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PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP
CULTURE AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

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AESTHETIC JOURNEYS AND MEDIA
PILGRIMAGES IN THE CONTEXTS OF POP
CULTURE AND THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

EDITED BY

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MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 10

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial – Fulfilling the purpose of a rich, productive, and successful 2021. And preparing for an as much as possible, definitely “true normal” 2022

MAXIME DANESIN (Independent Researcher, MIRA, France)
& **MARCO PELLITTERI** (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China)IX-XVIII

SECTION I:

STYLE, IMAGES, AND CULTURAL TOURISM FROM AND TO EAST ASIA

Guest Editors:

JESSICA SUGIMOTO BAUWENS (Ryūkoku University, Japan)
& **MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-PÉREZ** (Salford University, UK)

The virtual cultural tourist: Film-induced tourism and *Kubo and the Two Strings*

DENNIS YEO (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)3-20

From China to the World: The main media pilgrimages of Sun Wukong and Son Gokū

GIOVANNI RUSCICA (Fudan University, China)21-50

Fashionable pilgrims: Rental and second-hand kimono shops styling paths of new embodied communities

LUCILE DRUET (Kansai Gaidai University, Japan)51-92

Cute at an older age: A case study of *Otona-Kawaii*

SHIRI LIEBER-MILO (Osaka University, Japan)93-108

Undermining the gendered genre: Kabuki in manga

OLGA ANTONONOKA (Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan)109-134

SECTION II:

TRAVELLING (THROUGH) IMAGES AROUND THE WORLD

Guest Editors:

MARCO BELLANO (University of Padua, Italy)
& **JOSÉ ANDRÉS SANTIAGO IGLESIAS** (Vigo University, Spain)

In the steps of the Prophets: The dissemination and reinterpretation of David Roberts' Holy Lands sketches through the Shows of London

JEREMY BROOKER (Independent Researcher, UK)137-170

Bodies in motion and image recomposition in the early 20th Century

ANGELA LONGO (Tokyo University of the Arts, Japan)171-190

Immersed, yet distant: Notes for an aesthetic theory of immersive travel films NICOLAS BILCHI (Roma Tre University, Italy)	191-216
Anime tourism in Italy: Travelling to the locations of the Studio Ghibli films GIULIA LAVARONE & MARCO BELLANO (University of Padua, Italy)	217-250
<i>Ipar Haizearen Erronka</i> : A boat trip from the Basque Country to Newfoundland MAITANE JUNGUITU DRONDA (Independent Researcher, Spain)	251-270
Journeying to the actual World through digital games: The <i>Urban Histories Reloaded</i> project STEFANO CASELLI, FARAH POLATO & MAURO SALVADOR (University of Malta; University of Padua, Italy)	271-294
What is visual Vaporwave? Vaporwave arts and their history and position in China ZHANG XIAOLONG (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China)	295-326

REVIEWS

<i>Diverse Voices in Translation Studies in East Asia</i> – Nana Sato-Rossberg & Akiko Uchiyama (eds) JAMIE TOKUNO (Independent Researcher, MIRA, USA)	329-334
<i>When the World Laughs. Film Comedy East and West</i> – William V. Costanzo JOSE MONTAÑO (Rikkyō University, Japan).....	335-342
<i>The Values in Numbers: Reading Japanese Literature in a Global Information Age</i> – Hoyt Long VICKY YOUNG (University of Cambridge, UK)	343-346
<i>An Affair with a Village</i> – Joy Hendry AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA (Independent Researcher, MIRA, France).....	347-354

Cute at an older age: A case study of *Otona-Kawaii*

Shiri LIEBER-MILO | Osaka University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The word kawaii, meaning 'cute and sweet' in English, has been part of the Japanese culture for centuries. While the word and trend were historically associated with young women and children, there has recently been an attempt to expand the definition of kawaii outside of its traditional borders to other age and gender groups by creating uniquely synthesised words and trends. The newly coined term otona-kawaii ['adult-cute'] refers to mature women who passed their teen years and continue to dress cute and behave innocent and adorable. In this paper, a focus will be taken upon the new concept of otona-kawaii, and how it is defined and evaluated by the Japanese people.

Results of a recent survey conducted among male and female respondents between the ages of 18 to 29, showed that many of them were in favour of the idea of behaving cute at an older age. It was also found that women were more familiar with the term otona-kawaii and had a more positive approach towards it than men. The results of the study suggest that kawaii can be extended beyond infants and may apply to other age populations, such as mature women.

The aim of this study is to bridge the gap between kawaii and maturity by providing some empirical evidence and information, bringing to a deeper understanding of the concept of kawaii, contributing to the scholarship of the kawaii culture in Japan.

KEYWORDS

Adult; Cute; Japan; *Kawaii*; *Otona*; Survey.

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Introduction

The concept of *kawaii* has been employed by the Japanese aesthetic culture since ancient times to describe something adorable, endearing, and attractive, such as small objects, infants, and young animals (Nittono, 2016). Although the word is often translated as 'cute and adorable' in English, *kawaii* has several additional meanings such as pitifulness and ludicrous, which can be seen at first glance as contradictory to each other (Nittono, 2016: 81). The word itself originated from the word *kawahayushi*, a coined word of 'face' [*kao*] and 'flushing' [*hayui*], which was used to describe a sense of shame, and sometimes a sense of pity, sympathy, or affection towards weaker members of the society, such as women and children (Nittono, 2016: 81).

As a trend, the modern concept of kawaii culture has its roots in young teenage girls [*shōjo*] who are considered to be the ones who shaped kawaii and enabled it to achieve its current success. These young women are typically unmarried girls who act and dress in a girlish, cute way, and behave in a childish manner (Yomota, 2006; Monden, 2015: pp. 4-5). During the 1970s, this association between these young women and kawaii evolved and strengthened through a schoolgirl handwriting fashion that was often called ‘fake-child writing’ [*burikko-ji*], a writing style characterised by its round-shaped letters along with English lettering and cartoon pictures (Kinsella, 1995: pp. 222-3). Over the years, the popularity of *burikko-ji* had expanded to wider areas and channels. Today, this cursive handwriting is used extensively in the publishing media that focuses on a younger audience, such as in manga, magazines, and advertisements. According to Kinsella (1995: pp. 250-2), the rise of the *shōjo* subculture has materialised not only as a fashion statement, but also as rebellion against traditional stereotypical gender roles that perceived women as mainly responsible for bearing children and managing the household.

Thanks to these young girls, this trend has not faded since the 1970s and is still a dominant social and cultural element, as well as a powerful source of revenue in the Japanese economy, with many Japanese companies and media tools, such as Studio Ghibli, Sanrio and manga companies, focusing their line of products on women who are eagerly willing to spend large amounts of money on kawaii goods.

The term and concept of kawaii has been directly associated with young females and children’s world culture since the 2000s, but there has recently been an effort by the vast media to expand the definition of kawaii beyond its conventional borders by bridging the gap between other age and gender groups. This attempt is expressed in the creation of newly synthesised locutions that represent a new type of cuteness, which does not necessarily refer to young children and women, but also to other age groups, such as adult women (Yomota, 2006).

The new idiom and trend of *otona-kawaii* [adult-cute] represents a new phase in the evolution of kawaii, which expands its horizon from young women in their teens to mature women who are in their 20s, 30s, 40s, even 50s and 60s. According to Asano-Cavanagh (2017: pp. 225-6), the trend arose from mature women who wished to stay young and attractive, started to adopt the kawaii behaviour of innocence and ‘youthfulness’ into their age group of older women.

While the exact origin of *otona-kawaii* is unclear, Yomota (2006: 142-3) claims that one of the first forms of print media to bring *kawaii* to the awareness of mature women past the age of 20, was *JJ* magazine's November 2004 issue. According to *JJ* (as cited in Yomota, 2006: 142-3) an *otona-kawaii* is a person who continues to have a high interest in *kawaii* products, occasionally consumes its related products, and behaves innocent and adorable, even at an older age.

Followed by *JJ*, other women-oriented fashion magazines, such as *An-An*, *CanCam*, and *Cutie* attempt to adjust the *shōjo* world of cuteness to older women and often express their positive approach towards *kawaii* in some of their articles, in which women who retain *kawaii* fashion and style experience a sense of freedom, are content, and feel good about themselves (Yomota, 2006). By displaying slogans such as 'If you buy *kawaii* products...you will most likely become *kawaii* [*kawaii mono o kaeba, kawaiku naru deshōu*]' (Yomota, 2006: 136), women's magazines encourage their female audience, young and mature alike, to wear cute fashion and to attain and maintain their cuteness, even at an older age.

But these fashion magazines do not only exhibit *kawaii* fashion and encourage women to use its related products but also, to some extent, 'educate' their female readers about the thin line between the proper and improper practice of *kawaii*, and encourage them to have a suitable *kawaii* look and behaviour. These fashion magazines suggest that, if women follow their advice and explanations correctly, and, of course, use the products they advertise, they will be able to become a proper *otona-kawaii*, in a way that is both appreciated and cherished by many in their Japanese society (Lieber-Milo, 2017: p. 78).

Due to the rising trend, more and more Japanese companies have adjusted their brand to target mature women consumers. For example, Sanrio, a toy manufacturer, has developed a fresh line of cute products that include adult-oriented goods such as personal electronics and jewellery. The success of these adult-targeted products was reflected by the fact that, by 2000, Hello Kitty's target customer was women between the ages of eighteen and forty (Yano, 2013; May, 2019).

The power of cuteness

Numerous studies have shown that seeing cute, baby-like physical traits like young infants and animals, causes a positive reaction in the observer, with the consumption

of its related products serving as a useful tool in handling social interaction and stressful situations (see Sherman *et al.*, 2012; Kringelbach *et al.*, 2016; Nittono, 2016; Nittono, 2019; Lieber-Milo, 2021).

Beyond infantile characteristics, recent studies have shown that kawaii is irrespective of age, and other forms of physical characteristics may elicit a ‘cuteness response’; a coined term introduced by Sherman and Haidt (2011: pp. 245-6). For example, in their study, Ihara and Nittono (2011) found that a grown-up person’s smile may give an impression of kawaii and produce a positive reaction in almost any observer. In other words, regardless of her age, a mature woman’s smile may elicit a cuteness response in others.

While these characteristics of cuteness may convey weakness at first glance, May (2019) claims that cuteness is not as helpless as it may seem, and one of the reasons for its strength is its ‘seductive’ qualities that draw attention, causing others to be unable to resist the person who behaving in a kawaii manner. As such, being cute towards other members of society might be a useful tactic for obtaining favours, attention, making the person who uses his cuteness as leverage, a strong individual (Botz-Bornstein, 2016: 300; May, 2019).

Moreover, cuteness may serve as a temporary getaway from the harsh world of ‘adulthood’ to a better world of nostalgic, childlike self (Nguyen, 2012: 154; Lieber-Milo, 2021). As kawaii was originally the domain of youth, by defining themselves as kawaii and consuming its related products at an older age, adults are in many ways reminded of their childhood, and are “transported through a gateway” back to an idealised childhood (Anan, 2016; Nguyen, 2012: 154). In other words, since kawaii consists of various virtues that are correlated to childhood, by adoring kawaii and consuming its related goods at an older age, some of the childhood virtues are revived through ‘otona-kawaii’.

Therefore, one might say that the concepts of kawaii and otona-kawaii are associated with Peter-Pan Syndrome (PPS), an emotional condition in which a person manifests an emotional regression and a desire to become a young child once again. Although similar connotations exist between the two, Lieber-Milo (2021: 12) claims that individuals who retain cuteness at an older age, only choose to temporarily go back to the pink bubble of childhood and can “return” to the “real world” of adulthood at any time.

In contrast to the positive attitude revolving kawaii, in a survey conducted by Lieber-Milo (2017) it was found that some Japanese, especially male, described kawaii from a more critical and negative perspective. According to these, a woman who takes on a kawaii persona is both childish and spoiled in a way that renders her completely dependent on the mercy of other individuals, and thus, is neither appreciated nor looks natural in the eyes of the observer (Monden, 2015). In addition, some survey respondents suggested that when a person behaves in a kawaii manner, a “gap” or disconnection is created between the inner and outer self (Lieber-milo, 2017: p. 130). In this respect, an individual who outwardly behaves in a sweet, natural and innocent manner would be feeling completely different inwardly. According to this interpretation, women hide their true selves and wear a mask of artificial cuteness to comply with perceived societal expectations (Winnicott, 1965).

While negative aspects such as childishness do exist within kawaii, the positive virtues overcome its negative side, in which a woman who behaves in a kawaii manner conveys innocence, honesty, purity, smiles frequently and is friendly to anyone.

The present study aims to show how the newly coined term *otona-kawaii* is defined and projected by Japanese people, as well as clarifying their general attitudes towards the idea of continuing to behave, dress and ‘consume’ cuteness, even at an older age.

To do this, a survey was conducted by the researcher on 692 female respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 ($M=23.79$), and 67 male respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 ($M=20.5$).

The results of the survey show how the Japanese people define the new concept of *otona-kawaii* and their attitude towards the idea of behaving kawaii at an older age. It also reveals that *otona-kawaii* is a well-known and loved concept among Japanese women and demonstrates the positive attitude towards ‘being’ kawaii at an older age, whether in fashion choices, appearance or behaviour.

Methodology

A questionnaire was distributed by the researcher by hand and online in two phases over a period of five months. The questionnaire included a range of questions to examine the respondent’s knowledge of, approach to, and attitude towards kawaii and *otona-kawaii*. The research protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, Graduate school of Language and Culture, Osaka University. The part of the survey that

is not reported in this paper was published in 2017, 2019, and 2021. The complete dataset is available online at: <https://osf.io/gcvzk>.

To gather all the necessary data, a different sampling approach was taken by each study. In the first stage, a hand-written and an online survey was distributed by the researcher to 342 randomly chosen female university students between the ages of 18 and 23, and 75 male university students between the ages of 18 and 24 from three selected universities in the Kansai region of western Japan: Kyoto University, Osaka University and Doshisha University. These universities were selected due to their nationwide rating (two national universities and one private), as they attract a variety of students from all over Japan, not only Kansai, thus offering a broader and a deeper perspective to the analysis.

In the second stage, an online survey was delivered to 350 adult women between the ages of 23 to 29, who had graduated from higher educational institutions and live, in the Kansai region of western Japan. The same criteria was applied as to the first survey.

Before respondents were given the surveys, a consent form page was presented to inform prospective candidates about the aim of the study, their voluntary participation, and a privacy policy stipulating that none of their personally identifiable information would be retained. All respondents to the second survey, and some of the first survey respondents, received a small monetary compensation for their cooperation.

Results

In this study, I will focus on the last questions of the survey regarding the concept of *kawaii* at an older age, and the Japanese term *otona-kawaii*. Minor adjustments were made to the online survey to comply with the electronic version of the questionnaire. This included a modification to the structure of the question (b).

The following two questions were asked:

- (a)** Do you think it's good to behave *kawaii* ('nice and sweet') even at an older age? [4-point scale, 1= *Strongly Disagree* to 4=*Strongly Agree*]?
- (b)** Are you familiar with the word *otona-kawaii* [Yes or No]? (1) If the answer is yes, how would you define the word *otona-kawaii* [Free description]? (written survey).
- (b)** Are you familiar with the word *otona-kawaii*? If the answer is yes, how would you define the word *otona-kawaii* [Free description]? (online survey).

Out of 767 survey respondents, 717 people (75 men between eighteen and twenty-four years old, $M=20.5$, and 642 women between eighteen and twenty-nine years old, $M=23.7$ years old) responded to the first question (a) regarding their attitude towards the concept of behaving *kawaii* at an older age.

As originally part of young women *shōjo* culture, it was assumed that a high number of survey participants might have a negative attitude towards the idea of behaving in a *kawaii* manner at an older age. Surprisingly, the results of the question “Do you think it’s good to behave *kawaii* (nice and sweet) even at an older age?” showed that the majority of male and female survey participants have a positive attitude towards *otona-kawaii*.

Figure 1 below shows the histograms of the responses. The general attitude was rather positive in both gender groups, although female respondents provided a slightly higher evaluation than male respondents. There is no significant difference between young women’s response ($Mdn = 2$, Mean rank = 339.73, $n = 292$) and that of adult women ($Mdn = 3$, Mean rank = 352.11, $n = 350$), $U = 57537$, $p = .357$ ($z = -.922$), $r = -.035$, in relation to the idea of behaving *kawaii* at an older age.

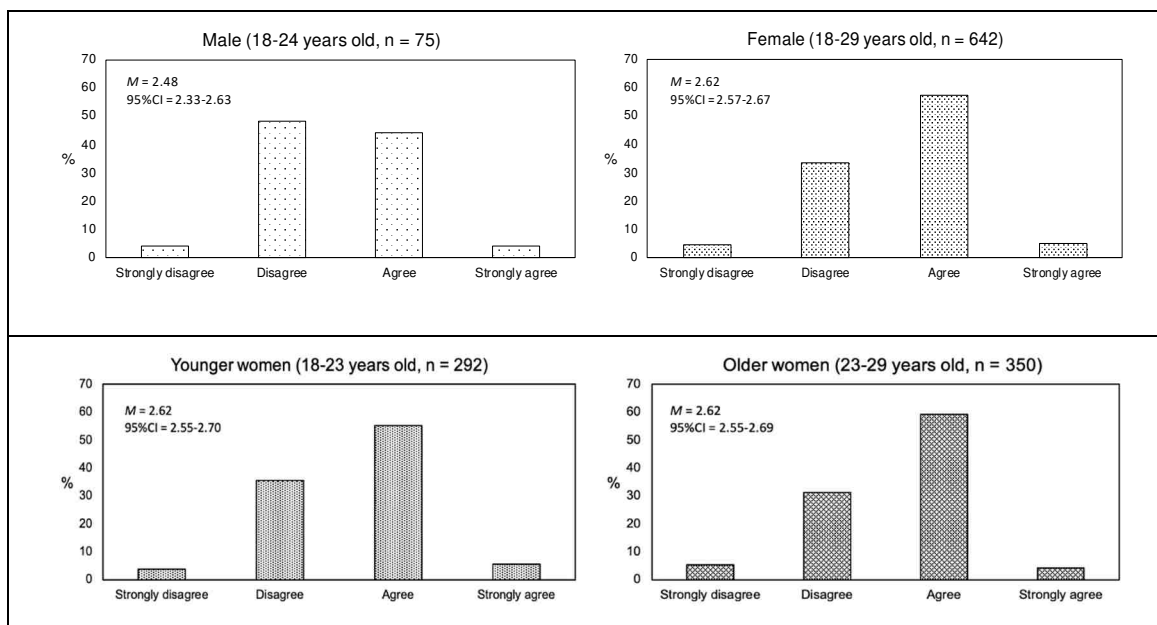


Fig. 1. Gender and age differences response to the question, ‘Do you think it’s good to behave *kawaii* (‘nice and sweet’) even at an older age?’

Following the first question, the results of the open-ended question, ‘Please describe in your own words how you define *otona-kawaii*’ produced a wide spectrum of views regarding the term and the concept of *otona-kawaii*. It suggests a high difference in the

gender groups and shows that the term is well-known among Japanese women. Out of the 692 female respondents who answered question “a”, $n= 325$ (47 per cent) were able to voice their own opinions and perspectives about the word *otona-kawaii*. On the other hand, only $n=5$ (6.5 per cent) of the male respondents were familiar with the word and gave their perception on the term.

The *kawaii* images given by responses were assessed numerically and divided into five categories through a discussion among five women between the ages of 20-60 who did not serve as participants: gender [*seibetsu*], appearance [*gaikan*], positive qualities [*pojitiba na tokusei*], negative qualities [*negatibu na tokusei*], and neither positive nor negative [*pojitiba demo negatibu de mo arimasen*]. The affinity diagram in **Table 1** and the numeral data in **Table 2** give a clear impression of how respondents perceive the new *otona-kawaii* trend.

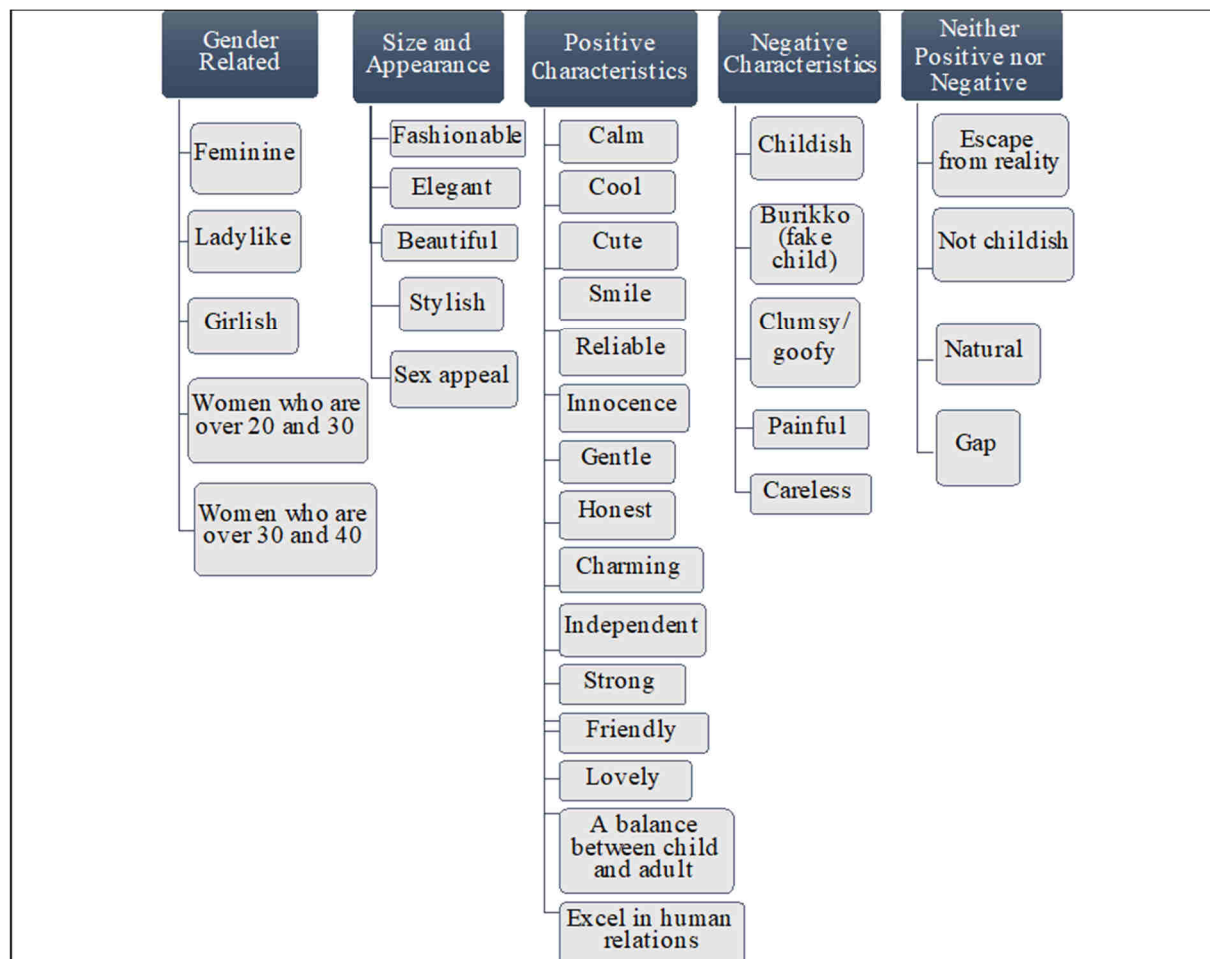


Table 1. Responses of 325 females and 5 males to the question “Please describe in your own words how you define *otona-kawaii*” (affinity diagram).

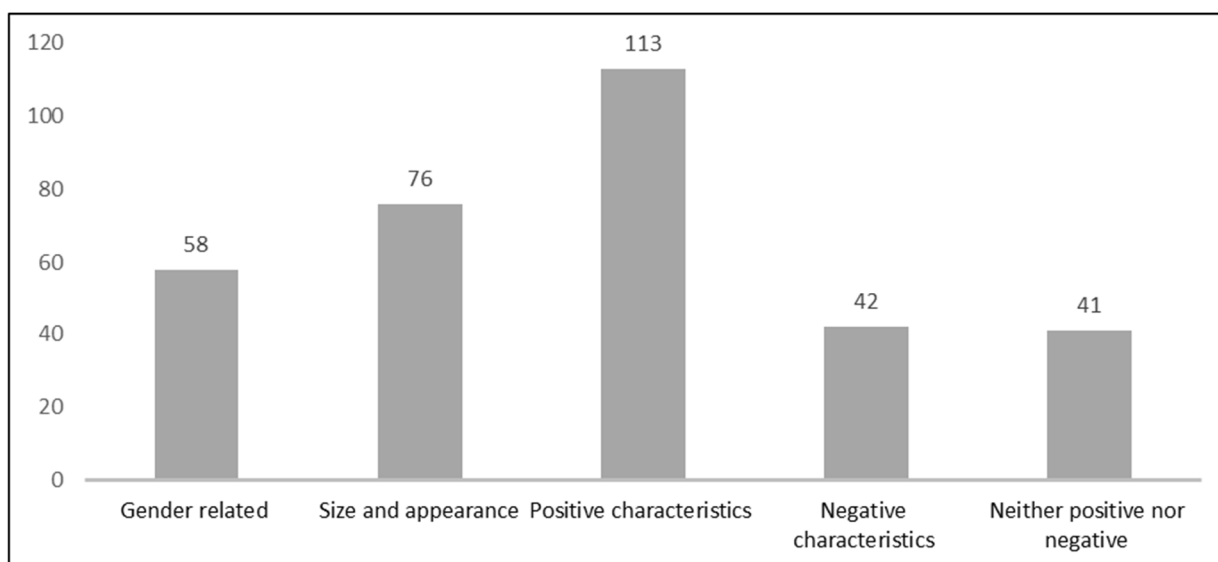


Table 2. Responses of 325 females and 5 males to the question “Please describe in your own words how you define otona-kawaii” (in numbers).

These definitions and illustrations in the open-ended question section show how female and male respondents portray a person who acts kawaii at an older age. According to respondents, otona-kawaii represents women past their twenties, thirties, or forties who, to some extent, still behave in a girlish, childish manner. While sometimes acting girlish, they generally convey a feminine and ladylike bearing when it comes to looks and behaviour. Their fashion choices are one of the reasons that make them attractive in the eyes of the opposite sex. In support of their views on *otona-kawaii* women, some female respondents suggested various names of models and actresses, such as Kyoko Fukada, Ryoko Shinohara, Haruka Ayase, Hiromi Nagasaku, and Aoi Miyazaki, who were already in their thirties and forties, but still project a youthful kawaii appearance and behaviour.

Out of the $n=330$ respondents who gave their interpretation of the new term, a high level of them have a positive attitude and approach towards this issue. According to some respondents, an otona-kawaii persona acts in an innocent, honest, and charming manner. All of these qualities are neither childish, nor immature, but rather a balance between childhood and adulthood. This balance is what makes otona-kawaii a reliable and cherished persona to those around them.

Below are some examples that were given by survey respondents:

“Women who are different from teenagers or those in their twenties that have a gorgeous image.”
 [*Tin'eijā-tachi ya 20-dai ni hito-tachi to wa kotonari, gōjasuna fun'iki o motta jousei-tachi.*]

(Japanese woman, 27 years old)

“A person who combines femininity and cuteness.”

[*Joseirashi-sa to kawai-sa o kanesonaeeta hito.*]

(Japanese woman, 29 years old)

“Women in their late thirties who wear cute clothes and accessories that don’t look “painful” on them.”

[*Itaitashiku mienai kawaii fuku ya akusesarī o mi ni tsuketa 30-dai kōhan no josei-tachi.*]

(Japanese woman, 25 years old)

“They have a cute image no matter how old they are.”

[*Nan-sai ni natte mo kawairashī imēji.*]

(Japanese woman, 29 years old)

“There is a sense of *kawaii* and beautiful image.”

[*Kawaiku, kireina imēji ga aru.*]

(Japanese woman, 23 years old)

“A person who has a balance between maturity and childishness.”

[*Seijuku shita otonappo-sa to, mijukuna kodomoppo-sa no ryōhō o baransuyoku motte iru hito.*]

(Japanese woman, 21 years old)

“A woman who is polite, has common sense and is lovely.”

[*Reigi tadashiku, futsū no kankaku o mochi, airashi-sa o motsu josei.*]

(Japanese woman, 28 years old)

“A person who has the strength to use her weaknesses as a weapon.”

[*Yowa-sa o buki ni tsukau tsuyo-sa o motta hito.*]

(Japanese woman, 27 years old)

“An adult who keeps her natural cuteness.”

[*Shizen ni kawai-sa o tamotte iru otona.*]

(Japanese woman, 28 years old)

“I sense that they are adults when they use proper words. Their fashion and hairstyles are suitable for their age, not too flashy. When being clumsy and excited, they tend to have a big reaction and a pure smiling face, I feel they are cute. I feel that women with these two qualities are *otona-kawaii*.”

[*Watashi wa kanojotachi ga tadashī kotoba o tsukau toki, kanojotachi o otonada to omou. Kanojotachi no fukusō ya heasutairu wa toshi sōō no mono de, kesshite hadena monodewanai. Kanojotachi ga ōgesa ni han'nō shi tari, junsuina egao o shi tari shinagara dojina koto o shi tari, hashai dari suru toki, watashi wa kanojotachi o kawai to kanjiru. Watashi wa futatsu no seishitsu o mochiawaseta josei ga, otona kawaii hitoda to omou.*]

(Japanese woman, 27 years old)

On the other hand, some respondents ($n = 42$, 12.7 per cent) were more critical of the new term and trend. According to them, a person who continues to behave in a

kawaii manner at an older age is exerting enormous effort to stay young in a way that looks unnatural and is even 'painful' to the eyes.

"A person who looks like an adult on the outside, but on the inside is a child."
[*Gaiken wa otona no yōnimieru ga, naimen ga sōdenainaraba, sono hito wa kodomode aru.*]
(Japanese male, 23 years old)

"Eighty per cent childish, twenty per cent kawaii."
[*8-Wari wa kodomoppoku, 2-wari wa kawaii.*]
(Japanese woman, 21 years old)

"Women in their thirties who wear 'painful' fashion that includes ribbons and skirts."
[*Ribon ya sukāto o fukumu 'itaitashi' fasshon o shiteiru 30-dai no josei-tachi.*]
(Japanese woman, 26 years old)

Lastly, there were controversial opinions regarding several kawaii qualities being either positive or negative, depending on the context. For example, the 'gap' can be viewed as an escape from social responsibilities and obligations, and on the other hand, it can be viewed positively. In the same light, a woman who behaves in a 'sweet and natural' manner (e.g., smiling, being nice at all times) can be perceived positively, but also, can be portrayed as 'unnatural' and even dishonest because it leaves the impression that she behaves kawaii only to attain her personal goals.

The analysis shows that the term *otona-kawaii* has a wide spectrum of meanings and that it is better known among women. In terms of appearance, an *otona-kawaii* persona is both stylish and beautiful, innocent looking and has great charisma. I also found that respondents portrayed *otona-kawaii* as being part of women's culture, where a woman can be both ladylike and girlish at the same time. While negative opinions concerning *otona-kawaii* do exist, the positive attitudes overcome the negative ones. For the supporters of this concept, an *otona-kawaii* person is innocent, gentle, honest, reliable, as well as calm and friendly (see table 1 above).

Discussion

The coined word and concept *otona-kawaii* signals the rise of a new phenomenon that symbolises the continuation of kawaii beyond its original designation. The new *otona-kawaii* term and trend, as reflected by its name, represent a more 'mature' version of the

style, in which an adult woman who dresses and behaves in a *kawaii* manner is perceived as being stylish, elegant, and even radiating sex-appeal to those around her.

The results of the survey exhibit how the Japanese people define the newly coined term *otona-kawaii* and their attitude towards the idea of behaving and dressing in a *kawaii* manner at an older age. I found that respondents generally agree to and accept the idea of behaving and dressing cute at an older age. While most of the respondents gave a positive response to the idea of grown-up *kawaii*, in the open-ended question section they acknowledged the thin line between the proper practice of *kawaii* and the dangers of becoming excessively *kawaii* [*burikko*], especially at an older age.

The rather extreme behaviour of *burikko* ['fake child'] presents a different aspect of *kawaii* and refers to women who simulate a particular style of personal appearance and behaviour that may seem strange to others. The expression of *burikko* conduct includes baby talk, childlike clothing, and infantile behaviour that may look unnatural and 'fake' and thus is criticised by many in their surrounding (Monden, 2015: p. 50). Hence, if a person adopts the *kawaii* style and behaviour improperly, such as in the case of *burikko*, their efforts will not only be unappreciated, but they will also be victims of social criticism.

One of the most famous *burikko* idols¹ is Kiriko Takemura, who is well known under her stage name, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. As a *burikko* idol, Kyary dresses like a child, loves sweets and junk food, wears outfits that normally belong to children, and acts in a sweet and innocent way, like a child with a message of endless happiness and freedom (Aoyagi, 2005). Kyary's character is often described as strange and remarkable at the same time. In this manner, Kyary took the *kawaii* culture of cuteness and twisted its meaning by elevating it to a new level that is both cute and strange (Iseri, 2015).

Another relatively new compound adjective, which is associated with *burikko*, called *ita-kawaii* [painful-cute], refers to a style frequently adopted by youngsters as a criticism towards those who force themselves to become *kawaii* in a way that looks painfully inappropriate for their age (Asano-Cavanagh, 2017: 15,228-9). Although Asano-Cavanagh (2013) maintains that it is not clear when and how this newly combined term

¹ Idol [*Idoru*]: Refers to highly produced and promoted singers, models and media personalities, who appear in almost any media channel, from television to print publication (Aoyagi, 2005: 2).

of *kawaii* and *itai* [painful] started to circulate, it became frequently used by youngsters as criticism of those who act and dress *kawaii* in an inappropriate manner.

The 2012 *An-An* issue introduces four kinds of ita-*kawaii* women, each of whom, to some extent, only pretend to be *kawaii*:

The 'Flirty' type [*Kobi-kei*]: women who only act in a *burikko* manner to charm others, especially members of the opposite sex.

The 'Older' type [*Oba-kei*]: older women who still talk and behave in a childlike manner and possess childish products such as ribbons, pink clothes and so on.

The 'Mysterious' type [*Fushigi-kei*]: women who create an aura of mystery so that people have a misperception of their behaviour.

The 'Unnatural' type [*Wazatora-kei*]: describing women who are only superficially *kawaii* to attract and elicit attraction from those around them. (Itakura, 2012: 54-5).

By introducing the various kinds of ita-*kawaii*, *An-An* does not merely present *kawaii* style and behaviour, but also teaches their female readers the balance between *kawaii* and the extreme sides of *burikko* and ita-*kawaii*. Through illustrating both sides of the coin, *An-An*'s readers can better understand the benefits and risks of being *kawaii* and learn how to apply it appropriately.

While itai people assume that their version of *kawaii* is stylish and 'cool', in reality, their fashion and behavioural choices are viewed as bad taste that looks fake [*burikko*] and painful [*itai*] to the eyes, causing uncomfortable feelings in the people who surround them (Asano-Cavanagh, 2013; 2017). Therefore, only if a woman, young or mature alike, adopts an appropriately, socially accepted, *kawaii* style, she will be appreciated and admired by others in her society.

Although it has an inappropriate side, the virtues of *otona-kawaii* prevail over its negative aspect, in which a woman who behaves in a *kawaii* manner, conveys sincerity, honesty, reliability and is innocent in an adorable way. Furthermore, a woman who behaves and dresses cute and appropriate for her age may use the 'seductive' qualities of cuteness (see May, 2019) to draw attention and assistance from others.

Over and above, the results of the survey also show the existence of a gender difference, that is, women seem more familiar and have a more positive approach towards the word and the concept of *otona-kawaii* than men. In particular, it was found

that none of the survey respondents, women and men alike, specified “men” as *otona-kawaii*, but rather distinguished it as part of women’s culture. To elucidate the high level of positive responses regarding *otona-kawaii* among women, one explanation could be the relationship between cuteness and women. Various studies have shown that women are found to be more sensitive, reactive, and positive to cute things than men (see Nittono, 2009; Sherman *et al.*, 2012; Kringelbach *et al.*, 2016; Nittono, 2019; Nittono *et al.*, 2021). Another explanation lies in the special characteristics of the Japanese society, in which *kawaii* is taking a dominant part in its history and culture. In Japan, *kawaii* is historically associated with the young female culture (Nittono, 2016: pp. 80-1) and even today, women are more attracted by and exposed to *kawaii*, whether via fashion magazines, commercials, than the opposite sex (Lieber-Milo, 2017).

In conclusion, the new term *otona-kawaii* signals the rise of a new phenomenon that challenges the “orthodox perception” that was held until recently, in which the *kawaii* culture of cuteness was thought to belong solitarily to young women in their teens and children. The idea of ‘adult-cute’ strengthens prior studies (see Borgi *et al.*, 2014; Nittono, 2016), indicating that cuteness goes beyond its ‘original settings’ from the past, and is no longer limited to the youngsters, but can now apply to other age groups as well, such as grown women in their 20s and even 60s.

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Supplementary Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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