

A Behavioral Science Framework for Understanding *Kawaii*

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Abstract

Kawaii is a key concept that characterizes modern Japanese culture. It is often translated into English as “cute,” but a subtle difference of nuance exists between the two words. Although many books and articles have been published on this subject, these discussions are mostly limited to the fields of humanities and sociology. In this paper, I put forward a framework for research on *kawaii* from a behavioral science perspective. First, I provide an overview of *kawaii*, including a summary of its dictionary meaning, history, and current usage. Then, I report the results of three surveys of Japanese university students about their attitudes toward the word *kawaii* and *kawaii* things. Based on these findings and past research, I propose a two-layer model of *kawaii*. This model postulates that the basis of *kawaii* is a positive emotion related to the social motivation of protecting and nurturing others, which originally stems from affection toward babies and infants. It also assumes that this culture-independent, biological trait has been amplified by certain characteristics of Japanese culture. I conclude by discussing future directions for behavioral science research of *kawaii*.

Key words: *Cuteness, Emotion, Cognition, Baby schema, Cultural differences*

Introduction

It has been argued that *kawaii* is a culture characteristic of Japan (Kinsella, 1995; Masubuchi, 1994; Yomota, 2006). For instance, *Hello Kitty* is a typical *kawaii* character created in Japan in 1974, and still beloved by many people across borders and generations (Belson & Bremner, 2004). In February 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan designated three young leaders who were active in the field of fashion as *Kawaii Ambassadors* to promote understanding and propagation of Japanese pop culture around the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2009). *Kawaii* is now officially recognized and used as a foreign policy tool.

This paper provides a research framework for understanding *kawaii* from a behavioral science perspective. Although many journalists and academics have considered the reasons why the *kawaii* culture has developed in Japan, these discussions are mostly based on subjective impressions and qualitative analyses, and therefore tend to emphasize cultural specificity rather than commonality. Like other everyday expressions, *kawaii* has a unique connotation that is not fully translatable into other languages. However, even if it is strongly influenced by culture, *kawaii* is primarily a psychological and affective individual experience.

In this paper, I provide an overview of *kawaii*, including a summary of its dictionary meaning, history, and current usage. I then report the results of three surveys of Japanese university students on *kawaii*. Based on these findings and past research, I propose a two-layer model of *kawaii* that combines a biological basis and cultural determinants.

The meaning and history of *kawaii*

As a starting point, the dictionary meaning of *kawaii* is cited from the second edition of *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (2000) (my translation):

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).

Kawaii appeared as an altered form of *kawayui* in the Edo era (ca. 17-19 centuries). The origin of *kawayui* is

thought to be *kawa* (face) *-hayu* (flushing) *-shi* (adjectival suffix), which meant “ashamed” or “to feel like blushing due to a twinge of conscience.” In the Middle Ages (ca. 12-16 centuries), *kawayui* was used in the sense of pitiable or piteous, with the connotation of something that one “could not stand to look at.” By the late Middle Ages, the term was also used to suggest the sense of affection that derived from feelings of pity toward weaker members of society, like women and children. In the late Edo era, the connotation of pity disappeared and only the sense of love and affection remained. Moreover, *kawaii/kawayui* came to be used for describing lovely small things as an attribute adjective. In principle, *kawaii* signifies the affection of superiors toward inferiors. However, the meaning of a word varies across historical ages. Nowadays, *kawaii* is also used for describing some elderly people as a kind of compliment.

Next, I made use of a large Japanese language database, *NTT Database Series on Lexical Properties of Japanese* (1999–2000). In the corpus of newspaper articles published between 1985 and 1998, *kawaii* was used 2263 times—much less frequently than related words, *utsukushii* (meaning “beautiful,” 8094 times) and *kirei* (“neat,” 6147 times). In contrast, standard word familiarity ratings (1 = low to 7 = high) included in the same database showed that *kawaii* (6.438 and 6.625 for spoken and written words, respectively) was rated as more familiar than *utsukushii* (6.281 and 6.531) and *kirei* (6.125 and 5.906 or 5.156 depending on the kanji characters used). Results suggest that *kawaii* is a word that does not appear very frequently in official print publications but is quite familiar in daily life.

Surveys of Japanese students

To obtain more specific data, I asked a total of 685 Japanese university students in introductory psychology or brain science classes to complete three questionnaires. The first survey (conducted in July 2008) addressed the nuance of the word *kawaii*. Figure 1 shows the mean rating scores for three words, *kawaii*, *kirei*, and *kakkoi* (which means “cool”), on 13 rating scales. Valid responses were obtained from 169 students (71 men, 98 women, 18–21 years old, response rate = 88%). Because there were no gender differences in the rating scores of *kawaii*, male and female respondents’ data were collapsed. For each adjective pair, the mean rating scores were compared by two-tailed paired *t* tests. Relative

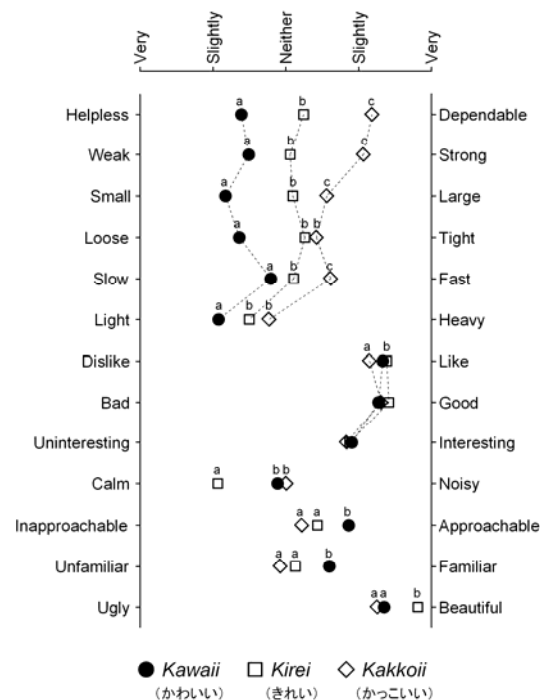


Figure 1. Nuances of three related words ($N = 169$). Means with different characters differ significantly, $p < .05$ (comparison-wise $p < .0013$).

characteristics of the three words can be summarized as follows. *Kawaii* is helpless, weak, small, loose, slow, lightweight, approachable, and familiar. *Kirei* is calm and beautiful. *Kakkoi* is dependable, strong, large, and fast. There were no differences in the good–bad and interesting–uninteresting dimensions.

The second survey (July 2008) asked students whether they found the following four things *kawaii*: human babies, animals, adults, and everyday objects. Respondents who answered *yes* to respective questions were further asked to give concrete examples. Figure 2 shows the percentage of the students who answered that they

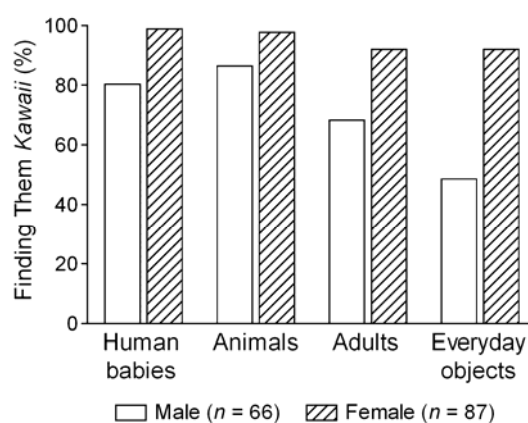


Figure 2. Percentage of students who found certain things *kawaii*.

Table 1
Japanese university students' attitudes toward *kawaii* things and beliefs about *kawaii*-ness

Questions	Male (n = 173)		Female (n = 190)		d	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
1. I'm interested in <i>kawaii</i> things (humans, animals, or designs).	4.01	1.00	4.48	0.69	0.56	.000 *
2. I like <i>kawaii</i> things.	4.00	1.03	4.49	0.73	0.55	.000 *
3. I'm sensitive to <i>kawaii</i> things.	3.23	1.14	3.62	0.94	0.37	.000 *
4. <i>Kawaii</i> things draw my attention.	3.71	1.04	4.19	0.83	0.51	.000 *
5. I get excited when I come across <i>kawaii</i> things.	3.59	1.14	4.01	0.98	0.40	.000 *
6. I feel better when I have contact with <i>kawaii</i> things.	4.06	0.89	4.23	0.75	0.20	.052
7. I feel comforted when I'm around <i>kawaii</i> things.	3.90	1.01	4.36	0.74	0.53	.000 *
8. I often use the word <i>kawaii</i> .	2.69	1.26	3.87	1.05	1.03	.000 *
9. I often judge a thing based on whether it is <i>kawaii</i> or not	2.51	1.14	2.84	1.06	0.30	.005
10. I believe there are gender differences in responses to <i>kawaii</i> -ness	4.45	0.87	4.32	0.78	0.16	.135
11. I believe there are age differences in responses to <i>kawaii</i> -ness	4.15	0.94	4.08	0.91	0.07	.530
12. I believe <i>kawaii</i> -ness is a sense of values that is peculiar to Japanese culture	2.39	1.10	2.58	0.94	0.18	.084
13. I believe things called <i>kawaii</i> have something in common, even if the things are different (children, women, animals, and designs)	3.28	1.17	3.43	0.93	0.14	.178

Note. 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Effect sizes of gender differences are shown by Cohen's *d*.

**p* < .05 after correction (comparison-wise *p* < .0038)

found these things *kawaii*. Valid responses were obtained from 153 students (66 men, 87 women, 18–22 years old, valid response rate = 78%). For all objects, female students gave a positive answer more frequently than male students (Fisher's exact probability test, *p* < .05).

The third survey (January and April 2009) dealt with attitudes and beliefs related to *kawaii*. Valid responses were obtained from 363 students (173 men, 190 women, 18–22 years old, response rate = 96%). Table 1 shows the question items and the mean scores of male and female students. Gender differences were tested by two-tailed *t* tests. Results can be summarized as follows. As for the attitudinal questions (1 to 9), respondents had a strong interest in and preference for *kawaii* things. They thought they were sensitive to, drawn to, and excited by *kawaii* things. They also believed *kawaii* things brought positive feelings of comfort. Generally, female students gave higher scores on these questions than male students. The largest difference was found in the frequency of the use of the word *kawaii*. As for the belief-related questions (10 to 13), respondents believed that there were gender and age differences in responses to *kawaii*-ness (in Japanese, *kawaisa*, which is the noun derived from *kawaii*). In contrast, they did not believe that *kawaii*-ness is a sense of values that is peculiar to Japanese culture. Although the term *kawaii* is applied to various objects, speakers are not necessary aware of the commonality among them. No gender differences were found in belief-related questions.

In summary, the survey results confirm the idea that *kawaii* is a familiar word with a positive meaning. Interestingly, men and women differ in responses to *kawaii*. Although there are no gender differences in

understanding *kawaii* at a conceptual level, female students are more positive and sensitive to *kawaii* at attitudinal and behavioral levels.

A two-layer model of *kawaii*

Because the meaning of *kawaii* varies according to generations and social groups, it is difficult to understand *kawaii* by the general characteristics, such as “smallness” and “roundness,” which are common in the objects we usually find *kawaii*. We experience *kawaii* through concrete objects we encounter in daily life. The instinctive feeling of *kawaii* at that moment is the starting point and what we want to investigate. Therefore, *kawaii* should be treated as an emotion. If *kawaii* is an emotion, it must be based on biology. On the other hand, the reason why the *kawaii* culture has developed so prominently in Japan needs to be answered. To meet these requirements, I propose a two-layer model of *kawaii*, assuming that certain biological responses come to the forefront when society allows and encourages them.

Because babies are typical *kawaii* things, the basis of *kawaii* can be seen as the affection toward infants. It is known that common tendencies exist in behavioral responses to the young across cultures and species. Lorenz (1943) proposed *Kindchenschema* (“baby schema” or “babyishness”), which is a set of physical features, such as (1) a large head relative to body size, (2) a high and protruding forehead, (3) large eyes below the horizontal midline of the skull, (4) short and thick extremities, (5) a plump body shape, (6) soft body surface, and (7) chubby cheeks. Living things with these features are perceived as cute, and tend to receive

approach, nurturance, and protection behaviors from other individuals. Empirical research has been conducted since the 1960s (e.g., Hückstedt, 1965; Glocker et al., 2009), based on Lorenz's assumption that the responses to baby schema are innate processes and are released by elemental features of the stimuli.

On the other hand, I propose *amae* (Doi, 1981) and *chizimi shikou* (Lee, 1984) as factors that characterize the Japanese culture of *kawaii*. *Amae* is a behavior or motivation to gain others' love and acceptance. From this perspective, the classical research framework of baby schema appears to be superficial, because it basically envisages a one-directional relationship from a strong protector to a helpless infant. In contrast, Japanese people are familiar with *amae*, so that they also see the situation from the infant's perspective. Consequently, the viewer is aware of not only the superficial protector–protectee relationship, but also of the relationship in which the viewer is/was also protected by others, which forms a convoluted structure consisting of the self who feels *kawaii* and the self being felt *kawaii*. By the same token, being *kawaii* can be an *amae* strategy. While Lorenz (1943) assumed that baby schema automatically triggered the viewer's responses, *kawaii* in Japan is more rightly understood in an interactive context.

The second factor, *chizimi shikou*, means the orientation toward miniatures, which is a tradition of Japanese culture. According to Lee (1984), Japanese people have a deeper attachment for things (especially, small and touchable things) than, for example, Korean and Chinese people. I would argue that this propensity helps to broaden the scope of *kawaii* from living things to nonliving artifacts.

Conclusion

The two-layer model of *kawaii* postulates that the basis of *kawaii* is a positive emotion related to the social motivation of protecting and nurturing others, which originally stems from affection toward babies and infants. It also assumes that this culture-independent, biological trait has been amplified by certain characteristics of Japanese culture. Using this framework, I am now planning several empirical studies to address (1) the similarities and differences between the feeling of *kawaii* toward babies and the feeling of *kawaii* toward nonliving things, (2) the differences between the *kawaii* feeling and other positive feelings, (3) the behavioral changes that

occur after encountering *kawaii* things, and (4) the cultural and individual differences in the scope of *kawaii* and in attitudes toward *kawaii* things.

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