SOFT POWER: 'CUTE CULTURE', A PERSUASIVE STRATEGY IN JAPANESE ADVERTISING

Oana-Maria Bîrlea

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract. The article addresses the ways in which soft power is used in Japanese advertising, both domestic and abroad. After the challenges brought by the end of World War II, Japan finds as a means of recovery the export of a new type of culture, focused on values different from the traditional ones and regains its place through cultural diplomacy (soft power). Having as a starting point this shift from hard (coercive approach) to soft power (persuasive approach) this article intends to explore the concept of *kawaii*, often associated with the new culture engaged in the promotion of nostalgia, disguised as cultural consumption, which promotes vulnerability, cuteness, innocence, purity etc. as values. The objective of this work is to show through different examples the main reasons why this overwhelmingly cute culture gained rapid popularity in Japan and abroad, going so far as to be used even by the government as part of advertising campaigns.

Keywords: soft power, *kawaii* culture, cuteness, Japanese advertising, persuasive strategy, collectivist culture, harmony, *wa*

1. Introduction

The extraordinary ability of the Japanese to adapt foreign elements so that they coexist in harmony (*wa*) with the traditional ones can be observed since the first encounters with Chinese and Indian civilizations (Frenţiu 2017: 208). Starting with

kanji logograms, Buddhist religion, art and culture, from the 6th century onwards, Japan managed to adapt or 'Japanize' elements belonging to different civilizations and, moreover, to build its identity under the idea of 'sacred space' (*shinkoku*) as a direct result of syncretic tradition (Williams 2014: 154-155). In the 9th century, Buddhist priests created the two syllables, hiragana and katakana (*kana*), from Chinese characters to make it easier for people to read and write. Traditional Japanese clothing, the kimono, a symbol of Japanese spirit and values, gastronomic culture (*ramen*, *soba*, *udon*), chopsticks (*hashi*) and other cultural products appeared based on Chinese and Korean models, while still maintaining the spirit of Japanese culture (Kshetry 2008: 30-33). Starting with the Heian period (794–1185) we can talk about the emergence of independent art and culture forms, which mark the features and peculiarities of what is now referred to as 'pure' Japanese aesthetics.

Such cultural exchanges took place not only with the countries in the immediate vicinity, but also with the Western world (Europe and US) in the mid-16th century (≈1543), but it is worth noting that Japanese culture and society suffered many changes without leaving aside traditional values and norms. The first Portuguese missionaries not only managed to promote Christianity in a polytheistic country and to introduce many foreign customs and teachings, but also made the island of 'Giapam' known to the world (ibid.: 39). They opened the horizons of knowledge to the Japanese and contributed significantly to the development of Japanese language and culture. There are Japanese records describing the first trades and cultural exchanges with the *nanbanjin* ('barbarians from the south') and their consequences, while the Portuguese records highlight the curiosity and hospitality with which they were welcomed by the inhabitants of 'Giapam' (ibid.: 62-63).

Another major phase of rapid and intense change is the period between the end of the occupation of the Japanese archipelago by the Allied Powers (1952) and the death of Emperor Hirohito (1989), which signals the end of the Shōwa era (1926–1989). The economic downturn, the hardships of defeat in World War II, and the foreign occupation have forced the nation to reconsider its priorities. So the post-war period, marked by great economic, political and social difficulties brought another period of transition in which 'Giapam' had to adapt quickly in order to keep up with the rest of the world. This time, 'adaptation' meant trying to regain its trust, and the first step was to adopt a pacifist policy. The 'new Japan' was often compared to the legendary Phoenix, being able to regain its place among the great powers by growing at an extraordinary pace and adapting to the demands of the modern world while having traditional principles, values and practices at its core. Rebuilding any nation involves changes in education, politics and management, but in this case the decisive factor that led to the 'Japanese economic miracle' (Dees 1997: xiv) was internal stability. We argue that the geographical isolation, meritocratic system and overall the importance of discipline and obedience perpetuated in the society through Buddhist teachings made it possible to preserve traditional values in the process of modernization. Surprisingly, after World War II, Japan found another way to recover by exporting a new type of culture based on completely different values than traditional ones (e.g. subtlety, profound grace, simplicity) present in arts

like *shodō* (calligraphy), ikebana (flower arrangement) or *nō* theatre, and reclaimed its position through cultural diplomacy (soft power – a persuasive approach, also referred to as cultural diplomacy in certain contexts). Japanese soft power refers to the influence and appeal of Japanese culture, media, and products around the world. It is a concept that gained prominence in the 1990s and has since been widely recognized as a significant aspect of Japan's global presence.

Soft power refers to a nation's ability to shape public opinion and attract others through cultural and social means, rather than through military or economic coercion. One of the key elements of Japanese soft power is the concept of *kawaii*, which translates as 'cute' or 'adorable' in English. *Kawaii* culture has had a profound impact on various aspects of Japanese society, including fashion, entertainment, consumer products, and even social behavior. The popularity of *kawaii* has extended beyond Japan's borders and has become a global phenomenon, and one of the main reasons why this happened is related to the extensive use of cute characters in advertising.

The term 'advertising' is used as in discourse analysis studies, meaning the communication practices and strategies employed by advertisers to promote products, services, or ideas, therefore we will examine the linguistic features, persuasive techniques, rhetorical devices, and visual elements used in advertisements. Social, cultural, and ideological dimensions embedded within advertising discourse are also taken in consideration because of their importance for understanding the ways in which advertising constructs and reflects social meanings, values, and power dynamics within a given society.

In this paper, the term *kawaii* is used to refer to the culture of cuteness in Japan. Following Kinsella's (1995) description, *kawaii* refers to "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances". It is important to note that the meaning of *kawaii*, as opposed to the English concept of 'cute', goes beyond physical appearance and can also refer to the overall atmosphere or to the emotions evoked. Moreover, 'cute' is often associated with children's culture, whereas *kawaii*'s audience is considered to be broader, not limited to a specific age-group. *Kawaii* has become an integral part of Japan's global image, and many Japanese companies and industries have harnessed its appeal to promote their products internationally. Characters like Hello Kitty and Pokémon are key examples of how *kawaii* aesthetics have been successfully marketed worldwide, generating significant economic value for Japan.

Overall, the concept of *kawaii* and its study reflect the multifaceted nature of Japanese soft power. By embracing and exporting *kawaii* culture, Japan has been able to capture the attention and interest of people from different countries, influencing their perceptions of Japanese society and fostering a positive image of the country on the global stage.

Through this paper we intend to explain how cute characters and sweet language surpass their basic, primary function of simply conveying information, both visually and verbally, and have a crucial role in persuading the viewer by 'manipulating' viewer's response through emotional appeal.

2. Soft power and Japanese culture

As mentioned in the introductory part, Japanese advertising has played a significant role in promoting Japanese soft power globally. Several studies have examined the relationship between Japanese advertising strategies and their impact on shaping Japan's image and influence abroad. Japanese pop culture, including anime, manga, and video games, has been a significant driving force behind Japan's soft power. Studies have highlighted how advertising campaigns frequently tap into the popularity of these cultural products to promote Japanese brands and products overseas. The phenomenon of Cool Japan has emerged, where advertisers capitalize on the global appeal of Japanese pop culture icons to enhance the perceived desirability of their offerings.

According to the models proposed by Nye (1992), the new type of power and world order in the 20th century leaves behind the militaristic position and advocates the power of the word and cultural symbols. In this vein, the shift from hard (coercive approach) to soft power (persuasive approach) in Japan is often associated with the new culture engaged in the promotion of nostalgia disguised as cultural consumption, which promotes values such as vulnerability, cuteness, innocence, purity, etc. 'Soft power' refers to a nation's ability to shape the preferences and behaviors of other countries through attraction, persuasion, and cultural influence rather than coercion or force. It relies on intangible assets such as culture, political values, diplomatic efforts, and it is mainly about winning the hearts and minds of others and gaining their voluntary cooperation, whereas 'hard power' refers to a nation's ability to influence others through the use of force, coercion, or economic inducements. It involves the application of military strength, economic sanctions, and the use or threat of military force to achieve strategic objectives.

In 2009, Douglas McGray, a prestigious journalist from Foreign Policy, described Japan as the 'new cultural power of the age' and outlined the stages of the country's transformation and the characteristics that made this 'miracle' possible. He argues that the nation's astonishing transition from an economic power (in the 1980s) to today's cultural superpower is due to specific ideas conveyed through cultural goods. The journalist argues that the power of Japanese pop culture is unquestionable considering that it has gained massive popularity (creating a global community) in all corners of the world by simply evoking positive emotions and feelings. Thus, the revitalization of the nation is not due to any ideology, but rather to the way of doing things, the management, worldview etc., all these aspects leading to the emergence of one of the most dynamic global economies. The perfect balance and fusion of Western and Japanese values and ideas reflects this dynamism as well as the 'readiness' to adopt and adapt foreign elements, the Japanese openness and curiosity being nurtured through cultural exchanges ever since the 6th century.

If during World War II there were strong anti-Western movements in Japan which led to banning of the use of neologisms (considered *tekiseigo* ['language of the enemy']) and thus to the obligation to use only kanji, perhaps in order to prevent the adoption of foreign cultural elements and customs, after the end of the war, interest

in Western cultures radically increased. In this sense, pop culture, and especially the concept of *kawaii*, reflects social, economic and political dynamics and is not merely a trend (Sato 2009: 38) that emerged as a form of rebellion of young Japanese who no longer felt comfortable with the traditional values, but rather a form of expression of pathos, feelings and the desire for self-expression. Although affection ('cuteness') was a recurring theme in Japanese literature and arts since the Heian Period, *kawaii* gained power over the masses (especially thanks to young Japanese women, *shōjo*) only since the second half of the 20th century. Japan began actively utilizing soft power as a deliberate strategy in the 1990s. This period is often referred to as the Cool Japan era, where the Japanese government and various industries recognized the potential of Japanese culture, media, and products to shape global perceptions and enhance Japan's international influence. The country's soft power efforts gained momentum in the 1990s due to several factors. Firstly, the economic success of Japanese industries, particularly in areas such as consumer electronics, automobiles, and animation, generated global interest in Japanese products and technology. Secondly, the rising popularity of Japanese pop culture, including anime, manga, and video games, captured the attention of audiences worldwide. Recognizing the potential of these cultural exports, the Japanese government and private enterprises began actively promoting Japanese culture and products overseas. They organized cultural exchange programs, supported the translation and distribution of manga and anime, and facilitated international collaborations in various fields. The goal was to leverage Japan's cultural appeal to foster positive perceptions, attract tourists, boost exports, and enhance diplomatic relations.

On the same note, Tsutsui and Ito (2006) analyze the influence of Japanese pop culture in the Western world and attempt to identify the factors that led to the 'unleashing' of the creative force responsible for the emergence and popularity of *kawaii*, manga and anime products and characters or *tokusatsu* style (special effects in audio-video productions) on a global scale. The first identified element that contributed massively to propelling the phenomenon into the Western space seems to be the character created by Tōhō Studio in 1954, *Gojira* (Godzilla). Following the success of the Saurian mutant, a whole series of other Japanese productions such as Astro Boy (*Tetsuwan Atom*), Ultraman or Speed Racer (Mach GoGoGo) 'invaded' the Western scene, coming up with a new vision, more exotic and futuristic, different from the narrative tradition and visual conventions of Hollywood productions (ibid.: 2). Godzilla was not only the pioneer who paved the way to the Western countries for the new Japanese culture, but came to represent Japan itself. Surprisingly (or not), in 1985 the character was ranked in the top three most popular Japanese among Americans (ibid.: 6-7). In addition, this 'pop explosion' also influenced how Japanese values and culture would be thereafter represented in advertisements. The founder of Tsuburaya Productions, Eiji Tsuburaya, and his desire for peace and anti-nuclearism after World War II is important for understanding the underlying message of this particular character. Tsuburaya's approach to Godzilla was deeply influenced by his personal experiences during World War II and his desire to convey a message of peace and caution about the destructive power of nuclear weapons. Through

the depiction of Godzilla as a terrifying and destructive force, the film served as a powerful metaphor for the horrors of nuclear weapons and the consequences of humanity's reckless actions. It is worth mentioning that Godzilla, initially portrayed as a destructive force, later evolved into a complex character in subsequent films. As the franchise progressed, Godzilla came to represent not only a symbol of destruction but also a guardian of Earth and a protector against other monsters and threats. Godzilla and Ultraman are prime examples of the Cool Japan phenomenon, part of the strategy to boost the country's economy. Even though the overall image of Godzilla remains primarily associated with its original portrayal as a powerful and destructive force rather than being inherently *kawaii*, both characters have also a 'cutified' (cuter) version. For example, baby Godzilla makes its appearance at some events and entertains the audience with its clumsiness and 'Bambi eyes'. Ultraman also has a *kawaii* version.

In the same note, this paper intends to contribute to the findings in this relatively new study field and explore further the added value that *kawaii* characters and sweet language bring to advertising and soft power efforts. By examining the impact of *kawaii* aesthetics and the use of endearing language in advertising campaigns, this research aims to shed light on their effectiveness in capturing attention, eliciting positive emotions, and fostering a sense of affinity among viewers. Additionally, it seeks to uncover the potential of *kawaii* and sweet language as powerful tools for enhancing brand image, promoting cultural values, and strengthening Japan's soft power on a global scale.

3. Japanese ads and pop culture

To sum up the ideas discussed in the previous section, after the second half of the 20th century there were important shifts in the way Japan used ads to change perspectives both domestic and abroad and draw the world's attention. In this regard, (at least) three patterns can be identified: 1) usage of traditional cultural symbols such as samurai, geisha, sakura flowers, sake, green tea in order to suggest the idea of uniqueness (*Nihonjin-ron* discourse); 2) eye-catching, unique characters (Godzilla, Hello Kitty etc.), which gained massive popularity especially after the 2000s; 3) a mix of elements from both traditional and pop culture, a harmonious blend between tradition and modernity.

Cultural changes and the tendency to 'niponize' foreign elements require bringing up the concept of *mukokuseki* (Yano 2013: 16), literally translated as 'without nationality'. The elimination of any trace of Asian origins (Iwabuchi 2002: 33), 'neutrality', has made it possible for elements of Japanese pop culture, especially *kawaii* characters to spread and to be rapidly accepted globally. Iwabuchi (ibid.: 71) argues that the term *mukokuseki* can refer to two distinct things: the combination of elements of different origins or the elimination of any cultural, historical and linguistic particularities. An example of this phenomenon can be *anime* characters perceived as elements of what is called 'neutral' visual culture. In contrast, the

popularity of Hello Kitty is due to its 'hybrid origin' and the mix of cross-cultural elements, which facilitates the rapprochement of any viewer. In other words, this technique makes it possible for traditional and foreign elements to coexist, which is an advantage in the context of globalization. The extraordinary ability and speed of adopting and adapting foreign elements in accordance with the values of traditional Japanese culture has been observed since the 6th century with the introduction of Chinese writing, culture and arts and continues today with the 'Japanization' of Western trends: "There are elements from France, Germany, Italy and all the other cultures of the world. But we have come to accept everything as Japanese" (Inoue 1985: 69). This statement accurately reflects the receptiveness of the Japanese to outside influences, since adapting new elements to the spirit of the native ones does not prevent the loss of traditional cultural values.

3.1. Pink globalization

Japan's desire to regain its powerful status was fulfilled through strategic plans which highlighted the uniqueness of Japanese culture (among other strategies), and one of the core ideas was and still is the promotion of *kawaii* culture. The sphere of influence of pop culture is not limited to national boundaries, but as Yano (2013) points out, it has led to a genuine 'pink globalization'. This trend has become an essential tool in foreign policy, promoting tourism and Japanese culture abroad. If at the end of the last century, Godzilla, the saurian monster, played the symbolic role of cultural 'attaché', in the current context this role was taken by real *kawaii* ambassadors, whose mission it is to represent the vibrant pop culture on a global scale. In February 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) came up with a new promotional strategy focused under the umbrella of 'pop culture diplomacy' (Kaminishikawara 2009), which aims to deepen intercultural dialogue and promote Japanese culture especially among young people. As discussed in the previous section, Japanese pop culture has rapidly gained popularity abroad through anime, manga and (mainly) Sanrio characters, and the role of the *kawaii* ambassadors (*kawaii taishi*) appointed in 2009 by Prime Minister Koizumi was and is to ensure the continuation of this path.

In 2012, one year after the tragic Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident, MOFA is trying to regain the trust of the world and its citizens through videos focusing on five key concepts in Japanese culture: 'Oishii: The Magnificent Flavors of Tohoku', 'Kawaii! Inside Japanese Pop Culture', 'Takumi: Japan's Artisan Tradition', 'Omotenashi: Japanese Way of Hospitality' and 'Mirai: Technology for a Better Future' (Frenţiu 2017: 192). We can admit that by including the concept of *kawaii* alongside traditional arts and customs, the Japanese government officially recognized the importance and merits of pop culture. A similar project materialized in October 2015 through the exhibition '*Kawaii*: Introduction to Japan's Cute Culture' at Epcot theme park (Walt Disney World Resort, Florida). A sign at the entrance to the exhibit succinctly explains the role of pop culture in the nation's reinvention: "After World War II, young Japanese surrounded themselves with cute objects seen as a form of distraction from the war. The new generation of anime and manga creators drew

inspiration from Western culture, and eventually Japanese pop art proposed a new, cuter style." The exhibits showcased Mount Fuji, Godzilla, traditional food and clothing through *kawaii* aesthetics and characters, aiming to promote the uniqueness and reinvention ability of the society. Sebastian Masuda's exhibition in Epcot Park, which also features the famous transparent sculpture 'Harajuku Girl' placed in a miniature Zen garden (a traditional element), containing a variety of colorful objects collected by the artist from his travels to other Asian countries and the United States reflects the 'harmonious diversity' of Japanese culture.

Another example is the appointment of *kawaii* characters as cultural ambassadors. At the 2015 World Expo in Milan, Hello Kitty was nominated for this role and this decision shows the intention to promote cultural education through entertainment (*edutainment*). Another similar example is Foreign Minister Taro Kono's decision in 2017 to nominate Hello Kitty and Pikachu as ambassadors in the race for the 2025 World Expo venue. The two mascots appeared at press conferences and were featured on posters, banners and products promoting Osaka city. This strategy paid off, as the city was named the winner in the elections held in Paris on 23 November 2018. Hello Kitty is not at her first nomination, having previously been appointed as tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong in 2008, this attesting the influence and role these cuddly characters have on a global scale.

The capitalization of *kawaii* culture has led to the ubiquity of these symbols in public and private life sectors through posters, goods and services, leading to what Yano (2013) calls 'pink globalization'. The strategies adopted show the intention to once again showcase the limitless creative capacity, adaptability and particularities of Japanese culture. Starting at the end of the 20th century as a form of 'harmless rebellion' against traditional norms, *kawaii* comes to take a place alongside traditional forms of culture, even in the promotional campaigns launched by MOFA. On a national scale, it has made immaturity, playfulness, innocence and other similar treaties essential skills for social integration, and on a macro one, it has facilitated intercultural communication (Koma 2013: 5). The culture of 'cuteness' and the pacifist values promoted are a form of expression of soft power through which global prestige is secured. Hello Kitty's involvement in various humanitarian, environmental and educational campaigns to promote intercultural dialogue is an example in this regard.

3.2. Case studies

3.2.1. Yomuyomu – addressing local *specificity*

Kawaii ('adorable') characters such as Hello Kitty, Gudetama or Kumamon are internationally recognized for featuring in very important ad campaigns for Adidas, TBWA\Shanghai, McDonald's etc. and for representing highly respectful organizations such as UN (United Nations). The ability to persuade the viewer is not necessarily directly proportional to the popularity of the character, although for a global impact this seems to be a necessary criterion. In Japan there are an overwhelming number of *kawaii* characters and mascots, each having a well-

established role, but they can disappear as quickly as they appeared if they are unable to trigger emotional response in the audience. Leaving this aside, the main reason these characters are used is related to their ability to attract attention and 'humanize' projects and products, encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and co-participation. Unlike the before mentioned famous characters, Yomuyomu is a locally known character, its shape and pink color reminding the viewer of a peach (*momo*). At the entrance to the Okayama Prefectural Library, a poster is displayed drawing attention to the importance of respecting the rules of conduct on the premises. This is part of a series carried out in 2019 entitled "*Kenritsu toshokan manā appu kyanpēn* 2019" ("Campaign to promote good manners, 2019. Prefectural Library"), which aims to ensure a pleasant and reading-friendly environment in all public libraries in the area. The poster is brightly colored and the '*kawaii* hero' strategically placed in the middle of it. The peach-shaped character, Yomuyomu has been designated as the mascot of public libraries from 13 July to 31 August 2019, and its name comes from the Japanese verb '*yomu*' ('to read'). Transliteration into the *katakana* syllabary and doubling the syllables turns the verb into a proper name and has a comic effect upon the audience. On the poster is the peach-character, Yomuyomu, next to which is written in large blue characters the text: "*Shizuka ni yomu yomu*". (lit. '*Yomu yomu* in silence'). Rendered in katakana, the construction *yomu yomu* refers to the library mascot, but the homophony makes it possible to associate it with the verb 'to read': 'Read, read in silence'. In addition to the mission of ensuring that the library rules are followed, according to the official page,[1] the mascot is meant to instil passion for reading in children: "*Yomuyomu wa, momo o mochīfu ni shita kyarakutā de, kodomotachi ga takusan hon o yonde,* ōkina *yume ya kibō o moteru hito ni sodatsu koto o negatteimasu.*" ("Yomuyomu is a character inspired by the shape of a peach, who wishes that children read many books in order to become people with great dreams and desires.")

Okayama is known as the land of delicious fruits, and the white peaches that are particular to this area attract many tourists all over Japan. Moreover, the peach blossom has been designated as the symbol of the prefecture, therefore it is used in all tourism campaigns. According to information posted on the official Okayama Fruit Information Site,[2] Okayama peaches are popular among Japanese because of the legend of the brave Momotarō. '*Momo*' means 'peach' in Japanese, so the character's name would translate as "Tarō-Peach". The official mascot of the prefecture, 'Momocchi' is also inspired by the same legend. Although not as well-known as the characters previously discussed, Yomuyomu is a totem for the city's residents, and because of his comical appearance, inspired by the shape and color of the most popular local fruit, the character facilitates communication and gives credibility to the authorities' moves and requests.

Regardless of the notoriety, these characters (*kyara*) do not merely offer visual pleasure, but reinforce cultural values and social norms. Thanks to their fictional

---

[1] Available online at www.libnet.pref.okayama.jp/, Okayama Prefectural Library official website. Accessed on 10.03.2022.

[2] Available online at <https://world.momotaros.com/>, Okayama Fruit Information Site. Accessed on 10.03.2022.

biographies, simplistic but effective appearance and childlike, sometimes even ambivalent behavior, they manage to maintain discipline, morale and team spirit among the members of the community. Used in campaigns to promote products, services, tourism, cultural activities or even moral ideas such as honesty, fairness and compassion, *yuru-kyara* ('mascot characters') succeed in creating a relationship with the viewer because of the positive feelings and general relaxed mood they convey.

The representation of indigenous cultural elements is essential in advertising and, in this regard, *kawaii* signs and symbols guarantee not only the success of the business, but also the maintenance of social order and the perpetuation of traditional values. *Kawaii* characters and mascots are versatile and somewhat ethno-culturally neutral, and this makes it possible to use them alongside both domestic and foreign elements in perfect harmony.

3.2.2. Prince Pickles – the official mascot of the Japanese Self-Defense Force

As mentioned in the first section of the article, there is a variety of characters and mascots created for all sorts of purposes. Beside the economic and marketing purpose (increasing sales), there is a special category of characters used for representing government organizations. The aftermath of World War II has subjected Japan to political and military change, besides having to accept other major reforms in the education system imposed by the Allied forces. Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution (*Nihonkokukenpō dai kyū-jō*) is a clause in the national Constitution of Japan (1947) outlawing war as a means to settle international disputes involving the state. In 2014, the Japanese government approved a reinterpretation which gives Japan Self-Defense Forces power to defend other allies in case of war being declared. Nonetheless, the important aspect in this context is that Japan renounced to the ideology glorifying war to a pacifist view. This brief historical overview is central for understanding the evolution and shifts in Japanese discourse as a facet of contemporary social change. Considering the paper's purpose, we will further focus only on the particularities of advertising discourse.

To exemplify the shifts presented above, we propose an analysis of the official mascot of the Japanese Self-Defense Force, Prince Pickles, adopted in the early 1990s. The character has round, curious eyes, big dimples and a tiny mouth, making it lovable and loving. Paradoxically, even though Prince Pickles represents the Japanese Armed Forces, his looks are far from intimidating. Starting with the character's name, which triggers laughter because of the 'royal' title, 'the prince of pickles', to the real life, to some extent even dangerous situations in which he is depicted, such as watching two divers practice disarming a dummy mine or helping the JDSF practice rescuing citizens from floodwaters etc., Prince Pickles gained rapid popularity and thus, was able to raise awareness among citizens regarding the importance of the activities of this institution, precisely because of his innocent look and childish appearance. The overall message that Prince Pickles and his partner, Miss Parsley want to convey is that Japan's new military is fun, flirtatious, and yet family-oriented.

The main reason why many Japanese ads use *kawaii* symbols (explicitly or

implicitly) and cute characters is simply because it helps to persuade the viewer by arousing empathy and stirring emotions. This logic behind this choice is that in order to think about an object/entity as 'cute, adorable' one has to project into that something his own mood or personality, as Gn (2016: 51) points out: "when one claims that the experience of cuteness is an anthropomorphic gesture, it is assumed that subjects, in varying degrees, project certain 'states of mind' or personalities onto artificial and/or non-human objects. To call a thing cute, in other words, is to allude to an approachable, affectionate other." Moreover, the quality of being 'cute' is culturally determined and cannot be analysed without taking cultural factors into consideration (Gn 2016: 50). In the case of Japan, and even abroad if we take into account Hello Kitty's involvement in UN's (United Nations) humanitarian actions,[3] these characters have proved to be very useful for conveying any kind of information (from mundane to more sensitive ones) and to raise awareness. Another important characteristic is the possibility of indirectly communicating certain beliefs or even taboos.

As Shotaro Yanagi, a Defense Agency official stated: "Prince Pickles is our image character because he's very endearing, which is what Japan's military stands for. He's our mascot and appears in our pamphlets and stationery."[4] This statement clearly explains the reason why the institution chose Prince Pickles to represent its principles and activities: to soften the image of the Japanese Armed Forces and, more importantly, to emphasize its importance for people's well-being and societal progress. In a three-series comic book, Prince Pickles is presented as a heroic figure, participating in peacekeeping missions, but at some point, he starts being used to overcome the deeply engrained pacifist tendencies of the Japanese population. Sabine Fruhstuck (2007: 136) describes this shift in perspective by arguing that "knowledge and appreciation of the military can be or should become a normative element of growing up". The character is depicted in front of tanks or while engaging in adrenaline activities such as helicopter rappelling or while shaking hands with smiling Iraqis. Because Prince Pickles seems to have some of the most valued qualities in Japanese society such as kindness (*yasashisa*) and consideration to all (*omoiyari*), this makes the viewer more receptive (Kurose 2002: 22) to his discourse. Prince Pickles is a good example to understand that Japanese cute characters are not used only for economic and aesthetic purposes, they are not meaningless 'faces' displayed on products or appearing in commercials, or simply 'the face' of the institution or the company, but on the long run, they can contribute to changing perceptions and stereotypes. In general, marketing characters aim to reinforce the brand and promote the vision of a particular company or institution anywhere in the world, but perhaps an essential difference is that in Japan they are given credit and some are even assigned to high-importance missions. To exemplify shortly, after the 2016 Kumamoto (southwestern Kyūshū Island) 7.3 magnitude earthquake, the residents sent dozens of messages on the city's Facebook page to

---

[3] For further reference see: "Launch of #HelloGlobalGoals collaboration with Hello Kitty" www.un.org/fr/creative-community-outreach-initiative-ccoi/hello-kitty-helloglobalgoals-launch>. Accessed on 15.03.2022.

[4] "Prince Pickles and the adventures of the Japanese Military and Anime based foreign policy...", <https://ns-kumiho.livejournal.com/158229.html>. Accessed on 15.03.2022.

inquire about Kumamon's condition, the official mascot of the prefecture. Moreover, a global movement called "Pray for Kumamoto" started, calling for support and aid for recovery and Kumamoto was the face of the campaign. This can be another proof that these cute characters are not just a cuddly appearance, but a symbol, in this particular case, of hope and humanity. During that difficult period, Kumamon helped rebuild the walls of Kumamoto Castle, led rescue operations with his head bandaged suggesting that he suffered an injury like many others, but with the same optimism through which the red-cheeked bear won people's hearts.

In this case, the cutesy icon is actually a statement for Japan's postwar pacifism ideology, even though it can be difficult to give serious thought to it. As Foreign Minister Tarō Asō argued, warm feelings for Japanese animation can translate into warm feelings for Japanese foreign policy. Prince Pickles is meant to win hearts and minds and to soften the rigid image of the Japanese Armed Forces.

4. Conclusions

As seen through various examples, cute (*kawaii*) characters are mainly used as emotional triggers, to arouse compassion and to show consideration (*omoiyari*, *kizukai*, *kikubari*) in and towards the viewer regardless of his gender, age or social status. From this point of view, we argue that these cutesy characters have the ability to temporarily suspend status differences between individuals and raise awareness in an indirect manner, in some way distracting the viewer. Undoubtedly, a person's response to this type of stimuli can vary, depending on the viewer's culture, background, previous experiences, personality, fondness etc., but in the case of Japanese ads and campaigns we can see that all these cute characters share some common characteristics: they are atypical (in name and/or appearance), inspire empathy because of their innocent look and small size, have wide, round, Bambi eyes, and we would argue that, in the case of Japan, an important aspect is that, through this innocent, somewhat clumsy behavior they leave the viewer the impression they are emotionally dependent (the concept of *amae*).

In many countries, animated characters are used to promote goods and services, thus this practice is not new, but what is worth mentioning is that in Japan they have a broader meaning, deeper implications, they are not merely associated with children's culture like in the Western countries. Besides the usual case in which cute characters are used to promote local goods or services, mainly having an economic purpose, the case of Prince Pickles shows that there is a deeper meaning to the trivial cuteness. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces use this perky cartoon to raise awareness on the importance of this institution for a society and to change people's perceptions regarding its role. Nonetheless, the main purpose of a cute character is to win people's hearts and trust and thus, to persuade the viewer. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces, or any army for that matter is associated with strength, discipline and power, thus to associate this kind of institution with a *kawaii* character seems at least peculiar in many ways. As we have presented in the article, the purpose is

to create a more friendly and approachable image of the institution. Through the examples given we can admit that *kawaii* ('cute, cuddly, adorable') characters in advertisements help to avoid/resolve conflicts, as they allow the authorities to express their views indirectly, symbolically, without offending anyone. If we look carefully at their childish appearance and clumsy behavior, we see that they do not express a point of view explicitly, but rather implicitly in order to maintain group harmony (*wa*). On the basis of the analysis undertaken we can state that cuddly characters are a way of expressing more through less.

Kawaii is a central concept in contemporary Japanese culture, promoting characteristics such as fragility, innocence, spontaneity as values and also simulates reality, thus it proves to be an indispensable tool for conveying complex information in a simplified manner. *Kawaii bunka* ('cute culture') and cute animated characters represent a very effective method for communicating smoothly and avoiding arguments. Considering that these *kawaii* characters have been 'adopted' as representatives even in UN (United Nations) programmes, we can state that they are undoubtedly an effective tool for communication both domestic and abroad, diminishing borders and bringing new opportunities.

In sum, the rapid acceptance of Japanese cute or *kawaii* culture can be attributed to its cultural significance in Japan, its emotional appeal, its unique style, the influence of Japanese popular culture, the role of social media and the internet, commercialization efforts, and the engagement of subcultural communities. These factors have collectively contributed to the widespread acceptance and popularity of *kawaii* culture both in Japan and abroad. Cute or *kawaii* aesthetics have a universal appeal and evoke positive emotions such as happiness, warmth, and nostalgia. The use of cute characters, designs, and products creates a sense of comfort and joy, which resonates with people across different cultures. The emotional connection established through *kawaii* characters and sweet language contributes to its rapid acceptance. *Kawaii* culture stands out for its distinctive and unique style. The emphasis on soft, rounded features, pastel colors, and adorable character designs sets it apart from other cultural aesthetics. The novelty and visual appeal of *kawaii* culture have attracted attention and sparked curiosity among people worldwide. In many countries, animated characters are used to promote goods and services, but as shown in this paper, in Japan, the use of animated characters to promote goods and services goes beyond typical advertising practices. The phenomenon of using animated characters and sweet language holds unique significance and plays a prominent role in Japanese marketing and cultural expression. These characters are often given rich back stories and personalities, similar to fictional characters. They are portrayed in various contexts, participating in events, interacting with fans, and even having their own animated series or merchandise. This narrative-driven approach adds depth to the characters and enhances their appeal, making them more than just advertising tools.

Address:

Oana-Maria Bîrlea

      Department of Asian Languages and Literatures

      Faculty of Letters

      Babeș-Bolyai University

      Horea Street nr. 31

      400394 Cluj-Napoca, Romania

E-mail: oana.birlea@ubbcluj.ro

References

Dees, Bowen C. (1997) *The allied occupation and Japan's economic miracle: building the foundations of japanese science and technology 1945–52*. Surrey: Japan Library.

Frențiu, Rodica (2017) *Limbajul poetic – act creator și actualitate culturală. Modelul cultural japonez*. 2nd ed. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.

Fruhstuck, Sabine (2007) *Uneasy warriors*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Gn, Joel (2016) "A lovable metaphor: on the affect, language and design of cute". *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, 1, 49–61.

Inoue, Yasushi (1985) "A culture of the heart". *NHK Overseas Broadcasting, Japan as I see it – Japanese Sensitivities*, 59-75. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Iwabuchi, Koichi (2002) *Recentering globalization: popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. London: Duke University Press.

Kaminishikawara, Jun (2009) "Cute ambassadors' roam globe to promote Japan's pop culture". *The Japan Times*. Available online at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2009/06/17/ national/ cute-ambassadors-roam-globe-to-promote-japans-pop-culture/>. Accessed on 25.05.2022.

Kinsella, Sharon (1995) "Cuties in Japan". In Skov, L. and B. Moeran, eds. *Women, media and consumption in Japan*, 220–254. London: Curzon Press.

Koma, Kyoko (2013) "Kawaii as represented in scientific research: the possibilities of Kawaii cultural studies". *Hemispheres* 28, 5–17.

Kshetry, Gopal (2008) *Foreigners in Japan: a historical perspective*. Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation.

Kurose, Yuki (2002) "The strategies used in Japanese advertisement". Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. Available online at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED463666.pdf>. Accessed on 15.05.2022.

McGray, Douglas (2009) "Japan's gross national cool". *Foreign Policy Journal*, Available online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/>. Accessed on 15.03.2022.

Nye, Joseph S. Jr. (1992) "What new world order?" *Foreign Affairs* 71, 2. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 83–96.

Sato, Kumiko (2009) "From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie. A postwar cultural history of cuteness in Japan". *Education about Asia* 14, 2, 38–42.

Tsutsui, William and Michiko Ito (2006) *In Godzilla's footsteps: Japanese pop icons on the global stage*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Williams, David (2014) *The philosophy of Japanese wartime resistance*. London: Routledge.

Yano, Christine R. (2013) *Pink globalization: Hello Kitty's trek across the Pacific*. London: Duke University Press.