

**THE POWER OF CUTE: REDEFINING KAWAII CULTURE
AS A FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

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Abstract

“Kawaii” is a term that has taken on a life of its own within its country of origin, Japan. So much so, that the meaning of the word has no precise English translation. “Kawaii” has become such a social phenomenon among Japanese youth that it has even evolved into its own culture. This culture or “counterculture” acts as an opposition to modern standards for how people should behave in society. At the forefront of this movement are young women. The kawaii phenomenon arguably underscores a third-wave feminist movement with which women can utilize to uplift themselves on an individual and social scale. This claim will be reiterated through two main points: that kawaii challenges pre-established social and gender norms that oppress women, and that kawaii empowers women through a celebration of femininity.

1. Introduction

Doe-eyed girls in 30-second commercials dance heartily to sell fruity shampoos; meanwhile, guard rails shaped like pink rabbits adorn construction sites in Tokyo as a reminder to be careful. Both these examples can be found readily in Japan and utilize cuteness in order to communicate a message to a broader audience. One unique facet of Japanese culture is its purveyance and emphasis on the value of cuteness. In Japan, cuteness is used perhaps more than any other tactic to sell products and relay messages. The word “kawaii” is generally used as the Japanese word for cute. However, this is merely a rough translation. “Kawaii,” in relationship with Japanese culture, has rapidly taken on a life of its own. What began as a mere aesthetic descriptor with the likes of “pretty” or “sexy” has surpassed its origins to become a unique phenomenon on its own, and can in some aspects even be classified as a culture. This dissertation argues that “kawaii phenomenon” was largely created by and for women and thus underscores a third-wave feminist movement due to its breaking down of social and gender standards as well as its empowerment of women.

2. Background

Because kawaii is a largely new concept that has taken root only within the last century, there is overall a lack of extensive research on the phenomenon itself. Kawaii, while quite renowned internationally, is often misunderstood due to a lack of background information. The origins of kawaii, both as a word and a trend, suggest that it is derived from oppressive ideals that infantilize and render women inferior. While this may appear true in certain extents, kawaii has prospered into an ambiguous construct that contains multiple “categories” and innumerable definitions. For example, kawaii can be used to

describe a style of clothing. On the other hand, girls can adopt kawaii mannerisms to embody cuteness without the aid of fashion. Kawaii has developed to the extent in which it has manifested into a youth culture mainly prominent in areas like Harajuku, where young people frequent to meet like-minded individuals who may possess similar interests in fashion and paraphernalia. This manifestation of kawaii, while largely driven by consumer companies, is still greatly influenced by young artists. In this way, kawaii has been more or less reclaimed by women to cater to them rather than oppress them. This can be seen when analyzing the history of the usage of kawaii and its evolution into a multi-faceted construct with no definite meaning.

2.1 Etymological Analysis

Although it is typically translated as “cute” or “lovely,” kawaii arguably has no direct English translation and exhibits a complex etymological background. In 1992, nearly twenty years ago, the word kawaii was “estimated to be ‘the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese’” (Kinsella 221). The use of the term has only expanded since then, so much so that it has gained international prevalence. This is further corroborated by an entry into the U.S. english Oxford dictionary in 2010 (Oxford), signifying the extent in which kawaii has permeated modern culture and society. In order to gain greater insight into kawaii as a pervasive societal construct, it is necessary to delve into the origin of the word itself, which includes its etymological and historical makeup.

When written using *kanji* characters, the word “kawaii” takes on the form 可愛い. This form of kawaii is an *ateji* (当て字), meaning the *kanji* were selected based on phonetic similarity rather than semantic. However, this etymological structure consists of

the characters *ka* (可) and *ai* (愛), in which the latter possesses an irregular reading. Since these characters are not actually phonetically similar to *kawaii*, the reasoning behind the use of these *kanji* can only be speculated. Interestingly, these *kanji* can possess logical meaning when used in tandem; if *ka* [可] is translated to “should” and *ai* [愛] to “love,” the union of the two characters essentially conveys a message of “should love”—in other words, feeling an obligation to love something.

Kawaii is thought to be derived from a shortened form of the word *kahohayushi* [顔映ゆし] meaning “unable to face” [顔を向けていない] or “unable to look at due to pity” [気の毒で見えていない]. The component *hayushi* [映ゆし] on its own alludes to a meaning of being “unable to open one’s eyes” [目をあけていない] referring to a situation or feeling that “causes one’s body to experience an ‘abnormality’” [身体に変調をきたすような感情や事態] (語源). In essence, the meaning suggests an object or situation evoking “pitifulness,” “bashfulness,” or “embarrassment” with other connotations including “pathetic” and “vulnerable” (Kinsella, 222). This interpretation, when observed in context of the above deconstruction of the *kanji* used in *kawaii*, indicates a quality of loving something out of pity. Nowadays, the original usage of *kawaii* to refer to something as pitiful or pathetic is generally obsolete. *Kawaisō* [可哀そう] “seems pitiful” is a phrase that originates from the initial meaning of *kawaii*, but uses different secondary *kanji*, which implies that the two words may have originated from the same root *kahohayushi* only to evolve into two distinct denotations. In modern praxis, *kawaii* is often spelled using hiragana due to the usage of *kanji* denoting a visual sense of formality and hard-edged stiffness which *kawaii* does not overtly encompass.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to examine the term etymologically in order to discuss its semantic evolution and the synchronous transformation of the perceptions of women throughout history. The negative qualities associated with kawaii's historical origin parallel those associated with women in Japanese society, and the intricate transformation of the term's definition coincides with the equally multifaceted conceptions of Japanese femininity.

2.2 Emergence of Kawaii as a Culture

While kawaii was arguably based around the expectations of men (Botz-Bornstein, 29), kawaii as a concept was largely created and cultivated by and for women. Because of this, it was able to expand into something more than its original intent. Kawaii's origins of usage can be traced to the end of World War II (Okazaki & Johnson 11). During this time, disposable incomes of the youth were on the rise, especially among young women (Kinsella 245). Items such as colorful illustrations of girls and paper dolls became increasingly profitable (Okazaki & Johnson, 11). Kawaii quickly flourished as a trend, however, starting in the 1970s. At this time, a form of childish handwriting became an increasing fad amongst teenagers, most notably teenage girls. These youth adapted a style of writing that utilized simplified, rounded characters in addition to cartoon symbols such as hearts and faces thought to be inspired by comics. The new script became such a phenomenon that it was even banned in certain schools. This contemporary style of handwriting became increasingly incorporated into commodities marketed towards a youthful audience such as magazines, advertisements, and fonts on word-processing programs (Kinsella, 222). Consumer companies such as Sanrio also attempted to capitalize on "cuteness" with an emerging line of such as stationery and notebooks that

featured stylized, round characters on them known as “fancy goods.” Meanwhile, fashion magazines further manifested these growing fads by promoting child-like clothing amongst teenagers and young adult consumers (Kinsella, 225). Even companies that exploited kawaii for monetary profit did so by aiming their products toward a female audience. These products largely consisted of traits attributed to “girliness” such as floral designs, pastel color schemes, or featuring girls themselves. This push for marketing that prioritized an appeal to adolescent customers would eventually become a driving force to the establishment of kawaii as a culture among Japanese youth.

2.3 Kawaii as a Culture

The emergence of a youth movement in which young adults began to embody kawaii qualities themselves marked the point in which kawaii emerged as a culture, as well as a change within the meaning of the word itself. As previously mentioned, it can be assumed that kawaii was readily applied to and aimed towards a female audience due to its many qualities also being qualities associated with young girls. In the beginning, kawaii was used to refer to things that were “immature and small” (Okazaki & Johnson, 8) and consisted of products, such as clothing, that were “deliberately designed to make the wearer appear childlike and demure” (Kinsella, 229). The innocence evoked feelings of simplicity and nostalgia of childhood which made kawaii extremely popular in Japan. The 1980s reveals evidence of a period in which kawaii began to manifest into a culture within society and thus the period in which the context of kawaii began to change. With the increase in consumerism among youth came a growing attitude in which girls were not satisfied merely owning kawaii possessions. Instead, they took it upon themselves to

embody kawaii on their own. Girls managed this by adopting kawaii qualities in their clothes, mannerisms, and speech.

Two main driving forces of this notion to “personify” the kawaii ideal included girls’ manga and the rise of female pop idols. Manga was prevalent during this era due to low prices, girls’ manga being no exception. These comics, including Riyoko Ikeda’s *Rose of Versailles* and Yumiko Igarashi’s *Candy Candy*, were created by female *mangaka* and frequently portrayed female protagonists who were as sweet and charming as they were ardent and headstrong (Okazaki & Johnson, 7-11). This, alongside their depictions with large sparkling eyes and elaborately detailed clothing helped spur emulation within young girls. On the other hand were the emergence of pop idols. Matsuda Seiko, who debuted in 1980, is considered a major instigator in the proliferation of idols within the Japanese music industry. Seiko, who was 18 at the time of her debut, became popular due to her childish demeanor that extended beyond speech and appearance and into her behavior and personality. “[She] took faltering steps and blushed, cried, and giggled for the camera... [and] published several books... filled with large wobbly handwriting... and ‘heart-warming’ poems...” (Kinsella, 235). As more and more girls began to adopt these pop culture trends into their own lives, the word kawaii began to exceed its use as a mere descriptive word or consumerist objective but also became a culture entirely its own.

Today kawaii not only pervades normal Japanese culture but has also embodies a culture all its own. A culture can be defined as “[t]he customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group” as well as “[t]he attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group” (Oxford). Sharon

Kinsella further describes culture as “the sphere to which people turn to fulfil spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and sexual needs and desires which are not met within the fabric of their lives at work, at school, at home” (Kinsella 252). By both definitions, kawaii embodies a culture all its own. Girls integrated kawaii in all facets of their lives: not only in appearance but also in speech, mannerisms, values, even in the food they consumed. Thus kawaii became more of a lifestyle than mere aesthetic. With the assimilation of kawaii into the intricacy that is the human lifestyle came the evolution of its definition into something equally complex. Fashion magazines such as *Cutie For Independent Girls* took kawaii’s “basic ingredient of childlikeness” and added a “rebellious, individualistic, freedom-seeking attitude” accompanied with eccentricity and androgyny (Kinsella 229-230). Throughout the 80s, youth gathered in areas around the country, including iconic places such as Harajuku. There, they ignited fashion trends of their own by designing ensembles from second-hand and remade articles of clothing (Okazaki & Johnson 114-115). These people, with the aid of magazines and amateur photographers, wore increasingly outspoken outfits that would branch off into the sub-genres of fashion known today such as lolita, decora, and kogal. These trends consistently pushed the boundaries of what could be classified as “kawaii.” Today, what qualifies as kawaii can be enigmatic and sometimes contradictory: “it is synonymous with beautiful, lovable, suitable, addictive, cool, funny” but can also be “ugly but endearing, quirky and gross” (Okazaki & Johnson 8). Along these lines, kawaii reveals itself as a culture that has grown to exceed its original meaning, nowadays possessing indicative qualities of a social movement.

3. Kawaii as a Feminist Movement

As is previously mentioned, *kawaii*'s growth into a culture was largely attributed to girls and young women. Despite this, the concept of *kawaii* seems primarily disadvantageous to modern Japanese women upon first glance. Many would argue that it further perpetuates gender stereotypes and exalts the historically-imbued concept that women are subservient to men or seek the approval of men. This is additionally evidenced by the attribution of *kawaii* as "childlike," as children are often powerless and lack self-reliance in standings of society. However, when examined in-depth, the modern *kawaii* youth movement possesses countercultural notions that challenge and disassemble established understandings of femininity, which can benefit both men and women by opposing rigid gender lines. Masafumi Monden aptly illustrates this idea in her thematic analysis of *shōjo* media: "[*Kawaii*] can be read as having two faces: one being an idealized construction imposed predominantly by men and the other being manoeuvred by the girls themselves" (Monden 266). The latter of this can be seen when analyzing the change in the perceptions of women in Japan throughout recent history, which notably coincides with the growth of *kawaii* after World War II. Coinciding this is the notion that *kawaii* culture acts as an empowerment towards women rather than a debilitation. Because of this, it can be argued that *kawaii* culture underlies its very own feminist movement. In order to provide evidence of this claim, three main components will be discussed: 1) *kawaii* is a third wave feminist movement, which allows for its integration into society with lesser resistance; 2) *kawaii* goes against traditional social norms, which allows both women and men who are oppressed and unsatisfied with these roles to turn to a new means of establishing their identity; and 3) *kawaii* provides empowerment to girls

by celebrating femininity and using it as a medium with which to raise themselves on both an individual and broader societal scale.

In order to discuss these assertions and those following within this essay, it is necessary to define what aspects of modern-day kawaii can be considered influential. The ambivalent meaning of kawaii demonstrates that, in current syntax, anything can be labeled as such and that what is perceived as kawaii can vary from person-to-person. Therefore kawaii can be used to describe animals, clothes, or people that one may just find “cute” or “endearing” within everyday life (Okazaki & Johnson 7). This means that certain aspects of kawaii may actually produce the opposite effect—setting social limitations on women rather than liberating them. In context of this essay, the kawaii that will be further analyzed will be the type of kawaii that exists as a niche culture among the youth of Japan in sites such as Harajuku and Shibuya, including the facets that youth take on and perpetuate through their lifestyle and identity, often to levels deemed extreme by surrounding society. As this distinction is best illustrated through examples, following is a brief analysis of two public figures and how they do or do not qualify as what will be referred to as “feminist kawaii.”

AKB48 is currently one of Japan’s most popular idol groups. Many, if not all members of AKB48 possess youthful features such as smooth skin, large eyes, and sometimes are seen wearing childish outfits such as school uniforms. Peers and fans alike often refer to them as ‘kawaii,’ however, AKB48 would not qualify as feminist kawaii in context of this dissertation. This is largely due to the fact that members of AKB48 belong to a huge company run entirely by and marketed towards men. Young girls audition in order to obtain a role in the idol group, and are then selected based on qualifications that

largely depend on their outward appearance. In addition to this, they have little say in their productions, including their songs and videos, as well as the outfits that they wear and the images that are assigned to them by their company. They are strictly controlled in order to maintain these images, which are vital for their marketing. This includes being forbidden to date as this interferes with the idea of them being accessible to their male fans (Martin). Due to these reasons, they only perpetuate the idea of conforming to social norms as designated by mass corporations. In these ways, while AKB48 may be considered ‘kawaii’ by many due to their cute and childish aesthetic, they do not qualify as “feminist kawaii” in context of this essay.

A notable example of this type of “feminist kawaii” is artist Kumamiki. Kumamiki is a video blogger and designer who is relatively well known among the Harajuku scene as well as internationally. Both AKB48 and Kumamiki exhibit feminine and childish qualities such as speaking in high-pitched voices and wearing make-up. However, Kumamiki differs from AKB48 in that she has a large control over all facets of her professional and creative output. Her outfits are created and arranged by herself, and she also creates her own designs, which she sells through her own brand (Okazaki & Johnson 123). Additionally, Kumamiki does not conform or perpetuate mass-produced social or gender expectations. Rather, she challenges them through her fashion and career choices. An important aspect that separates Kumamiki, or feminist kawaii, from AKB48, or what may be seen as typical kawaii, is an aspect of agency—in other words, the ability to make one’s own decisions free from the pressure of society. Therefore from this point on, it should be apparent that when the word “kawaii” is used throughout this discussion, it is referring to this distinct category of kawaii as embodied by people such as

Kumamiki. This type of kawaii is not necessarily created and sustained by large corporations but rather by individuals and smaller name brands and can be found in places such as Harajuku or Shibuya.

3.1 Kawaii as Third-Wave Feminism

Like many democratic countries, Japan has a long history of feminist activism. In a sociological context, feminism is typically defined as a movement toward the equality of male and female genders. Consensus views of feminism tend to consist of women's rights movements, such as the *Shin Fujin Kyōkai* who petitioned the government for the allocation of women into political organizations in the 1920s (Mackie 58). While *de jure* equality is important, the values and practices of those who make up a society are equally as consequential, especially within context of the modern age. Women who are socialized or pressured by society to conform to certain expectations can also be a hindrance to equality as those who are uninterested in these norms and may pursue other paths suffer. For example, while giving a speech at the Tokyo Assembly this past June, congresswoman Ayaka Shiomura was repeatedly interrupted with sexist taunts such as “Shouldn't you get married soon? [早く結婚したほうがいいんじゃないか] (Business Journal). Shiomura, who is 35 and still single, defies traditional ideals of a woman's role as solely bride and caretaker and as such was publicly shamed and humiliated. Incidents like this inhibit women like Shiomura who choose separate goals, such as career paths, by preventing them from pursuing decisions free from gender-based scrutiny.

Thusly, the interest in equalizing women's positions when it comes to issues such as agency, or the ability for women to make volitional decisions, can also equate to feminism. These decisions include those that defy traditional roles as well as those that

embrace them. In certain countries, feminist movements typically advocated a disassociation with feminine attributes; to gain equality, women attempted to become more like men. In contrast to this, Japanese feminism tended to follow a different method of achieving status in society which Sumiko Iwao illustrates in an analytical text on Japanese women:

In the movement for higher status of women, which involves gain for women but not necessarily for men, the nonconfrontational approach helps ease social resistance as women shift away from traditional role expectations and can be a factor that prevents or deflects backlash (Iwao 11).

In Japan, women did not necessarily demand men's attention to women's inequality, but rather attempted to gain social status and agency through methods that were non-aggressive. Japanese women did not seek to become regarded on the same terms as men, but rather to create a sort of "women's space" for themselves. "...Excluded from participation in the activities dominated by men, women have ended up establishing a separate world of their own" (Iwao 16). This illustrates how women in Japan have been able to attain status in society without wholly separating themselves from feminine qualities.

Meanwhile in countries like America, women who enjoyed traditional roles such as motherhood felt alienated from earlier first and second-wave feminist movements that rejected these roles altogether. Thus, in response to this came the emergence of a "third-wave" brand of feminism. Snyder-Hall defines this "third-wave" feminism in her text

Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of Choice:

Third-wave feminism is pluralistic and begins with the assumptions that women do not share a common gender identity or set of experiences and that they often interpret similar experiences differently. It seeks to avoid exclusions based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so forth. It recognizes that women in different subject positions often have very different perspectives.

Snyder-Hall also discusses how this emerging branch of contemporary feminism “views freedom not as simply ‘the capacity to make individual choices’ but rather as the ability to determine your own life path” (Snyder-Hall 256). In this way, third-wave feminism is largely adaptable and can be difficult to define in exact terms. However, one consensual proponent of its interpretation is the emphasis on allowing women to make self-determined choices regarding their own lifestyles. This includes the choice to engage in activities that are typically considered feminine. This is where kawaii culture comes in. Kawaii culture coincides with third-wave feminism in that it allows women to partake in what are considered female activities, such as wearing dresses or donning make-up, by their own choice rather than by a pressure to conform to societal standards. As shown by previous movements, this type of third-wave feminism is beneficial for Japanese society as it can be effective without being antagonistic.

Kawaii can be classified as feminist because it celebrates femininity. It does this by blurring the lines between gender dichotomies and challenging social norms of acceptable behavior and girliness; it encourages girliness among both men and women. Kawaii is also feminist because of the way in which it empowers women, thus giving them self-determination to make choices without pressure from patriarchal or other social forces.

3.2 History of Women’s Social and Gender Norms

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Japan’s emergence as a modern capitalist society brought about the rise and fortification of certain gender roles. These included the ascribed status of women as “‘good wives and wise mothers’” to their families and “‘passive supporters’” of the state (Mackie 3). During the initial period of the

Meiji Restoration, women were also refused the banning of prostitution, denied voting rights, and excluded from early political debates due to nationalistic reasons (Mackie 18). Outside the law, women were socially obligated to maintain chastity to ensure marriage, thus revealing how “morality, customs... were framed in terms of men’s desires” (Mackie 50). This reveals a historically established role in which the societal woman became the lesser, subservient counterpart to men socially, politically, and sexually. In addition to this were the accepted ideals of femininity, which can be seen in paintings, women’s fashion, and other aspects of the Meiji period and beyond. Femininity was thought of as pitiful and women who sought out things like educations were thought that they cannot possess feminine traits like beauty and intelligence at the same time. Girls and female adolescents were allowed certain freedoms such as behaving spontaneously or wearing their hair long and loose; however, they were expected to change their “[d]emeanor, clothing, hairstyles, manners, and even some forms of speech” as they grew older into something more “modest and subdued” (Iwao 23). Women who did not follow these expectations were berated. Indications of these standards of women as submissive and compliant above all can still be seen in modern society. However, evidence suggests that perceptions of women have greatly changed over the past few decades as female autonomy increased in the law, in education, and in the workforce.

Sumiko Iwako reveals a “backstage revolution” in which women achieved more independence and freedom in society through passive and roundabout methods, and used this in order to change the social roles they deemed insufficient (Iwako 2). She cites this movement’s beginnings after World War II, coinciding to the emergence of the booming kawaii trend. Among the various changes brought on by this post-war era, married

women were finding their positions as wives and mothers increasingly unsatisfying. Women were gaining more freedom in context of law and education (Mackie). With this newfound independence, women needed to reevaluate their places in society through more individualistic tactics including finding employment, as well as through non-traditional pursuits such as resuming their education (Iwako 21). Alongside this came an increase in independent revenue, which allowed women the freedom and assurance to support themselves without having to marry and depend on a husband's income (Iwao 28). This yearning to seek other means of fulfillment may unveil an explanation as to why the kawaii trend was so popular among young women of this time. The self-indulgent principles of kawaii which challenged pre-established values in society were appealing, especially to maturing women caught between old and new social standards. These girls sought a new methods of self-satisfaction that did not depend on a husband and family; kawaii offered a means of fulfilling this through rejection of adulthood values—including marriage—and instead embracing a world of childhood play. The popularity of the kawaii trend reflects an era in which women were growing increasingly unsatisfied with traditional social roles. Yet kawaii culture would come to play its own part in revolutionizing society by further deconstructing established perceptions and gender norms for men and women. While these changes were initially met with general resistance, kawaii's increasing pervasiveness in mainstream consumerism would come to allow kawaii culture to become an integrated part of society.

3.3 Kawaii as a Counterculture

Kawaii has evident countercultural aspects that further promote a changing perception of those who take part in it. To onlookers, those who participated in kawaii

culture were rebelling against traditionally established roles and convictions; this belief still persists today as interpretations of kawaii continue to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in society. Sharon Kinsella describes how cute culture of the 90s promoted consumption, which was thought of as “anti-social and immoral” in Japanese culture. This stance against consumerism was largely due to Japan’s traditional value of placing community above the individual, a notion that kawaii seems to disrupt through focusing on individualistic indulgence in material objects. “Cute” people of history, especially women, were often scapegoated for the issues of modern society; in fact, several analyses of the kawaii movement compare it to the movement of black culture in America (Kinsella, Botz-Bornstein). Young people who engaged in kawaii were stereotyped—in this case, thought of as selfish and tasteless. They were depicted as “spending horrendous amounts of money on music, clothes, and cute ‘things’ in Harajuku and Aoyama...” (Kinsella 247). Kawaii was “even meant to pinpoint ‘potentially disruptive young girls and women’ (Botz-Bornstein, 29). On the other hand, this consumption could also be perceived as “...an escape from traditional Japanese culture” where “kawaii-ness signified freedom” (Botz-Bornstein 29). In this context, kawaii was regarded in a more favorable light. Nevertheless, kawaii’s strong correlation with consumerism and materialism made it quick to be criticized and scapegoated as society was reluctant to embrace its inevitable changes.

Along with decadent consumption, cuteness was perceived as rejecting adulthood, and thus its associated responsibilities (Kinsella 246). This was especially true for young women. To many Japanese, entering the working world signified the end of innocence and freedom and the beginnings of a harsh and exploitative white-collar career. Ivo

Smits, in a short study on Japan's kawaii culture, surmises kawaii's inherent rejection of these "adult" values:

[Kawaii] was associated with childhood. Young people were reluctant to grow up, because they would have to pretend to be something they were not, and they felt they could no longer be authentic. The cuteness culture was a way of resisting this. Which did not, incidentally, mean that people stood still. They got jobs, had children, but they also created an opportunity for themselves to escape into a safe, cheerful fantasy world. (Smits & Cwiertka)

Such convictions still exist today. When asked about her clothing line *Party Baby*, designer Kumamiki explains: "I thought that becoming an adult was boring; I wanted to be an adult with innocent, sparkly feeling of being a child" (Okazaki & Johnson 123). She emphasizes this statement with a claim that by being childlike, she is maintaining a sense of innocence that inspires creativity, and it is simply something pleasurable for her. "When you grow up, this kind of sensibility disappears, but I want to keep these innocent feelings eternally," she explains (Okazaki & Johnson 123). Due to its ubiquitousness in consumer goods, it is not merely young people who can engage in kawaii culture. "A fifty-year-old woman with a Hello Kitty key ring is showing that she still belongs (Smits & Cwiertka)" notes Kasia Cwiertka, a professor at Leiden University. In this way, people of any age can preserve the ideals associated with kawaii culture, such as rejecting conceptions of adulthood, while still maintaining their role as a functional member of society.

In addition to rejecting traditional, repressive notions of adulthood, kawaii also heavily subverts gender roles. Upon its emergence in the 70s, women who followed kawaii trends were generally blamed for "feminizing society." Incidentally, following cute style was "not actually traditional feminine behavior at all, but a new kind of petulant refusal to be traditional subservient females" (Kinsella 249). During the rise of

kawaii, in fact, there were more young women in the workforce than any other time before the postwar era; however, this was also criticized for conflicting with traditional roles in which the women of a household belonged in the home. Women responded to this criticism by “defensively strengthening a ‘girls only’ culture and identity” (Kinsella 250), and further emphasizing the girlish aspects of their identity. Some of these young women would build feminine identities to the extent in which they were labeled “too girly” or “too cute.” In this way, they challenged societal ideals of femininity and thus cuteness by taking them to an extreme. Along with female ideals, kawaii also subverted standards of masculinity. As mentioned, kawaii possesses attributes typically associated with femininity and is largely dominated by women. However, in actuality it does not exclude men. Many young men actively participate in kawaii fashion and culture and also find it to be liberating. When asked whether he would consider his artwork “kawaii,” Shigetomo Yamamoto, creator of MGX Factory and the MonsterGirls design, responded “Yes! To say something is kawaii gives it a real power, a kind of motivational strength” (Okazaki & Johnson, 84). Men like Yamamoto who engage in and perpetuate kawaii culture can also sustain its benefits, such as freedom of creative expression. Men in modern society also suffer from restrictive gender expectations, including the expectation to become breadwinners, or thus enter demanding white-collar careers that alienate them from the rest of society, including their own family (Botz-Bornstein 34). Through rejection of adulthood and embracing of the feminine, men can find release within kawaii culture.

One notable example of kawaii challenging social and gender norms is pop idol Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. Born Kiriko Takemura, Kyary grew to fame as a frequenter of the

Harajuku scene in addition to running a popular fashion blog. Kyary's local renown grew until she was approached by Yasutaka Nakata and debuted as an idol in 2011. Her debut single, *PONPONPON*, currently has over 75 million views on Youtube and has spawned an array of parodies, vocal remakes, and dance covers across the internet. The immense popularity of this song alone may largely be attributed to its visual originality. In the video, Kyary performs a simple choreographed dance in a pink and orange ensemble, surrounded by brightly colored novelties including decorated hats, plastic baubles, and a boxes of junk food. Through its overabundance of childish toys, and impenitent usage of pink, the music video makes a strong inclination towards the feminine and childish. Kyary heavily establishes herself as an "icon of kawaii culture" (Nylon) that she is presently known for. Simultaneously, Kyary challenges proper ideals of femininity by presenting an air of what can be considered disconcerting: throughout the video, an overweight woman with a disturbingly obscured face dances behind her; in another clip, Kyary opens her mouth to release a flock of black birds, which is accompanied by the visage of a swan bearing a crown of bullet shells. These contradicting images of cute and creepy largely make up Kyary's identity as an idol. Like *PONPONPON*, most of Kyary's videos are largely nonsensical but with an underlying sense of visual artistry. This sense of absurdity additionally pervades the idol's overall image, making itself known in her fashion choices and live venues. In the official cover photo of her extended play album *Moshi Moshi Harajuku*, Kyary dons false eyelashes and eye-enlarging contacts. However, she stares into the viewer wide-eyed, with her hair disheveled and her mouth painted over with cartoon "fangs," invoking a sense of uneasiness. Earlier in her career, Kyary was also known for her *hengao* or "strange faces," in which she would often

exhibit on variety shows and social media photos by twisting her facial features to unattractive lengths. Kyary says of her image “I try to create chemistry between kawaii and darkness... [t]he dark isn’t supposed to be there, but that’s what I like about it” (Nylon). This notion plays an important role in how kawaii consistently challenges preconceived ideas of cuteness. Although kawaii is typically disregarded as a shallow obsession with physical appearance, artists like Kyary reject such a dismissal by adding a complex, artistic layer to their overall commodities. ““Cuteness, though ostensibly devoid of irony, does not negate darkness, and can in fact be a means to accessing darkness, as characters become loci of emotion and identification”” (Vartanian, qtd. in Wakeling 134).

Kyary represents the complexity and paradox that distinguishes kawaii culture . Unlike other contemporary idols, Kyary has a greater amount of control over her creative output. While Nakata writes and produces her songs, Kyary mentions how the two exchange ideas and, based on these discussions, she also decides how to perform them. She also independently maintains her blog and Twitter, posting photos and clever word plays that focus on herself and her experiences, and plays a choice role in the fashion she wears. This is important in that Kyary exhibits a sense of autonomy and assertiveness within her social status that prevents her reduction into a manufactured commodity. Through her own means, Kyary negates stereotypes and likewise challenges social and gender standards. By confronting these standards, Kyary epitomizes a stance that girls can still be “kawaii” while simultaneously being unendearing or gross. This dualistic notion presents kawaii as something multi-layered and complex, thus encouraging the idea that girls can be “kawaii” in whatever way they may choose.

3.4 Kawaii as Empowerment

Another aspect in which kawaii can be applied to feminism is through its empowerment of women. In order to discuss the extent of kawaii's empowerment, it is crucial to first define the word "empowerment" and what it means within context of Japanese feminism. An article listed in the Journal of Extension defines empowerment as follows:

...empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important (Page & Czuba).

Essentially, empowerment acts as a means to which people can exert control over various aspects of their lives, whether on an individual, group, or community basis (Page & Czuba). Researcher Sarah Mosedale states that in order for a social group to be empowered, they must first be lacking an extent of that power, or essentially a voice and ability to exhibit control within a society. She expands on this by noting that "it is not necessary for powerful individuals to prevent women from doing something they want to do because social norms and customs already achieve this" (Mosedale 1). Therefore, a minority group such as women may be legally equivalent to men in modern society but still be rendered unequal by social norms. Japanese women, then, can be considered 'de-powered' through traditionally-established perceptions and expectations of them as illustrated in the above section. Women can be empowered through varying means within different facets of society. While kawaii is largely an aesthetic, its culture creates a space in which participants, a majority of them women, possess agency, creative control, and are able to express their voices and identities. This is generally free from scrutiny of social and gender-related expectations, thereby allowing girls to assert their own

authority over these spaces. One instance of this that may be analyzed includes the lolita sub-genre of fashion.

While the word “lolita” has origins in the controversial 1955 novel of the same name written by Vladimir Nabokov, the similarities end with its etymology. Lolita fashion, originally “Natural Kei,” has acquired influence mostly from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and consists of Victorian style outfits such as lacy petticoats, skirts with ruffles, and peter pan collars (Dee). This brand of fashion assumes a hyper-feminized image of women, almost reducing those who sport the look into infantilized children. However, this hyper-feminization is where Lolita finds its power. Rinrin Doll, a prominent Lolita model, upon asking what kinds of people are attracted to Lolita fashion, responded with the following:

They are very shy. When I talk to the guests at tea parties, a lot of people say that they don’t have self-confidence, but when they wear Lolita clothing they feel that they can become a different person. They can have an alternate personality and can express how they feel more freely in these clothes than they do in their normal lives (Okazaki & Johnson 153).

Rinrin’s statement underlines Lolita’s ability to inspire self-confidence in girls. This includes the confidence to make their own decisions. Engaging in Lolita fashion is a choice for those who participate. These girls choose to reject beauty standards in favor of engaging in this distinct style. They coordinate their own outfits, often to extreme detail that includes elaborate jewelry and makeup. Thus, Lolita acts as a medium through which girls can more freely and openly express themselves and establish their identities in a unique and creative way. Lolita girls conspicuously take mainstream expectations and ideals of femininity and draw them out to extremities. In this sense, they reclaim standards imposed on them by society into something that uplifts rather than oppresses them.

Along with allowing girls self-determination and identity expression, Lolita also creates a space in which girlishness is valued, rather than considered detrimental. Like people who share similar passions or hobbies, Lolita acts as its own community in which girls can establish relationships with each other through exchanging tips on dress and makeup, organizing activities with each other such as *hanami* viewing, and trading outfits and accessories. In addition, it allows them the opportunity to make success for themselves whether it be creatively or professionally. This is done by creating a unique “girls’ only” space free from male and heterosexual narrative. Angelic Pretty is one of the earliest established brands of Lolita fashion. Founded in 1979 by Youko Honda, Angelic Pretty has become a leading icon of contemporary Lolita fashion both nationally and internationally. Angelic Pretty’s style is referred to as “sweet lolita,” and the official website explains the concept behind the brand as “adorable clothing... like that of a fairy princess” (Harajuju). Maki and Asuka, two of the company’s head designers who receive most of the limelight on behalf of the company, describe in an interview how their designs are meant to encourage girls to “make their own story” because every girl has “their own princess story” (AzIndies). Maki and Asuka acknowledge the creative extension by which wearers express their distinct identities through the brand’s fashion. Meanwhile, Angelic Pretty’s narratives—which include item promotion, advertising, and overall image—tend to exclude men and romance altogether. Through this complete elimination of a male presence, Angelic Pretty pushes an idea of what can be thought of as “girl power feminism” (Wakeling 139). Emily Wakeling explains how through communities that emphasize *shōjo*, in other words, qualities of girlishness, “girls have developed a creative space in which they are often awarded a special level of agency”

(Wakeling 141). Through creating spaces such as those found among Lolita fashion enthusiasts, girls can embrace their femininity and make their own choices regarding their identity. It is also worth noting that most, if not all of the designers on the Angelic Pretty team are female; therefore, through similar companies, women are also able to find career opportunities. Young women who run lolita fashion blogs can find creative and professional success.

4. Conclusion

To many, kawaii is a concept largely known but misunderstood. This is because kawaii is overall a complicated construct. What initially began as an idea to sell the idea of standard female norms was taken by women and made into something transcendent and uplifting. This type of kawaii acts as a means to a revolution that challenges preconceived notions of what is acceptable in society. In addition, it becomes a place in which people of all ages and genders can find freedom in self-expression and creativity where they might not in normal society. Feminism in Japan, like other countries, has a long way to go. However, it can be argued that kawaii advocates a non-confrontational brand of third-wave feminism that is slowly but steadily pervading the mainstream. Kawaii as a culture, while initially established as a cultural niche and greatly rejected by surrounding society, is nowadays becoming more and more mainstream; this is evidenced by growing renown of artists such as Kyary Pamyu Pamyu and brand names such as Angelic Pretty. As this idea of kawaii becomes increasingly integrated into society, it can be assumed that its associated dispute of traditional society and its celebration of feminine qualities may become increasingly accepted as well.

カワイイ文化の歴史

「カワイイ文化っていうどういう意味だと思う？」と日本人に聞いたら、面白いく返事を貰った。原宿などでカワイイを推進に参加している人は少しおかしそうと述べている。もちろん、この文化にあまり興味を持っていない人に聞いても、カワイイ文化と言えば、ただ日本人はそのイメージを持って知っている。日本の文化に入ったようらしい。それなのに、カワイイ文化の実態は分かりにくいと思っている人がいる。しかし、カワイイ文化は日本社会の一部だし、了解したほうはいいだろう。このユニークな文化の歴史を習ったら、日本文化がもっと分かってくることがあるかもしれない。カワイイ文化の始めは三つのステップがある。まず、高校生の女性の書き方が紹介された。二番目、雑誌などをこの書き方の使い初めた。最後、アイドルや少女漫画のかわいいのを具現することである。

「カワイイ」の使い方の始まり原因は実際はに女性向けの販売戦略のためようだった。第二次世界大戦の後に若者の可処分所得がどんどん増えて来た。そのため、企業はが若者に売ったことに決められた。それに、西洋化であると同時に、欧米的な商品が人気になった。1970年代の間に高校でシャープペンシルが紹介され、女の学生は新しい書き方を使い始めた。この筆跡手跡の形は広く大きくて丸いし、子供が書いたものみたいだし、「丸字」や「ぶりっ子字」と呼ばれた。企業はそのような現象を利用し、子どもが使うもののような、かわいいものをたくさん売り出すようになった。若者を対象にした雑誌にこの書き方が増えてきた。文具にもそれに似たような印刷されたものが増え

てきた。それで、かわいく見えるものは若者の中でどんどん普遍的な現象になった。未だにこの現象は日本の社会でまだ盛んである。

かわいいという流行は程なく超過し、実際には、現象や生活様式を超えて文化のようになった。若い女性は自分をかわいくすることに必死だった。子供のような服を着始め、高い声で話し、内股で歩くようになった。子供のように振る舞うようになったのはアイドルや少女漫画の影響だ。昔、漫画の掲載の中で、男性の漫画家は一番多かった。だが、1970年代から漫画は安くなっていたように、少女漫画の発売も急に増加していた。そのため、女性の漫画家の高まりがあった。池田理代子の『ベルサイユのばら』やいがらしゆみこの『キャンディ・キャンディ』といったのはこの頃の一番有名な少女漫画として知られた。このような作品は大抵女性の漫画家に作られ、女の子向け刊行された漫画だった。このように、特に女性だけの世界みたいなものが作られた。この世界の中で、女性は多数なわけだ。主人公は更に複雑で、愛くるしいと同時に意固地な女である。また、キャラクターは凝った服を着、キラキラ目の特徴として描かれた。女性の読者はこのようなキャラクターの姿勢を真似ることが流行になった。

少女漫画の他の影響はアイドルだ。アイドルの時代はかわいくなる人という考えに紹介された。影響を与えたアイドルの一人は松田聖子だ。松田はデビューした時に十八歳だったが、非常に幼いと思われた。子供のように泣いたり、笑ったり、しゃべったりしたからである。ファンにメッセージを書いた時に大きく稚拙の書き方で単純の表現を使った。ところが、日本人の若者ばかり

ではなく、大人にも好かれた。松田は1980年代においてユニークで、自己主張する女だと考えられた。そのため、若い女性は松田のような女の子のアイドルに憧れ、同じように子供のように振る舞ったのである。松田の人気のために子供に見えるアイドルの数がやがて上がり、社会で子供みたいになる女性も多くなった。現在にアイドルの現象は日本特有のようである。

少女漫画やアイドルの急増のおかげで、日本の女性の人々は自分の習慣や外観などをかわいくすることに夢中になった。それで、かわいいという概念は文化になって来た。日本の社会で「かわいい社会」かといって「カワイイ文化」が出て来た。原宿地区はそのような若者文化を中心としていた。原宿は現在にお洒落の中心地としてしられ、若者が集まる場所だ。始めには武家屋敷だったが、終戦後に米空軍の兵舎が建設され、外国文化の中心の場所になって来た。それから外国文化を知りたい若者が集まるようになった。1970年代が始めてから、そこでファッション雑誌が創刊された。「アンアン」や「non-no」といった雑誌は、若者の中で人気になった。雑誌は主にかわいくて子供みたいなスタイルを見せた。出た服を着ている人は原宿に集まり、新しいファッションアイデアを他の若者同士とシェアするようになった。ブランドを出したり、イベントを起こしたりするようになった。それで原宿は「流行の発信地」と呼ばれている。つまり、原宿などの場所により、Kawaii文化が根付いて来て開発されたわけだ。

他のファッションが大事な場所は渋谷や新宿だが、原宿でユニークなスタイルがある。かわいいというイメージは最初に子供みたいなのがあったが、年々変

わって来た。現在の原宿で「かわいい」の意味は様々である。「愛くるしい、面白い、かっこいい」または「見苦しい、変、気持ち悪くても何となく愛らしい」という意味もある。感じたら、かわいいと呼んでもいいかもしれない。それに、かわいいと呼ばれるイメージも人によって違う。かわいいファッションは様々ジャンルになった。ロリータやデコラは時を超えても、違う特徴がある。だが、共通点は社会の基準に反対することである。カワイイ文化は伝統的な日本の文化と違い、価値観や考え方はユニークらしい。カワイイ文化に参加している場合は前代の方が物質主義的で、正体に外見は大切だと思うようになった。また、カワイイ文化は社会人になることを拒んだ人の文化と思われた。これはいまだに存在しているが、イメージがどんどん変わっているようだ。大人になっても、かわいいことは止めるわけではない。実際には、カワイイ文化は仕事を提供した。例えば、ファッションブランドの店員や社長などになることができる。このような仕事に携わる女性は自己主張できる。それに、働いても自由に正体を伝えられる。カワイイ文化のおかげで出世できた女性の一人は「くまみき」という。くまみきはブロガーで、フリーランスとして活動している人だが、原宿以外に、外国でも人気が増えている女の人だ。カワイイ文化についてビデオやブログを投稿し、成功できた。くまみきの例によると、子供に見えたら、社会人にならないわけではないということである。

つまり、「かわいい」は形容詞だけではなく、文化になって来た。このカワイイ文化は他の国より日本のユニーク点のようだ。また、この点は主に女性から紹介され、女性のためのものになったようだ。それなのに、女性と男性もカワ

イイ文化の方に自己主張でき、また楽しめることがある。伝統的な文化と違って
も、悪いわけではない。若者はむしろこの近代的な文化による出世したりできる
ものだ。何と言っても、多々世界中でも人気になっているようだ。

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