

# A Study of the Differences in Factors That Influence the Impression of “Cute”: A Comparison between Japan and China

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## Abstract

“Kawaii” is not exclusive to Japanese culture, but it is attracting widespread attention overseas as a part of pop culture and in subcultures. Kawaii for individuals is primarily a psychological and emotional experience; however few studies have examined these psychological factors. The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in the concept of kawaii between Japan and China by comparing Japanese and Chinese characters and analyzing the differences between the two countries’ characters that are considered kawaii in both countries. The survey sample consisted of 116 Japanese university students (91 males and 25 females, mean age 19.66 years, standard deviation 1.29). The survey was conducted in July 2021. The questions were titled “Questionnaire on Impressions from Images,” and were administered during lecture time. The questions were asked by presenting images of 12 Japanese and Chinese characters, both animal and human, and asking for responses. The results showed that Chinese characters were cuter than Japanese characters. Furthermore, Chinese animal characters were found to give the impression of being younger than their Japanese counterparts.

## Keywords

Kawaii, Cute, ANOVA, Japanese Characters, Chinese Characters

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, “kawaii” has come to be considered a characteristic of Japanese culture. In his book *The Power of Cute*, Simon May talks about the 180 degree turn in Japan’s history, from the violence of war to kawaii starting around the 1970s, in the works of artists like Takashi Murakami, amongst others. By 1992,

kawaii was seen as “the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese.” (May, 2019). Since then, there has been some controversy surrounding the term kawaii and the expectations of it in Japanese culture. Natalia Konstantinovskaia, in her article “Being Kawaii in Japan”, says that based on the increasing ratio of young Japanese girls that view themselves as kawaii, there is a possibility that “from early childhood, Japanese people are socialized into the expectation that women must be kawaii.” (Konstantinovskaia, 2017). The idea of kawaii can be tricky to balance—if a woman’s interpretation of kawaii seems to have gone too far, she is then labeled as buriko, “a woman who plays bogus innocence.” (Konstantinovskaia, 2017). In the article “Embodied Kawaii: Girls’ voices in J-pop”, the authors make the argument that female J-pop singers are expected to be recognizable by their outfits, voice, and mannerisms as kawaii—young and cute. Any woman who becomes a J-pop icon must stay kawaii, or keep her girlishness, rather than being perceived as a woman, even if she is over 18 (Keith & Hughes, 2016). Characters such as Hello Kitty are loved by people of all generations, and anime such as Pocket Monster is broadcast around the world. Cute goods are all around us, and they are familiar not only to children and women, but also to the elderly and men. Furthermore, not only commercial enterprises but also public organizations are creating mascot characters for public relations purposes, many of which aim to be described as kawaii (Nittono, 2009).

In addition, “kawaii” is not only a Japanese culture, but is also gaining widespread attention overseas as a form of pop culture or subculture. In February 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan appointed three young leaders in the fashion field as Kawaii Ambassadors (pop culture ambassadors) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009), and kawaii has come to be used as a national policy. There have been many studies on the birth and development of kawaii culture in Japan (Koga, 2009; Yomota, 2006; Kinsella, 1995).

These studies are mainly humanistic and social scientific studies based on impressions, intuition, and qualitative analysis, and are cultural theories that emphasize the peculiarities of Japan. However, even if it is a cultural phenomenon, kawaii for an individual is first and foremost a psychological and emotional experience. As long as it is an emotion, there must be a psychological basis behind it. Few studies have examined this psychological factor.

Given the current situation in which “cute” has become so widespread, it is thought that there may be a factor that reinforces the behavior of seeing and holding cute things. From this perspective, there have been few empirical examinations of “what is cute” and “what is good about cute”.

In addition, although kawaii has been accepted as part of Japanese culture in other countries, there are few studies that have examined the differences in the original values regarding “kawaii. Especially in China, where there are cultural similarities, a study” (Li, 2021) focusing on cartoon characters and examining the factors that make them kawaii (cute), reported that the Japanese consider

“face” as significantly important, while the Chinese consider “head,” “fashion,” “personality,” and “background setting excluding personality” as significantly important. There is room for further investigation of the cultural differences in kawaii between Japan and China.

Therefore, with the aim of clarifying the utility of kawaii, this study analyzes the way kawaii is in Japan and the way it is in China by exploring the factors that cause kawaii in Japan and China, and examines the cultural differences.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Survey Subjects

116 mentally and physically healthy Japanese university students (91 males and 25 females, mean age 19.66 years, standard deviation 1.29).

### 2.2. Survey Period

The survey was conducted on Japanese university students in July 2021.

### 2.3. Survey Method

This was administered during lecture time. The questionnaire was conducted on the web using Google Form. The questionnaire items consisted of 12 images of Japanese and Chinese animal and human characters, and respondents were asked to answer the following questions about their impression on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The following questions were asked.

Question 1: “They are cute.”

Question 2: “They are youthful.”

Question 3: “I want to get close to them.”

Question 4: “I want to keep them close to me.”

Question 5: “I want to help them if they are in trouble.”

Question 6: “I want to protect them.”

### 2.4. Analysis Method

A two-way ANOVA was conducted on the responses to questions 1 through 6 above, with country (Japan or China) and character attributes (animals, people) as factors. IBM SPSS Statistics was used for the analysis.

## 3. Results

A two-way ANOVA with country and character attributes as independent variables and “They are cute,” “They are youthful,” “I want to get close to them,” “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” “I want to protect them” as dependent variables showed that the main effects of character attributes were significant (**Tables 1-6**). “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” and “I want to protect them” (“I want to keep them close to me,”:  $F(1, 1376) = 62.333, p < 0.001$ , “I want to

**Table 1.** Analysis of variance results for “They are cute”.

	Type III Square	<i>df</i>	Average Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	0.49	1	0.49	0.353	0.553
Character Attributes	60.104	1	60.104	43.296	0.000***
Country × Character Attributes	10.09	1	10.09	7.268	0.007**

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2.** Analysis of variance results for “They are youthful”.

	Type III Square	<i>df</i>	Average Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	43.852	1	43.852	34.053	0.000***
Character Attributes	57.626	1	57.626	44.749	0.000***
Country × Character Attributes	13.012	1	13.012	10.104	0.002**

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 3.** Analysis of variance results for “I want to get close to them”.

	Type III Square	<i>df</i>	Average Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	0.046	1	0.046	0.034	0.855
Character Attributes	100.278	1	100.278	72.669	0.000***
Country × Character Attributes	5.359	1	5.359	3.884	0.049*

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4.** Analysis of variance results for “I want to keep them close to me”.

	Type III Square	<i>df</i>	Average Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	0.742	1	0.742	0.515	0.473
Character Attributes	89.786	1	89.786	62.333	0.000***
Country × Character Attributes	0.003	1	0.003	0.002	0.964

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 5.** Analysis of variance results for “I want to help them if they are in trouble”.

	Type III Square	<i>df</i>	Average Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Country	0.609	1	0.609	0.439	0.508
Character Attributes	13.207	1	13.207	9.511	0.002**
Country × Character Attributes	1.102	1	1.102	0.794	0.373

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 6.** Analysis of variance results for “I want to protect them”.

	Type III Square	df	Average Square	F	p
Country	2.522	1	2.522	1.765	0.184
Character Attributes	94.436	1	94.436	66.073	0.000***
Country × Character Attributes	0.696	1	0.696	0.487	0.485

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

help them if they are in trouble,”:  $F(1, 1376) = 9.551, p < 0.01$ , “I want to protect them”:  $F(1, 1376) = 66.073, p < 0.001$  (Table 5 and Table 6).

“They are cute,” “They are youthful,” “I want to get close to them,” “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” “I want to protect them” were significantly higher for animal characters than for human characters.

For “They are cute,” “They are youthful,” and “I want to get close to them,” the interaction between country and character attributes was significant (“They are cute,”:  $F(1, 1376) = 7.268, p < 0.01$ , “They are youthful,”:  $F(1, 1376) = 10.104, p < 0.01$ , “I want to get close to them,”:  $F(1, 1376) = 3.884, p < 0.05$ ) (Table 1 and Table 3).

A simple main effect test showed that the main effects of character attributes for Japanese and Chinese characters were significant for “They are cute” (Japan:  $F(1, 1376) = 43.021, p < 0.001$ , China:  $F(1, 1376) = 7.543, p < 0.01$ ), “They are youthful” (Japan:  $F(1, 1376) = 6.163, p < 0.05$ , China:  $F(1, 1376) = 48.691, p < 0.001$ ), and “I want to get close to them” (Japan:  $F(1, 1376) = 55.076, p < 0.001$ , China:  $F(1, 1376) = 21.477, p < 0.001$ ), and responses were significantly higher for animal characters than for human characters.

As for “They are cute,” the main effect of country for human characters was significant ( $F(1, 1376) = 5.412, p < 0.05$ ), and responses were significantly higher for Chinese characters than Japanese characters. As for “They are youthful,” the main effect of country for animal characters was significant ( $F(1, 1376) = 40.628, p < 0.001$ ), and responses were significantly higher for Chinese characters than Japanese characters.

#### 4. Considerations

The main finding, and the focus of the theoretical investigation was that there is a difference in the impression given by Japanese and Chinese characters. In view of the significant results of the tests for simple main effects, there would appear to be two effects which warrant theoretical explanation. These are the effect that Chinese characters have on “They are cute,” and the effect that Chinese characters have on “They are youthful.”

First, regarding the impression of “They are cute” of human characters, it was found that Chinese characters were cuter than their Japanese counterparts.

In a study, Li (2021) that created average faces of Japanese and Chinese female

characters and compared the impressions, Chinese characters showed significantly higher values for cuteness, beauty, maturity, and overall image preference. Li (2021) pointed out that the reason for this is that Japanese characters have large variations in appearance, while Chinese characters are more similar in appearance, and the average facial contours are more neatly organized. As shown in Figure 1, the Chinese characters have the same hair color (brown or dark blue) and uniform clothing (skirts, etc.), giving them a sense of unity. On the other hand, Japanese characters are dark blue, light blue, and pink with various hairstyles, and have a variety of characteristics, such as characters wearing kimonos and characters imitating animals. Evaluations regarding “They are cute,” can vary greatly among individuals depending on the target of evaluation (Ujigawa, 2016).

Therefore, in this study, it is considered that the individual characteristics of Japanese human characters are emphasized by the variation in their appearance, and some subjects may not find certain characters attractive, resulting in lower values for the impression of cuteness than in China.

Next, with regards to the impression that animal characters are youthful, it was clear that Chinese characters gave a more youthful impression than Japanese characters.

Ihara & Nittono’s (2012) study showed that among the objects perceived as “They are cute,” categories consisting of babies, children, small animals, and stuffed toys gave a particularly “They are youthful,” impression. Maeda (1985) also states that animals and babies have physical characteristics such as large heads and short, thick limbs compared to their bodies, and that these characteristics are the ones that evoke cute feelings toward the objects. Comparing the Japanese and Chinese animal characters shown in Figure 2, it is clear that the Chinese characters emphasize features that are reminiscent of animals and babies, such as large heads and short limbs.



Figure 1. Japanese and Chinese characters.



**Figure 2.** Japanese and Chinese animal characters.

In the case of Japanese characters, similar characteristics were not always seen, or the characters were characterized by items such as helmets, rice bowls, haka-ma, etc. It is possible that the characteristics associated with “They are youthful” were not as memorable as those of the Chinese characters. As a result, the Chinese animal characters may have given a more youthful impression.

Finally, with regards to the impressions of “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” “I want to protect them,” it was clear that animal characters made stronger impressions than human characters, regardless of whether the respondents were Japanese or Chinese.

According to [Ujigawa \(2016\)](#), the phenomenon that human find “They are cute,” is caused by the object’s form (small, round, etc.), behavior and facial expressions (infantile gestures, good smile, etc.), and inferred personality (innocent, healthy, etc.), which in turn have psychological influences. These influences are the result of “I want to get close to them,” and “I want to keep them close to me.”. These influences can also be said to be related to impressions such as “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” “I want to protect them”.

In this study, we investigated the impressions received from still images of characters, and we believe that these impressions were mainly influenced by the form of the characters. Comparing the forms of human characters and animal characters, it can be inferred that the smaller and rounder features of animal characters were more pronounced, resulting in stronger impressions of “I want to keep them close to me,” “I want to help them if they are in trouble,” “I want to protect them”.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we demonstrated that there are differences in the impressions

given by Chinese and Japanese characters. Chinese human characters were found to be more likely to be perceived as cuter than Japanese human characters. In addition, Chinese animal characters were found to give the impression of being younger than their Japanese counterparts. Thus, it may be that Chinese characters tend to be preferred over Japanese characters. Future studies should aim to expand the characters looked at to those worldwide in order to more clearly identify the features which make designs likable.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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