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| Kawaii Culture |
| Contemporary Perceptions and How it is Used to Manipulate the Media |
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**INTRODUCTION**

“Kawaii” has been coined as a Japanese term for “cute”, but it has manifested into a phenomenon that affects the majority of a typical lifestyle in contemporary Japan. The term originated from Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji,* and referred to docile behavior amongst women. In the 1970’s, a trend amongst teenage females arose, focusing on an individualistic, cutesy style of handwriting, known under many names, such as “marui ji” (round writing), “koneko ji” (kitten writing), “manga ji” (comic writing), and “burikko ji” (fake-child writing) (Cheok, 2012). Developing new styles of writing was a minor form of social protest for Japanese youth, and schools began to ban it as a form of discipline. This idea of “kawaii” continued to grow, but was then limited to things such as young women and their preferences towards Harajuku and its unique street fashion or the globally-known Hello Kitty. However, researchers have determined that this cute aesthetic has managed to become a means of mental manipulation or “cute engineering”, because it enforces a positive attitude with users, and ultimately reduces feelings of fear or discomfort from a typically unsatisfactory piece of information. Such discoveries have made it possible to incorporate this idea into popular culture icons, merchandise, and behavioral mannerisms. Is “kawaii” really as simple as being adorable? Why is it such a major cultural aspect limited to Japan? In this paper, I will determine what “kawaii” really means in modern Japan, why it has become such an international spectacle, including its power in business marketing and tourism, as well as the negative possibilities that this concept can bring in times of crisis.

**Kawaii Culture: Contemporary Perceptions and How it is Used to Manipulate the Media**

“Kawaii” culture has become a staple across the globe, but it is still barely understood. It is far deeper than teenage fashion trends originating in Harajuku, or iconic symbols such as Hello Kitty. According to Masakazu Hosoda, “kawaii” is as simple to understand as young girls with dyed, curled hair and brightly-colored miniskirts. This is the traditional gal, and while it is still quite prevalent around the world, “kawaii” has expanded beyond something as obvious as street fashion. Although most translation dictionaries consistently refer to “kawaii” as cute or lovely, this cultural perception affects most factors of a typical Japanese lifestyle. It remains as a strong aesthetic concept, but this cute ideal even affects behavior. For example, “burikko” refers to acting in a cute manner in order to get what one wants, a minor form of mental manipulation. The basic visual components include the typical characters found in anime or manga, as well as popular music and fashion icons, but have expanded into business and marketing strategies, no matter how unpleasant the services may appear.

There is a science behind “kawaii” and the emotional aspects it carries. According to Hiroshi Nittono and Kumiko Tanaka, the idea of “kawaii” is a two-layer system that is made up of emotion and personal values, and “an expression of a positive emotion associated with social motivation for protecting and nurturing others, which originally stems from affection toward babies.” These cute images are projected towards a consumerist society highly made up of women, and their maternal instincts are most likely to gravitate towards something that mimics an infant. Nittono’s research has also proved that proportions play a major role in the success of this idea. “Kawaii” is reflective of baby animals, which often have a large head, eyes, and a protruding forehead. These features are human stimuli for “baby schema”, which produce positive feelings of affection and influence behavior, which is a clever tool in marketing. Positive emotional reactions can force possible consumers to neglect their logical impulses, and influences them to purchase goods or services they may not need.

Japan is known for its influx in “working characters” or mascots. They represent anything from cities, companies, or themselves. According to Matt Alt and Hiroko Yoda, working characters are designed to enhance communication by camouflaging into society whilst capturing our attention. The characters have a purpose, and their adorable qualities are proven to attract audiences in order to ensure victory for their product, service, or warning. For example, local governments have taken the time to develop city mascots in order to increase tourism among residents. Certain airway companies covered their airplanes with popular cartoon characters to catch the attention of families with small children. Companies that invest in incorporating “kawaii” imagery are more likely to be successful amongst younger people. But regardless of personal preferences, there is a character for practically every product or business.

But why is “kawaii” culture so common in Japan? Adrian Cheok describes this idea as a sugar-coating on a pill. Cute designs “engage users in a way which reduces fear and makes dreary information more acceptable and appealing” (Cheok, 2012). This is why so many types of companies incorporate working characters into their business ventures. Police and government offices do not generate affectionate emotions from anyone in particular, but their characters are made to persuade consumers into paying attention to their services. Because “kawaii” concepts also have the capacity to manipulate behavior, Cheok’s research also states that these kind of images “bring the user to a desired frame of mind and attitude, and then delivers content that might not otherwise be received.” This “cute engineering” is such a popular form of mental manipulation because it reduces feelings of discomfort from unsatisfactory information, often found in hospitals, police, and government services. In these situations, cure images are very beneficial, but it may also be a major source of social issues.

Because Japan is such a visual-based nation, “kawaii” concepts are very important in one’s daily life. For example, a great first impression is absolutely necessary, and how your appearance speaks to others may be the only chance you have. When a majority of the student population is forced into identical uniforms, “kawaii” symbols are featured in the form of cellphone and schoolbag accessories in order to preserve some type of individuality. Even in the working world, where photos are still required on resumes, while cuteness isn’t everyone’s aim, maintaining a sense of visual appeal is essential when competing for a job. But is this healthy? The need for individuals is completely tarnished when using this system. The lack of verbal communication has made “kawaii” values completely obligatory. Competition has fed the “kawaii” craze, both in human appearance and business marketing. Undoubtedly, common rivalry is healthy in any developed society, but dismissing all non-visual factors in the recruitment process, in school or work, is extremely damaging when Japan is already suffering from a declining population. When the new generation of workers is so made up of so few people, appearance shouldn’t be a major contributing component in the hiring process. Yes, “kawaii” concepts in business ventures are necessary when competing in a constantly growing global market. These ideals should be limited to non-human components, especially when the young population has declined so significantly.

Regardless of its purpose or its intentions, “kawaii” culture has helped Japan establish a national identity beyond ancient traditions such as sushi and samurai. These concepts may retain qualities from basic “kawaii” principles, including Harajuku street fashion and anime, but they are easy to understand and attract people from around the world. It has been integrated into tourism practices, and now fans of “kawaii” flock to Japan’s urban centers in order to experience it firsthand. With media icons like Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, now the official “Kawaii Ambassador”, Japan’s foreign tourism has skyrocketed. “Kawaii” imagery is very different outside of Japan, and in order to get the full effect, fans arrive from all over the world to purchase their own cute memorabilia and take part in practices that rarely occur in Western countries. Japanese culture can appear quite daunting to foreigners, so by incorporating “kawaii” values into tourist activities, the culture shock is softened, and travelers are less threatened by the language barrier and cultural differences.

**CONCLUSION**

 In conclusion, the concept of “kawaii” has become a source of national pride in Japan. It is a clever marketing tool in global competition, as many countries’ efforts to sell their products have failed due to a lacking knowledge of “kawaii” culture. It is also one of Japan’s most successful implements for increasing both foreign and domestic tourism. Japanese pop culture staples, such as J-pop and anime, have made a noticeable impact around the world due to its distinct look, made up of bright colors and theatrical silhouettes, and foreign fans wish to visit Japan in order to experience “kawaii” culture firsthand. In a country where the working population is declining, an increase in tourism can rapidly improve the state of the economy. Research has proven that there is a science behind this idea, and Japanese businesses can use it to their advantage in the global market. Although “kawaii” is often used as a means of manipulation through positive feelings, there is a slight possibility that this concept will grow to be Japan’s only source of popularity in the world, which may lead to a negative attitude towards Japan in times of crisis. Only urban areas are likely to make a profit from tourism activities. On a national scale, these popular images may expand beyond minor manipulation, and negatively influence this visually-dependent country. Also, in an increasingly competitive job market, companies’ ridiculously high standards regarding appearance may tarnish the newest generation of applicants. For future research, I’d like to understand how “kawaii” culture effects Japan’s youth as they attempt to become successful in the working world, and if businesses will change due to the global popularity of this cultural perception.

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