

Japan's Next Top Mascot: An Analysis of the Use of Character Marketing and Commercial Cute in Japan

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Abstract

Japan is absolutely obsessed with mascots, yet these lovable characters are just one part of the larger narrative of the commodification of cute (*kawaii*) within Japan. This paper will seek to understand what “cute” is, and how it has become so pervasive in contemporary Japanese society, namely through the use of character marketing. I will also take a look at market trends that assisted the rise of commercial cute in Japan’s postwar economy. Moreover, I will address three examples of cute characters by exploring the rise to power of Hello Kitty and that of two regional mascots (*yuru-kyara*). There will be analysis on the ways in which cute characters and products based off them are able to provide empathy and bridge the alienation of the modern age. This paper will provide arguments supporting the economic and emotional support that cute creates for Japan, as well as discovering how cute has gone global through an analysis of Japanese soft power, which forms the basis of Japanese cultural diplomacy.

Introduction

In 2016, there was an event that drew millions to vote. Different figures competed on a grand stage which left only one victorious. Spectators traveled across the country to interact with their favorite candidate, an event

which last year drew in 70,000 viewers.¹ However, among the different candidates, there was one theme that was universal: cuteness. This event was none other than the *Yuru-Kyara Grand Prix*, held in Japan. The Grand Prix is an event held annually in Japan to commemorate the wide range of mascots within the country, and to vote on the one that is the most popular. Yet, behind the scenes of this gathering are hundreds of booths filled with character products and commemorative souvenirs, which are closely tied to the mascot phenomenon.

The *yuru-kyara* hail from a larger trend of character marketing in Japan, an industry based around the creation and marketing of characters. Character marketing is more narrowly defined by author Marc Steinberg as:

The licensing, production, marketing, and consumption of goods and media based around the image of a character...narrowly defined character merchandising is the copyright business; it is the business of creating contracts and gaining income through selling or leasing the rights to use a character image its viability as a business depends on the existence recognition and enforcement of the intellectual property laws that support it.²

The *yuru-kyara* serve as regional mascots in Japanese society, generated to increase local pride or raise awareness for a person or company, including advertising and promotion for a specific brand or cause. Yet, character marketing is not a new phenomenon in Japan; one of the best examples is the 1970s creation of Hello Kitty, a character created specifically for the purpose of marketing. Although the *yuru-kyara* and Hello Kitty fulfill different functions and were created for different purposes, they were both created in the context of a culture of commercial cute in Japan. Japan has experienced an increase of character related products in recent years created under the guidelines of commercial cute, the commodification of goods that attempt to be universally perceived as cute.

The purpose of this thesis is to put character marketing in dialogue with commercial cuteness. I will explore the way in which commercial cute has become the focus of character marketing in Japan by first examining what

1 See Splendor, Jo., "Yuru-Kyara Grand Prix 2016 – The Ultimate Japanese Mascot Event," *Wanderlust Inc.*, July 28, 2016.

2 Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 41.

cute is, followed by investigating the rise of Hello Kitty and the world of the *yuru-kyara*. This thesis will inspect the effects that cuteness (*kawaii*) has on the consumer, and how characters are created to market that cute. We will then look at cuteness in contemporary Japanese society through Hello Kitty along with two examples of *yuru-kyara*. I would like to argue that both have a positive economic and even more important emotional impact on Japanese society. Furthermore, we will examine the global implications of Japanese cute culture through the global rise in the relevance of “soft power.” But before we can understand where “cute” can be found in Japanese society and its impact upon the character marketing industry, let us first begin by gaining an understanding of what “cute” is.

Cute (Circulating University Tradition and Empathy)

The word for cuteness in Japan is often translated as *kawaii*. While the word itself is similar to our understanding of “cute,” Kumiko Sato, a Japan Scholar, provides a more complete understanding of *kawaii* by looking at the etymology of the word:

In general use, *kawaii* is made up of two kanji (Chinese characters) that respectively signify ‘able’ and ‘love’, meaning in combination ‘lovable.’ The same kanji can be used for another adjective, *kawaisō*, which signifies pitiful or pitiable. *Kōjien*, the Japanese dictionary, presents three definitions of *kawaii*, which are 1) *itawashii* (pitiable), 2) *aisubeki* (lovable), and 3) *chiisakute utsukushii* (small and beautiful).³

While admitting that cute causes an “almost universal effect on humanity,” Sato also notes that the Japanese have a unique understanding of cute. She writes: “The Japanese idea of cuteness in fact emphasizes the sense of pathos that the powerless and helpless object inspires in the observer’s mind.”⁴ The psychological aspects of cute explain why these products are so lucrative and desirable.

One of the ways in which *kawaii* maintains its effectiveness is due to the universality of cute. Psychological studies show that humans not only

3 Kumiko Sato, “From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie: A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan,” *Education about Asia*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2009): 38..

4 Ibid.

have a tendency to subscribe to similar concepts of cute,⁵ but that cuteness may also affect the way in which we buy things, which helps explain the rise of cuteness in Japanese as well as global markets. *Kawaii* is marketed with the principle of a playful form of cuteness, known as whimsical cuteness. In an experiment that tested the responses of participants to whimsically cute stimuli, psychologists Gergana Y. Nenkov and Maura L. Scott concluded that “exposure to cute (vs. neutral) products and their whimsical nature prime mental representations of fun and indulgence, resulting in increased indulgent consumer behavior.”⁶ There is a positive correlation between the physical appearance of the product and our desire to buy it. This argument is furthered with the idea that cute products, “whose whimsical nature primes fun, [lead] to a tendency to approach self-rewards, and ultimately more indulgent consumption in domains that are both related and unrelated to the cute products.”⁷ By simply appearing “cute,” goods, and particularly character goods, are able to gain our attention. Commercial cute is the commodification of this universal appeal to cute, which attempts to make character-based goods that can cater to cute regardless of what product it is selling, whether it be a keychain, a stuffed animal, or even clothing.

Cuteness not only capitalizes on the universal, but the familiar as well. Nostalgia is a key emotion that marketers appeal to. Gregory Carpenter, Professor of Marketing Strategy at the Kellogg School of Management, observes that:

People become especially nostalgic when they are anxious about the present and, especially, the future. The past is safe because it is completely predictable. Connecting with the past through familiar, loved brands transports people to another time by evoking the same feelings they experienced so long ago. It can [also] work for brands without an authentic connection to the past if the brands can create

- 5 Melanie L. Glocker, Daniel D. Langleben, Kosha Ruparel, James W. Loughhead, Ruben C. Gur, and Norbert Sachser, “Baby Schema in Infant Faces Induces Cuteness Perception and Motivation for Caretaking in Adults,” *Ethology*, vol. 115, no. 3 (2009): 257–63.
- 6 Maura L. Scott and Gergana Y. Nenkov, “Using Consumer Responsibility Reminders to Reduce Cuteness-Induced Indulgent Consumption,” *Marketing Letters*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2016): 323–36.
- 7 Maura L. Scott and Gergana Y. Nenkov, “‘So Cute I Could Eat It Up’: Priming Effects of Cute Products on Indulgent Consumption,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2014): 326–41.

that familiar feeling without [a connection]. This is tricky but can be done.⁸

Character marketing often revolves around characters that possess a traditional heritage. Several *yuru-kyara* designs incorporate *kawaii* to harken back to traits that a region has been historically known for. The resulting nostalgia works to influence the emotional side of the consumer's brain.

Psychological research supports this idea that the emotional side of the brain has a major influence on what we buy. The brain is wired to process emotions quicker than rational thought. In his book *Emotionomics*, Dan Hill claims that “the older sensory and emotional brains dominate our decision-making process”⁹ and that “emotions process sensory input in only one-fifth the time our conscious, cognitive brain takes to assimilate that same input.”¹⁰ Our first impression of a product often dictates whether we will consider buying it. This is one reason why marketers use products that are *kawaii*; they draw our attention and give a favorable first impression. In a similar mindset Paul Zak reinforces the idea of the brain's effects on consumption, through his findings from research at Claremont Graduate University: “Our results show why puppies and babies are in toilet paper commercials...This research suggests that advertisers use images that cause our brains to release oxytocin to build trust in a product or brand, and hence increase sales.”¹¹ Marketers are continuously trying to find a way to sell products that cater to the way our brain works, and they have found a successful formula with *kawaii*. Our brains see something cute, which evokes the immediate response of emotions, such as indulgence and nostalgia, and influences (albeit not entirely) our desire to buy that product.

Another goal of commercial cute is to capitalize on empathy. Yano observes that *kawaii* goods are often marketed to represent a kind of “nostalgia for an idealized childhood that it circumscribes [which] directly points to adulthood as burdened with responsibilities and obligations...Within this

8 Steve Olenski, “What Was Old Is New Again -- The Power of Nostalgia Marketing,” *Forbes*, August 14, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveolenski/2015/08/14/what-was-old-is-new-again-the-power-of-nostalgia-marketing/#47f5eddd6881>.

9 Dan Hill, *Emotionomics: Leveraging Emotions for Business Success* (London: Kogan Page Publishers, 2007), 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 19.

11 Society for Neuroscience, “Oxytocin Increases Advertising's Influence: Hormone Heightened Sensitivity to Public Service Announcements,” *ScienceDaily*, November 16, 2010, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/11/101115160404.htm>.

context, *kawaii* represents a temporary state of abnegation. Surrounding oneself with *kawaii* objects may be interpreted as pure escapism.”¹² *Kawaii* goods are designed to catch the buyer’s eye, in the hopes that they will feel this nostalgia or experience a need for this escapism. The buyer can connect, at least temporarily, with this state of renunciation and be momentarily free from obligations of a busy lifestyle.

Furthermore, commercial cute also uses empathy to help bridge the gap created by alienation. Anthropologist Anne Allison notes that in modern Japanese society, people are becoming more distant from one another. She explains that: “Life, in this millennial Japan, occasions an even greater degree of solitarism, atomism, and disconnection from support systems... further, not only is more time spent in ‘mediated transitions,’ but more of everyday life is mediated by constructed realities that are increasingly engaged as a solitary activity.”¹³ Japanese society is marked by constant business for both students and workers, but the giving of *kawaii* gifts can be a display of empathy. Alienation can be bridged by the intimacy of the empathy from a gift. Author Sharon Kinsella reinforces this notion, observing that “modern consumers might not be able to meet and develop relationships enough with people, but the implication of cute goods design was that they could always attempt to develop them through cute objects.”¹⁴ Cute goods allow for the transfer of the sentiments behind purchasing a gift. It forms a connection between the buyer and recipient of a gift. The empathy connected between the two is complemented by “a warm, cheer-me-up atmosphere...the good cute design re-personalizes.”¹⁵ Empathy, along with nostalgia and indulgence, form some of the universal effects that cuteness can have on the consumer.

The universal effects of cute were channeled into Japan’s postwar economy. Sato claims that “the commodification process of *kawaii* goods can be traced back to the early 1970s with the establishment of a joint stationary and gift card business by Gakken publishers and Sanrio gift

12 Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty’s Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 57.

13 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 84.

14 Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” in *Women Media and Consumption in Japan*, edited by Brian Moeran and Lise Skov, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 228.

15 Ibid.

shops - now the largest purveyors in the cute gift industry.”¹⁶ Gakken publishers is a creator of educational toys, whereas Sanrio is the company responsible for Hello Kitty. Both companies, as well as many *anime* and *manga*, have utilized cute as a draw for selling their products. Over the next couple decades, *kawaii* became such a staple of Japanese commercial life that anthropologist Christine Yano argues that “no space is too small to avoid the clutter of advertising and products.”¹⁷ With *kawaii* available all over Japan, marketers utilized the psychology of cute to appeal to the greatest number of consumers, through the commodification of cute.

The rise of commercial cute mirrors a rise in a specific market trend during the late 20th century, the rise of consumerism from women. In their book *Women Media and Consumption in Japan*, authors Lise Skov and Brian Moeran mention that “women’s increased spending power has brought with it a new type of consumer market for married women...similar to that found in the explosive market for young single women.”¹⁸ Businesses responded to this new consumer group by creating products that they thought would appeal to them. Sociologist Sharon Kinsella observes that “the increasingly large disposable incomes of youth and young women in particular throughout the 1980s, and the inventiveness of Japanese businesses in providing goods to make them part with their money, had the greatest determining influence on the highly commercial nature of cute culture.”¹⁹ Businesses utilized *kawaii* gifts to entice these new consumers to spend money, thus beginning the commodification of cute.

Commercial cute, the commodification of *kawaii* goods for consumers, has paved the way to make widespread mascot usage and character marketing possible. Characters were designed in a way that harnesses the universal aspects of cute. Commercial cute utilized the brain’s responses to cute and was intertwined with the rise of character marketing. Instead of one causing the other, Yano notes that they occurred around the same time and that “this is not a chicken and egg question of which came first, marketing practices or extension of *kawaii*. Rather, it is important to note their parallel emergence

16 Leila Madge, “Capitalizing on ‘Cuteness’”: The Aesthetics of Social Relations in a New Postwar Japanese Order,” *Japanstudien*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1998): 155.

17 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 45.

18 Brian Moeran and Lise Skov, *Women Media and Consumption in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995): 35.

19 Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” 245.

in Japanese contemporary society from the 1970s through today.”²⁰ These two separate practices joined together to create an industry based around the selling of cute characters for marketing purposes. One of the ways this can be seen is through the marketing of Hello Kitty, a *kawaii* character created in the 1970s without a narrative for the purposes of marketing.

Hello Kitty: Small Gift, Big Smile

The quintessential rise of commercial cute is Hello Kitty. She demonstrates the effective marketing of *kawaii* towards a new consumer base of women that was gaining momentum in the 1970s and 80s. The results of which would be a billion-dollar franchise with its original roots in making a character that people would want to buy because it was *kawaii*.

Hello Kitty is a fictional character created by Yuko Shimizu for the Japanese company Sanrio in 1974. The company Sanrio focuses on the creation and marketing of products considered *kawaii*—mostly stationary goods and stuffed toys. Created without a background narrative or story, Hello Kitty was designed specifically for selling *kawaii*. The hope was that consumers would be enticed by her cute design. Although she was originally marketed toward young girls, her demographic has been broadened over the years to incorporate teens and adults as well. This proliferation of Hello Kitty merchandise is noted by Yano: “Hello Kitty can be found in department stores, gift shops, subway kiosks, toy shops, and souvenir shops throughout Japan.”²¹ This demonstrates the extent to which Hello Kitty can be found in Japanese society. And Hello Kitty’s journey is one that will assist in understanding of character marketing.

Hello Kitty’s success lends itself much in part to *kawaii*, and the emotions that it evokes. As described above, one of the properties of a *kawaii* gift is its ability to evoke empathy. Hello Kitty provides an accessible option (especially in the context of a culture of gift giving like Japan’s) due to the multiple platforms and products she can be found on, which includes everything from school supplies to microwaves or diamond necklaces. One of the ways in which Hello Kitty elicits empathy is through intimate alienation, evoking empathy within the buyer as well as the recipient. There is satisfaction in receiving a Hello Kitty gift, regardless of the size or price

20 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 59.

21 *Ibid.*, 44.

tag. Yano notes this phenomenon of receiving such a gift: “These are small yet vital pleasures of the heart, materialized in the form of a Hello Kitty cell phone strap, and given to another...most are exchanged informally, as presentations of affection.”²² The notion of a small but heartfelt present serves as an extension of the company slogan of Sanrio “small gift, big smile.”²³ This version of gift giving forms a ritual in which Hello Kitty becomes the medium for transferring feelings of affection and friendship, regardless of what kind of Hello Kitty product is being gifted. This empathy is transferred all throughout Japan, as noted by Yano: “Although purchasing a cute Hello Kitty souvenir as a gift for a friend can be an individual act, it can be interpreted as addressing a national need to assert and sustain emotional ties between people.”²⁴ Hello Kitty can serve as a connection between individuals, and through the commercialization of cute, there is a way to share a similar interest through the giving of gifts to a friend.

Another way for Hello Kitty to evoke empathy is through her “healing” properties. The “healing” property of gifts and toys is explored by Allison, who notes that products such as Hello Kitty “magically ‘[heal]’ the stresses of living in an environment with little time or space for the imagination.”²⁵ While by no means unique to Hello Kitty, this quality of healing can often be found in character marketing, especially in toys and products aimed towards children. These products gain special meaning through the remembrance of when the gift was received. The healing property within commercial cute remains one of the reasons why it can achieve a timeless popularity amongst a wide demographic.

However, for everything positive that Hello Kitty embodies, there are critiques as well. A major concern with Hello Kitty is the accusation that she stands for a monetization of happiness. Yano reports that “most [critics claim] the target is not heart so much as its commodification,”²⁶ as well as what they perceive to be “the faux sincerity of Sanrio’s heart-produced, marketed, packaged for sale.”²⁷ For some critics there is a point when commercial outweighs cute, which creates a dilution and corruption of the message of Hello Kitty. Professor Norihiro Kato furthers this criticism

22 Ibid., 70.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 69.

25 Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 24-5.

26 Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 163.

27 Ibid., 164.

stating: “Hello Kitty has no mouth, and certain critics have seen this as a symbol of the social apathy and compliance that characterize consumerism. But the truth is that Hello Kitty isn’t just missing a mouth; she also has no story, no obstacles to overcome, and thus achieves no growth.”²⁸ Because Hello Kitty is a non-narrative character, there is a worry that she is not a good role model, since she does not have a story to achieve personal growth. This negative commentary of Hello Kitty demonstrates that while cute may have near universal effects on the brain, it is not universally appreciated.

Nonetheless, while some critics argue that Hello Kitty is the personification of commodified emotions, the prevailing appealing opinion around Hello Kitty is one of friendship. Through her ability to go beyond alienation and connect others, Hello Kitty provides a source of empathy to people across the globe, especially the “healing” aspect of empathy. She was originally marketed as something *kawaii* to a new generation of women consumers, but the resulting effects timelessly display how *kawaii* can connect people.

***Yuru-Kyara*: The Many Mascots of Japan**

Hello Kitty is not the only character that embodies or markets cute. One of the more fascinating aspects of the proliferation of cute in Japan is the concept of the *yuru-kyara*. The *yuru-kyara*, which are loosely translated into English as mascots, are used to represent anything from a local region to the Japanese national tax system. Understanding how these characters emerged and the comforting and marketing effect that they have on Japanese society presents another facet of the character marketing narrative.

Yuru-kyara can serve as regional symbols to not only aid in tourism but also raise enthusiasm for a cause. BBC contributor Neil Steinberg examines the case of one *yuru-kyara* named Kumamon:

He has become more than a symbol for [the Kumamoto prefecture], more than merely a strategy to push its tourism and farm products. He is almost regarded as a living entity, a kind of funky ursine household god (it is perhaps significant that the very first licensed Kumamon product was a full-sized Buddhist shrine emblazoned

28 See Norihiro Kato, “Goodbye Godzilla, Hello Kitty,” *The American Interest*, vol. 2, no. 1, (2006).

with his face). He hovers in a realm of fantasy like a character from children's literature.²⁹

As Kumamon attests, *yuru-kyara* have taken on a life of their own and can bridge a gap between fantasy and reality. They can provide a sense of community or solidarity in times of crisis, creating a sense of comfort for fans. *Yuru-Kyara* also function on a system that relies on character marketing, or to a lesser extent character awareness, using a character to promote awareness for an issue.

Though it is difficult to locate an exact origin of *yuru-kyara*, two events in their near two-decade history demonstrate an increase in prevalence of the *yuru-kyara* in Japan. These include the 2006 unveiling of the *yuru-kyara* Hikonyan and the first Mascot Grand Prix held in 2010. Hikonyan was created to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Hikone Castle, an important cultural landmark. He is a white cat adorned with a samurai helmet, which is reminiscent of a samurai helmet within the museum of Hikone Castle. The hope was that he would draw people to the celebration and increase the popularity of the local region. His friendly way of celebrating a samurai past quickly gained fans and other local regions began to create *yuru-kyara* of their own. This would eventually culminate in the first Mascot Grand Prix, held in 2010. Mascots from around the country gathered together, and fans cast votes on their favorite character. The winner of the Grand Prix, whoever received the highest number of votes from fans, received major publicity which led to more merchandising opportunities. The Grand Prix drew tens of thousands of spectators and has become an annual event, solidifying the *yuru-kyara*'s position in Japanese society. To best understand the *yuru-kyara*, this paper will address two different case studies, which serve the purposes of promoting regional popularity and awareness.

One of the most popular *yuru-kyara* characters is Kumamon, who is a five-foot-tall black bear with rosy red cheeks. He was originally created in 2010 to promote a new bullet train in the mostly agricultural Kumamoto prefecture. Kumamoto was originally relatively unknown due to its limited tourism potential. The media boosted Kumamon towards the fame that he

29 Neil Steinberg, "Meet Japan's Kumamon, the Bear Who Earns Billions," *BBC*, July 20, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160719-meet-japans-kumamon-the-bear-who-earns-billions>.

has today, as recounted by Japanese culture website WebJapan:

Using social networking services (SNS), it was devised so that the topic of *Kumamon* would spread among his witnesses. After *Kumamon* gained wide recognition, the Kumamoto Governor held a serious press conference based on a contrived story that *Kumamon* disappeared from Osaka for nearly one month, and he called on people “to search for *Kumamon*”. This strategy paid off with *Kumamon* being featured in major media outlets such as newspapers and TV, making the once unknown character into a character recognized nationwide through the Internet.³⁰

His rise in popularity would lead him to victory in the *Yuru-Kyara* Grand Prix of 2011, after receiving over 200,000 votes. The results of this success have led Kumamon to be credited with:

Bringing the prefecture ¥11.8 billion in revenues in the first six months of 2012 alone, after drumming up only ¥2.56 billion in all of 2011. Kumamon promotes thousands of Kumamoto products, the vast majority food-related, and he has 120,000 Twitter followers. In a prefectural survey of local companies, 90 percent said they believe Kumamon significantly boosted their business.³¹

This quote displays the economic benefits that a *yuru-kyara* can provide to a local community. A major reason for the spread of the *yuru-kyara* is a desire by other prefectures or organizations to mimic this success and to revitalize the tourism industry in areas of rural Japan.

However, Kumamon has supported his community in more ways than solely economic marketing. Another important characteristic of Kumamon is his ability to bring people together. When his twitter account went oddly quiet after an earthquake struck the Kumamoto prefecture, Steinberg notes that “his fans simply conjured him up themselves, independently, as an object of sympathy, a tireless saviour, an obvious hero.”³² In the weeks of

30 “‘Kumamon’-Japan’s Most Popular Bear,” *Web Japan*, August 2013, https://web-japan.org/trends/11_culture/pop130812.html.

31 Philip Brasor, “Mascots bear cash for local authorities,” *The Japan Times*, January 13, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/01/13/national/media-national/mascots-bear-cash-for-local-authorities/#.XIm8HCJKjIU>.

32 Neil Steinberg, “Meet Japan’s Kumamon.”

silence, fans posted messages on his twitter or drew images of Kumamon to unite around a common figure in the hopes that he would emerge from the destruction. One of the attributes of Kumamon, and of several other *yuru-kyara* is the potential healing property discussed earlier with Hello Kitty. As seen in this instance, fans of Kumamon joined together and form a sense of community around a mascot for their region, in a time of crisis. This community came together as Steinberg recounts:

Three weeks after the 14 April earthquake, Kumamon visited the convention hall of the hard-hit town of Mashiki, where residents were still sleeping in their cars for protection as 1,200 tremors continued to rumble across the area. The visit was reported on TV and in the papers as news, as if a long-sought survivor had stumbled out of the wreckage alive. The children, many of whom had lost their homes in the earthquake, flocked around him, squealing, hugging, taking pictures. Their friend had returned.³³

Kumamon provided a sense of familiarity to victims of the earthquake, in doing so he demonstrated the ways in which a *yuru-kyara* can transcend the label of regional symbol or mascot. It is the *yuru-kyara*'s capacity to generate this empathy and connection that has sustained them in Japanese society.

Another facet of the *yuru-kyara* is their ability to promote an issue or concept within Japan; although less well known, another example of the *yuru-kyara* is Eeta-kun, the mascot for the Japanese National Tax Agency. Eeta-kun was created to promote and utilize electronic tax filing and serves as an example of the Japanese government's attempt to capitalize on the concept of character marketing. Writers for the Wall Street Journal, Daisuke Wakabayashi and Miho Inada, researched this phenomenon, observing that:

Eeta-kun—a green mascot with a square head resembling a computer screen, with eyes and mouth configured in the shape of an 'e' and the word 'tax' written vertically on his torso—stands 5-foot-5 inches tall, according to his official profile. His weight is 'secret' and he is skilled with computers. His friends include a gang of rainbow-colored mascots called the 'El-rangers' who share a similar passion for promoting the electronic filing of taxes, although

they focus on local levies. ‘He can fly too,’ said a tax agency official of Eeta-kun. ‘He flies around the country to different locations to get as many people as possible to use this e-tax system.’³⁴

Eeta-kun serves as the embodiment of Japan’s National Tax agency, and the hope is that by adding a “cute” face to the agency, people will feel more welcome to it. Contrary to Kumamon, “healing” is not the primary focus of Eeta-kun; the way in which he connects people is more for communication. While not directly involved with the advertising of character merchandising, Eeta-kun represents an effort to use a *kawaii* character for the promotion of civic education.

Despite these two examples, the effects of *yuru-kyara* are not universally positive. A recent government law has placed a limit on the number of *yuru-kyara* that can exist, the reasoning behind it being that:

Last year, the Finance Ministry said that many public bodies had put little thought into the rationale for having a mascot, or whether a cuddly character would represent value for money. Ongoing maintenance costs can be exorbitant, the ministry tersely noted, with one somewhat reclusive mascot setting back its owners ¥1 million a year, despite only making five outings.³⁵

With the specific purpose of creating revenue through increased tourism or the sale of merchandise, it is important to local economies that the *yuru-kyara* help the regions they were created for. However, Japan is in a current state of cuteness overload, with over 1,500 mascots representing different places and causes.³⁶ The result of this saturation has made it difficult for individual *yuru-kyara* to gain popularity. Neil Steinberg acknowledges that many *yuru-kyara* are “cute yet obscure, the common fate for most *yuru-kyara*. The city of Osaka [alone] has 45 different characters promoting its various aspects, who must fend off periodic calls for them to be culled in

34 Miho Inada and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Isn’t that Cute? In Japan, Cuddly Characters Complete,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 25, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323717004578156610405635572>.

35 Shingo Ito, “Japan’s Cuddly yet Costly Mascots Face Extermination,” *The Japan Times*, April 8, 2015.

36 Justin McCurry, “Character Assassination as Japan’s Mascot Ranks are Trimmed,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/09/character-assassination-japan-mascot-ranks-finance-ministry>.

the name of efficiency.”³⁷ With so many *yuru-kyara* attempting to compete for popularity, a system where a great portion of the *yuru-kyara* fade into obscurity has been created.

Regardless to the benefits or harms the *yuru-kyara* cause to Japanese economy and society, they have become a quintessential part of Japanese life. While the initial ideas behind them were the hopes of local revival through the distribution of character-based products, *yuru-kyara* have become so much more than that. They have been able to form connections within local communities through an attribute of “healing,” as well as education and outreach. The *yuru-kyara* inhabit a unique position as the pride and soul of local communities, and when that soul is in danger, as in the case with Kumamon and the earthquake, the people band together in support around their icon. What started out as simple character marketing has now become a nation-wide, even global phenomenon.

Soft Power: Cute, Rather Than Brute, Force

In a global community in which economic dominance often equates to political and global power, countries such as Japan have begun to find a new way to exert their influence, through what is known as soft power. Soft power, as defined by Professor Koichi Iwabuchi, is “the capacity to attract foreign nations by the appeal of the lifestyle and culture of the nation.”³⁸ The key to soft power is its non-coercive nature. Japan has been the quintessential example of the impact that soft power has. On a local scale, the usage of *yuru-kyara* can be seen as an exertion of soft power. The government uses these characters to help promote programs it would like the citizens to participate in, such as the E-tax system. Although often specifically designed for marketing, the contributions of the *yuru-kyara* to soft power are judged in a much less commercial light. In observing this trend, Dianne Walters, a writer for JapanSociology.com, notes that “part of the soft power that mascots have is the fact that they are not seen as marketing tools, but as a friendly character something between a mascot and a human.”³⁹ Mascots, such as Eeta-kun, non-coercively market or

37 Steinberg, “Meet Japan’s Kumamon.”

38 Koichi Iwabuchi, “Uses of Media Culture, Usefulness of Media Culture Studies: Beyond Brand Nationalism into Public Dialogue,” In Meaghan Morris, & Mette Hjort *Creativity and Academic Activism: Instituting Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 142.

39 Dianne Walters, “Japanese Mascotization, Marketing, and Imagined Communities,”

promote an idea, and are therefore seen as less aggressive and more welcoming. Soft power for Japan, which has allowed it to retain a major international presence, has resulted from the global spread of Hello Kitty and the *yuru-kyara*.

The Japanese Government has taken notice of the proliferation and enthusiasm for Japanese culture that began to spread across the globe in the 1990s. In the hopes of nurturing this soft power, the government has created a program known as “Cool Japan (of which Cute Japan is an important facet),” to help support this growth. The government of Shinzo Abe has funneled more than \$880 million⁴⁰ into what Iwabuchi calls “the active development of national cultural policy discussion and implementation aimed at further enhancing Japan’s cultural standing in the world.”⁴¹ By following the doctrine of soft power, the Japanese government looks to ways in which to market aspects of its culture, namely a combination of cool and *kawaii*. The plan is to see a holistic, world-wide growth of appreciation for Japanese culture, because currently, “Japan’s cultural exports have been of a random and piecemeal nature, and there has been no sustained attempt to exploit merchandising opportunities. This is because creative companies tend to be small or medium-size and lack the resources to establish a global presence.”⁴² This global presence is not only a response to the global economic force that China has become, but also to developing markets in other Southwest Asian countries. Journalist Roland Kelts continues: “At the same time, Japan is both alien to and suspicious of its rising Asian neighbors. In this respect, the timing of Cool Japan makes sense.”⁴³ The program of Cool Japan is centered on the idea that Japan can build relationships with foreign countries by sharing its own culture, thus creating a system of cultural diplomacy. While Japan will constantly be in a struggle for economic superiority, it can achieve relevance through cultural spread.

It is equally important to analyze what Japan is marketing and spreading to these countries. While there are economic factors at work, it is important

JapanSociology (blog), February 4, 2014, <https://japansociology.com/2014/02/04/japanese-mascotization-marketing-and-imagined-communities/>.

40 “Japan’s Soft Power: Squaring the Cool,” *The Economist*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/banyan/2014/06/17/squaring-the-cool>.

41 Iwabuchi, “Uses of Media Culture,” 141.

42 Roland Kelts, “Japan Spends Millions in Order to be Cool,” *Time*, July 1, 2013, <http://world.time.com/2013/07/01/japan-spends-millions-in-order-to-be-cool/>.

43 Ibid.

that Japan is placing an emphasis on the *kawaii* aspects of its culture. As discussed above, this “cuteness” serves as potential healing for alienation in the modern world. Japan hopes to foster relationships by demonstrating a non-coercive and cool culture. This kinder, softer Japan has appealed to other foreign countries, which is best observed through the creation of *yuru-kyara* ambassadors. May Masangkay in an article for *The Japan Times* reports that “some foreign embassies are not missing out on the chance to catch a ride on the massive mascot boom.”⁴⁴ This attempt to forge stronger ties between cultures is best seen by Israel, who created an official *yuru-kyara* to represent the Israeli embassy in Japan. The reasons cited for this creation were to help with “problems of [Israeli] branding” in Japan, as well as what Ronen Medzini from the Israeli embassy calls presenting “the soft side or the real side of Israel.”⁴⁵ The *yuru-kyara* ambassadors present a non-threatening face of a nation, allowing a country to participate in Japanese culture and promote their own interests as well. This practice of *yuru-kyara* ambassadors has spread to embassies from Latin America in Japan as well, demonstrating the government’s commitment to cute diplomacy.

As a result of soft power, Japan has become a key practitioner of cultural diplomacy, a form of diplomacy in which ties are strengthened by the promotion of one country’s culture. As author Nissim Otmazgin stated, “no doubt, cultural exports—and their recent marriage with soft power—are beneficial for the producing country as they present a friendlier, softer, image of this country abroad. Culture can also generate economic value for the producing country in the form of direct income.”⁴⁶ Japan has commodified its culture to help promote its interests in the global community. Using the same principles as the *yuru-kyara* and Hello Kitty, Japan markets *kawaii* across the globe, with the knowledge of the positive way in which our brains react to cute. The commodification of cute has now evolved into a leading foreign policy for Japan.

44 May Masangkay, “Embassies in Japan Using Mascots as Cultural Ambassadors,” *The Japan Times*, October, 18 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/10/18/national/embassies-using-mascots-as-ambassadors/>.

45 Ibid.

46 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, “Geopolitics and Soft Power: Japan’s Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy in Asia,” *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2012): 54.

Conclusion

The character marketing industry within Japan quickly realized that its characters would be best complimented by a *kawaii* appearance. The resulting process of using cuteness to appeal to consumers would be known as commercial cute. Yet, this process did not happen randomly. On the one hand, a growing consumer group of women were eager to buy not only for their households, but also themselves. Cuteness appealed to this group; though, through observing several psychological studies, we can see that there is something cute for everyone. Whether it is a sense of empathy, nostalgia, or “healing,” cuteness has a wide appeal, a fact that marketers are increasingly aware of. One of the ways cuteness was marketed was through Hello Kitty, a character originally created to promote cute goods. However, she quickly developed a huge following due to her ability to give intimacy and empathy in an increasingly isolated world. The *yuru-kyara* occupy a similar comforting spot in people’s hearts. While both had noticeable economic impacts, it was the emotional aspect of both groups that brought them love and popularity. These cultural phenomena have formed part of Japan’s new initiative to market its culture to the world and to increase its foreign standing and foreign relations through soft power.

To best understand this cultural phenomenon, this paper would like to return to the election of 2016 (the one for the *yuru-kyara*). Millions of people voted in this election, but this was not simply a competition of who was the cutest. People were voting for the heart and soul of their local community, the winner of which would become Japan’s next top mascot.

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