Paola Ferreyra

Dr. Pham

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Kawaii and its impact on Japanese Pop Culture

Kawaii style has gained recent prominence in Japanese Pop Culture. Although it has

become a widely recurrent theme, there are different aspects as to how this style needs to be

approached. Sharon Kinsella describes that anything that is considered cute is an overwhelming

threat to traditional culture yet it appears to have a different establish purpose, "this popular

culture is almost entirely devoted to an escape from reality, and its dominant themes have been

cuteness, nostalgia, foreignness, romance, fantasy and science fiction," (Kinsella 252). For that

matter, cute culture has provided an exit from the asphyxiating adultworld and reverted these

individuals to simpler times that included their childhood memories. Some social experts have

argued that the Kawaii style has actually had a negative impact on Japanese society because it is

seen as a form of rebellion. Kawaii culture has also been described as a way for various

industries to establish Japan's soft power around the world. In other words, Kawaii culture has

become one of the many examples that has allowed industries in Japan continue making profit

off of their various consumers. Lastly, Kawaii culture has also become an important factor in

politics, where this type of style has created various different political scenarios. This especially

being so in terms of environmental policies enforced. Therefore, in my paper, I will analyze how

the Kawaii style has impacted various aspects of the Japanese Pop Culture. These aspects being

the consumer industry, the Japanese society and how they express themselves, and how the

Kawaii style has implemented various changes in the political and education systems respectively.

One of the many ways that the Kawaii style has affected the Japanese Pop Culture is the way the Japanese society is expressing themselves. There has been various forms of expression within society, however, the Kawaii style has been recently linked to a form of rebellion. This form of rebellion has become more used by new generations as a way to seek uniqueness from previous generations. According to Sharon Kinsella, the Kawaii style saturated the majority of the consumer goods and services in the early 1980s and 1990s (Kinsella, 220). In her article *Cuties in Japan*, Kinsella describes Kawaii as a cute style that emphasizes on the items that are weak or innocent, " Kawaii or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances," (Kinsella 220). This definition is also very similar to Matthew Burdelski's *"She thinks you're kawaii": Socializing affect, gender, and relationships in a Japanese preschool*, where he defines the Kawaii style as "Kawaii, an adjective meaning 'cute', 'adorable', and 'lovable', is an important aspect of Japanese material culture and a key effect word used to describe things that are small, delicate, and immature," (Burdelski 65). This is important because the definition of the term Kawaii establishes what its function will be. In her article, Kinsella explains that the majority of society that feels more connected to the Kawaii style are, an estimated 70%, was between the ages of 18 to 30 ages. As a result, a new style of writing has been established by these individuals who feel more connected to the Kawaii style. Kinsella describes that the new style was writing as a sort of slang where the extreme stylised characters defined the already established traditional characters:

Using extremely stylised, rounded characters with English, katakana, and little cartoon pictures such as hearts, stars and faces inserted randomly into the text, the new handwriting was distinct and the characters difficult to read. In middle and high schools across the country, the craze for writing in the new style caused discipline problems. In some schools, the writing was banned entirely, or tests which were completed in the new cute style would not be marked (Kinsella 222).

This is important because many professors and educators saw the new handwriting as a way of rebellion from the students, who the professors thought were disobeying established school rules (Kinsella 224). This also reminded me of a similar situation that occurred within the United States. When texting started gaining prominence, the texting language and emojis started becoming a recurrent issue for academic purposes. In other words, many students were accustomed to using texting jargon, that when it came to writing academic papers, the texting language became evident even within school work. This was the similar case that occurred in Japan. Academic professors saw that Kawaii style and its characters were becoming present in academic environments and evidently saw it as a threat. Therefore, they had to eventually ban the use of the Kawaii style of language and characters because this sort of childish self-expression was not tolerated, "the aims of playfulness, individual emotional expression, and naivete incorporated in childlikeness are not consistent with traditional social values," (Kinsella 250).

On the contrary, even though Kawaii style appears to be something positive meaning "cute" or innocent, many analysts have shown that the true origin of the word Kawaii actually showed otherwise. Some of these analysts argue that one of the reasons why Kawaii style has

gained so much importance within the Japanese society is because in Japan these type of "childishness" is accepted and appreciated:

> Cute things are popular worldwide. In particular, Japan's culture accepts and appreciates childishness at the social level. Various kinds of anime and character goods, such as Poke´mon and Hello Kitty, which are often described as kawaii, are produced and exported to many countries. This phenomenon attracts considerable attention from various fields, including aesthetics and engineering . Kawaii is an attributive adjective in modern Japanese and is often translated into English as ''cute.'' However, this word was originally an affective adjective derived from an ancient word, kawa-hayu-shi, which literally means face (kawa)flushing (hayu-shi). The original meaning of ''ashamed, can't bear to see, feel pity'' was changed to ''can't leave someone alone, care for'' (Nittono 1).

This is important because it shows how various aspects of any culture change and evolve from generation to generation. That being so, what was once seen as something that would hurt society can be modified by upcoming generations by shedding light on how that specific aspect is positive for the well-being of the community. On the other hand, the Kawaii style has also created awareness for the various gender roles in Japan. In Marilyn Ivy's *The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo's Parapolitics,* she explains that Kawaii has lingered to further relationship that also deals with gender issues and what is considered feminized and therefore pitiful:

> The notion of the cute is entirely wrapped up in the relationship to the child figure as the epitome of vulnerability and helplessness (and thus kawaii is closely linked to the notion

of kawaisō, or "pitiful"). There is no doubt that kawaii is closely gendered feminine, with women and girls linked, as they are in many societies, with children (and, yes, with little animals), (Ivy 13).

This is essential to point out because it exhibits how the Kawaii style is indirectly raising awareness to other gender issues. Although it was not its intention, the use of Kawaii as something pitiful and relatiing it to the feminine gender, shows the constant struggle that women have to face when they are considered less than their counterpart.

In *Kawaii/Cute Interactive Media* by Adrian David Cheok, he explains how the cute aspect in Japan's culture has been influenced by the Chinese. Cheok describes how Japan's previous policy situation regarding their borders affected the Japanese Pop Culture aspects, "Japan is a country with a unique culture. Influenced by Chinese high culture from the early days, isolated deliberately from the outside world for centuries, absorption of and adaptation to western cultural elements marked the cultural history of Japan," (Cheok 224). In other words, Japan was able to establish their elements for their pop culture on a basis of the influence from other countries because of the then current policies that kept them separated from the outside world. However, as I will describe later on, Japan also has a prominent soft power of their own which has influenced various industries. In fact, this soft power has reflected on the Kawaii style which has impacted different aspects of the consumer industry, "Japanese culture of Kawaii, which has made a large impact around the world, especially in entertainment, fashion, and animation," (Cheok 233). Although this may seem obvious, the impact that the then growing Japanese culture had on the Western world was not as expected. In other words, after the defeat

in the Second World War, that left Japan destroyed politically, economically, and socially; the

profound influence that the Japanese culture had was imaginable (Heng 179).

Another aspect where the Kawaii style has gained some ground has been in the use of

Japan's soft power. First and foremost, soft power is defined as a country's possible influence

over another country or perhaps another industry (Heng 170). In his article *Beyond 'kawaii' pop*

culture: Japan's normative soft power as global trouble- shooter, the journalist Yee-Kuang

Heng analyzes how effective and affective Japan's soft power has been in incorporating relative

new aspects such as the Kawaii style with the threatening issues that climate change has created.

However, many analysts have argued that Japan's soft power has actually decreased making the

Japanese weaker in terms of its influence on other countries, " Japan's soft power is declining

revolved around three assets: economic influence; membership in regional institutions, and

overall image amongst neighbouring countries," (Heng 178). Therefore, this article exemplifies

how various different aspects of the Kawaii style cam impact more political issues like the laws

and possible regulations that environmental studies need, "aligning with climate change norms

that have become globally and domestically resonant, Japan could well find greater purpose with

'green' innovation and 'normative' soft power as an environmental trouble- shooter," (Heng

187). Nevertheless, Japan's increasing popularity on various aspects of their Pop Culture has also

affected other sectors of the Japanese life. In this case, this article shows how in Japan the

implications of the influence that Japan has on other countries also influences policy and law.

The growing effects of climate change has had effects on the way Japan deals with new

components of its pop culture. In other words, Japan has had to take measures concerning

climate change which has affected how the Kawaii style industry is presented and exposed, (Heng, 189).

Although it appears that the Kawaii style only seems like a power of expression, analysts state that their outlining effects on other ways of behavior still remain unclear, " Kawaii (a Japanese word meaning ''cute'') things are popular because they produce positive feelings. However, their effect on behavior remains unclear." (Nittono 1). Therefore in this case study, *The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus* by Hiroshi Nittono, Michiko Fukushima, Akihiro Yano and Hiroki Moriya, they examine the effects that viewing cute and Kawaii style images has on performing subsequent tasks. These critical analysts and graduates from Hiroshima University, conducted three experiments in 2012 in order to analyze carefully any behavioral tendencies that individuals have in specific situations or scenarios, (Nittono, 1). In the first experiment, forty-eight students were chosen randomly and assigned one of the two possible conditions: baby animal or adult animal. The participants were then asked to describe a series of images where the concurring adjective words used were "cute", "infantile", "pleasant", and/or "exciting," (Nittono 2). The images consisted of viewing images that would alter their later behavior. In other words, according to the experimenters, the participants that saw the images that were denominated as "cute" tended to act more "friendly" for the remaining of the day and improved their respective performance on tasks that required careful attention to detail, "that viewing cute images has a positive effect on behavioral
performance in tasks that require carefulness. The effect occurred not only in the motor domain but also in the perceptual domain," (Nittono 6). The remaining two experiments were conducted

in similar manner and were done so to try and discredit any possible discrepancies (Nittono 5).

Although the experiment has several limitations that could affect the results, which could

possibly include the previous emotional and psychological state that the participant was in prior

to participating in the experiment and the fact that the results might of varied depending on the

various gender differences; I found that it was necessary to see the results because it may be a

possible indicator for the Japanese society. Particularly, this experiment can show that the

Japanese society is more prone to seeing and accepting cute images. Like previously stated, it

appears that the Japanese culture is accustomed to seeing "cute" images that Kawaii style is

already accepted as part of the many childish aspects of their Pop Culture (Heng 184). However,

various conflicts arise when Kawaii traspasses what can be considered cute and what is overly

cute, to the point where it becomes creepy. For example, Marilyn Ivy explains that in Mara

Yoshitomo's work, Yoshitomo's work has been considered within the difference of what is

Kawaii and what is the bukimi-cute or creepy style (Ivy 15). Therefore, this thin line on what can

be characterized part of Kawaii style and what is not, Ivy explains that it can even be seen as an

aggressive form expression, "the modal requirements of the kawaii have been pushed past the

limits of vulnerable malleability, disclosing the aggressive dimension always implicit in the

curtified aesthetic relationship," (Ivy 15). Accordingly, Kawaii style has impacted various

decisions on what can be considered an acceptable "cute" factor and what can not.

In the context of education, Burdelski describes that currently, Japanese children are

being exposed to the use of Kawaii as early as three years old. Especially that being so that

teachers in preschools have been examined and those teachers have made the Kawaii style a

recurrent use (Burdelski 79). This case study also sought to analyze what are the differences

between the use of Kawaii style differentiating between little boys and girls and concluded that

girls use Kawaii in more than one area:

> while both boys and girls use kawaii toward toys and animals, girls kawaii in relation to
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> their own and female peers' personal items. Among the 26 tokens of kawaii in relation to
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> personal items, female children produced 25 of these (96%), which were distributed
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> among six girls (four native and two non-native speakers) (Burdelski 82).

For this reason, analysts like Matthew Burdelski and Koji Mitsuhashi have concluded that

Kawaii style is even to this day, more frequently used by females than by males. That being so

because females find it appropriate to direct themselves to their friends with the Kawaii style,

while on the other hand, men feel restricted because it would probably not be as socially

accepted if males behaved the same way:

> These data also show that teachers use kawaii (and kakkoii) to index gender.
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> In particular, teachers made assessments using kawaii more often when the target
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> and/or addressee was female than when male, which reflects preferences of
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> speaking and acting in relation to gender in Japanese society. In particular,
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> female-female conversation is a prominent context for the use of compliments on
>
> appearance and possessions, and kawaii is a frequent word deployed in this social
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> Action (Burdelski 86).

 In summary, the use of Kawaii style from an early age on, can become as a way for the students

to become more empathetic because the students would appear that they would be able to

interpret another student's behavior and empathize (Burdelski 87).

Lastly, Kinsella presents Okonogi Keigo's established idea of moratorium people to describe anyone who uses any cute style as a form of expression by denominating them as people who have no sense and instead seek to escape from the current society (Kinsella 250). Therefore, Kinsella describes that many individuals see the Kawaii style as something that evidently goes against society and is a recurring threat to the conservatives moral demand because it contradicts social values:

> cute style is anti-social; it idolises the pre-social...cute fashion blithely ignores or outrightly contradicts values central to the organisation of Japanese society and the maintenance of the work ethic. By acting childish, Japanese youth try to avoid the conservatives' moral demand...rather than working hard, cuties seem to just want to play and ignore the rest of society completely (Kinsella 251).

Therefore, this perspective on Kawaii culture can be interpreted in a similar way to the manner Otaku culture has been handled, where Otaku are seen as individuals who are not helping the current Japanese society and are in fact damaging Japan's economy and political approach.

To conclude, the use of the Kawaii style or the cute culture has become a prominent factor in Japanese Pop Culture since the early 1980s. This type of cute culture has had an impact on the way children attend schools and express themselves and has also played a prominent role in Japan's soft power influence over other industries. This soft power has been evident because the Japanese Pop Culture continues to influence other countries' cultural aspects and has increased the interest of many foreigners. In terms of politics, various policies have been implemented because these individuals who express themselves through cute objects are perceived as threat to traditional norms and are see as immature. For that matter, the use of the

Kawaii style is also been perceived as a form of rebellion by the conservatives who see the use of this new form of characters as a challenge for the already established norms and expectations hidebound by the previous generations.

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