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Cuteness Needed

The New Language/Communication Device In A Global Society

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Abstract

As exemplified by the recent popularity of manga *(Japanese cartoons, especially in animation form), the well-known Japanese consumption of 'kawaii' (pretty/cute) culture has not only intensified inside Japan, but has also permeated global society, particularly through youth culture. This paper examines 'cuteness' as an effective, powerful communication device in today's media cultures, and situates it in relation to struggles of individuality with the pressure for social conformity and surveillance, as well as in the context of the fading of the immediacy of personal contact and the performativity of self-presentation.*
The Japanese obsession with cuteness has been condemned as a subculture peculiar to children and women, although the extent of the quotidian reach of its signifying use extends throughout Japanese society to include even Governmental documents and signs. It manifests itself as an inquisitive and complex site for the integration of social, economic, and aesthetic dimensions and it registers (inter)personal as well as psychological demands. Numerous studies of the discursive significance of cuteness have appeared, and they have included various cultural expressions for its examination such as manga*, consumerism, technology, life styles and personal relationships, as well as gender and sexuality. However, most scholarly accounts have not extended the scope for the cultural purview of cuteness beyond its Japaneseness, and so have neglected examination of its increasing worldwide popularity in a global context. Why has this uniquely Japanese obsession with cuteness been widely accepted and reproduced outside Japan? In order to answer this, this paper will focus on the social dimensions of cuteness that are invested with particular significance by people with different cultural backgrounds. It will also examine why these qualities are sought out and how they are integrated into local cultures as part of peoples' construction and negotiation of their identities. This discussion will also broach the potentialities of the real and virtual spaces comprising 'global culture' for human relationships.*

Keywords: Kawaii' (pretty/cute) culture, Manga, Communication, Local and global societies , Performativity

Introduction

Recently emerging trends in the global popularity of *manga* (Japanese cartoons), and *anime* (animated *manga*) are indicative of a need for closer study of the well-known Japanese consumption of '*kawaii*' (pretty/cute) culture, which as McVeigh notes, represents a '"standard" aesthetic of everyday life' (2000b:135). 'Cuteness' has not only prevailed Japan, but has also permeated South East Asian and Western societies, particularly through youth cultures and urban techno cultures.

What is *Kawaii*? In her comprehensive analysis, "Cuties in Japan" published in 1995, Kinsella summarises the multiplicity of its meaning thus: Kawaii or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances. 'Cuteness' has developed into a powerful cultural medium, which has been represented in diverse forms (e.g., commodities, clothing, hand writing, speech and gesture) as an effective, powerful and discursive communication/self-presentational process in today's media cultures. The Japanese obsession with cuteness has been condemned as a subculture peculiar to children and women, although

the breadth of the quotidian reach of its signifying use extends throughout Japanese society to include even governmental documents and signs. It manifests itself as an inquisitive and complex site for the integration of social, economic, and aesthetic dimensions and it registers (inter)personal as well as psychological demands. The cultural preference for 'cuteness' can be discerned throughout Japanese history from the ancient period onwards, although it only became a national, mass-mediated phenomenon in Japan from 1970s, with the last decade of the twentieth century registering its globally increasing pervasiveness through *manga* and *anime*, commodities and Internet-based communication and mobile telecommunications. The 'social life' or durability of the concept can be attributed to its discursive ability to mix humour with amusement and goodness.

A number of studies of cuteness in Japan have appeared and various examinations of the phenomenon reflect the diversity of its cultural manifestations and interpersonal expressions such as *manga/anime*, consumerism, technology, life styles and personal relationships, as well as gender and sexuality. These forms include the commodification of cuteness in products involving media mixes (Ōtsuka 1991; Masubuchi 1994; Kinsella 1995;

McVeigh 2000a; Allison 2003; Ito 2003/4); cuteness and cyberspace e.g., mobile phones and Internet-based communication (Hjorth 2003a, 2003b, 2005); cuteness and self-presentation (McVeigh 2000b; Akita 2002; Kinsella 2002; Richie 2003) and cuteness and *shōjo*/girls' sexuality (Skinner 1979; Shigematsu 1999; Kinsella 2000; Napier 2001; Perper & Cornog 2002; Ogi 2001a/b, 2003; Orbaugh 2003). However, most scholarly accounts have not extended the scope of the cultural purview of cuteness beyond its Japaneseness, and so have neglected examination of its increasing popularity in a global context.

Why has this uniquely Japanese obsession with cuteness been widely accepted and reproduced outside Japan, not as an orientalism, but as a part of the consumer's own culture? In relation to this question, this paper will discuss the social dimensions of cuteness that are invested with particular significance by Japanese consumers and then move onto people with different cultural backgrounds. Overall, this study aims at situating cuteness in relation to the following: the struggles of individuality with the pressures for social conformity; multi-layered surveillances of daily life; the fading of the immediacy of personal contact; and the intensifying of performativity through self-presentation. By examining the essential qualities of cuteness and its evolutional changes as a mass culture within a consumer society, this essay will discuss why these qualities are sought out and how they are integrated into local cultures as part of peoples' construction and negotiation of their identities. This discussion will also broach the potentialities of the real and virtual spaces comprising 'global culture' for human relationships, arguing that the comicalness embedded in cuteness is particularly significant in this context.

With regard to references to Japanese names, the surname precedes the personal name.

Essence of Cuteness and its Visual Formulation

In general, the adjective '*kawaii*' means the following: an object that is pretty, expressing the user's affectionate gaze as well as the desire to protect it; an object that is small, soft and fragile as exemplified by angelic images of infants. Spirituality, such as the object's innocence, is an essential quality of cuteness, but it does not imply any sexual nuance, such as the way 'cute' in English can. This indicates that the word is both aesthetical and evaluative, in a way that is similar to how the Heian nobles (794-1192) perceived 'beauty' as the evidence of 'goodness' (Morris 1964).

Historically, the Japanese love of small, cute and innocent things has been recorded from the ancient period, although the adjective used to describe it was '*utsukushi*' which is regarded as the predecessor of

'*kawaii*'. For example, in the late tenth century, a Heian court lady, Sei Shōnagon, listed what she considered as '*utsukushiki mono* (pretty/adorable things) which included the appearance, voice and behaviour of infants, stating in her famous essay collection *Makura no Sōshi* (The Pillow Book) that "indeed all small things, are most adorable" (Morris, 1967:169). This typifies the ambiguous and ambivalent quality of 'cuteness' - demonstrating warmth, innocence and comical liveliness, as well as vulnerability and fragility, which secures the viewer's safe and superior position. Unlike icy beauty, such cuteness invites other's affectionate involvement with cute objects. This suggests that the significance of cuteness manifests through its incompleteness, which enables the generation of the multi-layered communication between each viewer and a 'cute' object (either tangible or intangible) as well as between the viewers' shared experience.

The fondness of cuteness continued through Japanese history, often expressed as the Japanese passion for miniatures (Lee, O. 1984). The word '*kawayushi*', first appeared in the late Heian period, and it expressed the user's sense of pity and/or shame about an object's condition (e.g., *Konjaku monogatari-shū* [Tales of Times Now Past] in the 12th century), but the end of the Medieval period it also came to imply love/affection towards an object. During the Edo period (1602-1868), the word '*kawaii*' and its variations came to be used to express cuteness. A sense of pity/compassion denotes the user's tender, caring feeling for, and genuine interest in, a specific object, which easily transforms to an object of love/affection, as the relation between pity and affection is close in Japan (Miyaji 1979). The mixed sentiments of love/affection and sense of pity/compassion remain as its core element even though the word has gradually shifted from emotional value to one of aesthetic significance, such as the objective of prettiness.

In the modern period in Japan, cuteness was understood to induce in the onlooker immediate sentiment towards specific others, with it becoming more visually formulated and fixed in meaning, as being small, soft and somewhat playful. Under the influence of Western culture, it is represented by an image of a little girl's large head with fluffy hair and large eyes with a small and slender physique, thus representing innocence, sincerity, defencelessness, and appealing to the spectator for protection. This typical feature may be found in Nakahara Jun'ichi's girls, in the pre-war period, whose femininity is represented as dreamy and fragile. In post-war publications targeting the readership of girls, such as magazines and *manga*, the docile image of cuteness was gradually changed to a more active, independent and rather comical representation that graphically involved simpler and stronger lines (Minakawa 1991). In the early 1950s, the formula of cuteness

was reinvented and reinforced by Tezuka Osamu, the 'father' of today's *manga*, who developed a visual style that involved depicting characters with round, childlike, Caucasian looking faces with huge, vertically oval shaped eyes (e.g., Astro Boy's eyes in *Tetsuwan Atomu* [Astro Boy 1952-]). This distinctive visual style established the convention for graphic representation in *manga* (Schodt 1996). With this representational formula, Tezuka visually encoded cuteness with a poignant combination of conflicting elements such as fragility and strength, purity and innocence with just a subtle hint of childlike/feminine sexuality. Using the formula, Tezuka also created an androgenous heroine, Sapphire in *Ribon no kishi* (Princess Knight 1953-) for the first girls' *manga*, which provided light-hearted, positive depictions of girlhood for its readers/audiences. This characterisation of cuteness created a fertile foundation for the representation of girls and their lives in later decades, particularly for engaging with social representations of gender and sexual identity (Fujimoto 1998).

The forms of cuteness represented in 1950s *manga* were followed twenty years later by a spectacular surge in depictions of elegantly detailed beauty in Western style in girls' *manga*, which involved much more sophisticated manifestations. The 1970s was an epoch making period for girls' *manga* in which talented female artists such as Ikeda Riyoko, Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko, Ōshima Yumiko and Yamagishi Ryōko, challenged artistic and social conventions to dramatically widen the sphere of content, style and readership of girl's *manga*. The narratives in such *manga*, generally driven by love stories and romance, often involved girls' independent experience of their gender and sexuality in provocative visual presentations. Androgynous, transvestite, and non-human characters as well as feminine, beautiful boys in homosexual relationships were employed to create independent 'fantasy' worlds which allowed the artists to inject their sharp criticism of girls' suppressed lives. Detailed illustrations with fine lines were generally utilised, as exemplified by abundant curly hair of heroines such as Oscar in Ikeda's *Berusaiyu no bara* (Rose of Versailles, 1972-) and Chibi-Neko (Little cat) in Ōshima's *Wata no kuni boshi* (Star of Cotton Country, 1978-). The characters, both boys and girls, have slender bodies and are more 'beautiful' than visually 'cute'. However, by emphasising the incongruity between their fragility and occasionally unexpected comical behaviours and facial expressions, cuteness in these serialised contexts involves eliciting the readers' sympathy and warm, congenial feeling towards the characters.

From the late 1970s, fluffiness and childlikeness were stressed in *manga* representations with the light-hearted, comical cuteness of characters seeming to prevail over their more serious beauty, such as Ikeda's Oscar. This trend was typified by

Igarashi Yumiko's *Candy Candy!* (1975-), whose central characters are relatively young girls with large heads and eyes with short yet slender bodies. They are cute, warm and casual and are prone to making unintentional mistakes. They are not too beautiful or formal, and thus were presented as role models achievable for girls. This type of representation explicitly utilised and reworked the gap between the girl character's cute, innocent and defenceless appearance and their admirable strength and forward-looking attitudes to appeal to a younger and possibly wider demographic of readership.

The increased comicalness embedded in cuteness, especially its visual style in *manga*, can be understood in relation to more traditional understandings of humour. Priestley claims that the essential ingredients of humour are "a feeling for irony; a sense of the absurd; a certain contact with reality, one foot at least on the ground; and, perhaps at first sight surprising, affection" (1976:9). It is this capacity to be visually imbued with affection that underscores comical cuteness in *manga*, not just through the use of illustrations, but also through the casual use of informal fonts and handwriting. For example, in her popular *manga*, *Chiisana koi no monogatari* (Story of a little love, 1980-), Mitsuhashi Chikako utilised her somewhat untidy handwritten texts, rather than printed fonts to express humour, warmth and personality. Rather than perfect beauty, imperfection, irregularity and crafted 'naturalness' came to express individuality (Ochiai 1990; Akurosu 1994). Today, there are a variety of fonts and handwriting styles employed to display a range of different tones, nuances and tension, much like the visualisation of sound effects in *manga*.

Comicalness became particularly explicit in a new genre, *Lovecome* (love comedies) which flourished in both boys' and girls' *manga* in the 1980s, as exemplified by Takahashi Rumiko's *manga/anime*, e.g., *Urusei Yatsura/Lum* (1978-), *Maison Ikkoku* (1980-) and *Ranma ½* (1987-). This genre focused on producing light-hearted comedic situations, often provoked by exaggerating discord between dichotomous characterisation such as that between childlikeness and adult femininity, power and vulnerability and innocent souls and sexualised bodies.

In the 1990s, the cuteness of girl characters was further stressed through the femininity of their bodies (large breasts, thin waist with long legs) as well as provocative costumes, replete with childlike faces and innocent facial expressions and gestures. Exemplified by the popular *Sailor Moon* characters, who wear overly girlish/feminine, often provocative costumes, while their speech and behaviour in daily life are childish, even boyish, this genre of cuteness offers readers safe, cheerful pleasures. Ōtsuka critically notes (1991) that this external spectacle is indicative of a loss of 'interiority', however, this

may indicate rather a shift of the subject from one of comical, exaggerated 'cuteness' registering passively in the viewer's perspective to being part of a chosen role in play.

This comicalness was further inflated with girls' gag *manga*, beginning with Maya Mineo's *Patariro! Boku Patariro!* (Patariro, I'm Patariro!, 1978-). *Manga* with a sense of comical sarcasm, such as Sakura Momoko's *Chibi Maruko-chan* (1986-), Kubo Kiriko's *Imadoki no kodomo-tachi* (Today's children 1986-) and Usui Yoshito's *Crayon Shin-chan* (1992-) gained popularity, demonstrating even further the diversity of forms of cuteness. For example, the responses to Shin-chan's behaviour (e.g., taking his pants down and baring his buttocks) were diverse: many adults were disgusted, regarding it as indecent; whereas young people and children vicariously enjoyed it as funny and as '*kawaii*'. *Crayon Shin-chan* depicts comical yet real parent/child relationships with a sense of resistance, showing the generational border between adult and children being effaced in society (Katori 1993; Lee, W. 2000). The cuteness of these illustrations does not necessarily lie in the features of the drawings, but with the characters' speech and behaviours.

But where cuteness is exhibited as lacking comicalness, the result is often the stressing of innocence and vulnerability through beautiful yet tragic stories, or an intensification of sexual connotation. In the latter case, the combination of childlike cuteness with provocative sexuality has worked to create a new pornographic genre. '*Lolicon*' (Lolita Complex) *manga* appeared in early 1980s. It exploited the mismatched attraction of innocent cuteness and sexuality to an extreme level, and despite its repeated social persecution, it continues to thrive through magazines, comics, *anime* and websites (Schodt 1996). This genre was pioneered by, and continues to be identified with, the work of Azuma Hideo, which is characterised by the depiction of explicit sexual activities staged with Tezuka Osamu's styled, innocent, cute characters and the withdrawal to an internal, virtual world. In *Lolicon manga*, it is fairy common to see the absence of rapists in rape scenes of cute girls, which ironically expanded female readership and authorship of the sexual fantasies as 'playful', unlike Western pornographies which basically objectify female bodies for male readers (Ōtsuka 2001, 2004).

Cuteness as Commodity and Performative Device

With its ambiguous qualities, cuteness in Japan exhibits a rich potential as a commercial apparatus that flourishes through a range of visual commodities such as *manga* and *anime* as well as through the materiality of an enormous variety of cute, 'fancy goods'. Shimamura (1991) argues that the image of cuteness has evolved through 'fancy goods', which are essentially 'small', 'whitish/pastel coloured', 'round' and 'soft'. She suggests that despite the enormous variety, fancy goods signify safe (passable?), ordinary tastes, as well as conservative, passive and uncreative forms of mass identity, rather than overtly distinguishing individualities, and so therefore function as comfortable yet inconspicuous acts of consumption in everyday spaces.

As an aesthetic code, Japanese cuteness generally exhibits a strong, fluid hybridity, in contrast to Western cuteness which is strongly bound to the image of 'children' from the viewpoint of adults, that is, children who need to be loved and cared for, as described by Harris (2000). It freely emphasises a specific part of essential qualities and/or amalgamating different (even seemingly opposite) elements such as comical ugliness and emotionlessness. The image of cuteness has gradually been exploited by strengthening its comicalness and light-hearted informality to stress liveliness and sincerity, whilst reducing beauty, perfection and helplessness, which may be felt as cold, unapproachable or too heavy. This reflects a general negative view of adulthood in Japan (e.g., Kinsella 1995), as exemplified by the overwhelming Japanese popularity of cheerful, girlish, cute, Licca-chan dolls produced by Takara, in contrast to the adult-like, sexy Barbie produced by Mattel in the United States (Masubuchi 1987; Shimamura 1991). The fondness of cute dolls is so strong in Japan that even Mattel had to resort to the sale of a Japanese version of Barbie, which was modified by Takara between 1982 and 1986, with this doll later becoming 'Jenny'.

Girls' 'cute' sub-cultures socially surfaced in connection with the strong domestic commercialism experienced at the end of rapid economic growth in Japan. They grew from girls' desire to own '*kawaii mono*' (pretty goods) which became attainable through the prevalence of 'fancy goods' (Ōtsuka 1991). This signified a critical shift in the value of commodities from the practical to the iconographic. These cute images inundated Japanese daily lives through *manga/anime* and commercial products, but also through the popularisation of TV, which created, by the 1970s, a shared, visual culture regardless of audiences' age, sex and position (Sakurai 1994; Morton 2003). With this trend, images became commodities. Sanrio, which produced the first 'fancy goods' with Mizumori Ado's illustrations in 1963, achieved dramatic sales growth with the introduction of original characters such as Hello Kitty (1974) and the little boy frog, Keroppi (1987)[1]. As Ōtsuka (1991) emphasises,

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[1] Sanrio's Japanese website
(http://www.sanrio.co.jp/characters/characters.html) displays all of its characters as up to date, although

Sanrio was the first company to recognise and intentionally promote not the practical value, but the image value of fancy goods. Moreover, in the same period, *Ribon*, a major girls' magazine started to provide original stationary, as supplements, with popular *manga* characters such as Mutsu Ako's cute, warm and casual characters (ibid). It also became common practice for confectionary companies to supply free gifts (e.g., cards and small plastic characters/figures) with their products.

Amongst the numerous image-driven products, Hello Kitty exemplifies the most successful commercial exploitation of cuteness. Hello Kitty's continual popularity and its recent resurgence, particularly through its marketing towards adult women, lies in the complexity of its discursive construction of 'cuteness'. Kitty is a little girl cat, drawn very simply, resembling Dick Bruna's Miffy, a white girl rabbit created in 1955. However, Kitty's mouthless, emotionless face with small vague eyes in conjunction with the ambiguous image of a cat creates a stronger effect at showing different nuances, allowing it to reflect the viewers' point of view and emotions. To venture an analogy, it is like the fertile vagueness of women's masks in Noh plays, which changes the emotional expression through the actor's subtle gestures. McVeigh claims that Sanrio's success lies in their expansion of consumer identities, by linking "within one individual different modes of self-presentation, chronologically corresponding to girlhood ("cute") female ("cool") and womanhood ("camp")" (2000a).

The prevailing performativity of cuteness has also been displayed through the phenomenal emergence of high school girls' peculiar handwriting in the mid 1970s, referred to by various terms (e.g., '*manga moji*' [manga style scripts]). It was a comical, graphic writing style used exclusively for horizontal writing, in contrast to the traditional vertical, cursive handwriting with feminine beauty. It comprised a set of highly stylised, stereotyped round characters/letters and it easily combined with alphabets, signs and graphics. It was simultaneously created by high school girls in various areas and quickly spread throughout Japan, despite adults' strong criticism of it. This new writing was seen as 'cute' and its spontaneous proliferation signified girls' cultural sharing. It was considered girls' chosen tool for the presentation of their group/generation identity, although later it became normalised and dedicated pre-packaged fonts were produced and marketed. Yamane (1989) named it *Hentai shōjo moji* (variation of girls' letters) and claimed that this particular writing evolved as 'communication cosmetics' from a fusion of socio-

their English website http://www.sanrio.com/ shows only limited ones.

economical, cultural and psychological changes: new stationaries (mechanical pencils, fancy notebooks and letter papers); the demand for efficiency; and its ability to create a fictive identity derived from writers' ambivalent desires for self-expression, conformity and anonymity. Coinciding with the phenomenon of increased visual presentations and horizontal writing, *manga* style illustrations, generally cute, round and comical, such as those seen in Takamine's *Ryakuga jiten* (Sketch dictionary 1984), became a visual standard in Japan including even governmental documents, as if they were an integral component of language itself. Moreover, drawing *manga* became popular among young people. Ōtsuka (1986) claims that 80% of junior high school students were able to draw *manga*-styled illustrations, with the *manga* style becoming a paradigm for their feelings, thinking and expression.

The 'artistic' and 'fictional' quality of cuteness was also utilised in people's performances. It was exemplified by *Pink Lady*, a pair of well-known girl pop idols in the mid-1970s, whose huge success was due to their artificial, *manga* style image orchestrated through their songs, bright costumes and marionette-like choreography. *Pink Lady*'s phenomenal popularity, especially amongst children, and their rather quick disappearance from the public domain indicate that pop idols in Japan are not roles which an individual aims to 'be' but to 'perform' (idol-*suru*) (Nakamori 1991), and therefore systematically engineered (Inamasu 1987). The 1980s saw the creation of a new Japanese word, '*burikko*' (a girl pretends to be good/cute), a caricature derivative of a girl with "a high-pitched voice, giggles helplessly when addressed, and squeals "'*kawaiiii*'' (cute) or "*iyaa!*" (I hate it) when asked her opinion of a boy, a new soda drink, or a cartoon on TV" (White 1993:129). The emergence of such a phenomenon manifested itself through the widespread acceptance of such artificial touches as well as the ability to play with them. Although often cynically used, *burikko* is represented by the singer Matsuda Seiko as part of her readily identifiable repertoire of cute behaviours, professionally utilised to perform her fictitious image of '*shōjo*' (girl). This is a commodification of people as performers, and it has been largely driven by mass media, which often plays a role in effacing the cultural barriers between generations, social positions and professional and amateurs. This light-hearted comicalness became ubiquitous through diverse media presentations, including advertisements in 1990s (Yamaki 1992). The performance of non-professionals in mass media has been thriving, for example, with models in fashion magazines, and participation in TV (reality) shows e.g., *Yūyake Nyan Nyan* (Sunset Kittens) and *Morning Musume* (Morning girls). The commodification of the cute, innocent yet sexy image of *shōjo* (girls), especially in high school

uniforms, was amplified through 1990s' mass media and commercialism, along with the scandalous phenomenon of teenage school girls' casual, private prostitution, called *enjo kōsai* (compensated relationship). To a certain extent, the ironic bond between innocence and sexuality in the '*Lolicon*' genre was represented in real lives by these girls' extreme form of commodification of themselves (Miyadai 1994).

Responding to aggressive patterns of domestic commercialism, the bubble economy and the increased semiotic value of commodities, cuteness transcended the border of girls' circles and widely diffused to Japanese society, continuously expanding its applications to enhance impact with strong playfulness and even 'strangeness'. Signifying as comical, witty, friendly and harmless, commercialised and artful cuteness has been enthusiastically exploited as a cultural item and as a standard aesthetic code, producing a vast range of products. It aims to amuse the viewers/customers and make them smile and/or laugh. Hoshino (1985) asserts that the increased fantasies supplied through advertisements, consumer goods, with funny, witty, fantastic designs, naming and images points to the fictiousness of today's consumer society. Unlike the individualistic emotional quality which cuteness originally held, performative cuteness utilises ready-made items, signs and codes, to craft and maintain their desired, intended, artificial images. It is a form of role-playing. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, artful performativity, or fantasies involving fictional sites have also been socially provided in the form of festivities, events, and amusement/theme parks (e.g., Tokyo Disneyland) (Ichijō 1991).

Performative self-presentation has also proliferated within cyberspace, particularly with Japanese Homepage diaries, emails, chat rooms, and text messages. In electronic communications, participants rely on each others' projected images, thus cuteness plays an important role in ensuring friendliness, often by using emoticons (smilies/smilys, *kaomoji* [face-marks]). Like the aforementioned writing style of girls, this practice epitomises today's communication strategies - using stylised, commonly shared icons to display personal, individualistic and spontaneous emotions. Cuteness is essential for Japanese graphical emoticons, *kaomoji*, which are used predominantly by young female Internet and mobile phone users, unlike Western smilies, created and used by young males, for fun. Sugimoto and Levin (2000) summarise their differences as follows.

1. Kaomoji are upright, whereas smilies use a sideways face;

2. Kaomoji focuses on the 'eyes' with ^ ^ and the mouth is often depicted with a straight line (^_^) or even absent (^^), whereas

smilies focus on the 'mouth' which is upturned at the corners (:-));

3. Kaomoji's popular, apologetic 'cold sweat smile' (^_^;) is absent in smilies.

Often employed to pacify the recipients with playfulness, whilst conveying a subtle message to keep an arms-length relationship, emoticons are used to generate another layer to the message formally expressed with written text, combining to create 'communication cosmetics' in Yamane's term (1989). The prevalent use of emoticons, including animated smilies/*kaomoji*, indicates, on the one hand, people's nervousness about another's emotional response, but on the other, people's familiarity with such artificial items/signs.

Under such circumstances, ambiguous cute items are powerful forms for self-presentation. A wide range of cute goods help people to create and indulge their desired self, often emphasising an unsettlingly innocent yet sexual body, such as school girls attire which includes mini-skirts, loose socks and very cute accessaries (e.g., Hello Kitty mobile phone cases), may also reproduce a form of 'prostitute chic' (Kinsella 2002). Similarly, a middle-aged housewife may collect cute, flowery panties to express and/or reminiscence her innocent girlhood (Ueno 1989). Further assertive example of self-fashioning or role-playing is seen in *kosu-pure* (costume plays), originally started as costume plays of *manga*/*anime* characters in fans' events and spread to street performances, e.g., *Goth-Loli* (Gothic-Lolita fashion) in Takeshita-dōri in Harajuku, Tokyo, from the late 1990s.

That crafted cuteness and the use of emotional expressions have become social norms indicates how our daily lives depart from nature, the feel of biological materials and perhaps even natural, spontaneous speech and gestures. The widening availability of tools, including cuteness, for self-presentation and communications, however, does not seem to assure people's ability to express themselves with sincerity and immediacy. Critical comments have often been made by scholars, commentators, and educators regarding young people's poor communication skills. For example, they can chat for many hours on the phone, but are unable to talk directly, even with friends. They can only talk fluently within their own groups. Their answers for outsiders and/or adults are often extremely succinct (e.g., *Betsu nii* [Nothing particular]), as if responding to multiple-choice questions. These behaviours may be considered as a form of resistance and refusal, rather than their inability or limited vocabularies, although their passiveness and/or apathy in communication are evident. The hegemonic view of adulthood in Japan is generally not conducive to freedom and independence, but heavy responsibilities and there is an explicitly

strong dislike/refusal or desire/effort to postpone entry into adulthood (e.g., Okonogi 1978, 1981; Inamura 1981; Machizawa 1992; Yoneyama 1999). Mori (1980) argues that young people use fashion, music etc. to express themselves, as they have lost words under the continual control and surveillance at school and workplace. Similarly, Ōhira (1990) finds that many people use goods, pets and even their bodies as materials for self-expression, which indicates both a desire to treat living things including humans as the same as goods and an avoidance of direct, emotional association with others. Kayama (2001) argues that Japanese people's prevailing love of (*anime*) characters/figures is an indication of a loss of an ability to interact with real people. This suggests people's fear and anxiety about their direct communication with others. The love of cuteness and cute character commodities as an expressive medium is considered, in this context, as a desire to return or remain in a dreamed of state of childhood (Kinsella 1995).

Humour and laughter have a power to crack and/or smash/cancel (the heaviness of) reality (Kimura 1983) and to overcome narcissism and alienation (Morishita 1996). The overwhelming penetration of playful cuteness in society is considered to be an indicator of a heavy social pressure for conformity and competitiveness, as detailed by Yoneyama (1999), as well as individual needs for self-presentation, escapism, healing and ambivalent desire for belonging and alienation/self-exile. In Japan, due to a strong tendency for group conformity, individuals are compelled to behave according to their expected 'role' which is often internalised, becoming second nature (e.g., Nakane 1967, 1978; Lebra 1976; Sugimoto 1997). 'Role' is determined by situational needs, thus, a person plays various 'roles' or have different 'personae'. Consequently, there is an imperative need for 'communication cosmetics', such as playful cuteness, which allow individualistic discourses to be utilised in situations, particularly where expected expressions contradict the speaker/author's intention.

Cute Culture Outside Japan

Globalisation, underpinned by consumerism and electronic communications, has brought about what has been referred to as '*the new space in the non-place*' (Hardt and Negri, 2000:357) which enables an individual and a multitude at a local level to directly and autonomously interact with the global and other locals. '*Kawaii*' (sub)culture has been facilitating the creation of virtual, psychological and socio-cultural spheres – '*the new space in the non-place*' – through cute images and individual social spaces with fancy goods (materialised cuteness), and in Japanese society as self-presentational and communicative devices.

Through massive, incessant consumption of cute images and goods, '*kawaii* culture has continuously been redefining and widening the meaning of '*kawaii*', whilst still tightly reiterating an essential affectionateness in its seemingly diverse presentations from typical, childish, sweet, innocent cuteness to comical, bizarre, cynical or disguised forms, such as '*shibu-kawaii*' (lit., bitter [tastefully austere]-cuteness). The capacity for such fluid metamorphosis is the strength of '*kawaii*' culture to be able to extend out of girls' subculture from a specific period to prevail in mass-mediated forms in Japanese society. With this faculty, '*kawaii* culture, both tangibly and intangibly manifested, has a strong potential to saturate global society, as an aesthetic code, where commodification of 'youth' is prevailing, as Brooks (2003) examines.

As mentioned earlier, *manga* and *anime* are significant vehicles of diverse, (audio)visual (re)presentations of cuteness, by continuously visualising Japanese characters with Caucasian looks, white skin, light coloured, curly hair, large eyes, pointy nose, and a tall and slender body with long legs. Such characters' unrealistic appearances signify that they are 'iconographic' and ensure the *mukokuseki* (stateless, non-Japanese) fictionality of the fantasies and also essential 'vocabularies' to create the spheres of virtual realities. The artistically deliberate absence of locality (Japaneseness) facilitates foreigners' easy appreciations of *manga*/*anime*, although it was not originally intended. The recent popularity of *anime* and games (e.g., cards and electronics) indicates the global acceptance of cuteness depicted in such media.

Napier (2001:12) claims, 'animation's emphasis on metamorphosis can be seen as the ideal artistic vehicle for expressing the postmodern obsession with fluctuating identity.' This is not only applicable for examining the story–telling capability of *manga* and *anime* as narratives, but also for comprehending cuteness as being embedded within and interlinked to visual narratives. Cuteness, either tangible or intangible, provides cheerful consolation by creating safe, fantastic spheres within which numerous individuals struggling with the insecurity of 'identity', including the challenges resulting from the vast, erratic, ambiguous connections to a 'global' society where diverse ranges of powers, individual, local and global, interactively and fluidly conflict, integrate and negotiate contradictory meanings.

Ambiguous, stateless, fictional cuteness has an intrinsic faculty to proliferate in such spheres where the virtual and the real are daily integrated. The kaleidoscopic nature is an essential element of cuteness, thus it will not form any clearly identified culture abroad yet is able to permeate diverse societies with different racial and cultural backgrounds, through massive yet seemingly insignificant entertainments and fancy goods, and

softly and cheerfully cover them (both individuals and societies) like a very fine yet vast web or lace.

Cuteness has already become an aspect of such a global culture. It is however, diversely transformed through local appreciation/consumption, hybridisation, and indigenisation/domestication. As Iwabuchi (2002:465) argues, transnationally circulated images and commodities become culturally odourless through local transculturation processes. One such process is the customisation or personalisation of communication technologies such as mobile phones through visual displays of cuteness, both internally and externally to the handset. These practices are modes of individualisation that also involve forms of sociality, practices which, as Hjorth (2005:53) contends, "clearly demonstrates alignments and contradictions between hegemonies of cultural capital and contingencies of habitus". The kaleidoscopic nature of cuteness accelerates such fluid localisation.

Generally, *kawaii* cuteness is enthusiastically consumed in South East Asian cultures (e.g., Korean, Taiwan, Hong Kong), in a way similar to the Japanese, whilst in Western countries, it seems to still belong to the cultural world of children (Kusanagi 2003), for example, merchandise of *Pokemon* characters.

Hello Kitty represents a popular consummation of Japanese cuteness abroad. The "migration" of the Japanese cuteness of Hello Kitty through the Asia-Pacific region underscores the need to conceptually rearticulate how the local is understood to respond to cultural Japanisation. Ko's study (2003) of the Hello Kitty phenomenon in Taiwan reveals the extent to which critical reflection on the consumption of the brand is invested with overdetermined meanings and values that draw on wider contests over identity formations involving nationalism, gender politics and popular culture. In short, the prevalence of cuteness in Taiwan urges more micrological analyses of *socialised* consumption of commodities as forms of adaptation. This involves recognising the *constructed* absence of Japaneseness through cuteness. That is to say, as Hjorth argues (2005:47-8), it is less that cuteness from Japan represents a form of odourlessness as Japanese triumph in the marketplace, than a form of aesthetic code that enables commodity objects with the capacity for personalisation or humanisation as immanently Japanese:

This mode of domestication, I want to suggest, is a clear illustration of what Iwabuchi calls the mukokuseki odourless of many 'cute' Japanese products; an odour so distinctive and yet so 'flexible' and 'gentle' that it can be translated into different cultural, social and technological contexts. It is this co-presence (state and yet stateless, virtual and yet actual) capacity, built into kawaii's multivalent customization…that makes it a type of odourless odour (Hjorth 2005:48).

In Western societies, although still mainly for children's use, Hello Kitty has become familiar through patterns of consumption of everyday objects such as confectionaries, stationaries, clothes, shoes, beddings, sofas and fabrics, as well as videos and DVDs. The range of items has been increasing, as have Hello Kitty/Sanrio shops and outlets in many countries. The further expansion of such cute items in Western markets for teenagers and adults may not be unfeasible, as new uses of cute items by girls, such as attaching cute mascots (including Hello Kitty) to their mobile phones and bags, are reworked by companies as wearable accessaries.

Cuteness in Western dolls has also increased and dolls such as Bratz (by MGA Entertainment, US, from 2001) with physiques similar to Japanese *manga/anime* stylised characters (unrealistically large head and eyes with short, slender body with narrow shoulders) have gained popularity.

Light-hearted, stylised and often exaggerated, playful cuteness has increased in various areas in our daily lives (e.g., fashion, entertainment, advertisement). Women's fashion (e.g., a light coloured, flowery camisole like top with lace, low hip jeans and high heeled sandals) enjoys the incongruent mixture of childish innocence and playfulness with sexual maturity. This is considered in relation to common cultural symptoms, e.g., the increased significance of, and social pressure for, self-presentation and identity through forms of performativity in global, consumer societies. Moreover, many children in different countries own and/or become familiar with manga characters through media mix of anime programs, videos, DVDs as well as a variety of merchandise (e.g., *Pokemon* and *Yūgi-Ō*), forming a shared culture (Itō 2003/4). It indicates that originally cultural specific *kawaii* culture has already begun to assimilate itself to global society through various fine tunings through localisation and to form a part of global cultural products.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the discursive construction of Japanese 'cuteness', its significance and evolution in socio-cultural and psychological contexts and attempted to understand why and how these culturally specific aesthetic codes have an ability to cross cultural borders. It has shown that the intrinsic, sentimental quality of the user's affectionate gaze underpins the seemingly diverse (re)presentations of cuteness in later periods. Cuteness has become socio-culturally tagged with virtuous, emotional, evaluative images (e.g., innocent, nostalgic, rich, cheerful, unique) and has evolved into an effective, versatile apparatus for individual self-presentation(s) and for sympathetic, friendly yet "arms-length" communication.

In response to the increased significance of visual presentations in people's everyday lives, cuteness, both as a commodity and a performative has inundated Japan. This is a response to drastic changes in the social structure of human interrelationships, ranging from the traditional, close-knit community life style where each member's role and presence were secure yet socially determined, to the urban lifestyle, where individuals possess weak, arbitrary ties with communities and live free and anonymous yet easily alienated lives. People may experience numerous fleeting encounters with strangers, which may possibly make reliance on their external presentation more important than who they really are. This is more salient in cyberspatial encounters where people can communicate anonymously. To create desirable self-presentations, people use various items and methods, such as certain fashions, belongings, make-up, language, writing, voices, facial expressions and behaviours.

Cuteness involves ambiguity, incongruity and fluidity, which was apparent in the original concept although evolving over time, it has become especially more dynamic in the way can respond to socio-economical changes. Although a considerable number of studies have revolved around images of '*shōjo*' (girl) and their sexual and/or social issues, the playfulness in cuteness invites further study, particularly regarding the past, present and future appreciation of the diffusion of *kawaii* culture beyond Japan as part of our global society.

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