

How the Japanese Term *Kawaii* is Perceived Outside of Japan: A study in Israel

- Lieber-Milo Shiri, Graduate School of Human Sciences. Researcher. Cognitive Psychophysiology Laboratory, Osaka University, Japan.

- Nittono Hiroshi, Graduate School of Human Sciences. Professor. Cognitive Psychophysiology Laboratory, Osaka University, Japan.

Abstract

In Japan, many products contain the characteristics of small, round, bright colors, and are adorable and sweet, in short *kawaii* (“cute” in direct translation into English). Over the years, the mass production of *kawaii* goods has made its way to the West, initially through visual media and later on through consumption goods. This exposure has brought increased interest in Japan and its culture among young Westerners as well as a rise in familiarity with everyday Japanese words like *kawaii*. This study illuminates how non-Japanese people, in this case Israelis, define and treat the term *kawaii*. The results of the survey showed that a high number of respondents were familiar with the term *kawaii*, were able to define it in their own words, and had a positive approach toward it. This paper provides some empirical evidence of a successful penetration of the Japanese consumer-related culture and popular words in Israel.

Keywords: *kawaii*, Japan, Israel, cute, aesthetics

Discipline category: Humanities

Introduction: The term *kawaii* and its aesthetic qualities

Considered to be one of the most widely used and beloved words in modern day Japan, the Japanese term *kawaii* describes playfulness, warmth, cuteness, eliciting maternal instincts and even the feelings of empathy and compassion, and is usually used to indicate small objects, like infants and young animals, young women that look lovely, and fancy goods (such as decorations, toys and so on) that please us. Although the direct translation of the word is “cute and sweet” in English and “hamud” in Hebrew, *kawaii* comprises a variety of meanings such as sweetness, pitifulness and ludicrous that can be seen as contradictory to one another (Nittono, 2016).

The word itself originated from *kawahayushi*, which meant “embarrassed.” This conjoined word of “face” [*kao*] and “flushing/illuminating” [*hayui*] was used to describe a sense of sympathy and pity toward weaker members of society, such as children. Over the years, the meanings of “pity” [*kawaisou*] and “ashamed” vanished, while the sympathetic and affective meanings of *kawaii* remained. Today, “pity” is no longer a part of the modern meaning of *kawaii*; according to Dale (2017), at present the word has no negative connotations in Japan. In other words, while *kawaii* had a negative connotation in the past, its positive meaning overrode its negative meaning, and today *kawaii* generally implies something good.

In Hebrew, on the other hand, the term *hamud* (“cute”) has always had a positive meaning. The roots of *hamud* (masculine) and *hamuda* (feminine) came from the biblical term *lahmod* that described something adorable, cute, delightful, and good, and objects that people desire (Erez Zvi, 2011). Today, *hamud* is generally addressed to young children or small animals and refers to their cuteness/niceness and sweet nature. While the modern term *kawaii* is being used in a positive manner in Japan, in everyday

Israel the word *hamud* can be used in a negative manner, depending on the situation and voice intonation. In a radio show that was produced in one of the most distinguished Israeli newspapers website, *Haaretz*, a broadcast was made upon for presenting and describing the Hebrew term *hamud*. According to the radio broadcaster, the term *hamud* can be used to describe both genders in many occasions and in positive situations. However, when the term is said in a criticizing tone, *hamud* can be quite distasteful to both genders: for women, as a chauvinist act in which they are being treated as small children and for men, as an offensive statement that may “damage” their masculinity (TLV1, 2017). While there is a similarity in the definitions of *kawaii* and *hamud*, differences exist between the two words in terms of interpretation and historical background.

Aesthetically, *kawaii* figures and icons include the physical characteristics of a rounded face, large eyes, bright colors, and a small body, which played a significant role at the outset of modern Japanese popular consumer culture. Unlike the “conservative” design of cuteness in the West (such as Miki and Mini mouse Disney characters, modern Teddy Bears), Japanese *kawaii* design sometimes can be less cuddly and more provocative in a way that may evoke a blend of mixed feelings in the observer; such as disgust and repulsion. For example, Gloomy Bear; a two meter tall, violent, covered in blood, pink bear that heart people, may not be seen cute by non-Japanese but for many Japanese this bear is entitled *kawaii*.

These aesthetic qualities often generate, according to Dale (2017), a sense of close emotional feelings in the observer and can motivates potential consumers into buying a certain product. For thus, *kawaii* aesthetics became central to the consumer culture and marketing strategy in Japan; up to a level of “national obsession” in the words of

Allison (2006) and a “stepping-stone” in a product’s success as described by Marcus Kurosu, Ma, and Hashizume (2017). As such, when creating a cute character, brands (such as Sanrio and Disney) often follow the general guidelines of “cute” design with aspects that are childlike, rounded, simple, small, and soft, with warm and bright colors (Marcus et al. 2017).

While *kawaii* fancy goods were initially produced for young women of the 1970s, over the years the application of *kawaii* design has spread beyond its traditional borders and today it is being used and marketed by the mass media. For example, government organizations such as police departments and cities often utilize characters that convey *kawaii* physical characteristics and place them as the “face” of the organization. This strategy has a few purposes: to inspire fondness for the organization, and to form a kind of “united identity” of the selected group. This application has become so common that almost every city and corporation in Japan has its own cute character; there is even an annual gathering that brings all the city mascots to one place. Lieber-Milo and Nittono (2018) mentioned that not only Japanese corporations and governmental offices but also foreign ones, such as the Embassy of Israel in Japan, understood the power of *kawaii* aesthetics in Japan and have supported mascot selection contests through social media in an attempt to design their own cute mascots. According to Nir Tork (Nir Tork, personal communication, August 15, 2015), an Israeli employee in the Culture and Science Affairs section of the Embassy of Israel in Tokyo, Shalomchan, the Israeli mascot in Japan, had succeeded in softening the image of Israel in the eyes of the Japanese as well as increasing Israel’s incoming tourism rate from Japan.

Over the years, it has been said that the world of *kawaii* aesthetics has stretched beyond the borders of Japan and now its related products are being sold and practiced in

numerous countries. However, empirical evidence for this has been relatively scarce. Although past studies (e.g., Kinsella, 1995) described *kawaii* aesthetics in a more criticizing tone; as childish and inappropriate for certain people, the present study was conducted under the hypothesis that today many non-Japanese people have a positive attitude toward *kawaii*. In this study, by means of an online survey in Israel, we examined how the term *kawaii* is defined and evaluated by Israelis. The results of the survey demonstrate the spread of consumer-related culture outside of Japan and provide an example of the successful assimilation of Japanese terms and trends in Israel.

Kawaii globalization

The export of *kawaii* products from Japan to other parts of the world has been a huge success since the 1990s, with Japanese companies such as Pokémon and Sanrio gaining revenue from Western consumers. *Kawaii* products created a “pink globalization,” a term that was coined by Yano (2013), where the *kawaii*/cute aesthetics of childlike physical characteristics, bright colors, and soft textures spread across the global market. This global success of *kawaii* has encouraged numerous international corporations such as Victoria’s Secret, Motorola, and Google to use “cuteness” as a tool of persuasion for motivating a broader consumer base to buy commercial products, as well as to arouse positive emotions in consumers (Lieber-Milo & Nittono, 2018).

The question that arises from this phenomenon is how these products and characters became such a success in Japan and abroad. Studies of the psychology of cuteness began many years ago, when Konrad Lorenz (1943), a pioneer in the field of ethology, proposed *Kindchenschema* (baby schema). According to his ideas, some visual features—such as a high forehead, big eyes, an oversized head, and full cheeks—trigger positive feelings with a desire to protect and care for the observed object. Inspired by

Lorenz's baby-schema theory, many researchers have attempted to expand the field of *kawaii*/cuteness. For instance, Sherman and Haidt (2011) argued that cuteness is not a releaser of parental instincts. Regarding the response to cuteness as an affective mechanism, they proposed that its primary function is to motivate sociality by activating mentalizing processes that attribute mental states to agents. Kringelbach, Stark, Alexander, Bornstein, and Stein (2016) reviewed recent advances in psychological and neurophysiological research on cuteness and suggested that cuteness is not limited to visual infant features but includes positive sounds and smells. They argued that cuteness plays an important role not only in caregiving but also in increasing pleasure and empathy and facilitating social relationship and well-being.

These studies show that the power of cuteness response, the Aww affect as Buckley (2016) and Dale (2017) present, is an effective and powerful source that can motivate a positive reaction in humans. In resemblance to Lorenz (1943) theory, Marcus et al. (2017) also argued that the global success of *kawaii* goods came as a result of a similar emotional mechanism in humans: a universal sensitivity to all things that comprise the visual characteristics of baby-schema.

While the appreciation of cuteness is universal and appeals to many, Japan is considered to be one of the first countries who understood the economic potential of cuteness and in the words of Marcus et al. (2017) had "opened" the world to *kawaii* design from the 70s' (p. 43). As an example, Sanrio is one of the most famous Japanese companies that introduced *kawaii* aesthetics to the West, with over 450 character brands and more than 3,000 products in 46 different countries since their establishment in 1962. During the 1990s, Sanrio introduced the world of *kawaii* with their ambassador Hello Kitty [*Haro Kitty* in Japanese] to English speaking countries (especially North America)

with a focus on the youth market. The success of Hello Kitty came not only from her “cute” design, but also from her story that every child can relate to, regardless of his or her nationality. To generate a sense of close emotional bonding between the consumer and Hello Kitty, an attempt was made to create a qualitative bridge between the character of Hello Kitty and the potential buyer in the shape of a background story that included a birthplace, hobbies, and more. For example, she was “born” in England, has a family and a boyfriend, her blood type is A, and she loves baking and playing the piano (Yano, 2018).

This “identity of the product,” was created to bring Hello Kitty to “life” and to make her a relatable figure (Marcus et al., 2017). According to Pertiteli (2018), these narratives and tactics have made Japanese characters such as Hello Kitty a global success that have successfully penetrated the international market.

The assimilation and acceptance of *kawaii* in Israel

While in Japan the *kawaii* mass production took place during the 70s’, young Israelis were encountered to the Japanese cuteness later during the 90s’, with the introduction of the Japanese anime industry. Created in 1995, Pokémon is a media franchise centered on fictional creatures called Pokémon (pocket monsters), which people capture and train to fight each other. The storyline revolves around Ash (Satoshi in the Japanese version) who travels in a virtual world, accompanied by his friends (Misty and Brock) and his trusty Pokémon, Pikachu. In Israel, the television show was first broadcast during the 1990s and gained almost instant success, with a high rating of more than 21.4% of viewers (Lemish & Bloch, 2004). The show, with its cute iconic characters, especially Pikachu, appealed to the young Israeli crowd who watched the show and consumed its related products (such as card games, dolls, Nintendo games and more) in large quantities. Even today, Pokémon is still an attraction in Israel; for the

young generation and for the mature one.

In today's world, where many young people are communicating with each other via social media networks rather than in face-to-face encounters, the close relationship that evolved between Ash and Pikachu and the unconditional love and self sacrifice Pikachu is willing to make for his friend/master are desirable to many of the TV show's fans, Japanese and non-Japanese alike. Allison (2006) even presented these characters as a "shadow family"; companions who will always love and be there for you in a time of need, sometimes even more than your family.

While the design of the characters remained the same as the Japanese original series (with only their names altered, excluding Pikachu), adjustments and modifications were required in the design of the Pokémon characters and background story of the TV show to customize and localize Pokémon to the Israeli and other countries' markets. These adjustments included a focus on the hero character of Ash instead of the Pokémon creature Pikachu as well as visual changes, such as more solid colors and a stronger music background (Allison, 2006). According to Gail Tilden (quoted in Allison 2006, pp. 245-246), these modifications were brought about to acclimatize the show to other countries so that all children, regardless of their nationality, could relate to the story and its hero in a way that would inspire them to "travel" to the fantasy realm of Pokémon and "catch them all." With sales in over 124 countries (as of March 2018) and over 6.0 trillion Yen in domestic and global sales (as of March 2017), the world of Pokémon creatures became one of the biggest fads among children in the last two-decades (Business summary, 2018).

According to the Head of the Departments of Asian Studies in the Hebrew University Otmazgin Nissim (2018) this exposure to Japan through the visual media

influenced many young Israeli to learn about Japan and its culture, and motivated many to form Japanese culture related gatherings such as cosplay conferences, Japanese culture evenings, movie nights, and more.

The growing trend and interest also made Japan a favorite destination for independent travelers and families. The statistical information reported by the Japan National Tourism Organization (2016) in “Foreign Visitors and Japanese Departures” showed that in 2016, incoming tourism from Israel totaled 29,436, 34.2% higher than 2015.

This trend also encouraged Israeli and Japanese businesses to invest in the Israeli marketplace. For example, famous Japanese retail chains such as the 100-yen shops *DAISO* and the Chinese chain *MINISO* opened their doors to Israeli consumers with their first stores in Israel in the summer of 2018. Although Chinese, the chief designer, Junya Miyake in *MINISO* is Japanese and was inspired from *kawaii* and designed various products that were influenced by *kawaii* aesthetics. These two chains introduced a “Japanese experience” to Israeli consumers; a shopping experience where everyone can purchase various products of Japanese everyday life, from sushi tools to home accessories, some of which feature Hello Kitty and other Japanese characters.

This exposure to and rise of interest in Japan and its culture had established the cornerstones of the impressive growth of knowledge in Japan and its culture with more people are becoming familiar with various Japanese everyday terms and trends. For example, Japanese restaurants in Israel list various dishes on the menu using Japanese words such as *shitake* (mushroom), *tamago* (egg), and more. With this exposure to Japanese culture in Israel, we assumed that a high number of Israelis might know the term *kawaii* and have a positive attitude toward it.

Study Materials, Methods and Results

To examine how Israelis define, treat, and approach the term *kawaii*, a quantitative online survey was created on the SurveyMonkey platform (August and September 2018) and were solicited to participate through various social media groups (mainly Facebook). Respondents included personal acquaintances of the first author, general groups: “Wild Guitars Shop” and “Orna Lieber School of Music and Arts” [*Mercaz Orna Lieber Lemuzika Vomanuyot*] and some groups that had relation to Japan, including “Embassy of Japan in Israel” and “Japan for Israeli Travelers”. All respondents participated voluntarily in the project. The research protocol was approved by the research ethics committee of the Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, Japan.

Although the questionnaire consisted of 38 questions regarding the participants’ attitudes toward *hamud/cute* (not *kawaii*), here we focus on the last three questions about the Japanese term *kawaii*: (1) Are you familiar with the Japanese word *kawaii* [Yes or No]; (2) If yes, what is your impression toward the word [5-point scale, 1 = *very negative* to 5 = *very positive*]; and (3) How do you define the word *kawaii*? [Free description]. The numerical data are available at <https://osf.io/rpfx4/>.

A total of 445 people (168 men and 277 women, between 13 and 68 years old, mean = 30.6 years old) responded to these questions. Among them, 85.6% ($n = 381$) answered that they were familiar with the word *kawaii*. There was no large gender difference in recognition rate: 82.7% ($n = 138$) of men and 87.7% ($n = 243$) of women. When the positive and negative answers were coded as 1 and 0, the point-biserial correlation between age and familiarity was $r = -0.42$ ($p < .001$, $df = 453$). This moderately large negative correlation coefficient suggests that younger generations

know the word better than older generations.

Among the 381 respondents who were familiar with the word *kawaii*, 373 people (136 men and 237 women) provided their impressions about the word. Figure 1 shows the histograms of the responses. The general attitude was positive in both gender groups, although female respondents provided a higher evaluation than male respondents. When men and women were coded as 1 and 2, the correlation between gender and rating was $r = 0.20$ ($p < .001$, $df = 371$), suggesting that gender affected the ratings. On the other hand, the respondents' age did not affect the ratings significantly. The correlation between age and rating was $r = -0.04$ ($p = 0.50$, $df = 371$).

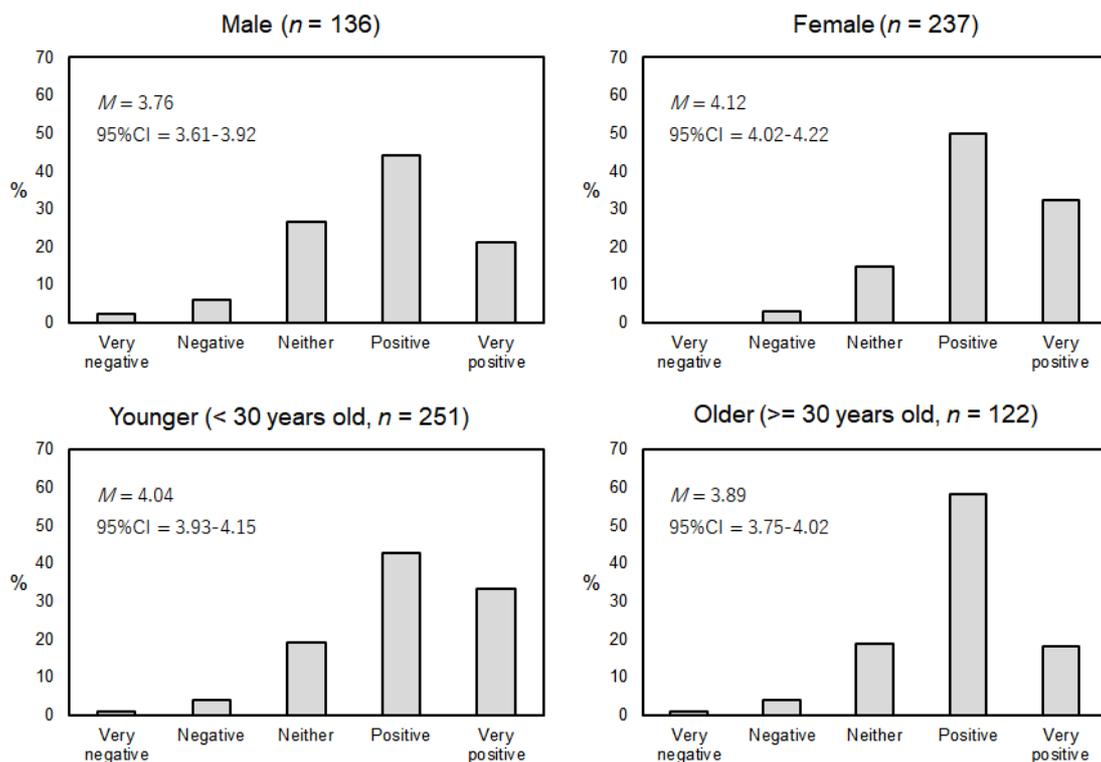


Figure 1. Gender and age differences in the answers to the question “What is your impression toward the word *kawaii*?”

Because we did not ask about other words, we cannot be sure whether this

gender difference was specific to the word *kawaii*. Nevertheless, the gender difference may be related to the fact that women generally have a stronger interest toward *kawaii* (Nittono, 2006). This difference may come from social and educational backgrounds. For example, Burdelski and Mitsuhashi (2010) carried out a direct observation of five-year-old children in a pre-school educational environment in Japan. They noticed that teachers used the term *kawaii* more frequently with female students and *kakkoii* (“cool”) with male students as a positive response to good behavior or in relation to artifacts and designs, such as painting. The results of the study showed that gender identification is being structured and instilled in children from a young age by influential societal representatives who associate and relate “cute” with women and link “cool” to men.

Following the first question, the results of the open-ended question “How do you define the word *kawaii*?” showed that the majority of respondents described *kawaii* similarly; as something small, soft, and warm that conveys innocence, honesty, and purity like small animals and infants. According to the respondents, these physical characteristics tend to trigger a sympathetic and positive response with a desire to bring the item closer and to protect it. The term *kawaii* is presented in a positive light as an important aspect of Japanese aesthetics that brings forth a good feeling. Respondents also acknowledged the widespread interpretations of the term in which *kawaii* combines with the aesthetic qualities of cool and beautiful and infantile and pure, thus extending the orthodox translation of cute and *hamud*.

The descriptions below are only a few examples of the extensive explanations and interpretations of the survey respondents (translated by the first author):

“One of the terms most identified with Japan. Mostly related to cute wear, cute speech, and cute animals in Japanese style, sometimes unique.” (Israeli woman, 27 years old)

“Kawaii is less ‘cute’ like in Hebrew, and more a combination of cute, cool, and beautiful. Everything can be kawaii, a little puppy or even a grown-up, beautiful strong woman.” (Israeli woman, 25 years old)

“When I see someone or something cute/childish and innocent, big eyes etc. . . . it makes me feel good, it makes me want to care.” (Israeli woman, 37 years old)

“A better way to use the word ‘cute.’ I feel the word ‘kawaii’ is more than just cute, it’s an expression of cute, stylish, and beautiful.” (Israeli man, 19 years old)

The qualitative analysis also showed that, regardless of age or gender, respondents associated *kawaii* with young women’s culture. It seems to be an international trend that *kawaii* aesthetics have gained more success and acceptance among young women who are willing to spend large amounts of money for its artifacts and related merchandise.

Similar to Lieber-Milo’s (2017) survey results that focused on Japanese female attitudes toward *kawaii*, Israelis also acknowledge the thin line between the proper and the improper practice of *kawaii*, in which “too much” *kawaii* could be considered absurd, bizarre, and scary, and thus may provoke a negative reaction and lack of appreciation from others. Though some respondents presented *kawaii* in a more negative light, such as childishness or a lack of dealing with reality, the majority of survey participants acknowledged the positive virtues of *kawaii*, where the mere sight of

kawaii objects evokes affirmative responses, such as warmth, smiling, compassion, and thoughtfulness from the observer.

It was also found that respondents often related *kawaii* to a fashion statement, especially to the unique fashion style of the Harajuku area in Tokyo.

“It is often used in slang to represent a certain cultural fashion in places like ‘Harajuku’ known in many genres and lifestyles, a significant part of which is the outward appearance. The fashion and cultural style have recently become international.”

(Israeli woman, 17 years old)

Many Israeli survey respondents whom the first author asked about *kawaii* (through Facebook’s messenger system) almost immediately connected this style to Lolita fashion, a fashion subculture that developed during the 1970s and was based on Victorian and Edwardian clothing that was mainly popularized in the city of Tokyo, as well as to Harajuku street fashion, a style developed in the early 1990s that introduced a new type of cute fashion that overshadowed the standardized *kawaii* fashion and can be described as punk, kitsch, and even weird at the same time (Iseri, 2015). Harajuku was first recognized by Kinsella (1995) as a rebellion against the traditional feminine gender roles in an attempt to resist social pressure and obligations and withdraw to a cute world that is frozen in time.

In sum, Japan has become a favorite destination for Israelis and its culture to be explored and studied by many. The continuous exposure in the last two decades to Japanese culture has increased Israelis’ awareness of Japan’s popular trends and words and as such, the survey results showed that the majority of the respondents were aware

of the word *kawaii* and had a positive attitude toward the word and trend.

From these positive attitudes, we can assume that some aspects of Japanese trends and design will be welcome in Israel.

Conclusion

Kawaii has a special appreciation in Japan and as such, the world of *kawaii* aesthetics that include the physical characteristics of being small, bright colors, and a childlike appearance plays a significant part in Japanese everyday life routines from art, fashion, and digital media to the cute representatives of companies and governments. Over the years the world of *kawaii* design had set foot outside of Japan and in many ways “colored the world” with pink and cute style.

The aim of this paper was to express how non-Japanese people define and treat one of Japan’s most popular and beloved terms and trends. The many interpretations and positive opinions of *kawaii* demonstrate knowledge and an acceptance of Japanese culture and popular words among Israelis. Thus, we can assume from these results that contemporary trends and terms from Japan can be successfully assimilated in other countries with completely different historical and cultural backgrounds, like Israel.

The current study has several limitations. For example, it examined only one country and the respondents may be skewed due to the inclusion of Japan-related groups who may have had previous knowledge of *kawaii*.

Nevertheless, the survey results portrayed a rising interest in Japanese culture in Israel and provided some empirical evidence of how the word *kawaii* and its trends are perceived and appreciated in other countries outside of Japan.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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