Article title: KAWAII: ANALYZING CUTENESS IN JAPANESE MEDIA, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to sum up and categorize the basic findings related to the phenomenon of cuteness (kawaii) in Japanese culture and society. It looks at various media representations of “cute” things while emphasizing the culture-specific interpretation of this phenomenon. Originally, the term kawaii referred to childhood and is commonly used in Japan to describe small, soft, round objects in pastel colors. However, the world of kawaii is much larger today – it includes material objects (toys, miniatures, mascots), people (toddlers, girls, women), animals (kittens, puppies, teddy bears), behavior (words, gestures, appearances), writing (stylized Japanese, cartoons, emoticons), fashion (clothes, ribbons, ruffles), and more. The aim of this study is to show how kawaii came to represent one of the most culturally persuasive aesthetics of the new millennium. This study consists of three thematic units, namely psychology, aesthetics, and history of cuteness. Within psychology, the study approaches kawaii as a broader psychological concept that stimulates an emotional effect in human psyche. It introduces some insights into the kawaii phenomenon from psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives. It approaches kawaii as affect, desire, nostalgia and eros. As for the aesthetics, it looks at a wide range of objects, characters, and styles that are designed to be endearing, charming, and visually appealing. It observes the basic aesthetic features of kawaii objects in various areas, including writing, design, fashion, food, mascots, and politics. Finally, the study offers a brief history of Japanese cuteness. It will show that the contemporary obsession around cute objects has its roots in Japanese cultural tradition. This tradition began with the court literature of the 10th century and culminated in the second half of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS: cuteness, kawaii, Japan, Japanese aesthetics, history of cuteness

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# INTRODUCTION

As this study will show, there exists a plenty of literature on the subject of cuteness, both in Japan and the West. One may therefore think that the subject in question is largely covered and there is no need for another study. But with the arrival of Joshua Dale’s new book *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired our Brains and Conquered the World* (2023), there seems to be a revival of “cute studies” – a scholarly discourse which was established by Dale in 2016. Moreover, cuteness is constantly developing, taking on new shapes and provoking new desires that are worth analyzing. While being inspired by Dale’s new book, this article aims to categorize and summarize the basic facts we know about the culture of Japanese cuteness, widely known as “kawaii”. It places the kawaii phenomenon within three disciplines: psychology, aesthetics and history.

# THE MEANING OF KAWAII

What is kawaii? First of all, it is one of the most widely used Japanese words, whose closest English equivalent is the adjective "cute". Generally, this adjective points to attributes such as adorable, endearing and attractive, but for the Japanese, it connotes much more than that: innocent, vulnerable, dependent, imperfect, harmless, immature and weak, among other things. These traits may seem negative from the viewpoint of Western culture, but they represent positive affective values from a Japanese cultural perspective.

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The word kawaii is used across generations in Japan and functions as an idiom that expresses in a compact form what the speaker is unable to express in complex sentences. In interpersonal communication, kawaii can serve as a verbal "padding" in conversation, a positive reaction to an adorable thing, or a way of expressing emotional affection (compliment). In conversation, the word kawaii represents an emotionally loaded exclamation toward an object or being that the communicator spontaneously perceives as "cute." The kawaii utterances may seem largely meaningless, but it is this very meaninglessness that permits conversation to occur (Madge 1998, 169). Moreover, it is an attempt to communicate in friendly, nonhierarchical, egalitarian way. In other words, everyone is equal in the kawaii world.

Kawaii is a highly polysemous term that evokes a wide range of emotions and whose meaning may vary according to each user's personal taste. What is important here is that, unlike Western cuteness, Japanese kawaii can oscillate between joy and pity. The word kawaii describes a behavior that is lovable (*amai*), adorable (*airashī*) and innocent (*mujaki*), but the very same behavior can be simultaneously perceived as vulnerable (*kizutsukeyasui*), immature (*mijuku*) and regrettable (*kawaisō*). To speak with Madge (1998, 165), the rhetoric of lovability always contains within it a rhetoric of displeasure. The origins of this ambiguity go back to the court literature of the 10th century, and they will be examined in the last chapter of this study.

Kawaii is not just a linguistic expression - it is also a global cultural phenomenon. In contemporary pop culture production, the "cute culture" (*kawaii bunka*) represents one of the main pillars of the cultural aesthetics of the new millennium (Dale 2017, 2023). In Japan, kawaii symbolism is an important economic driver not only in the field of manga and anime, but also in fashion or pop music. The “cutification” of Japanese society ties directly to marketing practices. Almost every large Japanese company today has a PR built around a cute mascot. There is even a view that without the cute culture, Japanese economy would stagnate and Japan's influence on the global economic scene would weaken (Kato 2002). But kawaii is not limited to Japanese economy, as the cuteness aesthetic is also widely used by political actors (see below). At any rate, kawaii is not just a temporary fashion trend – it is practically a "standard aesthetic" that permeates all areas of Japanese everyday life (McVeigh 2000, 13).

On the one hand, kawaii is a subliminal desire to surround oneself with cute things. On the other hand, it is also a subtle rebellion against established social reality, as certain aspects of kawaii behavior allow one to break away from the traditional (Confucian) values of Japanese society. Kawaii culture subverts the traditional ideal of the Japanese woman, blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and provides Japanese women and men with a new identity that is based less on commitment and obligation (*giri*) and more on fun and play (*asobi*). Play is an important part of the cultural frame. It is far more than child’s play – it forms an integral part of adult creativity in Japan (Yano 2013) and it influences the appearance of cuteness in art and literature (Dale 2023). At any rate, kawaii culture is not just mindless consumption of fetishized and mass-produced items – it also represents a symbolic form of playful defiance for young millennials who are dissatisfied, alienated and depressed.

Although Japan is labeled as “kingdom of cute”, cuteness is by no means a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. In other words, the semantic concept of “cute” is transcultural: people have cute feelings toward similar objects and express favorable attitudes toward cuteness regardless of nationality (Nittono, Lieber-Milo and Dale 2021, 13; Yano 2013; Dale 2017). Kawaii indeed seems to be a purely Japanese phenomenon, but cute feelings exist irrespective of culture and have become popular in countries other than Japan. This being said, the Japanese society has accepted and ascribed a high value to the kawaii sentiment ahead of other countries (Lieber-Milo and Nittono 2019). In the west, the cute aesthetic had started to emerge in popular culture only by the mid-19th century (Dale 2023), but in Japan, the first mentions of kawaii go back to the court literature of the 10th century (see below).

Cute culture is currently experiencing a worldwide boom. At the beginning of the 21st century, the phenomenon of cuteness is significantly linked to social, political, economic and technological conditions worldwide (Dale 2017). Cuteness has become part of the “affective economy” (term by Henry Jenkins) in which producers and designers seek to create a deeper, more emotional relationship between consumer and product. Cuteness, however, is not an entirely new phenomenon: the roots of this sentiment can be traced back to the historical origins of Japanese literature. Before looking at these origins, it is necessary to outline what actually goes on in the mind of a person who is affectively preoccupied with a cute being or object. In other words, what are the psychological origins of cuteness?

# KAWAII PSYCHOLOGY

This chapter approaches kawaii as a broader psychological concept that stimulates an emotional effect in human psyche. It introduces some insights into the kawaii phenomenon from psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives. Here, the reasons for the immense popularity of kawaii are sought in the specificity of Japanese social self. The chapter discusses kawaii in relation to affect, desire, nostalgia and Eros.

## KAWAII AS AFFECT

Kawaii can be understood primarily as an affect, i.e. an intense emotional response to some significant stimulus from the outside world. The default stimuli of kawaii culture are the angelic face of a toddler, a clumsy baby animal, and a cute “little girl” (*shōjo*, see below). Kawaii, then, refers to a person, animal, or object whose fragile beauty affects human brain and creates the so-called “aww effect” (Buckley 2016). It increases the heart rate, stirs positive emotions and triggers sympathetic response. Moreover, it activates brain networks associated with empathy, compassion, caregiving and playfulness (Dale 2023). When affected, we feel a certain closeness to the object that intensifies our emotional response. Moreover, we create an impression, i.e. an inner feeling that we project onto the object. Since this impression is more or less subjective, we can relate affectively even to an object that does not appear cute at all.

There is a direct connection between the material properties of kawaii objects (soft, small, furry) and the human affects that are evoked by these objects (weakness, helplessness, defenselessness). In this context, we can recall Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, according to which small children have certain characteristics that they have acquired through natural selection. These qualities then arouse in adults a maternal urge to care for small, defenseless, innocent, and otherwise “cute” children. In other words, cuteness is part of human evolution (see Dale 2023). The Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz (1943) speaks in a similar context of the so-called Baby Schema, i.e. a set of certain traits of inherent cuteness that can be observed in both baby animals and small children (large head and eyes, tiny mouth and nose, clumsy body and limbs). Ivan Pavlov would add that the Baby Schema triggers a reflex – an instinctive reaction in humans to care for cute babies and infants. In other words, the appreciation of cuteness is wired in our brain. Our affective response to cuteness is part mental construction and part biological inevitability. In other words, it is both nature and nurture.

In contemporary Japan, the Baby Schema is not anymore the only trigger of kawaii sentiment. Japanese psychologists (e.g. Shiokawa 1999; Nittono 2019) confirm that the affective state of kawaii today can be induced by virtually any stimulus that we cognitively evaluate as positive and desirable. (Some authors call this a “whimsical cuteness”). Unlike the English "cute," kawaii represents a semantically flexible concept within which cuteness can appear in combination with seemingly contradictory attributes, such as grotesqueness (*guro-kawaii*), ugliness (*busu-kawaii*), sickness (*yami-kawaii*) and repulsiveness (*kimo-kawaii*).

## KAWAI AS DESIRE

Next, the kawaii phenomenon can be approached as a form of desire. If we consult the aforementioned Baby Schema (Lorenz 1943), it appears that the primary desire of an individual in the kawaii world is to nurture and be nurtured. The equivalent of this sentiment in Japanese psychoanalysis is the concept of *amae* (“need-love”). This can be understood as a higher degree of emotional "clinging" and psychological dependence on it (Doi 1986). *Amae* is primarily a maternal instinct, but in the kawaii world, it is also reflected in adult individuals who are not blood-related. These individuals then feel an affective desire to care for the small, soft, and fragile objects. These objects “seduce” the individual to gaze at them, bring them closer, touch them – and eventually buy them. Thus, even adult Japanese women are not reluctant to purchase overpriced childish objects because infantile behavior and the desire to appear cute fits well within the *amae* world. Cuteness, then, can be approached as a superficial exaggeration of the *amae* approach.

Here, some authors would point out that kawaii is not only a maternal desire to nurture a defenseless being, but also a "sadistic" desire to subdue and manipulate that being (Ngai 2012). In other words, a submissive being that displays its weaknesses may paradoxically trigger “cute aggression” (e.g. an urge to squeeze or pinch the baby cheeks). In its extreme form, this sentiment becomes evident in some works or erotic cute (*ero-kawaii*) where cuteness incites violence, domination and exploitation.

Another desire associated with kawaii is the desire to relax (*iyasu*) and escape (*nigeru*) from social everydayness. In other words, kawaii has a healing/therapeutic effect (*iyashi*) because indulging in this culture allows us to eliminate problematic realities from our consciousness. The world of kawaii represents a "parallel universe" that offers a sense of ontological security for tired secretaries, overworked clerks, and stressed-out students (May 2019, 63). Kawaii characters allow for a fantasy escape into imaginary worlds, and this form of escapism (*datsuningen*) can reduce anxiety about lived reality. Thus, kawaii objects are not mere decorations, but “buffering protectors” that ease the stresses and strains of daily life (Yano 2013, 67). Moreover, they represent “transitional objects” to which children develop intense attachments (typically a teddy bear). These attachments are important, because they are part of children’s ego development, and they help to establish a sense of self (Winnicott 1953). Besides, escaping into the kawaii world during work hours actually increases work performance in Japanese companies (Nittono 2019).

One more desire related to kawaii is the desire to connect with others. In other words, cuteness prompts prosocial responses. It humanizes (or “cutifies”) other people and objects, and it elicits affiliative behavior that reinforces social bonds and facilitates relationships (Nittono 2019; Dale 2023). Simply put, people seek to reach out and relate to others through the medium of cuteness. Here, the power of cuteness is egalitarian and based on emotion and friendliness rather than logic and authoritarianism (May 2019). Besides, the kawaii accessories can also function as a tool for public self-presentation, as there is a general consensus in Japan that a person who likes kawaii things is friendly and modest (Kato 2002). This trend is exploited by Japanese politicians who strategically surround themselves with cute mascots to sway the voters (see below).

The shapes and colors of kawaii objects suggest that they are primarily intended for toddlers and preschoolers, but the fact that each character has its own weaknesses means that adults can identify with them as well. Cute toddlers, baby animals and little girls are often handicapped in some way (unable to walk, talk or do anything for themselves) and it is this helplessness that evokes feelings of empathy (*omoiyari*). While displaying a certain neediness, incompleteness and inability to stand alone, the kawaii objects are presented as *lacking* something. Thus, something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks (Harris 2000, 4).

## KAWAI AS NOSTALGIA

Many Japanese are tired of the adult world and resort to "nostalgic consumerism" through kawaii products. Nostalgia offers a sense of social connectedness for which the Japanese are not reluctant to pay a higher price. Thus, they buy things that reflect their desire to reject adulthood while longing for an idealized childhood. These consumers remain loyal to the toys of their youth, with the hope to reclaim the feeling of childhood wonder and teenage freedom (Cross 2015).

Most Japanese retain a lifelong nostalgia for the childhood paradise (Buruma 1984) while desiring to return to the earliest *amae-*based stage of life (Houser 2004). In Japan, adulthood is officially regarded as a social ideal, but many Japanese are resistant to this: they either refuse to become adults or at least try to postpone entering adulthood as long as possible (Bryce 2006). This is also due to the fact that adulthood in Japan is not seen as a time of freedom or independence, but rather as a period of commitment, restriction and surveillance. Many Japanese adults are therefore trying to return to the emotional and mental states of a child. Through escapism (*datsuningen*) they can bypass the desire for adult sociability. For instance, Japanese women and girls behave childishly (*kodomoppoi*), shyly (*hazukashī*) and innocently (*mujaki*). By doing so, they attempt to become the cute object itself (“self-cutification”). However, such submissive behavior has its limits: if a Japanese female tries to act too cute, she may be condemned as *burikko*, i.e. a girl who fakes innocence. *Burikko* is typical for an extremely high voice and an excessive use of the word *hazukashī* ("I am ashamed") in the company of men. Once this behavior is perceived as unnatural and fake, *burikko* becomes a victim of social criticism (Monden 2015)

## KAWAII AS EROS

Although the kawaii behaviour described above is not necessarily "sexy”, the shy little girls are at times framed as objects of erotic desire. The innocence of the object is essential to kawaii, but this in itself does not necessarily imply sexual nuance (unlike in English, where the word "cute" can mean "sexy"). Kawaii culture may have rewritten cultural norms of femininity, but the relationship between kawaii and sexuality is more complex than it seems. Originally, kawaii culture was not conceived of as "sexy" – rather, it was “sexless”, it ignored gender roles, and it wanted to break out of the world of adult sexuality. The childlike behavior of kawaii women suggested a renunciation of sexuality while challenging the idea of institutionalized sexism (Botz-Bornstein 2016).

It was mainly the popular image of a young unmarried female (*shōjo*) that became heavily eroticized in postwar Japan. The origins of *shōjo* go back to the 19th century, but it was the world of Japanese post-war comics that popularized a new category of spontaneous, infantile girl with big, round eyes. *Shōjo* was imbued with kawaii symbolism (ribbons, laces, bows) and eventually linked to the Japanese Eros (cf. *ero-kawaii* or *rorikon*). Thus, what was meant to desexualize the appearance became eventually read in relation to traditional gender/sex roles. This is in strong contrast to Judeo-Christian culture where sexuality is incompatible with childishness.

Today, *shōjo* conjures images of both an innocent teen girl in a school uniform and a sexualized female character (Shamoon 2020). However, one of the hallmarks of *shōjo* is the absence of heterosexual experience, while her sexual energy is directed rather towards stuffed animals, cute mascots, and other products that evoke a nurturing desire rather than a sexual one. Even the kawaii outfits of the Japanese Lolitas are often opposite of a provocative sexuality. Also consider the image of “beautiful boy” (*bishōnen*) who is visually and psychically neither man nor woman, and lives outside of the heteropatriarchal world (Welker 2006, 842). Thus, the primary purpose of kawaii symbolism is not to attract the opposite sex, but rather to break out of the rigid expectations of a patriarchal society. Still, the symbol of *shōjo* has been effectively eroticized, as can be seen in the rampant production of erotic manga bordering with child pornography (*rorikon*). Throughout the postwar history, one of the most obvious locations for male consumption of kawaii images has occurred in the sex industry (Madge 1998, 164). This resonates with the controversial view of Japanese literary scholar Naitō Chizuko, who once described Japan as a "loliconized society" (*rorikonka suru shakai*) (Naitō and Shockey 2010).

# KAWAI AESTHETICS

Kawaii is now a standard aesthetic that permeates all areas of Japanese everyday life. It encompasses a wide range of objects, characters, and styles that are designed to be endearing, charming, and visually appealing. This chapter looks at the basic aesthetic features of kawaii objects in various areas, including writing, design, fashion, food, mascots, and politics.

## WRITING

The kawaii aesthetic was first developed in the 1970s by Japanese high school girls (*joshi kōsei*). Kawaii was originally an avant-garde trend in written Japanese, in which the schoolgirls deliberately used stylized, decorative and rounded writing (*marui-ji, koneko-ji, burikko-ji*). In this trend, Japanese is usually written in a horizontal format (instead of the traditional vertical writing) while rigid characters (*kanji*) give way to simple Japanese alphabet (*hiragana*). Alongside Japanese writing, the schoolgirls combined Latin, broken English or pseudo-French. Cute cartoons (faces, animals), illustrations (hearts, stars) and emoticons (emoji, kaomoji) became an essential part of kawaii writing.

This script transformed the visuality of written Japanese and was even banned in many Japanese schools as a deviation from the conventional standard. However, within a decade the kawaii script began to appear in magazines, comics and advertisements. At its peak in the 1980s, over 75% Japanese schoolgirls used the kawaii writing (Avella 2004, 212), while many boys started to use the writing as well (Dale 2023).

## DESIGN

Another area in which the kawaii aesthetic has been strongly promoted since the 1970s is the world of Japanese design. Kawaii design is most commonly observed in stationery, toys, and small daily necessities, but today, even cars, houses and high-tech products have a kawaii design. The slightly naive design reflects general ideas of cuteness and is therefore less practical and more decorative. Aesthetic perfection and concreteness of design is not desirable, while the greater the abstraction, the better the visual impact.

Individuality is not expressed in some form of "perfect beauty", but rather in imperfection (here, we may see the influence of the traditional Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, which sees beauty and wisdom in imperfection). The function of imperfection is important in the kawaii world because it allows the object to merge with organic nature, which is itself also imperfect (Kato 2002).

Another keystone of modern kawaii design is reduction and minimalism. While reflecting the traditional Japanese aesthetic (i.e. employing restraint to achieve a desired effect), reduction lies in simple outline drawings. The roots of this tradition go back to the anthropomorphized animal drawings of the Scroll of Frolicking Animals from the 12th century (Dale 2023).

Instead of striving for perfection, kawaii designers seek to create a dreamy, welcoming and uplifting atmosphere in which warm, bright and pastel colors predominate. A rounded design is typical (kawaii products generally do not have sharp corners). Furthermore, it is significant that kawaii design is not necessarily based on traditional Japanese aesthetics. It was strongly influenced by Euro-American culture, while there is a view that kawaii culture is the result of post-war interaction between Japan and the USA.

## FASHION

The kawaii aesthetic has also made a strong impact on the world of Japanese fashion. Today, kawaii fashion is an essential part of mainstream clothing, but in its early days, young Japanese women used this fashion as an expression of rebellion against conformity and rules. Their distinctive style of dressing, based on recycling and mixing various influences, broke away from the stereotypical image of the orderly and responsible Japanese woman (*ryōsai kenbo* or *yamato nadeshiko*).

A dreamlike or fairytale-like atmosphere prevails in kawaii fashion. Kawaii girls wear lolita-like outfits with ruffled and laced skirts, puffy sleeves, cute hats and colorful ribbons. The outfits are decorated with kawaii characters, illustrations and slogans, while the variously modified school uniforms (*sērā fuku*) function as an essential part of kawaii fashion. The school uniform is important because it played a major role in the transformation of girls from submissive objects of male desire to powerful agents of Japanese subculture.

The main center of kawaii fashion is Tokyo's Harajuku district, which is home to many fashion boutiques, animal cafés and social clubs (see below). Harajuku was a place where young people who did not fit into the mainstream could express their individuality (Dale 2023). Nevertheless, kawaii fashion today is more a way of fitting in with the crowd through accepted patterns of consumption.

## CHARACTERS

The main platform of the kawaii aesthetic is represented by various fictional characters (*kyarakutā*). The world of these characters consists of iconic figures (*kyara*) with a recognizable name (e.g. Hello Kitty), and live mascots (*yuru-kjara*) designed to promote locations, towns or companies (e.g. *Kumamon*). Their function lies within emotionalizing, humanizing, and finally commercializing the everyday material world through embodied cuteness (Yano 2013, 61-2).

The default aesthetic of these figures lies in pastel colors, round eyes and a simple design that works with asymmetry, imperfection and minimalism (the character’s face is often reduced to simple lines and points). The worship of cute mascots stems from an ancient Shintō tradition in which Japanese gods, residing in both animate and inanimate objects, were reduced to miniature "figures" with a specific personality and a specific name (May 2019). The process of miniaturization itself makes the gods more “graspable”, more understandable, more endearingly kawaii (cf. Yano 2013, 65). The figures of these gods then served as personal good luck charms, much as cute characters on cell phone straps serve today.

Fundamental to the development of kawaii characters in Japan was the artist Tezuka Osamu – the father of Japanese manga and creator of a specific visual style that featured cute little girls with round faces and large eyes. Tezuka's specific cuteness consisted of combining contradictory elements such as fragility, strength and innocence with a touch of girlish sexuality. As a matter of fact, Tezuka was heavily influenced by Walt Disney (e.g. Snow White or Bambi) while following the tradition of cute comic book characters from the pre-war era (e.g. the little girl *Kurukuru Kurumi-chan* or the stray dog *Norakuro*). These cute characters, along with various cute toys (e.g. the Kewpie doll), formed a suitable breeding ground for the upcoming kawaii boom.

Japanese characters are often the result of anthropomorphism (attributing human-like qualities to animals or object). The earliest example of cute anthropomorphized animals (monkeys, rabbits, frogs) can be found in one of the oldest-surviving Japanese works of visual art, the Scroll of frolicking animals (*Chōjū giga*) from the 12th century (e.g. Dale 2023). A similar tendency to worship cute animals dates back to the 19th century, when figures of waving cats (*manekineko*) and badgers with oversized testicles (*tanuki*) were commercially produced as items that bring good luck.

The absence of (self-)consciousness, the spontaneity and shyness of animals is fundamental to kawaii aesthetics. Animal figures are often depicted as mute, unprotected and helpless. Their bodies are small, soft, fragile, furry and rounded, typically with small shoulders, larger heads and clumsy legs (cf. Baby Schema). The face is large, the eyes round, and the mouth and nose are rather miniature. The colors are traditionally pastel, the graphics are simple and the character looks childish. Importantly, these figures usually do not exhibit specifically Japanese features – they have “no nationality” (*mukokuseki*), which is the result of the cultural adaptation of Japanese production to Western consumers (Iwabuchi 2002). In other words, the main characteristic of Japanese kawaii objects is the absence of typically Japanese aesthetic features, which makes kawaii easily transferable to different contexts (cultural, social, technological).

The boom of cute characters in post-war Japan started with Hello Kitty, which was introduced by the Sanrio company in 1975. However, this character was not completely without a nationality, because the authors set her in British London (European culture was very popular in Japan in the 1970s). Designed by Shimizu Yūko and popularized by Yamaguchi Yūko, Hello Kitty was conceived not as a kitten, but as a little girl who has a full name, dresses like a human, has a boyfriend, and never stands on all fours. Either way, Hello Kitty fits into the Baby Schema as a cute creature who evokes helplessness, weakness, docility, and dependence. She is expressionless, mouthless, and therefore unable to speak for herself, thus asking to be "taken care of" (cf. *amae*). Her body is handicapped and her face is emotionless, owing to which she can serve as a neutral medium (or a “blank” mirror) into which feelings of both joy and sadness can be projected. To be sure, Hello Kitty evokes the (maternal) instinct to protect and care not only in girls and women, but also in young Japanese men (no matter how effeminate).

Sanrio, which makes up to five billion dollars a year just from the sale of Hello Kitty merchandise, has virtually created a monopoly on cuteness in postwar Japan: theme parks, restaurants, hotel rooms, condoms, and even baby coffins are now specially designed based on Hello Kitty. All these products have become part of the "pink globalization" in which kawaii culture has spread further into Asia and the West since the 1970s (Yano 2013). Today, kawaii is mass-consumed especially in Southeast Asia (Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong), but pink globalization has been slower to progress in the West, where the kawaii aesthetic is still seen as a childish kitsch. Nevertheless, Hello Kitty has an increasingly universal impact within global consumer culture - it can be found on credit cards, vibrators, guitars, jewelry, and airplanes around the world.

## FOOD

Even food can be kawaii. In the kawaii world (e.g. in various themed cafés), light and small sweets are served, such as milk dishes, ice creams, cakes and desserts. Some dishes are inspired by rustic or Victorian culture, while others come straight from the world of fairy tales. Zoomorphism (i.e. non-human objects are attributed animal features) plays an important role here. The kawaii food then takes the shape of a cute animal (e.g. an ice cream scoop and two wafers are shaped into the head of a bunny). This strategy is also adopted by Japanese mothers who, in an attempt to bring food closer to their children, prepare cute snack boxes decorated with familiar characters (*kyara-ben*). Food thus becomes “play” (*asobi*), which is a trend that has its roots in the Edo period (1603-1868). At that time, food functioned not only as a purely biological necessity, but also as a source of pleasure and entertainment (De Vries 2017).

Kawaii food is now an essential part of Japanese marketing strategies. In the new millennium, the company San-X (Sanrio's main competitor) launched the now iconic food mascots – including the cute little chestnut that longs to be eaten (*Amagurichan*) and the burnt toast that regrets not being edible (*Kogepan*). The most prominent food mascot, however, is *Gudetama* - a despondent and apathetic egg (or egg yolk) that wallows in melancholy, is demotivated and hates waking up in the morning. Gudetama can be categorized as “creepy-cute” (*kimo-kawaii*) and points to the fact that elements that are repulsive, depressing and demotivating have effectively permeated the kawaii world. Gudetama’s cutified impotence resonated strongly with those Japanese who felt alienated and depressed in the precarious life of late capitalism (Kinsella 1995). It is thus a form of therapy (*iyashi*) in which the unproductive Gudetama demonstrates that we do not need to work ourselves into a stupor to keep pace with life. The creepy-cute Gudetama certainly does not tempt to be eaten, but it is precisely this inability (or unwillingness) to behave like a proper egg that makes *Gudetama* kawaii.

## POLITICS

Kawaii culture is now widely used by political actors to persuade, influence and control the population. In other words, Japanese authorities and institutions use symbols of defenselessness and innocence to maintain the status quo. Advertising spots, corporate logos, greeting cards and postcards, government decrees, children's faces and baby animals – they all warn, recommend and reprimand. This sentiment has its roots in pre-modern times, when cute characters helped Japanese authorities communicate the rules of social life to a semi-literate population (Vesely 2017). Today, politicians are photographed with cute mascots to show the public a "human face"; advertising agencies use girlish models to soften the impact of aggressive campaigns; bank clerks are surrounded by cuddly animals to convey the cold image of financial transactions, etc.

The kawaii aesthetic is used by the police stations, as Japanese officers want to be known for the warmth of their care rather than the strictness of their enforcement. Kawaii is also used by the Japanese military to soften the image of an organization designed to kill (e.g. combat helicopters are printed with cute animals or *shōjo* characters). Here, militarism is set in a light and friendly context, owing to which kawaii effectively sublimates aggression (May 2019). Thanks to the kawaii aesthetic, the public is convinced that Japan does not have any murderous “military machine”, but only a peaceful “self-defense force” (cf. McVeigh 2000, 76).

Kawaii in this context touches on the asymmetrical relations between the governing and the governed. The political function of kawaii, then, is to soften the asymmetry of this relationship. This is the “affective labor” of kawaii (Yano 2013, 61). It is also a form of “soft power”, i.e. the power to indirectly influence behavior through cultural and ideological means, rather than through overt military or economic domination (Nye 2004).

Politicians and bureaucrats engage with kawaii symbolism because it dispels their negative image and obscures their authoritarian figure. Photographing politicians together with kawaii mascots not only reduces the distance between the governing and the governed – it also allows authority figures to present themselves as likeable individuals with an interest in popular culture. Thus, kawaii transforms a symbol of authority into a fetish of consumption (Yano 2013, 65). It is evident, however, that the aim of this governmental PR is a subliminal inculcation of obedience and strict work ethic through political communication that is lightened precisely by kawaii symbolism.

The kawaii culture is not resistant to power: it conforms to the power structures and does not challenge them in any way (perhaps with the exception of the Japanese avant-gardists). It is neither rebellious nor aggressive: instead of calling for “freedom” or “liberty”, it simply praises cute mascots. However, kawaii is not entirely powerless – it has an emancipatory potential, as it blurs and overcomes the traditional binaries (weak-strong, feminine-masculine, sexual-nonsexual, real-fantasy, good-bad) (Allison 2004; Botz-Bornstein 2016)

The public seems to be attuned to the cutified political communication: most Japanese will only respond to a government decree if the text is accompanied by a kawaii figure (Nittono 2019). This is because public messages with kawaii characters are seen as honest and close, while those without kawaii characters appear neither true nor relevant (Madge 1998, 168).

# KAWAII HISTORY

If we consult Japanese dictionaries, the default definition of the term kawaii is usually based on three attributes: pitiful (*itawashii*), loveable (*aisubeki*), and petite and handsome (*chīsakute utsukushii*). But the original term, which is traceable to writings of the Heian era (793-1185), implied much more ambiguity. Historically, the first Japanese word for things cute was the term *kawa-hayushi*, which consisted of two words: face (*kawa*) and flush (*hayushi*). It is an archaic Japanese word meaning a person whose face turned red from embarrassment. Thus, the original meaning of *kawa-hayushi* referred to feelings of shame and regret while connoting helplessness and sadness. In other words, kawaii culture in its early days was directly related to the melancholic “pathos of things” (*mono no aware*). It is a sense of pathos that the helpless and powerless object inspires in the observer’s mind.

The young, innocent girls of pre-modern Japan reflected an awareness of fragile beauty on the one hand, and sadness based on impermanence of things on the other hand. In this context, kawaii comes from feelings of yearning/longing (*akogare*)for something that is not attainable. The term kawaii has undergone various historical transformations, but its semantic core, i.e. the combined sentiment of loving affect, pitying compassion and regrettable unavailability can be still spotted in some contemporary variations.

## PREHISTORY

The contemporary obsession around cute objects has its roots in Japanese cultural tradition. The first mentions of specifically Japanese cuteness can be registered as early as the court literature of the Heian era. At the end of the 10th century, the Japanese court lady Sei Shōnagon (965-1017) referred to fragile young girls and miniature objects as "lovely things" (*utsukushiki-mono*). Here, cuteness referred primarily to innocence and immaturity (cf. Baby Schema), but the author did not limit herself to young girls. Originally, the word *utsukushii* described a man’s affection for his wife, but Sei extended the meaning to anyone who is moved by a certain kind of cuteness (Dale 2023). Cute to Sei was, for example, a drawing of a baby's face on a melon, a young sparrow responding to a mouse's squeak, or a little servant strutting around in a festive costume.

Another Heian-era author, Murasaki Shikibu, also observed fragile young girls, but she perceived them less as “lovely” (*utsukushiki*) and more as "pitiful" (*kawaisō*). In this interpretation, the melancholic pathos of things (*mono no aware*) comes to the fore, pointing to the original meaning of the term kawaii (shy, embarrassed, defenseless, pathetic). The intense feeling of pity, shame and compassion stemmed from the observed helplessness and naivety of the kawaii object.

Let me now move to the 20th century. Although the roots of kawaii can be traced back to the court literature of the Heian period, some scholars claim that kawaii culture was not fully realized until the Taishō period (1912-1926). During this period, individualism, consumerism, and westernization flourished in Japan, which had a certain impact on the position and representation of women in Japanese society. During the Taishō period, the now obsolete term *kawayushi* was used, referring to meanings such as embarrassed, shy and vulnerable. The main object of interest was the innocent, platonic girl (*shōjo*) with a slender body and large eyes, who featured in magazines (e.g. *Shōjo no tomo* or *Shōjo no kuni*), paintings (e.g. Nakahara Jun'ichi or Kawabatake Kashō) and books (e.g. Nobuko Yoshiya). All these sources helped to form a new identity for (school)girls of all classes, and they brought a visual dimension that further developed kawaii culture (Dale 2023).

In the Taishō period, the sentimental symbolism of *shōjo* can be best spotted in the *shōjo* illustrations of Takehisa Yumeji (1884-1934). With long lashes, eye make-up and trendy hairstyle, Yumeji’s little girls became a standard *shōjo* image of the Taishō era (Dale 2023). Moreover, Yumeji was also behind the boom of “fancy goods” (*fanshī guzzu*), that is, cute decorative commodities (postcards, stationery, writing goods, dolls) that were oriented to girls. This enabled the girls to bring kawaii style into their lives by purchasing kawaii products for daily use. In 1914, Yumeji opened a shop with fancy goods in Tokyo, thus heralding the consumer boom of kawaii culture in postwar Japan.

## 1960s

The 1960s in Japan were marked by rapid economic growth, rising wages, and thus a "joyful life" (*akarui seikatsu*). Within this growth, there was an increasing interest in consumption (*shōhi*) and play (*asobi*) in an otherwise rigid Japan. In this context, the kawaii aesthetic was primarily associated with post-war affluence and a female-oriented consumer economy. Young Japanese women were now spending more time as housewives (*sengyō shufu*), which allowed them to indulge more in their consumerist desires.

From the late 1960, the word kawaii was applied not only to persons, but also to clothes and small goods advertised in girls’ comic books (Madge 1998). Moreover, since the 1960s the female comic artists started participating in the production of manga, owing to which the *shōjo* heroines became more active, but still cute, characters (Shiokawa 1999, 100). These female artists distorted the initial meaning of kawaii and transformed it into a “strength based on weakness” (Botz-Bornstein 2016).

In the late 1960s, young Japanese students experienced a radical shift in their thinking about the adult world. The university rebellions of the late 1960s represented an open uprising of young men against adult authority and established rules. Although this rebellion was suppressed, it was the first moment in history when Japanese youngsters tried to break out of the conventional pattern of the responsible adult (the main slogan of the rebels was "trust no one over thirty"). In a show of defiance, students began to read cute children's books and teenage comics instead of the obligatory reading of the classics (Kinsella 1995). This triggered a moral panic – Japanese sociologists denounced these students as a "generation of three nihilisms": lethargy (*mukiryoku*), irresponsibility (*musekinin*), and disinterest (*mukanshin*) (cf. Madge 1998, 166). Historical developments, however, suggest that postwar kawaii culture was born out of this very rebellion against tradition, authority, and adulthood. Many contemporary kawaii images and icons came precisely from the idealistic movements of the 1960s (Yano 2013, 167).

## 1970s

As shown above, the history of cuteness goes deeper into Japanese history, but kawaii only became a truly national phenomenon in the 1970s. Once the 1960s’ student rebellions waned, Japan experienced a shift from political idealism to postindustrial consumerism (Sato 2009). Thus, cuteness has lost its subversive edge. Instead of violent clashes and open rebellion, subsequent generations protested against the adult system only by infantile behavior and nostalgic consumption. Simultaneously, young working women with their free-living, free-spending lifestyle became the chief producers and consumers of kawaii culture (Dale 2023). Kawaii at that time no longer represented a closed concept that can be applied exclusively to small, cute things – it became an umbrella term for anything that is in any way endearing (Shiokawa 1999).

The beginning of this decade was marked by a consumer boom, as it did not take long for Japanese producers to realize the enormous commercial potential of kawaii. The symbolic beginning of the kawaii boom can be seen in 1975, when Sanrio launched the first Hello Kitty product in Japan (a translucent coin purse). Hello Kitty went immediately global: it was marketed in the United States (1976), Europe (1978), and finally Asia (1990) (Yano 2013). Throughout the 1970s, Hello Kitty was commodified as a decorative item (*fanshī guzzu*) and began to be widely used for product design.

At the same time, kawaii culture continued to spread to Asia and Western countries as part of the aforementioned “pink globalization” (Yano 2013). An important platform for the spread of kawaii culture in this decade was the cartoon production which targeted both girls (*shōjo manga*) and boys (*shōnen manga*). Simultaneously, Japanese high school girls introduced their stylized form of kawaii writing (*marui-ji*), which gradually spread throughout society. Tokyo's Harajuku district became a symbol of the kawaii fashion fever, while the new fashion brands (Pink House or Milk) became the founders of kawaii fashion.

In the 1970s, the first cute idols appeared in Japan (e.g. Yamaguchi Momoe or Pink Lady). Although not vocally talented, these idols captivated many Japanese women with their childlike behaviour and innocent appearance. However, the spread of kawaii culture in the 1970s did not stem only from the spontaneous needs of Japanese schoolgirls and housewives. In fact, kawaii is an object of both female and male desire: many Japanese salarymen (*sararīman*) and hardcore fans (*otaku*) embraced kawaii culture and fetishized cute little girls via manga, anime and pop music. By the end of the decade, it no longer surprised anyone that some Japanese men dressed in kawaii style or at least owned some kawaii accessory.

## 1980s

In the 1980s, the kawaii aesthetic dominated Japanese pop-culture production and continued to gain popularity. Cuteness became a way of life in this decade, not only for the pampered generation of economic growth, but also for the Japanese women whose purchasing power and consumerist desires were soaring. By the 1980, many young girls had reached a new level of escapism, desiring freedom from traditional marriage and gendered (re)production (Madge 1998, 162). This was also the case of the new “gal” culture (*gyaru*) – a street fashion and lifestyle of young "emancipated" females who were rebelling against traditional gender stereotypes and aesthetic standards of beauty. (The *gyaru* cuteness is characterized by dyed hair, tanned skin, long nails and prominent make-up).

The rounded kawaii script, introduced by Japanese schoolgirls in the previous decade, was in the 1980s used by as many as five million young Japanese (Kinsella 1995, 222). The script was banned in many schools, but it eventually made its way into manga, advertising and fashion. In the meantime, companies and institutions started introducing their cute PR mascots (*yuru-kyara*) while Japanese architects and designers were creating entire houses and cars in kawaii style. In 1983, Tokyo Disneyland opened in Chiba Prefecture, instantly becoming the new center of cuteness. In the same year, Hello Kitty was named Child Ambassador of UNICEF in the United States, while in Japan, the character was marketed to appeal to female adults (Yano 2013). Moreover, there was a huge pet boom in 1980s, owing to which a cute animal became the main medium of kawaii culture. For instance, Sanwa Bank has introduced a deposit service for pets, while the bathroom manufacturer Toto has produced a "cute" toilet that can be used by both animals and humans.

In the early 1980s, a new genre of manga production, *rorikon* (from Lolita Complex), emerged, offering a combination of childlike cuteness and provocative sexuality. The father of this genre in Japan was the artist Azuma Hideo, who worked with conventional aesthetics but placed his female characters in a sexually charged context that bordered on child pornography. This kind of erotic cuteness (*ero-kawaii*) oscillates between childishness and maturity, innocent soul and sexualized body.

The meaning of kawaii expanded further in the 1980s: in addition to "classic" cuteness, the new attributes such as eccentric, androgynous or comic came to the fore. Moreover, Japanese girl idols penetrated the media market, being framed as innocent little girls who entertain fans with their infantilism. The epitome of such cuteness in the 1980s was the Japanese national idol Matsuda Seiko, whose fashion and behavior were emulated by many Japanese women and girls. Matsuda had an easily identifiable look and a wide repertoire of kawaii behavior, thus fulfilling the stereotypical cliché of orderly family entertainment with a subtle hint of provocative sexuality.

## 1990s

In the early 1990s, Japan became the second strongest economy on the planet, but soon entered a “lost decade” and began to stagnate economically. The development and sales of kawaii products also stagnated, but the kawaii business still reached a turnover of ten trillion yen (Kinsella 1995, 226). The high turnover was also due to the Pokémon boom (1996) which has elevated Japan to a major exporter of global popular culture. In 1990, Sanrio opened its Hello Kitty park (“Purorand”), and in 1992, over 70 percent of Japanese aged 18-30 subscribed to kawaii culture. Public polls from the same year confirmed that “kawaii” had become Japan's most popular word. In 1994, Hello Kitty was appointed official Child Ambassador for UNICEF in Japan, and in 1998, Kitty goes global, becoming a “world idol” (Yano 2013). By the end of 1990s, the cute rebellion of Japanese schoolgirls from the 1970s became practically a nationwide trend.

The 1990s proved that laughing toddlers, animal babies and infantile girls have ceased to be the only models of kawaii aesthetics. Kawaii is by no means limited to children, as even people of very advanced age can be described as kawaii in Japan. For instance in the early 1990s, two centenarian sisters, Kin-san and Gin-san, were frequently featured on television talk shows. These kind, frail grandmothers behaved and acted in an old-fashioned manner, while their “cute” confusion was appropriate to their age. This is why these sisters were seen as both kawaii (cute) and *kawaisó* (pitiful). In a similar manner, Japanese high school girls described the aged Emperor Shōwa in 1988 as “kawaii” – supposedly because he represented an isolated, lonely, but “pure” existence (cf. Madge 1988, 172). This points to the fact that a certain amount of helplessness and incapacitation at any age is essential to kawaii aesthetics.

The iconic figure of the lazy and tired panda (*Tarepanda*), introduced in 1995 by San-X, was also built on helplessness and incapacity to function in the adult world. Tarepanda is a typical representative of the *kimo-kawaii* aesthetic (from the slang *kimoi* - disgusting, repulsive, ugly), in which cuteness meets weirdness and repulsiveness. In such a context, depression, laziness, and dislike of work can be "glorified" as kawaii. The lazy Tarepanda instantly became a hit among Japanese adults, for whom this distressed pet mirrored the feelings of frustration caused by the economic crisis.

In the 1990s, kawaii culture further penetrated the world of serious business: cute characters came to represent Japanese banking institutions, stock companies or insurance agencies. At the same time, the aesthetic of cuteness also penetrated the realm of Japanese politics. For example in 1993, the Japanese Communist Party in Nagoya introduced a new PR logo dominated by a caricature of a cute giraffe.

The 1990s saw a further transformation of kawaii culture against the backdrop of economic crisis and an ageing population. On the one hand, conventional manga production continued, working with the somewhat comical image of the infantile schoolgirl with enlarged eyes (e.g. the 1991 manga *Sailor Moon*). On the other hand, new forms of kawaii emerged since the 1990s, based on a kind of symbiosis of cuteness and cruelty. An example of this symbiosis is the bloodied bear Gloomy (*Itazura no Gurúmi*) from 2000, who has trouble remembering not to attack people. The elements of horror, darkness and violence thus entered kawaii culture. Also consider the dark/Gothic lolita-style dressing that has become a dominant offshoot of Japanese subculture since the early millennium. The Sanrio company immediately responded to this trend and dressed Hello Kitty in darker shades.

## 21st CENTURY

At the start of the new millennium, Prime Minister Koizumi announced a brand new strategy for promoting Japan's pop culture business. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) promoted since 2002 the governmental project “Cool Japan”, which aimed to further globalize Japanese pop culture in general, and kawaii culture in particular. As a result, kawaii became an important part of Japan’s “gross national cool” (McGray 2002). In 2003, Japanese Cultural Agency proclaimed that “soft power” (including the kawaii power) is now more important than military power (cf. Nye 2004). In other words, kawaii in the 2000s is not only an aesthetic style – it became a political asset.

In the new millennium, cute mascots (*yuru-kyara*) have already represented prefectures, cities and villages, while even police stations and fire departments had their own mascots. A 2001 survey showed that the vast majority of Japanese across generations (up to 87 percent) is very fond of these mascots (Kayama 2001). In the same year, the first "maid café" opened in Tokyo's Akihabara district, offering visitors a venue to interact with cute girls dressed as Victorian maids. The girls serve food (for an inflated price), pose for photos and joke with customers, but flirting or exchanging contact is strictly forbidden (see Galbraith 2017).

In 2002, Sanrio’s Hello Kity became a $1 billion-a-year franchise. One year later, a survey confirmed that the vast majority of Japanese (84% of those aged seven and older) own at least one kawaii-themed item (Richie 2003, 56). In the same year, the San-X company introduced a new character –the lazy bear *Rilakkuma*, whose enormous popularity threatened Hello Kitty's dominance in the Japanese market. In 2004, Hello Kitty was named UNCEF’s Global Special Friend of Children, and in 2005, the pop girl mega-group AKB48 was founded, with over a hundred cute female singers (the group’s headquarters is Tokyo's Akihabara district).

In the meantime, the Japanese government made further inroads into the kawaii world: in 2008, Hello Kitty was named Ambassador of Tourism, while the robotic cat Doraemon was named Ambassador of Anime. A year later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) selected three young Japanese women to be officially announced as Ambassadors of Cuteness (*Kawaii Taishi*). Kawaii has thus virtually become an official instrument of Japanese foreign policy.

In 2010, a musical band called *Babymetal*, consisting of three cute girls dressed as Gothic Lolitas, caused some sensation in Japan. This band once again highlighted the semantic flexibility of the kawaii concept, which was since the new millennium moving further away from its traditional characteristics (defenselessness, weakness, fragility) toward a more darker, horrific, and "gothic" atmosphere. Among cute mascots, the influence of the iconic Hello Kitty was waning, and in 2011, the black bear *Kumamon* won the national vote for Japan's most popular mascot, taking over the scepter of cuteness. However, these mainstream sentiments have been countered by some avant-garde artists (e.g. Aida Makoto), who have instead deconstructed mainstream cuteness and aestheticized cruelty in their paintings. This “anti-kawaii” sentiment came to full fruition in the controversial "Bye Bye Kitty" exhibition at Tokyo's Mori Museum in 2012.

In 2013, Empress Michiko expressed her wish to meet with the mascot *Kumamon*, highlighting the deep-rootedness of kawaii culture even at the highest levels of Japanese society. In 2016, Pokémon Go was unleashed worldwide and became a social phenomenon. In the same year, Sanrio introduced a new product: the aggressive red panda (*Aggretsuko*) who suffers from social anxiety, slanders her boss, and takes out her frustrations with work by singing metal on karaoke. Alongside *Tarepanda* and *Gudetama*, *Aggretsuko* is just another example of the use of the *guro-kawaii* (“gross-cute”) aesthetic to express frustration with life and work in Japan. At the same time, kawaii characters continued to infiltrate the world of Japanese politics – both domestic and foreign. Examples of this include Hello Kitty and Pikachu, who were in 2017 named Ambassadors for EXPO 2025. In the meantime, the new technologies such as robotics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality have increasingly incorporated the power of cuteness (see Dale 2023).

# CONCLUSION

Although it may not seem so today, Japanese kawaii culture was in its early days a form of defiance. Indeed, the main features of kawaii (unbridled playfulness, free-flowing emotions and infantile naivety) were not very compatible with traditional social values. In Confucian terms, maturity refers to the ability to function well in a team, to compromise, to fulfil commitments to parents, employers, etc. But the post-war generation of young Japanese refused to grow up and eschewed the cult of seriousness, brutality and obedience which was earlier associated with the era of Japanese militarism. Kawaii culture thus resisted, above all, the dominant (male) ideology of productivity, which is based on standardization, order, surveillance, rationality, and impersonalization (McVeigh 2000; May 2019). In other words, cuteness was in its origins a response to the strong social pressure toward conformity.

Today, kawaii culture conveys a fantasy world without risks and provides comfort to those who struggle with uncertainty about their own identity (Bryce 2006). This is especially true for those Japanese who are separated from their families or friends and lead stressful lives in big cities. In this world, anonymity prevails, neighbors cease to be significant others, and relatives becomes geographically separated. Such a world may evoke feelings of alienation and impersonalization, and the task of kawaii culture is to reconfigure and "humanize" this world (Kinsella 1995, 228). One’s strengths and skills go by the wayside, as young people acquire their desired identities based on weakness, vulnerability, and powerlessness. It is a means for expressing identity from the margin of society where powerlessness can lead into subversion (Sato 2009, 42).

Let me briefly look at the main criticism of kawaii culture. Critics argue that kawaii culture is infantile, effeminate, and tasteless, while the fans embrace a form of mass identity that is passive, conservative, and uncreative. Kawaii represents selfish tendencies (*wagamama*) and a desire to escape conventional responsibilities (Madge 1998, 164). Some argue that the consumption of kawaii represents an implicit and explicit disregard for Japanese aesthetic tradition and the Japanese way of life (Kinsella 1995, 247). Others point out that kawaii culture merely reflects the immaturity and simple-mindedness of the Japanese (Tang 2006), while the predilection for characters and mascots has to do with a loss of the ability to interact with real people (Kayama 2001). Cuteness is ultimately dehumanizing, paralyzing its victims into comatose, semi-conscious beings (Harris 2007).

The prominent artist Takashi Murakami (2005) attributes the formation of Japan’s kawaii culture to Japan’s emasculated (“castrated”) postwar condition. Kawaii may be perceived as a way of appearing harmless and inoffensive after the second world war, but it only triggered unfortunate but widespread traits of narcissism and childishness (Dale 2023). Moreover, to participate in kawaii consumption practically means to support consumer fetishism of epic proportions (Allison 2004). Kawaii becomes a nightmare of consumerism running amok, beginning with the most vulnerable ones (children) and continuing to adult women (Yano 2013, 197). It only infantilizes adults while seducing children into hyper-consumption.

The feminist critique of kawaii is usually concerned with cultural and social exploitation and submissiveness of women. The critics assume that the consumption of kawaii culture makes women more subordinate, weak, limited ( Asano 1996). They are completely dependent on the mercy of other individuals and do not look natural in the eyes of the observer (Monden 2015). Kawaii in this context represents a hypersexual and heteronormative culture that constructs Japanese women as "mirror objects" in a traditionally patriarchal society. Other scholars are less critical: they admit that kawaii may represent a culture of defiance, but to them, the kawaii style itself is virtually harmless – it is merely a cultural expression of the pursuit of “harmony” (e.g. Tang 2006).

In the 1970s, subscribing to kawaii culture was an expression of individuation, as cute writing, cartoons, and clothing helped young Japanese break out of the "tyranny of the crowd." However, within the commercial boom, kawaii symbolism has become more of an expression of mass and kitsch, while kawaii behaviour today paradoxically represents a herd mentality in which objectification and imitation reign. Today, kawaii is less a search for childlike innocence and harmony, and more a sign of consumerism and infantilization. Brian McVeigh (2000, 145) even stated that "not being kawaii" (*kawaikunai*) today practically means "being disobedient.” The subversive subculture of rebellious students has thus become a form of mimicry – an evolutionary desire to fit in with others because blending in with the crowd is more advantageous for survival.

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