness to the relationship between the observer and the observed object.

- Attracting consumers to purchase and to follow the corporation's suggested product recommendations.

Recent globalization processes have also allowed this world of cuteness to extend beyond Japan and toward other Asian and Western countries. Indeed, such a proliferation of *kawaii* brands and products that Yano (2013) has called "pink globalization" is clearly apparent in the export of cute icons, images, and merchandise from Japan to other parts of the industrial world.

Finally, and as the world of *kawaii* cuteness becomes more internationally accessible and affordable for non-Japanese consumers of all ages, the *kawaii/*cute aesthetic continues to spread globally from Japan to other countries, and has even led such international corporations as Victoria's Secret, MINI, Motorola, Volkswagen, and others to embrace and use *kawaii* as a fundamental element of their design aesthetic (Granot et al. 2014).

Conclusion

The present paper described the dictionary meaning of *kawaii*, its current connotations for Japanese women (between the ages of 18 to 29), its psychological aspects and effects, and the manners in which this concept is employed by the mass media and commercial actors. The paper further demonstrated how the results of both quantitative and qualitative empirical research has emphasized the power of the *kawaii* aesthetic as a fundamental element of commercial Japanese consumerism. As such, the application of the *kawaii* culture of cuteness, which was initially focused on products for young women, has spread beyond its traditional borders. Correspondingly, the *kawaii* aesthetic is being used, manufactured, and marketed by companies, organizations, and the mass media as a tool of persuasion which motivates and attracts a broader consumer-base to buy commercial products or use certain services, as well as triggers positive consumer responses. Indeed, this usage of *kawaii* has proved to be a successful strategic tool in raising the level of affection potential buyers hold for almost any brand. Furthermore, and thanks to the endorsement of the aesthetic qualities of *kawaii*, alongside the employment of aggressive marketing and promotion efforts, the contemporary *kawaii* aesthetic has also managed to play an important role in the Japanese economic, industrial, and political worlds, where its presence appears almost everywhere, from advertisements to election campaigns, as well as world-wide.

All in all, the present paper sought to bring about a better and more comprehensive understanding of the *kawaii/cute* aesthetic, and to pave the way for further research by both Japanese and foreign researchers seeking to expand the present study's investigatory parameters and broaden them to other areas and settings. Finally, and as the "world of cuteness" becomes more accessible and affordable globally for both young and mature consumers outside Japan, further research may, for example, examine how *kawaii* is presented, portrayed, and perceived in other countries.

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