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Article

## Softening Power: Cuteness as Organizational Communication Strategy in Japan and the West

Iain MACPHERSON

MacEwan University, Faculty of Fine Arts and Communication, Assistant Professor

Teri Jane BRYANT

Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary, Associate Professor Emerita

This paper describes the use of cute communications (visual or verbal, and in various media) as an organizational communication strategy prevalent in Japan and emerging in western countries. Insights are offered for the use of such communications and for the understanding/critique thereof.

It is first established that cuteness in Japan—*kawaii*—is chiefly studied as a sociocultural or psychological phenomenon, with too little analysis of its near-omnipresent institutionalization and conveyance as mass media. The following discussion clarifies one reason for this gap in research—the widespread conflation of ‘organizational communication’ with advertising/branding, notwithstanding the variety of other messaging—public relations, employee communications, public service announcements, political campaigns—conveyed through cuteness by Japanese institutions. It is then argued that what few theorizations exist of organizational *kawaii* communications overemphasize their negative aspects or potentials, attributing to them both too much iniquity and too much influence.

Outside of Japan studies, there is even less up-to-date scholarship on organizational cuteness, critical or otherwise. And there are no such studies at all, whether focused on Japan or elsewhere, that integrate intercultural insights. In a preliminary contribution toward such knowledge, we discuss the understudied, longstanding, and increasing use of this strategy by western companies. Points of comparison and contrast with Japanese *kawaii* are highlighted, in both its organizational and pop-cultural aspects, drawing also on sociological studies of the west’s current cuteness craze. Guiding insights are offered and future research directions specified, both for those seeking to advise western organizations in communicating cutely, and for those concerned that such softening power will be abused.

**Keywords:** Cuteness, *Kawaii*, Character Branding, Strategic Organizational Communication

### Introduction

Contemporary Japanese society teems with *kawaii* (‘cute’) images and styling. This ebullient aesthetic suffuses every form of mass media: *manga* (comics) and *anime* (cartoons) as well as high-minded ‘pop art’; fashion and all genres of entertainment, including erotica; advertising and public relations; industrial design including robotics; instruction manuals and street signage, etc. *Kawaii*, in all its ubiquity, has been the subject of much commentary in recent decades, both scholarly and journalistic, and by both Japanese and non-Japanese observers. Most such scrutiny has explored the subject as a psychological or cultural phenomenon, explaining *kawaii* as an instinctive, universally human affect, or exploring it as a reflection of traditional or changing

societal norms, either worldwide or in regard to particular countries and/or cultures. In all such cases, analytic focus has mostly been applied to cognitive processing, to consumer interpretations and self-expression, or to the aesthetics of artists and designers.

Less attention has been paid to producer intent in the sense of organizational strategic communication in any of its varied manifestations: official rhetoric, visuals, or other sensory forms (i.e., jingles, anthems) aimed at informing, persuading, and establishing good will – such as advertising/branding and design, public relations, employee communications, public service announcements, and diplomacy or propaganda. This dearth of research exists despite the prevalence of *kawaii* in all types of organizational communications, from all types of Japanese institutions – corporate, governmental, or otherwise. And there has been nearly no analysis drawing comparisons and contrasts between Japanese and western organizational communication in this regard. This absence of cross-cultural scholarship persists despite a recent increase in ‘cute communications’ among western companies, often inspired by Japanese exemplars, and even though such ‘soft power’ strategies have long been more widespread among western organizations than is usually recognized.

This study seeks to fill that research gap in an exploratory, theory-building way. It does so by synthesizing insights from scholarship on ‘cuteness culture’ in Japan and the west, on *kawaii* organizational communication and design, on the psychology of cuteness, and on character branding. Advice is advanced for western organizational communicators regarding the strategic benefits and risks of ‘cute communications.’ Broader insights are also offered to a general readership, for improved critical understanding of the cuteness *zeitgeist* now ascending in western popular culture and mass media.

The following Section 1 begins this paper with a survey of commentary, by scholars as well as journalists, art critics, and other pundits, on *kawaii* as an aspect of Japanese culture and aesthetics. The review concentrates on a divide between more and less critical apprehensions of the phenomenon. A somewhat similar analytic divide structures Section 2, our overview of the much sparser literature on *kawaii* organizational communications. Here the distinction lies between critical appraisals and a more applied scholarship proffering principles of *kawaii* design and communication strategy. This discussion segues into the following Section 3, where our focus turns to western ‘cute communications.’ A literature survey spans psychological research, business studies on character branding, and sociological explorations of popular culture. This review establishes that western organizations have a history of cuteness appeals that is under-recognized – most notably by those fixated on *kawaii*’s putatively unique ‘Japanese-ness.’ Moreover, Section 3 sheds light on a present uptick in western organizational uptake of such communication strategies, especially by advertisers. Section 4 concludes the paper by specifying future directions for research into cuteness as a rhetorical appeal aimed at western consumers and publics.

## 1. *Kawaii* Aesthetics and Culture

In everyday English parlance, where the term *kawaii* is increasingly adopted (Nitto, 2016), this Japanese adjective is usually translated simply as ‘cute.’ Of English-language dictionaries *Webster’s*, *Dictionary.com*, *Cambridge*, *Oxford*, and *Collins*, only the latter two offer definitions of *kawaii*, both emphasizing its Japanese cultural specificity:

Adjective: denoting a Japanese artistic and cultural style that emphasizes the quality of cuteness, using bright colours and characters with a childlike appearance.

Noun: (in Japanese art and culture) the quality of being lovable or cute. (Kawaii [1], n.d.)

Adjective: (in the context of Japanese popular culture) cute.

Mass noun: The quality of being cute, or items that are cute. (Kawaii [2], n.d.)

Official Japanese definitions offer more semantic detail. Nittono (2016) translates from the 2000 edition of *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*:

*kawai-i* (adjective) (1) looks miserable and raises sympathy. pitiable. pathetic. piteous. (2) attractive. cannot be neglected. cherished. beloved. (3) has a sweet nature. lovely. (a) (of faces and figures of young women and children) adorable. attractive. (b) (like children) innocent. obedient. touching. (4) (of things and shapes) attractively small. small and beautiful. (5) trivial. pitiful. (used with slight disdain). (p. 81).

However, as Nittono (2016) points out, these “somewhat contradictory meanings” reflect the word’s historic connotative shifts as well as the subjectivity, context-dependency, and situation-specificity, with which Japanese people today use and understand *kawaii*. In everyday usage, it is applied to a voluminous range of imagery, fashion, and stylistics. For prime examples: saucer-eyed cartoon characters; hyper-saccharine pop music; childlike or otherwise quirky clothing, accessories, and body language; very bright or pastel colours; soft or frilly textures; circles or blobs; hyper-rococo faux-European motifs; rounded cursives; infants and toddlers; small and/or chubby adults; and baby or tiny animals. As is the case with ‘cuteness’ in English – those seeking to precisely define the word *kawaii* have found themselves grappling with its deeply contextual polysemy. Pop media scholar Nobuyoshi Kurita has even called it a “magic term” that encompasses everything positive (as cited in Kageyama, 2006, p. 2).

*Kawaii* is primarily associable with girls and women (Nittono, 2016). However, many Japanese males of all ages appreciate or adopt the aesthetic and attitude, without irony. It can semantically overlap with ‘cool’ in a way that defies understanding for westerners. Its positivity frequently goes beyond ‘cute,’ to take on the moral qualities of innocence and purity; however, *kawaii* can equally imply naughtiness and a lack of reserve. Japanese subcultures, and even more popular media, often aesthetically combine *kawaii* with eroticism and grotesquerie, in genres labelled by neologisms such as *ero-kawaii*, *guro-kawaii* and *kimo-kawaii* (‘creepy-cute’). As well, in general usage, *kawaii* itself sometimes has negative connotations, typically involving inordinate, or spurious, submissiveness and frailty (Madge, 1997; Nittono, 2016).

Moves to establish and explain the polyvalent pragmatics<sup>1</sup> of *kawaii* sentiment are often prefaced with etymological and historical parsings. These typically note that the word’s antecedents, and its usage in Japanese classics like *The Tale of Genji* (ca. 1000 - 1020), mostly conveyed pitifulness – today the common adjective *kawaiso* still means ‘pitiful’ – and that only in later centuries did its ‘cute/adorable’ associations emerge. These positive overtones then came to the fore in the twentieth century, partly or frequently displacing the term’s original pathos. Scholars debate the extent to which this was a pre- or postwar sociolinguistic development (Birkett, 2012).

Certainly, contemporary *kawaii* culture, both Japanese and global, is intrinsically tied to commodification, and so can largely be traced back to the economic boom-then-bubble of Japan’s recent decades. This kitschy efflorescence reached full force in Japan during the 1970s, beneath the aegis of Hello Kitty – as character-creator Sanrio both capitalized upon and cultivated market expansion from girls to women (McVeigh, 2000b) – and the nation’s real-life albeit heavily ‘manufactured’ pop idols. By the mid-1980s *kawaii* permeated every nook of the Japanese archipelago, manifesting in “pink road diggers” and “police boxes in the form of gingerbread houses” (Kinsella, 1995, as cited in Peek, 2009, p. 3). Since then *kawaii* culture and consumerism has been explained and evaluated by a wide range of Japanese and foreign commentators. Scholars, artists and art critics, journalists and politicians, have all championed or denounced *kawaii* alongside those aspects of Japanese society they take it to reflect and influence.

*Kawaii* is exalted or excoriated for a range of reasons. As with pop culture anywhere, *kawaii* producers

<sup>1</sup> The branch of linguistics studying actual communicative usage, as opposed to formal grammar and semantics.

and consumers, when called upon to explain the worth of their goods and services, often wax tautological – *kawaii* is great because it's *kawaii!* – and state or suggest that such truths cannot be put into words. The Japanese government is promoting popular culture abroad for pragmatic purposes, in hopes of championing an export industry and of wielding *kawaii* as 'soft power' (Heng, 2014; Valaskivi, 2013). There are more learned glorifications as well. The sensibility is often linked to ancient Japanese idealism, love of miniatures, and pantheism (think mascots as godlings) (Kageyama, 2006). Others perceive, in its blurring of aesthetic boundaries – between childhood and adulthood, and between sentimentality and moral ambivalence – a binary-transcending mentality that makes Japan better-suited than the west to postmodernity. According to anthropologist Anne Allison, this "polymorphous perversity" helps explain the global spread of *kawaii* alongside other types or aspects of Japan's popular culture (Allison, 2003, 2006).

However, *kawaii*'s 'perverse' blurring of boundaries between innocence and maturity is also the source of much concern over an infantilization of Japanese society. Takashi Murakami, perhaps Japan's most internationally-famous contemporary artist, combines anime-inspired *kawaii* with surrealism, eroticism, and grotesquerie. His 'Superflat' manifestos wryly proclaim the unwillingness or inability of modern Japanese artists to recognize defining distinctions in western artistic tradition: 'high' and 'low' culture, fine art and commercialism, adult and children's entertainment, good and evil, depth and surface. In Murakami's professed view, this 'flatness' stems from the trauma of psychic emasculation that atomic bombing wreaked upon Japan (Ivy, 2006).

Less equivocal and abstract denunciations of *kawaii* abound throughout political and popular discourse, delivered by Japanese and foreigners. Such condemnation spans the ideological spectrum, from right to left. Cultural purists rue the displacement of Japan's traditionally refined, subtle aesthetics by everything opposite in *kawaii*. Conservatives and progressives alike damn its purported suspension of adulthood, if for different reasons. Both decry the political apathy – the lack of patriotism or reformist spirit – that most *kawaii* consumerism reflects and encourages. Both heap scorn on its hedonistic consumerism. And as happens with pornography in the west, social conservatives make strange bedfellows with those feminists (mostly foreign, in this case) who condemn the borderline or blatant pedophilia of much 'Lolita' *manga* and *anime* (Ashcraft, 2010; Lah, 2010). Japan's political pundits on the right target the protracted unwillingness of *kawaii*-besotted Japanese women to get on with the duties of motherhood (and of videogame-obsessed males to forge careers).

Of course, many left-wing critics deplore *kawaii*'s propagation of submissive femininity. In such regards, though, some feminists and social theorists offer a measured or partial defence of *kawaii* culture: "I cannot deny that the presentation of young women as *kawaii* can reinforce an image of women as subservient although ... I also wish to stress that the aesthetic has a nonconforming or escapist aspect to it" (Madge, 1997, p. 157; see also Kinsella, 1995). This thrust of such arguments runs thus: Especially in a society like Japan's, where opportunities for politicized consciousness and agitation are simply more circumscribed than in the west – where 'the nail that sticks out gets hammered down' – there is a subversive edge to the decades-long escape that so many women make into *kawaii* whimsy. The same is said of the solipsism that transforms so many Japanese men into *hikikomori* shut-ins or 'grass-eating,' metrosexual slackers. These millennial movements are not revolutions advocating progressive agendas. Nevertheless, they are real rejections of Japan's traditional social order, and *in toto* they are transforming the nation, most starkly through low birth rates.

That feminist debate is intra-ideological, between parties who are both opposed to Japanese social conservatism. This has a rough parallel in 'critical' social theory as applied in and to western countries such

as those in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> On one hand ‘cultural studies’ scholars find, in the styles and stances of youth subculture, symbolic dissent – legitimate however partial – against the hegemony of mainstream conservative ideology. In contrast, neo-Marxist scholars of ‘political economy,’ with their materialist focus on class structures, find popular culture and its disaffected poses to be escapist at best, if not a disseminator of reactionary attitudes – hedonic individualism, consumerism, and sexism. In turn, defending their scholarly interest in popular media products (and their love of them), cultural studies devotees accuse the political economists of dour and reductive economic determinism (Babe, 2010).

## 2. *Kawaii* as ‘Soft Power’ Strategic Organizational Communication

No less than in other walks of life, the *kawaii* aesthetic pervades Japanese organizational communication. This is most commonly or obviously the case with corporate branding, such as mascots marketing a company or character goods produced by it, or the *kawaii* attributes of actor spokespeople, advertising jingles, and logo font, along with other design elements. However, the *kawaii* aesthetic is strategically applied by all manner of other Japanese institutions: political, educational, religious, and even military (Frühstück, 2009). It is directed by these institutions at all their stakeholder audiences, both external and internal, from employees to voters and broader publics both in Japan and abroad. The strategic intent of such communications may be to persuade stakeholders to adopt a specific behaviour, such as buying, voting, or recycling; to inculcate a more generally favourable impression; or even to improve information intake (Nittono, Fukushima, Yano & Moriya, 2012). Many of this paper’s explanations and arguments about *kawaii* apply to all such manifestations. Therefore the authors refer generally to *organizational communication* (strategy) as a term including external or internal and verbal or (especially) visual messaging; advertising for all manner of goods and services; public relations, employee communication, and foreign relations; public service announcements; instruction manuals, and product or even architectural design. (In the 1990s, a college redesigned its campus to look like Disneyland, after which applications increased threefold (Madge, 1997)).

In all such cases, standard *kawaii* elements – girlish women, squeaky voices, hyper-happy pop muzak, rounded cursives, and especially big-eyed cartoon characters – are key elements of strategic messaging aimed at influencing and/or informing audiences. The basic objectives here are obvious: Organizations want to endear themselves to stakeholders; to make their message content simpler and engaging; and in the case of impersonal or authority-wielding institutions, to soften their image. Most research into *kawaii* organizational communication, or at least touching on it, is ‘siloe’d’ into disciplinary subfields of management studies and political science, with scarce attempts to advance general insights about organizational communication more broadly speaking. There are a number of studies focused on *kawaii* advertising for Japanese and international markets (e.g., Allison, 2006; Otmazgin, 2014; Steinberg, 2012). Probably more academic and journalistic attention has fixated on Japanese government communication strategy, especially the omnipresent deployment of mascots – by electoral campaigners (e.g., Aoki, 2013; Torres, 2012); by police and military forces (e.g., Frühstück, 2009); by local authorities and industries, aiming to sustain and brand their communities and regions (e.g., Birkett, 2012; Ripley and Henry, 2014); and most recently, with official efforts to promote “Cool Japan” abroad, both in hopes of boosting cultural business sectors and of brandishing diplomatic ‘soft power’ (e.g., Borggreen,

<sup>2</sup> The authors use ‘western’ or ‘the west’ as a cultural umbrella term to encapsulate ethnically Caucasian-majority, comparatively wealthy, liberal-democratic countries and regions, and we follow common practice in attributing attitudinal, behavioural, and institutional similarities to the mainstream populations of these places. However, we also recognize that substantive differences in all such regards distinguish each ‘western’ country/region from the others, and we recognize the methodological hazard inherent in making any cultural generalization. This caveat informs our decision to not capitalize the word *west*, on grounds that doing so too strongly suggests monolithic cultural uniformity.

2011; McGray, 2002; Yano, 2009).

There is has not been much theory-building work on *kawaii* aspects of Japanese organizational communication strategy in its *general* sense: messaging meant to inform, persuade, and perpetuate goodwill with all types of stakeholders for all types of purpose. The scholarship that has broadly conceptualized this aspect of Japanese organizational communication can be divided into theoretical and functional interests. On the one hand, 'critical' scholars mostly frame managerial *kawaii* as a manipulative, smiley-faced mask for domination and deception on the part of authorities and businesses. A more 'applied' vein of study, usually written by Japanese designers and engineers, formulates principles and processes for making *kawaii* communications more effective, especially in visual modes and *vis-à-vis* high technology such as computer interfaces and robotics.

The ideological critiques of the first camp routinely reference, as a principal influence, anthropologist Brian McVeigh's insights into the institutional interests behind the design and dissemination of *kawaii* communications, products, and styles (e.g., 1996, 2000a, 2000b). He explains how "[c]uteness communicates power relations ... effectively combining weakness, submissiveness and humility with influence, domination and control" (1996, p. 291). McVeigh invokes Michel Foucault's points about power – that it must often function invisibly, and that it often "induces pleasure" in subjects (Foucault, 1978, p. 36). These cardinal insights are related to psychoanalyst Takeo Doi's (1971/1973) diagnosis of Japanese social relations as comprised of mother-child-like mutual dependencies. McVeigh warns:

We should be aware of how centres of authority (state agencies, educators, large companies, etc.) attempt to associate themselves with smiling babies, innocent children, talking animals, pretty colours ... funny creatures and *akarui* (cheerful things). If those in positions of power can convince those below them that they are in fact not intimidating, the task of persuading, influencing and controlling them becomes easier. (2000a, p. 150)

The extent to which one shares McVeigh's concerns will depend on how suspiciously one apprehends 'centres of authority,' both in general and in Japan. It will also depend on one's beliefs regarding the power of mass media to mould public opinion, for better or worse. When weighing this issue, it is worth considering some evident limits of *kawaii*'s capacity to disarm people's critical and rational faculties.

For one example, immediately after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe, powerplant operator Tepco stopped using *kawaii* communications, most notably its housewife cartoon-mascot Denko-chan. Since then, "Tepco's post-3.11 TV ads have been limited to solemn apologies silently displayed across the screen, before disappearing altogether" (Sekiguchi, 2012, para. 8). One must conjecture about any reasons for this sudden shift in communication strategy, beyond cashed-strapped Tepco's stated cost-cutting motives – "part of our streamlining" (as cited in Sekiguchi, 2012, para. 9). However, it is no great stretch to surmise that this decision partly stemmed from recognition that *kawaii* communications would not defuse so grave a crisis, and could instead give offense.

Beyond Tepco's 'firing' of Denko-chan, a broader cuteness cull seems to be imminent, targeting Japan's 800-plus prefectural and municipal mascots, called *yuru-kyara* ('relaxed characters'). These creatures mushroomed during the last decade, in cartoons and costumes, largely in response to the increased local autonomy that has come with political decentralization (Birkett, 2012, as cited in Walters, 2014, para. 1). The 'strategic communication' purposes of *yuru-kyara* are manifold, beyond putting an adorably benevolent face on administration and commerce. Often based on local folklore or industry, these figures assist in marketing domestic tourism, the most successful becoming national icons worth millions of dollars to their sponsoring institutions. Rural domains also utilize *yuru-kyara* in attempts to shore up civic pride – "imagined community" (Walters, 2014, para. 2, citing Birkett, 2012) – in the face of ongoing population shrinkage. However, their

heyday might be closing – or at least, their masters might need to produce more proof of their efficacy. In June 2014, Japan's finance ministry ordered local governments to reduce their taxpayer-supported use of *yuru-kyara*, citing a dismissive internal report: "A majority of them were created for vague 'public relations purposes' and some of them were created just 'because others have introduced mascots'" (as cited in "Japan Cracks Down," para. 4).

Broadly speaking, though, the national Japanese government has exploited cute-character branding as eagerly as has any toy or accessory company – but with an overall achievement record that remains mixed or indeterminate. New media technologies have helped secure some successes. Not only in Japan but generally, anthropomorphic spokes-avatars are proving especially efficacious for enlivening digitally interactive communications (Vranica, 2012). And with the recent lifting of Japanese restrictions against online campaigning, much was made of successful multimedia mascot handling during the 2012 general elections, by the now ruling LDP (e.g., Aoki, 2013) and Japan's Communist Party (e.g., Blair, 2013), across videogame-app and social-media platforms.

Yet in the case of foreign relations, appraisals of Japan's mascot-mediated communication, at least among the commentariat, have ranged between scepticism and scorn (Borggreen, 2011) – with many caveats and criticisms hypothesizing flaws from a communication-strategy standpoint. Much of this assessment engages the overall 'Cool Japan' initiative. Dating from the mid-2000s, this is the overarching campaign through which Japan seeks to promote abroad all facets of its culture – traditional, popular, and even subcultural – as a twofold plank for marketing and diplomacy. Doubters forward many arguments (see, e.g., Valaskivi, 2013). The chief amongst them is this: However much 'cool' has proven amenable to commodification, it is not subject to guidance by governments, especially avowed social conservatives (e.g., Chiang, 2014; Valaskivi, 2013).<sup>3</sup> Others opine that cute, comics, and cartoons are synonymous with 'cool' for only specific segments of western youth. Therefore, Japan's branded characters, *manga*, and *anime*, will never have the near-universal appeal of, say, Hollywood movie stars (e.g., Reynolds, 2009). From a communication standpoint, such critiques amount to the charge that 'Cool Japan' lacks a requisite air of *authenticity*.

*Kawaii* plays a key tenor in 'Cool Japan,' and a succession of mascot champions are trundled forth in its name. During 2008, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) officially dubbed Japan's most famous cartoon cats, Hello Kitty and Doraemon, ambassadors of tourism and anime; and in 2013 the latter character was named chief envoy for Japan's (successful) bid to host the 2020 Olympics (Chavez, 2013). English-language commentators reacted with bemusement and mild condescension to these news items. Teasings about cross-cultural tone-deafness shaded into sharper objections with the 2009 MOFA appointment of three human, young female fashion idols as "cute ambassadors," representing different *kawaii* street-culture styles. This trio included one then 19-year-old, Shizuka Fujioka, costumed in a miniskirted school uniform. Offended western observers perceived her as embodying official sanction for the infantilization of Japanese women, if not for the illustrated pedophilia in much *ero-kawaii manga* and *anime*.

Bloomberg correspondent William Pesek called the leggy-schoolgirl persona "creepy" (2009, para. 3), and anthropologist Laura Miller even compared the globetrotting of all three *kawaii* emissaries to "global exploitation and sex trafficking of young women" (Miller, 2011, p. 20). Of course, the 'chattering classes' can themselves prove tone deaf. Time will tell how populations en masse respond to Japan's nascent *kawaii* outreach. Or time might tell, given the difficulties of measuring attitudinal shifts at any mass scale, much less international ones (Valaskivi, 2013). For one complication among many, it will be a very fine-tuned survey that can parse between any global goodwill engendered by Japan's diplomatic darlings, versus grassroots fandom inspired by self-anointed *kawaii* crusaders among western pop iconicity such as Avril Lavigne (Franich, 2014) and Gwen Stefani (Ahn, 2005), or even by lesser-known social-media 'influencers.'

<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently declared ankle-length kimonos to best represent Japanese 'cool' (Booth, 2014).



If the plain and the plausible limits to *kawaii*'s 'soft power' provide some counterweight to critical concerns about organizational propaganda, so should its positive potentials. To the extent that *kawaii* communications do work to nudge Japanese citizenry toward beneficial ends – for example, signs showing big-eyed, babylike cartoon characters causing drivers to slow down – such cuteness appeals should be widely applied and applauded. Indeed, they might even be proving increasingly applicable and appropriate in the west. Such an evolution is urged, in a recent *New York Times* editorial (2014, July 19), by geriatrician Louise Aronson. Given the U.S.'s greying demographics, she argues, Americans have no choice but to hope their elderly prove as susceptible as Japanese seniors to the charms and (seeming) solicitude of sweetly-designed robot caregivers. She suspects that they will do so, but repines: "Even within the medical community, this idea that machines could help fulfill more than just physical needs meets largely with skepticism, and occasionally with outrage" (para. 8).

Unsurprisingly, there is a good deal of investigation by psychologists, designers, and engineers into what makes *kawaii* work – all of it premised on the belief that such mass communications are typically benign if not beneficial for organizational or societal interests, at least when effective. One example is the *kansei* school of industrial-design thought, formed in the 1970s. Its international network of technologists (e.g., Hotogi & Hagiwara, 2014; Saeed, 2012) have pushed boundaries in imbuing all manner of hardware devices and software interfaces with a range of affective properties, such as *kawaii* or calming. *Kansei*-inspired mood-modifying machines run a gamut from robots and hairdryers to anthropomorphized ATMs.

There are just as many studies done on the user/audience-reception end of *kawaii* effects. For one example, Nittono, Fukushima, Yano and Moriya (2012) reported that not only did subjects viewing cute images subsequently become more careful at tasks – which previous studies had shown – but their focus and completion speed also improved. The authors found no appreciable gender differences in this response. They were careful to note that their participants were Japanese university students, so that these findings weren't generalizable to employees or to non-Japanese, both of whom they suggested might not be so receptive to *kawaii*.

This paper garnered wide circulation in the English-language business press (e.g., Bender, 2012; Koh, 2012; Steadman, 2012). However, most writers hyped the research as though it suggested that "browsing LOLcats" (Bender, 2012, para. 1) could improve job performance. As well, very few commentators addressed the question of cultural differences. (Steadman, 2012, was an exception.) This lazy thinking bespeaks a conceptual lacuna that is no less pronounced in scholarship. When it comes to *kawaii*, *cute*, or whatever the basic affect is called in other languages, there remains a paucity of empirical analysis and theory-building concerning cross-cultural contrasts, similarities, or convergences. And there is no such research found by the authors which brings this issue to bear on organizational communication strategy, broadly speaking.

### 3. Cute Communications in the West – Past and Present Practice and Research

*Kawaii*'s rough English-language parallel is *cute*. English dictionaries define the word as describing a specific type of attractiveness – "endearing" in Oxford Living Dictionary's terms (Cute [3], n.d.), and "especially in a childish, youthful, or delicate way," according to Merriam-Webster (Cute [2], n.d.). Much less semantic variety is attributed to *cute(ness)* than is the case with *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*'s previously quoted definitional detailing of *kawaii* (as cited in Nittono, 2016). However, dictionaries note that *cuteness* can refer, in North American informal usage, to adult sex appeal. And as with *kawaii*'s original connotation of pitiful pathos (Birkett, 2012), *cute* has less 'endearing' etymological roots. It originally stemmed, in the early eighteenth century, from the root *acute* as a personal descriptor meaning "clever; shrewd" (Cute [1], n.d.; Cute [3], n.d.). This meaning has echoes in current North American informal usage, where *cute* can label someone as "clever or cunning, especially in a self-seeking or superficial way" (Cute [3], n.d.). Some dictionaries also emphasize that the word can today informally denote

a failure of communication strategy: “straining for effect; artificial” (Cute [1], n.d.). All such polysemic variances should be borne in mind during the following discussion, though for the purposes of this paper, *cute(ness)* and *kawaii* both refer in general terms to their most commonly understood meaning: ‘endearing’ childlike attractiveness.

Much of contemporary, applied Japanese *kawaii*-effects research branches out from a western tradition of study into the psychology of cute appeals, traceable at least back to Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz’s 1940s *Kindenschema* findings (e.g., 1943). He and following ‘cute-ologists’<sup>4</sup> explore a basic human response to physical features found in babies – roundness, fragility and clumsiness, big heads and eyes, short limbs, etc. – but also in similarly aligned adults, animals, cartoons, and even machines or other objects. Such cuteness often signals or suggests a range of personality traits, such as vulnerability, playfulness, affection, curiosity, innocence, and naiveté (or ignorance and inferiority). In Lorenz’s terms, perceived cuteness “releases” protective and adoring reactions in people. Many analyses find that the effect is comparatively heightened in women, whether from socialized or biological instincts, but this all remains a matter of mixed results and debate (Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, & Moriya, 2012; Nittono, 2016; Sherman, Haidt, & Coan, 2009). Current research is also uncovering a range of other cuteness aspects and affects, from ‘whimsy’ arousing self-indulgence (Nenkov & Scott, 2014), to ‘sincerity’ inspiring stakeholder trust and brand loyalty (Folse, Garretson, Netemayer, & Burton, 2012).

Since Lorenz’s seminal experiments in the 1940s, western ‘cuteness studies’ has continued uninterrupted, often independently of the newer *kawaii* vein of inquiry, though in some obscurity compared to its Japan-focused counterpart. Recently renewed interest and work in this transatlantic tradition, within a variety of disciplines, has doubtless been spurred by the *au courant* fascination with Japanese cases and contexts. However, cuteness in all its cultural and national flavours is increasingly drawing attention. Indeed, much of such research adds to knowledge without making (or needing) any reference to *kawaii*. In one recent example, a U.S. study with American participants, Nenkov and Scott (2014) establish the important distinction that much cuteness has little if anything to do with *Kindenschema* – it needn’t remind people of babies.

The authors find that cuteness can instead present and prime a “whimsical” sensibility that triggers ‘fun’ feelings rather than care, thereby inclining respondents to *careless* self-indulgence (and perhaps even aggression). Such a finding fruitfully expands the scholarly conception of cute beyond strictly neotenic<sup>5</sup> or *kawaii* parameters. This helps to delineate an emerging, ‘indigenously’ western, variant of cute: one typically more Jetsons than Sailor Moon, stylistically speaking, and more ironic or ‘adult’ in sentiment. Recognizing the risk of generalization with such terms as ‘western,’ it should be noted here that sardonic distance from sentimental appeals such as cuteness is often said to distinguish Anglophone cultures more so than Latin ones, with Northern European societies perhaps occupying a middle ground. In such regards, famed cross-cultural theorist Geert Hofstede’s son and collaborator Gert Jan Hofstede links cultural differences in humour, including cuteness and kitsch, to his father’s broader *masculine/feminine* spectrum, which respectively situates Anglophone and Latin regions at either extreme, the former oriented more so towards pragmatism and scepticism, whereas the latter more readily or openly embrace sentimentality and emotionality in general (Hofstede, 2009).

Theoretic discoveries and refinements regarding ‘western cuteness’ will likely also feed into applied communications. Unlike scholars and journalists, advertisers and other communications practitioners never really forgot the ‘softening power’ of cute in western culture, and they are now turning it to ever more, and more effective, uses (Vranica, 2012). Just as western cuteness studies sometimes draws from *kawaii* scholarship,

<sup>4</sup> The subfield is sometimes called *neoteny*, though this term is usually reserved for the condition in which adults retain juvenile physical or psychological characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> “Neoteny: the retention of juvenile features in the adult animal” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.)

but also exists as an older, independent strain, the same applies to the oft-related subfield of 'spokes-character' branding.

However, there has been nearly no intercultural cross-fertilization of character-branding knowledge across regions. Such myopic ethnocentrism is a shortcoming in marketing research generally. Usually, western-focused studies state or suggest universality to their findings – whether from inattention to other markets, or inordinate belief in the westernizing 'convergence' of globalization (deMooij, 2004; Limon, Kahle, & Orth, 2009). On the other hand, all types of *kawaii* studies tend to over-emphasize the uniqueness of this aesthetic, in a form of 'bizarre Japan' Orientalism (or self-orientalizing *nihonjinron*, in the case of Japanese writers). The truth is that mostly nonhuman mascots proliferate everywhere in the world – if even more so in Asia, or more obviously. These anthropomorphic agents probably constitute the main mode of organizational cute communications, though other conveyances abound: "brand name, logo and symbol, slogan, packag[ing] and the like" (Huang, Hu, & Wu, 2013, p. 40).

Western companies were pioneers in mascot communications, which has a history stretching back to the late 1800s, when printing technology freed up the medium, and the rise of big business created a need to simulate personal connections between proprietors and their publics. Many of today's most iconic personified trademarks, such as Tony the Tiger and the Michelin Man, range between fifty and a hundred years in age or more (Callcott & Lee, 1995). And western corporations have not been the only organizations to thereby soften up their stakeholders. Disney's critters very effectively emitted a range of U.S. wartime communications, from propaganda to military training videos. Their efficacy in this respect was largely attributable to the fact that it wasn't until the 1960s that western societies developed today's perception of comics and cartoons as strictly juvenile fare (Raiti, 2007).

However, to some degree, this western distinction between 'adult' and 'children's' media has been a matter of popular and scholarly misperception. Over the postwar decades, adult westerners in many nations did become comparatively inured to cuteness, or indisposed to acknowledge its softening power. And today the aesthetic features less in western organizational communications, especially outside of branding, than is the case in Japan, where *manga* and *anime* mediate all types of institutional content. However, although eclipsed in this regard by their Japanese counterparts, western companies never stopped advertising to adults with a plenitude of cutesy appeals. These affective tactics have continued – widely though in some abatement, and largely unstudied – alongside more distinctively western brand traits such as 'rugged,' 'edgy,' or 'sexy' (cf. Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). The extent to which Japan monopolizes the mode is somewhat overstated, explicitly or through implication, by nearly all commentary on *kawaii* organizational communication.

Among English-speaking countries, an increase in cute advertising, and belated scholarly attention to this tradition, took place in the 1990s. Baby-boomer nostalgia was a factor here (Callcott & Lee, 1995), and the new cuteness was often couched sexily or ironically, in 'retro' or absurdist fashions. As an added influence, it is also at this time that *kawaii* overtook North America and Europe, spearheaded, in particular, by Sanrio as the company capitalized on the same blurring of childhood and adult markets that it pioneered in Japan (McVeigh, 2000b). Many U.S. technology firms rival any Japanese institution in cute communications; their intention is plainly to persuade stakeholders – customers but also the public more broadly, if not government regulators as well – that they're hastening a 'warm and fuzzy' future. Aside from Telus's adorable animals, Apple's apple, or Android's R2D2-esque mascot – round, awkward, babylike – consider the strenuous output of silly company names: *Google*, *Twitter*, *Bing*, *Yelp*, *Hulu*, etc. Tellingly, the first prototype of Google's driverless car looked "like a cross between a Volkswagen Beetle and a Disneyland ride" (Garber, 2014, para. 4).

During the 2000s another escalation of cute communications ensued, though lay business writers have taken note of the trend before any published organizational-communication scholarship. The increasing centrality of visual communications leads management consultant Dan Pink to predict as "inevitable" (cited in Clark, 2008, ques. 2) that western organizations will more widely adopt Japan's use of cartoon and comic mediums for

persuasive and informative communications. *Maclean's* senior culture writer Anne Kingston (2014) notes that Generation Y has become old enough for nostalgia marketing, so that cartoon advertisement and art, recalling the halcyon 1980s and 1990s, is undergoing now-cyclical resurgence. *Wall Street Journal's* advertising editor, Suzanne Vranica (2012), attributes today's trend in mascot messaging to the communicative affordances and constraints of social media. The platform's normative informality means 'soft sells' become imperative, while its interactivity animates avatars with compelling 'virtual personality' as they engage in cheerful dialogue with loyal or angry fans.

There are organizational risks as well as benefits to implementing comics, cartoons, mascots, and other cute communications. The idiosyncrasies of digital and social-media communications are one major strategic factor. A traditional benefit of fictional trade mascots, especially ones created for the sponsor organization, lies in the control over their image that strategists can maintain. Contrariwise, human spokespeople, especially famous ones, have a tendency to engage in brand-tarnishing real-life behaviour (Callcott & Lee, 1995). This equation has been altered with double-edged consequence by new media, owing to its audience-participatory capacities. Popular corporate cartoon characters often become the basis for fan art, a genre that increasingly serves for companies as 'user-generated' viral marketing, or is even crowdsourced for product design purposes (Brustein, 2014; Marrs, 2014). However, fan-rendered mascots can take on lives of their own veering sharply from organizational interests. A search-engine scan of images for "Erin from E-surance," with the 'safe settings' off, will reveal one reason why this company retired its sexy-cute, secret-agent spokes-cartoon (Edwards, 2010). In E-surance ads, Erin has been replaced with human nerds and old ladies – also cute, but less likely fodder for fan-art sexual fantasies.

A more fundamental challenge in strategizing cute communications lies in hitting just the right emotive pitch for the moving target of contemporary audiences. Perhaps especially at work, westerners remain less predisposed than Asians to cute appeals, or at least more loath to admit their charms (the persistently viral near-ubiquity of 'cat videos' notwithstanding). Outside of certain fandoms, the *kawaii* aesthetic cannot simply be transplanted wholesale, much less for the full catalogue of organizational communications: PR, internal communications, manuals, nation branding, etc. (notwithstanding Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau's character-emblazoned socks; Corsillo, 2017). However, despite recent business-press interest in *kawaii* research (e.g., Bender, 2012), there remains nearly no organizational cuteness scholarship conducted in light of current, non-Asian and cross-cultural contexts. This is clearly a gap in knowledge that needs filling, both from the perspective of organizational communicators and that of their stakeholder audiences, external or internal.

Though organizational-communication research has yet to engage the subject, many cultural cognoscenti have augured an imminent 'age of cute' in the west, or argued that this effervescence has already established itself as one of "the dominant aesthetics of the twenty-first century" (McIntyre, 2015, p. 423; see also Kretowicz, 2014; and Wittkower, 2009). Its emerging or ensconced ubiquity is pointed to by a panoply of markers: the normalization of pink colours in menswear (Baker, 2012); *kawaii* simultaneously establishing mainstream and underground cachet (Kretowicz, 2014); a 'brony' fan culture of men from all walks of life who adore the 'My Little Pony' cartoon (Wigler, 2014); the cupcake craze (Emery, 2014); children's movies with in-jokes for parents (McKay, 2011); adults who read children's books (Graham, 2014); the fact that an *emoji*-only social site has been launched (Kingston, 2014); an ever-expanding number of cute little cars (Patton, 2008); and perhaps above all, the internet's infinitude of kittens, lolcats, and babies.

Just as many reasons are proposed for this pop-cultural paradigm shift. Wittkower (2009) ascribes a central role to technology, especially internet communications. In terms of communication and interpretation strategies, producers and consumers alike infuse the tech sector's organizational messages and machines with cuteness, as a gambit to allay anxiety over socio-technological change. Another factor involves the increased prevalence and prestige of amateur media production. This DIY ethos accords more with cuteness, in all its shameless imperfections, than with the beauty of professional design. Other media characteristics – the visual

nature of much communication; the rapidity of information flow; the 'pull-oriented' autonomy and anonymity of consumer choice – orient our age toward a “desublimation” of taste and thought, channeled via simple aesthetics and immediate affects: sexual, horrific, slapstick, and cute.

Others point to broader societal shifts. Perhaps above all, there is the increasing economic centrality of women and girls, and their growing role as consumers, producers, and circulators of new media (Luce, 2014). What McVeigh (2000b) pointed out of Hello Kitty's reign in Japan now holds true for kitsch in the west: it appeals to females as 'cute' when they are girls, as 'cool' when they are adolescent, and then as 'camp' to women. As for men, most western metrosexuals don't embrace cuteness *per se*, but they are modeling a masculinity that is consanguine with cuteness in its 'post-machismo' (Ibsen, 2013).

Recessionary trends are also diagnosed. Today's trend towards valuing small possessions – from dwellings and cars to pets (“Twenty Trends,” n.d., item 5) – can perforce set the stage for an aesthetic of cuteness. When Generation Y isn't living in petite apartments, they are often nesting with their parents for longer than their precursors did. Some postulate that this delayed independence fosters a “child/adult liminality” (McIntyre, 2015, p. 425) that helps account for protracted receptivity to juvenilia such as Harry Potter fiction. More sympathetically, many such critics also posit that the cuteness aesthetic, in its basal or absolute superficiality, represents a rejection of adult reality rooted in Millennial hopelessness: “That's the revealing duality of this 21st century incarnation of 'cute' – it identifies the emptiness in excess that is as true as it is ultimately terrifying” (Kretowicz, 2014, para. 12).

A 'cuteness backlash' stirs in some western media (e.g., Windolf, 2009), along similar ideological fault lines to those arrayed against Japanese *kawaii*: Conservatives shudder or snort at the immaturity of it all, while progressives bemoan 'cute culture's' consumerist and escapist retreat from political engagement (e.g., McIntyre, 2015). Yet the current enthusiasm for kitsch and schmaltz has its defenders, of differing political stripes. They herald the sensibility as a bellwether for hopeful societal shifts – toward a revitalized idealism; away from the bitterness and prurience of so much mass media, and even from the western tradition of 'binary thinking' that erects rigid aesthetic, moral and cultural boundaries between people (e.g., Allison, 2006; Napier, 2007; Pratt, 2014).

Management guru and Ted Talks star Dan Pink predicts as “inevitable” (cited in Clark, 2008, ques. 2) the Japan-inspired embrace by western organizations of cartoon and comic communications for persuasion and information-transmission. If Pink proves prophetic, strategic communicators from political campaigners to advertisers will have to weigh all the considerations just discussed: cultural globalization; the affordances and constraints of social media and other new multimedia; a persistent irony in the western (especially Anglo) adoption of cuteness; the nascent norms and anxieties of Millennials; a risk of pop-cultural backlash against cuteness overplayed or poorly executed. Audience analysis both quantitative and qualitative will be key, and organizations will need to sense and follow emergent societal tendencies rather than seeking to transplant *kawaii tout court*. To the extent they are successful in such regards, it is to be hoped they reflect and render real the most hopeful aspects, latencies, and possibilities of *kawaii*-slash-cuteness as a new *lingua franca* – one that softens our natures without softening our resolve.

#### 4. Conclusion – Future Directions

This paper has theorized *kawaii* and cuteness as a mode of organizational communication strategy, offering a conceptualization or reconceptualization of these concept-phenomena for both practitioners and those seeking to understand or critique such mass media. In Sections 1 and 2, *kawaii* was discussed as a broad cultural descriptor, focusing afterward upon ideological hostilities to the sensibility, both right-conservative and left-progressive, and both Japanese and western. A defense of the aesthetic was offered, partly on grounds of its limited influence upon actual behaviour, and partly on grounds that this influence has positive organizational

and societal impacts, such as improved attention to tasks or to road signs. Coverage of Japanese design and behavioural research into *kawaii* effects segued into Section 3's overview of related or cognate non-Japanese studies, from Lorenz's 1940s *Kindenschema* findings to character-branding management scholarship. These paper sections and literature reviews supported Section 3's subsequent argument that western organizations have successfully strategized 'cute communications' for longer, and continue to do so more widely, than is commonly recognized. Section 3 concluded by addressing arguments that cuteness, in many ways influenced by *kawaii*, is a burgeoning pop-cultural sensibility in the west, if not a profounder societal paradigm shift, to which organizational communicators and their commentators must attend.

The fascinating questions and thorny issues involving *kawaii* or cuteness and surrounding sociocultural contexts demand more comparative cross-national study. Globalization's entwinements ensure that only such expansion of scope will prepare researchers to pinpoint the universals truly in play, rather than formulating generalizations based solely on purported peculiarities of Japan or the Millennials. And this enterprise requires research that is more empirically grounded, qualitatively and quantitatively, than the speculation mostly on offer, however important the best of such theory-honing work has been. It is true that psychological and design research has made decades of headway in the science of cuteness – but with little if any outside insight from sociological or intercultural knowledge. For the most part this work experiments upon western or Japanese subjects in contextual isolation, a limitation some researchers highlight (e.g., Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, & Moriya, 2012). Such analytic gaps are even more pronounced in organizational-communication research, which has not begun to concentrate on the softening power of cute communications in any regional milieu, much less through intercultural lenses. This paper has sought to establish the need for such a focus, given the increasing cutesiness of corporate communications.

The questions to be answered are many, both for scholars imparting advice to organizational communicators, and for those more interested in examining this softening power from the standpoint of organizational audiences, internal or external. Clearly the subject is understudied, but exactly how widespread are cute communications already? What types of western stakeholders are present or potential targets, and with what institutional genres beyond advertisement: public relations, internal communications, instruction or safety manuals, retail or workspace layout, product design, foreign affairs? Will ambient cuteness make us more productive, more pliant, more attentive, more altruistic? To date, the only empirical research incorporating such audience and format specifics has involved Japanese subjects, and these are mostly female university students. How cute can communicators get with workers and with men, of different ages and nationalities? For each audience and client demographic, what is the right tactical admixture of sentiment, nostalgia, irony, and sex in cute communication strategy? And of course, for thinkers of a critical bent, there will be a countervailing directive: to devise and disseminate resistant strategies of *interpretation*, and *counter-messaging*, athwart attempts by authorities and businesses to seem adorable though they are not.

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