Yuniya Kawamura

KAWAII-OLOGY

Constructing Japanese Cute Aesthetics and Identity through *Ukiyo-e*, Manga, and Harajuku Fashion

Fashion and Personal Style Studies

Collection Editor
JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

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In memory of Joanne B. Eicher (1930–2026)

Abstract

Kawaii-ology is the study of "kawaii," a Japanese term translated into English as cute and adorable. This book traces the socio-cultural history of the concept, phenomenon, and practice of kawaii in Japan, which is not merely an adjective used to describe children but an ideology that shapes one's social and personal identity, aesthetic expression, and lifestyle at both micro and macro levels. It examines how images of cuteness were introduced and how cute culture was established and disseminated through paintings during the Edo period (1603–1868), manga and anime characters, plush toy mascots, capsule toys, and Harajuku fashion.

Key words

Japanese kawaii, cute aesthetics, anime and manga, *Ukiyo-e*, Edo, Lolita, Decora, Harajuku, Yuru-chara, mascots

Note on language

This book contains a number of Japanese words and phrases because the term "kawaii" originated in Japan. All Japanese words unfamiliar to English speakers are italicized, while "kawaii" is not italicized because it appears in English dictionaries and is used in English conversations and dialogue.

In addition, the Japanese language employs numerous honorifics to demonstrate respect and hierarchy, such as "chan" and "kun," which indicate seniority, endearment, and affection. "Chan" frequently appears in discussions of kawaii culture, as it is commonly used to refer to young, sweet, and adorable girls or infants. For male references, "kun" is used to denote young boys or individuals who are younger and subordinate in social hierarchy. For example, *Fukka-chan*, a mascot character associated with Fukaya City in Saitama Prefecture, refers to a young female character, whereas *Gunma-kun*, representing Gunma Prefecture, implies a young male character.

Similarly, within the context of Japanese naming conventions, the standard format entails placing the family name before the given name. For example, the artist Katsushika Hokusai has "Katsushika" as his surname and "Hokusai" as his personal name (see Chapter 1). I shall refer to individuals by their given names if that is the manner in which they are commonly recognized, such as Yumeji for Takehisa Yumeji (see Chapter 2).

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Introduction

Kawaii-ology, a term coined by the author, denotes the scholarly investigation of "kawaii," a Japanese term translated into English as "cute" and "adorable," which embodies childlike innocence and purity. Japan has established itself as a leader in popular culture by creating and disseminating charming, lovable anime and manga characters, thereby commodifying and commercializing kawaii culture. This cultural phenomenon has been propagated globally through fashion, music, and entertainment, thereby providing psychological comfort and fostering optimism among youth worldwide. Like other forms of fashion and aesthetic expression, kawaii can be analyzed on both micro and macro levels (Kawamura, 2023). This publication traces the historical development of the concept, phenomenon, and definitions of kawaii in Japan, where it functions not merely as an adjective describing children but also as a philosophical ideology influencing social and personal identity. This influence is frequently expressed through external appearance and stylistic choices. Kawaii manifests as an aesthetic form of self-expression that many girls and young women aspire to achieve. Their makeup, hair, attire, footwear, socks, bags, accessories, food, voice, attitude, performance, and demeanor are collectively curated to cultivate a cohesive kawaii look and lifestyle. The characteristics of kawaii include: rounded or oval shapes with circular edges; the first ten colors in the Mansell Colors Chart, a globally standardized color system; small shapes in comparison to larger ones; and tactile surfaces that are soft rather than hard (Ohkura, 2019).

This introductory chapter investigates the etymological origins of the term "kawaii" in Japanese and examines the historical context of its first appearance in English-language discourse. The term is predominantly associated with females and young women; however, it is seldom utilized as a research subject by educators and scholars, despite the frequent exploration of femininity, beauty, and aesthetic expression within women's and gender studies. Nonetheless, this paradigm has undergone a gradual transformation over the past decade, as scholars in the United States and Europe have increasingly emphasized the practice of kawaii, often exemplified in anime and manga dialogue. Kawaii is a multifaceted term, layered with nuanced meanings that serve to empower and inspire youth worldwide.

The content of this publication is compiled from various sources, including corporate websites such as Sanrio and each Prefecture in Japan; digitized historical archives and databases, such as the image bank at the National Diet Library and the Tokyo National Museum; interviews conducted by the author with individuals involved in kawaii culture; and summaries of content from the author's previous publications, such as *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (Kawamura, 2012; 2025a) and *Sebastian Masuda* (Kawamura, 2025b).

The etymological origin of kawaii and its development

Rea Amit proposes that kawaii culture should not be restricted to its contemporary connotation as a youth subculture and clarifies that the origins of kawaii trace back to the *Makura no Sōshi*, a classic work of Japanese literature written by the court lady Sei

Shōnagon in the early eleventh century. He further explains that small, fragile objects, a need to protect someone, and an allusion to coquetry have all helped refine the unique aesthetic to which this word refers (2012, p. 174).

A term that most closely matches today's use of kawaii dates to the Heian period (794–1185 A.D.), when "kao-wa-yushi" referred to an embarrassed facial expression (Yomota, 2006). In the twelfth century, the term evolved into "kawa-yushi," defined as both pretty and pitiful, and later became "kawayui." During the Edo period (1603–1868), the verb "kawai-garu" (to treat something or someone kawaii with affection) and the adjective "kawai-rashii" (with kawaii-like qualities) appeared, and both carry today's meaning of kawaii (Amit, 2012, pp. 178–179). By the Meiji period (1868–1912), the term kawaii was commonly used in daily conversations. "Kawayushi" appeared in dictionaries printed in the Taishō era (1912–1926) up until 1945. In dictionaries printed between the war and around 1970, "kawayushi" changed to "kawayui," but the meaning of the word remained the same. Kawaii is a derivation of a term whose principal meaning was "shy" or "embarrassed," and secondary meanings were "pathetic," "vulnerable," "darling," "lovable," and "small" (Kinsella, 1995, pp. 221–222).

In the twenty-first century, kawaii contains multiple layers and dimensions, having been developed and evolved into various forms through its integration with other terms. Influenced by popular culture, kawaii is incorporated into additional adjectives to generate new variants that transcend mere childlike cuteness. These new terms often emerge organically within dialogues in anime and manga, social media platforms, and subcultural

communities among youth, who create their own slang and idioms. These terms convey subtle distinctions of kawaii (Table 0.1).

Expressions such as *kimoi* (a slang term for creepy) and *gurotesuku* (grotesque) carry negative connotations, but by combining them with kawaii, these negative elements are embraced and transformed into something positive and charming. Therefore, *kimo-kawa* and *guro-kawa* blend negative and positive elements while softening the negativity to some degree. Similarly, *yami-kawa*, a combination of *yami* (sickly) and kawaii, derives from a youth subculture called *Men-hera*, a community of girls

Table 0.1: Different types of kawaii

Type of kawaii	Combination of two words
Batchi-kawa	*Batchiri* (perfect) and kawaii
Busu-kawa	*Busu* (ugly) and kawaii
Guro-kawa	Grotesque and kawaii
Kakko-kawa	*Kakkoii* (cool) and kawaii
Kimo-kawa	*Kimoi* (creepy) and kawaii
Kire-kawa	*Kirei* (beautiful) and kawaii
Kowa-kawa	*Kowai* (scary) and kawaii
Loli-kawa	*Lolita* (very girly) and kawaii
Me-kkawa	*Meccha* (extremely) and kawaii
Oni-kawa	*Oni* (super) and kawaii
Oto-kawa	*Otona* (mature adult) and kawaii
Tsuyo-kawa	*Tsuyoi* (tough) and kawaii
Yami-kawa	*Yami* (sickly) and kawaii
Yume-kawa	*Yume* (dreamy) and kawaii
Yuru-kawa	*Yurui* (laid back) and kawaii
Zuru-kawa	*Zurui* (cheeky) and kawaii

Source: Compiled from various sources

with mental health issues who often come from complex families and upbringings; instead of rejecting their depressive mental state, they encourage themselves to embrace it by adding kawaii so they can accept and recognize their unfortunate surroundings, and as a result, *yami-kawa*, along with its styles, becomes a therapeutic concept. Furthermore, *kowa-kawa*, a combination of *kowai* (scary) and kawaii, is a concept with a mischievous connotation introduced by Takashi Murakami, a world-famous Japanese artist, who designed the Ursa Bear with fangs. There are also terms that pair two seemingly opposite concepts, such as *otona* (a mature adult) and kawaii (innocent, untarnished characteristics associated with young children), to create a new term, *oto-kawa*.

Kawaii as an English term

Due to the widespread international popularity of anime and manga, the term "kawaii" has been integrated into the English language, alongside other Japanese lexical items such as emoji, futon, teriyaki, and karaoke. The term kawaii has been included in English dictionaries for an extended period. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, kawaii is defined as an adjective meaning "cute, especially in a manner considered characteristic of Japanese popular culture"; it is also described as "charming, darling, and ostentatiously adorable" (Oxford English Dictionary). The term first appeared in the dictionary in 2011, indicating its considerable usage within the English-speaking world for at least 15 years. Similarly, the Cambridge English Dictionary states that kawaii relates to Japanese culture or a style of cuteness and signifies the quality of being pleasant and attractive.

The term first appeared in *The New York Times* as early as 1965, in an article titled "When East Meets West Japanese Call It Kawaii," which discussed American designer Helen Lee's children's wear collection in Tokyo and the Japanese audience at Mitsukoshi Department Store, whispering to each other, "kawaii, kawaii" (Chapin, 1965). Similarly, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article titled "Contemporary Kawaii Is Flourishing – There is No Japanese Word for Cloying" (1986), implying that kawaii is so cute that it becomes distasteful. During that period, no Western author could have foreseen that this term or concept, originally and exclusively Japanese, would become so widely adopted and embraced in everyday English discourse.

Sebastian Masuda, widely acknowledged as the godfather of Harajuku's kawaii culture and known for his flamboyant attire, explains that "kawaii is a microcosm of Japanese culture where people can create their own closed universe" (Al-Jamie, 2024). This concept pertains to the construction of an enclosed personal world, manifested not solely through tangible objects but also as a psychological and emotional state that influences an individual's lifestyle, perspectives, and attitudes toward life.

Kawaii as a micro-level identity in a macro institutional context

Given that identities are frequently regarded as micro-level constructs and as personal and subjective, they are often believed to be constructed by individuals themselves. Nonetheless, a macro-level analysis remains essential, whereby identities or a sense of self exist within broader societal structures and contexts.

Consequently, it becomes necessary to examine how large-scale macro elements influence our identities, as the micro and macro levels are invariably interconnected, making their separation challenging given their mutual dependence. External and environmental factors significantly shape our identities. It is further asserted that both individual and institutional efforts contribute to the formation of kawaii identities, which encompass behaviors such as wearing kawaii fashion, carrying kawaii mascots, reading kawaii manga, watching kawaii anime, consuming kawaii food, and composing kawaii Japanese letters. Although some criticisms suggest that adopting kawaii fashion infantilizes one's sense of self and impedes personal development, it is crucial to analyze the social framework within which kawaii is commodified and commercialized. Moreover, kawaii also manifests as a subcultural identity through participation in subcultures, where individuals maintain and share their kawaii identities with peers, thus rendering it social and relational.

Studies of kawaii as an emerging academic field

Scholars and academics have traditionally investigated femininity, adornment, self-presentation, and female beauty among mature women. Nonetheless, they have rarely explored the social significance and phenomenon of cuteness, which is predominantly associated with infants and children and often regarded as lacking substantial intellectual consideration. In addition, the attributes of cuteness in women are frequently a focal point of contentious feminist politics and debates, resulting in its marginalization within scholarly circles. However, this paradigm is

gradually evolving, as popular culture, subcultural studies, fashion studies, and anime and manga research have attained considerable prominence within academic discourse. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in interest and scholarly attention directed toward the phenomenon, practice, and conceptualization of kawaii. Cuteness can be studied from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including psychology, sociology, history, business, marketing, gender studies, media studies, and fashion studies. These varied perspectives also provoke insightful and compelling questions about cuteness, highlighting that numerous layers and dimensions remain to be explored and analyzed within "kawaii-ology," a term the author suggests.

Sharon Kinsella is one of the first Western scholars to focus on Japan's cute culture. She wrote an article, "Cuties in Japan" (1995), in which she explored cuteness in handwriting, food, goods, and clothing. She discussed the commodification of cuteness and the subcultural impact of young women's fashion trends, explaining that cute styles are notions of childhood as an entirely separate, and hence unmaligned, pure sphere of human life. She also noted that the general belief that childhood is another world, in some ways an ideal world, has been the dominant perception of childhood throughout the developed world for most of the twentieth century (Kinsella, 1995, p. 241).

In her *WIRED* magazine essay "Cute, Inc." (1999), Mary Roach examined the phenomenon of cuteness from a business perspective. Kawaii has become an influential marketing force, appealing to individuals' desire to nurture and care for cute items that evoke positive psychological responses. Ordinary everyday

objects adorned with cute motifs, such as small animals, ribbons, candies, macarons, and flowers, are psychologically appealing to consumers. Anne Allison further elucidates that cuteness entails emotional attachments to imaginary creations or creatures, which resonate with childhood and Japanese traditional culture (2006, pp. 34–35), and that it blurs the boundaries between good and bad, real and fantasy, animal and human within the "cute business" (2006, p. 39).

Merry White provided a cultural explanation of kawaii and conducted a comparative analysis of Japanese and American adolescents, emphasizing that both groups are influenced by their material environments. She noted that Japanese society utilizes kawaii to mitigate the constraints imposed by rigid social norms and to promote a sense of belonging. Conversely, American adolescents endeavor to project images of independence, autonomy, and resistance to their parents' generational authority (1994). Noriko Murai emphasized that kawaii, as a significant social and cultural value, has been influential in the lives of girls and women in Japan since the 1990s and has contributed to the development of *otona-kawaii*. She interpreted kawaii as an expression of female empowerment rather than infantilization (Murai, 2022). Similarly, Sianne Ngai sought to conceptualize kawaii as an aesthetic category and explained that cuteness represents a novel aesthetic emerging from modern capitalist consumerism. She contextualized cuteness within the historical elevation of notions of beauty and the sublime. Although attributes associated with cuteness, such as softness, smallness, and simplicity, may appear ineffectual, they nonetheless exert

substantial influence. She introduced the concept of "the aestheticization of powerlessness" (Ngai, 2005; 2012).

Similarly, Simon May, in his *The Power of Cute* (2019), asserts that cuteness encompasses more than it superficially appears. He cites Mickey Mouse as an example of cuteness and notes that, prior to the Second World War, Mickey was depicted as an "unprincipled go-getter" with malevolent intentions. Postwar, the character was reimagined as a benevolent and gentle emblem of the United States. Consistent with this perspective, May challenges traditional definitions of cuteness characterized by small size, fragility, harmlessness, and helplessness. He writes that cuteness can be cunning, possess deceptive innocence, and be somewhat cheeky, potentially evolving into something more perilous and commanding. He offers a philosophical interpretation, suggesting that cuteness functions as an addictive antidote to the contemporary societal pressures of discovering one's purpose. He contends that cuteness, within a mental and physical framework, provides a sanctuary from uncertainty, vulnerability, and imperfection, and therefore, mature adults often find it difficult to accept. The refuge afforded by cuteness is also described as being comfortable, therapeutic, relaxing, and secure, qualities that attract today's youth.

Christine Yano introduced the term "pink globalization" to describe the multifaceted phenomenon of Japanese kawaii culture, encompassing the widespread distribution and consumption of adorable goods (2009, 2013). She observes that Japan is characterized by pink-clad girls, animated fantasies, and winking Kitty logos, offering a broader social, economic, and political

perspective on Japan's kawaii culture, which the Japanese government employs as a diplomatic soft power to promote Japanese popular culture. Her focus particularly lies on the rise and global appeal of Sanrio's Hello Kitty, which has fostered a multimillion-dollar market (2013). In addition, the government appointed Doraemon, a robotic cat character, as a cartoon ambassador, and designated Hello Kitty as the official tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong in 2008. Moreover, three girls, namely Misako Aoki, Yu Kimura, and Shizuka Fujioka, were appointed as Kawaii Ambassadors of Japan (2009). Sebastian Masuda was also selected as a cultural envoy of Japan and was dispatched to the Netherlands (Kawamura, 2025b). Yano further raises thought-provoking concerns about Japan's portrayal as a childish, superficial nation with a culture lacking substance, questioning whether Hello Kitty merely reinforces a demeaning image of women as cute, quiet, and submissive.

In his article "Cute Studies: An Emerging Field," Joshua Paul Dale identifies the two pillars of cute studies, nature and/or nurture (2017, pp. 7–8), a question that has long resonated in intellectual discourse. He notes that the study of cuteness began by considering a particular synthesis of this binary and asks whether our affinity for cute things is a result of nature or nurture. He suggests that cute studies, as a new academic field, deserve more attention, since they are not taken seriously, and discusses the lack of resources for cute studies. More recently, in *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired Our Brains and Conquered the World* (2023), Dale provides a global approach, differentiates Japanese cuteness from Western ones, and points out that researchers are now looking at cuteness in the Asian region, such as South Korea, Taiwan,

Singapore, and Mainland China, in addition to the Western cute aesthetic (2023). While some writers study cuteness from a feminist perspective and express their concerns, others take a broader, macro approach to it as one of the important socio-economic phenomena sweeping the world.

Outline of the book

This book is organized into four chapters, each chronologically illustrating the significant social phenomena that epitomized Japan's kawaii culture throughout different historical periods. Chapter 1 explores the concept of kawaii as manifested in Japanese paintings and artworks during the Edo period (1603–1868), under the rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate. While many presume that kawaii, as a visual phenomenon disseminated to the general public, is a twentieth-century invention, its historical roots can be traced back to a series of *Ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) and Sumi-e (ink wash paintings) from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. *Ukiyo-e* are woodblock prints illustrating figures, landscapes, and societal lifestyles, among other themes. Notably, *Ukiyo-e* artists attained celebrity status, and their prints functioned as precursor to contemporary photography books. It is less widely known that some *Ukiyo-e* artists produced highly adorable images, characterized by deconstructed or exaggerated lines. For instance, certain artists rendered manga-like sketches of men, women, and creatures, such as dogs, tigers, and frogs. Artists like Nagasawa Rōsetsu (1754–1799) and Maruyama Ōukyo (1733–1795) depicted charming, fluffy puppies using black ink. Likewise, Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), renowned for his "The Great Wave off Kanagawa," also published a collection

titled *Hokusai Manga*. These artists enhanced the depiction of cuteness in individuals and animals, which had not previously been illustrated before the Edo period. Furthermore, *Ukiyo-e* artworks also featured cute kimono prints, accessories, toys, dolls, and candies.

Chapter 2 introduces several Japanese manga and anime artists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912) after Edo, Japan opened its doors to the West, and the Meiji Emperor pushed Japan toward modernization and Westernization. This shift affected the types of girls and young women depicted by artists, as people began to change their dress from kimono to Western-style clothes. It led to the construction of new female identities and a new standard of beauty for Japanese girls. Takehisa Yumeji (1884–1934) drew a collection of cute girls wearing fashionable clothes and called them the Beauties of Yumeji. Nakahara Junichi (1913–1983) designed girls'Western-style clothing and published it in his own fashion magazines. Cute, colorful Western fashion provided hope and optimism to young Japanese women after Japan's devastating defeat in the war against the United States. The manga characters created by Osamu Tezuka (1928–1989) were also cute, with big eyes that did not look Japanese or Asian. He was one of the most influential manga artists of all time. Their works taught young girls how to cultivate cute, elegant identities, which became desirable qualities for young Japanese women at the time. Manga provided an idealized image of a young Japanese woman. This chapter also explores the emergence of *shojō zasshi* (girls' magazines) and manga, which introduced many new artists who continued to depict kawaii girls.