The Power of SweetNess? The Infantilisation Process of Japanese Youth. *Kawaii* and *Otaku* Subculture in the Perspective of Visual Anthropology

Potęga słodyczy? Proces infantylizacji japońskiej młodzieży. Subkultura *kawaii* i *otaku* w perspektywie antropologii wizualnej

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Abstract: This paper presents the original Japanese *otaku* youth subculture, initially associated with young boys, and the *kawaii* (cute/sweet) culture, whose close relationship with young girls has been underlined in social science studies. The contemporary *kawaii* culture has been present in Japanese aesthetics and popular culture for many years, supported by the government program "Cool Japan". Both psychologists and sociologists observe that the adorable cuteness of the *kawaii* culture, encountered in commercials, animated films, comics, toys, street fashion, popular music and even a peculiar manner of speaking, causes and perpetuates infantilisation of the Japanese youth. There is a new generation who are afraid of entering adulthood. The ubiquitous presence of the *kawaii* culture in contemporary Japanese society has been interpreted using the methods of visual anthropology, defined by some scholars as visual ethnography.

Keywords: subculture, infantilisation, Japanese youth, kawaii, otaku, visual anthropology

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie oryginalnej japońskiej subkultury młodzieżowej *otaku* związanej początkowo ze światem młodych chłopców oraz kultury *kawaii* przez badaczy społecznych wskazujących na jej związki z młodymi dziewczętami. Współczesna kultura kawaii jest obecna w japońskiej estetyce i kulturze popularnej od wielu lat, wspierana przez rządowy program „Cool Japan". W opinii zarówno psychologów, jak i socjologów, urocze i słodkie *kawaii*, widoczne w reklamach, filmach animowanych, komiksach (mangach), zabawkach, modzie ulicznej, muzyce, a nawet specyficznym sposobie mówienia, powoduje proces infantylizacji młodzieży. Pojawia się kolejne pokolenie, które obawia się wejść w dorosłość. Kultura *kawaii* została poddana próbie interpretacji z wykorzystaniem metod antropologii wizualnej, przez niektórych autorów definiowanej jako etnografia wizualna.

Słowa kluczowe: subkultury, infantylizacja, japońska młodzież, kawaii, otaku, antropologia wizualna

Introduction

Most associate Japan with the technological revolution and the introduction of the consumerist lifestyle that emulated the American model. Attempts to discover what lies behind the facade of that modern society were made years ago by an American researcher Ruth Benedict in the study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. As a cultural anthropologist, she set out with the premise that even "the most isolated bits of behaviour have some systematic relation to each other" and that one thus can comprehend the most bizarre instances (Benedict 2016, 21). As a seasoned social researcher, she observed that one of the misfortunes of the 20th century was that we still go along with vague, prejudiced and stereotyped views about other nations because no attempts are made to try and learn about the culture, habits, and values that guide other peoples. Hence, she concluded that "the lenses through which any nation looks at life are not the ones another nation uses. It is hard to be conscious of the eyes through which one looks. Any country takes them for granted, and the tricks of focusing and of perspective which give to any people its national view of life seem to that people the god-given arrangement of the landscape." (2016, 22).

The term *kawaii* derives from the word *kawayushi*, dating back to the 12th century. Originally, it meant "pitiful" and "poor", but from the 16th century onwards it would denote "loved" and be used to refer to children and small creatures (Okayama & Ricatti 2008). Nowadays, *kawaii* has many meanings, including childlike, cute, innocent, honest, weak, and inexperienced (Kinsella 1995). The term was most often applied to children or women who, because of their delicacy, evoked pity, but at the same time appeared charming and lovely. In the modern period, the term began to denote things or attributes that were sweet and evoked friendly feelings. The English "cute" seems to be its closest equivalent, although this, too, is not an accurate translation. "The origin of *kawaii* should be sought in women's culture, from the 'fashion for cute writing' to behavioural models. At present, *kawaii* is not limited to the female domain; it can also be employed with respect to men and boys. After all, by the 1980s the associative scope of *kawaii* had already expanded so much that it even included the emperor himself" (Janczarek 2017, 162).

Present in Japanese aesthetics and popular culture for many years and initially aimed at girls, the modern *kawaii* culture has undergone quite an evolution. It has transitioned from an independent subculture linked to the romantic manga market, comics and video games to an official culture supported by one of the government schemes. Thus, by the end of the millennium, "the term had evolved into a universal, hyperbolic superlative to be used by the young in body and spirit alike, representatives of all ages, genders and orientations: *kawaii* had become a Platonic ideal of innocence and acceptance" (Alt 2021, 126). As Japanese popular culture expert Matt Alt underlines, attempting to define the meaning of *kawaii* would be "pure folly" but, despite this caution, we will attempt to get to the core of the matter by exploring the origins, the essence, the generational inspirations and the contemporary impact of *kawaii* on both Japanese and international popular culture.

1. Research methodology

Nowadays, it is not the lack of information but its surfeit that presents a problem; therefore, it is crucial for the researcher to skilfully select the information obtained (Google search engine shows 315 million results for *kawaii*; the term is covered in an extensive Wikipedia entry). In order to enhance the examination of pertinent literature, field research utilising visual anthropology (also known as visual ethnography in various publications) was carried out in Tokyo during the autumn of 2022. This is because visual depictions such as images, photographs, and films – which are the fundamental languages of visual arts – serve as significant sources of information on social reality, including analyses of the younger generation (Kunat 2015).

Contemporary youth subcultures are manifested mainly through distinct symbols one encounters in street fashion, hairstyles, as well as in comics, anime, video games, films, advertising and the style of interiors designed specifically for young users (bars, cafés, shops, etc.). For this reason, visual anthropology was opted for as a method of inquiry since it constitutes a valuable source of knowledge, oscillating between art and science. Visual anthropology (ethnography) is considered by researchers as a paradigm that integrates various procedures for acquiring, analysing and interpreting visual data. At present, two currents are discernible in the field; on the one hand, it is interested in the means that an anthropologist may use to study foreign cultures, including photographs and films in the first place. On the other, it involves the study of the visual products of the "visible culture", which in the 21st century has obtained its own unique visual aspects linked to the development of new social media (Rethinking 1997; Olechnicki 2003; Sztompka 2005; Pink 2008; Nowotniak 2012).

As Sarah Pink (2008, 34) argues, visual ethnography is a modality of experiencing, interpreting, and representing a culture or a community, while the theoretical and methodological premises of visual ethnography draw on the research tradition of image anthropology. While in Japan, that author gathered substantial photographic material documenting the presence of *kawaii* in the public space, whose interpretation will be attempted further on.

2. *Kawaii* – youth culture of subculture? The dilemmas of definition

The term *kawaii* gained increasing popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, "when the girl subculture flourished in Japan" (Bator 2014, 198). While some scholars describe *kawaii* as an original culture or aesthetics (Burdzik 2015), it is just as often presented as a distinct youth subculture (Kansal & Rakshit 2020), not unlike the *otaku*, i.e. devotees of Japanese popular culture in the shape of manga, anime, video games, and films about giant monsters, which have their precursor in Godzilla. Otaku serves "to describe one of the most robust subcultures to have emerged in Japan, although sociologists dispute whether 'subculture' is a fitting term for a group that is ostentatiously apolitical, inward-focused and openly unopposed to anything" (Bator 2014, 165).

Just as the *kawaii* phenomenon was initially associated with a subculture of young girls – only to become much more than a cultural niche today – *otaku* was intrinsic to the world of boys. Following the first generation of *otaku* born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, subsequent generations of *otaku* emerged, while the originally local subculture gained an international dimension, "opening up" over time to the world of young girls. According to Joanna Bator (2014, 167-168), *otaku* differ from other anime and video game enthusiasts in that they subordinate other areas of life to their passion and live in a world of virtual fascinations. Cited by Bator, the German sociologist Volker Grassmuck stated that the *otaku* draw radical conclusions from the promises of the age of technology, consumption and communication, believing that one can be the master of the world and everything can be bought, whereas face-to-face communication is unnecessary now that the internet and mobile phones have been invented. Should the *kawaii* culture be approached in a similar fashion? Before defining the historical context of its emergence, it may be worthwhile to determine the extent to which this phenomenon belongs to a specific youth culture, fitting well into the abundant and varied palette of youth subcultures.

The understanding and definition of the term "subculture" is debated in scholarly literature since it is often informed by the categorisation created by authors within their academic discipline. Witold Wrzesień finds that subcultures are a peculiar subject of interest for social sciences, "they have been and continue to be defined differently, which often makes their analysis difficult, but at the same time illustrates well the complexity of the issue and the wealth of the inner worlds that arise within them" (Wrzesień 2013, 37). Characteristically, taken colloquially, subcultures have usually been associated with social pathology, maladaptation, and attitudes that challenge and reject the established norms or encourage low-quality participation in culture (Sokołowski 2012). The very etymology of "subculture" already contains an element of inferiority and lesser value since "sub" in Latin means "under", i.e., something that is beneath culture, ranks decidedly lower, is less valued, and is thus inferior to "true" culture (Pęczak 1992, 3). In descriptive terms, subculture denotes a segment of social life and its culture that is discerned according to an ethnic, professional, religious, or demographic criterion (Filipiak 1993, 13). The phenomena that the term encompasses include specific forms of conduct, social and religious movements, as well as music, song lyrics, certain customs, clothing, and symbolic and everyday objects (Wertenstein-Żuławski 1993, 19). It may be assumed that a subculture involves manifesting particular behaviours and communicating professed values, which, in a certain way, channel the discontent of those belonging to a given subculture.

The sociologists who study subcultures assert that they are evinced through a specific language, a separate system of information and communication, peculiar attire and hairstyles, and a manner of spending leisure time and frequenting specific venues. Meanwhile, representatives of subcultures argue that culture is the property of all societal groups and everyone is entitled to contribute to it. Therefore,

subcultures cannot be ignored, disregarded, or their existence overlooked as a component of the entire culture since they enrich it with new trends that often tend to be embraced by popular or even elite culture (Dyoniziak 1965; Hebdige 1979; Jędrzejewski 1999; Piotrowski 2003; Muggleton 2004; Preis 2005; Rychła 2005; Sokołowski 2007; Bąk 2008; Chaciński 2010).

The internal diversity of subcultures, compounded by the continual emergence of new representations, prompted a need to formulate a typology. As early as in the mid-1960s, Ryszard Dyoniziak (1965, 34) distinguished three types of youth subcultures: the typically criminal subculture, developing in well-integrated communities, the subculture of conflict, whose high member mobility is offset by general instability, and the withdrawal subculture, also known as the double-loser subculture, which brings together young people who do not have the opportunity to achieve success lawfully. The typology developed by Marek Jędrzejewski (1999, 87) is more extensive and more accurately reflects the contemporary reality of youth subcultures, among which the researcher distinguished: alternative and ecological-pacifist subcultures, subcultures of (social and moral) rebellion and escape, as well as creative subcultures in which the young seek development through artistic self-creation, functioning in an independent cultural circulation. The latter is a form of self-improvement and self-actualisation based on the principle of independence from professionals – established cultural creators.

Given the above, Japanese *kawaii* qualifies as a creative subculture; its influence is visible, especially in Japanese comics and animated films (manga and anime), offbeat fashion trends, music, and video games. However, its influence has long transcended the realm of youthful fashion and fascination, becoming a part of Japanese popular culture that receives official support under a government scheme. Nowadays, *kawaii* is no longer an exclusive subculture of young girls and women, as its aesthetics has become so predominant in Japan's social and cultural landscape that it is increasingly regarded as an intrinsic cultural heritage of the Land of the Cherry Blossoms. This process has been protracted and seen many pivotal moments, but it has inevitably resulted in infantilisation that affected not only the Japanese youth, considering that nominal adults (persons over the age of 18) display behaviours characteristic of adolescence, such as reading comic books, watching cartoons (anime) or playing video games (Barber 2008; Światy dzieciństwa 2016).

3. Cultural infantilisation. An overlooked sign of the times?

Social scholars noticed some time ago that speaking (and writing) about the traditional division of societies in developed Western countries (including the USA, Japan, and Australia) based on biological age is slowly becoming an anachronism. The process of infantilisation intensifies, being noticeable in the psychological, sociological, cultural, linguistic and biological domains. Many modern adults have embraced it as a means to escape reality, an expression of refusal to participate

in real, challenging and problematic life. It serves as a "medicine" that relieves stress and helps nurture the so-called inner child. By participating in a special kind of culture, reading literature, watching films and television series, and following the "adolescent style" in terms of clothing (such as the aforementioned Japanese *kawaii*), one can "return to the realm of childhood". This gives rise to special, open time-spaces, fuelled secondarily by artefacts in the form of photographs, advertisements, or special objects (which will analysed in greater detail later on in this paper). As for the main causes behind infantilisation and the adolescent reluctance towards entering adulthood, one cites departure from the traditional, conservative attitudes or a bid to shun the seriousness and solemnity in everyday life, as well as "the influence of other cultures, such as Japanese, where – in a country of rigid rules – society began to rebel, changing their appearance and lifestyle to a more childlike one" (Jarosz & Kosowski 2019, 112).

In terms of psychological manifestations of infantilisation, adolescents and "young" adults yearn for innocence and show unwillingness to bear the consequences of erroneous actions, which entail refusing responsibility for one's conduct and constant avoidance of guilt. The process is attributed to the absence of a turning point in a person's life, a certain rite of passage, or a kind of initiation into adulthood (Dobrołowicz 2016). Although a number of factors are involved, such as changes in the labour market, continuing education after completing a particular major, or the influence of the mass media which promote youth and youthful behaviour, changes in the perception of age categories and the escape into permanent "childishness" are probably also due to cultural infantilisation. However, a "childish" young adult is different from someone who is "childish" as a result of a natural process, e.g., a senior whose senility resembles the world of a child. Instead, infantilisation is more of a deliberate cultural-aesthetic strategy, a refusal to participate in socio-political life, a subcultural manifestation of dissent against the adult world that one finds intolerable.

Thus, culture witnesses gradual infantilisation, whereby "features that were formerly characteristic of the child become a universal and adopted set of values for adults. This set comprises the following characteristics: playfulness, reacting on impulse, emotional instability (…), irresponsibility, lack of long-term interpersonal relations, short-termism, volatility, fluidity, focus on one's own needs, crossing boundaries" (Bogunia-Borowska 2006, 14). Although psychologist Erik Erikson (1997, 418) argued that "society must early (…) take care of the unavoidable remnants of infantility in its adults", he probably meant strengthening the defence mechanisms in the adult against the latent fears of their childhood. The driving force behind the phenomenon should be seen in the intensifying processes of cultural infantilisation and commercialisation of childhood. As for the future, traditional social roles are likely to be blurred even further (Jasielska & Maksymiuk 2010).

The *kawaii* and *otaku* cultures did not cause contemporary Japanese popular culture to be puerile, having only reinforced and perpetuated the process. Takashi Murakami, the most internationally acclaimed of the contemporary Japanese visual

artists, observes that it is impossible to understand Japan today without *otaku*. When organising the enthusiastically received 2005 exhibition Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture in New York, Murakami was surprised to learn that it was seen as a manifestation of the "subculture" associated with Hello Kitty-type creations.

In his eyes, there is no division between popular and high art in Japanese tradition, and the very idea of such a hierarchy comes from the West. The artist and theorist of the "super flat" maintains that "post-war Japan, living in colonial dependence on the United States, did not have the chance to grow up." Considering the category of childishness in relation to political institutions and the psyche of Japanese people, he finds that infantility and powerlessness have been interdependent and reciprocal traits of Japan's "super flat" culture for several decades, in which images of apocalyptic catastrophes, military gadgetry and perverse eroticism go hand-in-hand with the childlike sweetness of Hello Kitty (Bator 2014, 228). Next to Pokémon, the latter is indeed a "flagship" product of the aesthetically cute *kawaii*.

4. *Kawaii* in Polish narratives

One of the first to introduce the *kawaii* subculture into Polish literature was Joanna Bator, a cultural studies scholar with an anthropological bent who sought to experience the Asian world directly and personally through cultural tourism. Her several stays in Japan (2004, 2011) yielded publications that combined cultural and social reflection with elements of analysis and field research: half novels, half reportages dedicated to intercultural communication. Although the author was criticised for highlighting the "weirdness" of certain aspects of Japanese culture and conduct, her books still enjoyed popularity in Poland as an introduction to Japan.

Writing about the Japanese predilection for miniaturisation, Bator noted that things are downsized to make them better, more comfortable or more beautiful, recalling simultaneously that miniaturisation has been accompanied by "*kawaii*-isation" since the 1980s. How does the author define the phenomenon? According to Bator, it consists of Japanese preference to appreciate things that are not only small but also *kawaii*: cute, uplifting and naive. One of these is the size-reduced and condensed keitai novel, the mobile phone narrative, dedicated mainly to melodramatic themes. "Novels composed of simple sentences and emoticons are *kawaii*. It is a familiar girl's world, taking on a new form thanks to modern technology. This is not the first time that young Japanese women have set a new trend in an act of collective spontaneous creativity" (Bator 2004, 41).

Such a portrayal was approached by experts as somewhat careless, "unprofessional", and subjective, though it may be justified insofar as it was a sign of the times when Japan remained a distant country for Europeans (including Poles). For this reason, Bator's journalistic account represents a product "packaged in the guise of pseudo-science" (Jabłoński 2016, 58) in which sloppy narratives do not serve to provide information on Japan but merely create a fictional reality while disregarding the facts.

A different perspective on *kawaii* was adopted by Karolina Bednarz (2018), a reporter and translator, a graduate of Japanese Studies from Oxford University, who lived and studied in Japan. Describing "Japan through women's eyes", she underlined that the image of the contemporary Japanese young woman or the teenage girl aspiring to be one has little in common with what applied centuries ago. Even little girls are taught that appearance determines their worth. If they are not kirei, or beautiful, they should at least be *kawaii*, i.e., cute. Bednarz observes that currently, being cute is much more difficult for young girls than meeting the standards of beauty or appealing looks. "Kawaii is behaviour, the way one speaks, and moves, hobbies, clothes, make-up (…) The fashion for *kawaii* was not created by business. Entrepreneurs merely capitalised on the rebellion of the 1970s teenagers who had no desire to fit in with social norms. Instead of reading the compulsory classics at school, they decorated the margins with hearts and stars, abbreviated words and wrote curlicue syllables, as children do (…). They were playing out their own puerile alter egos" (Bednarz 2018, 39). Girls imitating childlike behaviour became known as burikko – "pretending to be children" – while the *kawaii* would come to be regarded as a new subculture, the product of a generation that benefited from Japan's economic boom of the late 20th century, who were indifferent to everything.

Similar in its expression, American popular culture was propagated via the aesthetics of Disney animated films, cutesy pop music, superhero comics, and women's romance fiction (love-themed novels of negligible literary value, such as those published by Harlequin). When *kawaii* first appeared, it was initially intriguing and interesting as a new youth subculture, which would probably expire with the next generation and be forgotten, just as the generation of "flower children" – American hippies, British skinheads, punks, the Polish iteration of teddy boys known as "bikiniarze" (Chłopek 2005) or the delinquent-like "gitowcy", and many other youth subcultures.

Contrary to those predictions, the *kawaii* phenomenon has proved surprisingly enduring, contributing to the infantilisation of successive generations of youth. Is this because "the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics takes one back in time to an idealised childhood in which there (still) is no place for responsibility, norms or demands" (Bednarz 2018, 40)? Is permanent immaturity, the refusal to face adulthood and responsibility a way for the Japanese youth to find their place in the harsh realities of the 21st century? A brief overview of how *kawaii* developed may offer some insights into this particular social phenomenon of contemporary Japan.

5. *Kawaii* as Japanese export culture

Over the past decades, products of Japanese popular culture have been exported, sold and consumed throughout East and Southeast Asia. A wide range of such products is in evidence in major cities in the region. Japanese comic books are translated into the local languages of South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Taiwan and dominate the comic book market in East Asia. Japanese animated

characters Doraemon, Ampan Man and Pokémon are ubiquitous there, featuring in licensed or unlicensed toys and items. Japanese anime, usually dubbed, is immensely popular; Astro Boy, Sailor Moon and Lupin the Third are some of the animated characters found in virtually every shop selling anime (Otmazgin 2007).

Christine R. Yano, who studied the emergence and development of the character (mascot) Hello Kitty as part of Japanese culture and the governmental "Cool Japan" programme, argues that its international popularity is an aspect of what she calls "pink globalisation", the spread of goods and images described as cute (*kawaii*) from Japan to other parts of the world (Yano 2013). In interviews she conducted, Yano reveals how consumers use this iconic cat to negotiate gender as well as (supra)national identity. She thus demonstrates that "pink globalisation" enables strangeness to be familiarised, as it combines the intimacy of cuteness and the distance of coolness. What Hello Kitty and its world connote to the audience spans innocence, sexuality, irony, sophistication, and happiness. Kawaii is cute, so it is worthwhile being *kawaii* to be equally "cute" and "charming".

The rebellion against the society of consumerism, against Japan's aspirations of technological perfection and becoming one of the world's most developed economies, has somewhat unexpectedly taken the form of an escape from reality into a world of rosy delusion of happiness, childishness, funny kitties and the iconic Pokémon. For the subsequent young generation, duties and responsibilities have ceased to matter while pleasures have become precious (Gordon 2010).

According to Iwona Kordzińska-Nawrocka (2012, 108), the *kawaii* culture comprises people, animals and objects; it may define shapes, behaviour, gestures, words, fashion, clothing, hairstyles, ornaments, comic book characters and the comics themselves, animated films (anime) based on the latter, everyday items, accessories and gadgets. For this reason, one speaks of *kawaii* fashion and products, *kawaii* music and dolls, and stars of films and series. The complexity of the phenomena that the semantic scope of *kawaii* encompasses makes it practically impossible to formulate an unequivocal definition (Amit 2012, 178; Asano-Cavanagh 2012; 2; Miller 2011, 7; Nittono et al. 2012). In order to capture the essence of *kawaii* better, let us now interpret its artefacts using the method of visual anthropology.

6. Discussion of findings

Following the field research conducted in Tokyo, the collected artefacts – in the form of photographs – demonstrate that the *kawaii* culture is intensely present in Japan's public spaces. Initially disapproved, the subculture of young girls who dissented against the traditional cultural norms and values of contemporary Japan in the making, *kawaii* has become part of the mainstream culture in the Land of the Cherry Blossoms. Despite the lapse of time and the fact certain themes – with their "oversweet" pink aesthetic dating to the 1980s – may have become somewhat unoriginal, it is clear that *kawaii* plays an important role in the country's culture, continuing to promote Japan.

The preference for cute goods with their adorable *kawaii* design has a positive impact on the economy. The authorities officially support the creators of this culture as part of the "Cool Japan" programme, whose concept was launched in 2002. It originated outside Japan, drawing on an article by Douglas McGray published that year entitled Japan's Gross National Cool (Valaskivi 2013). However, it is alleged that *kawaii* promotes consumerism and encourages the public to remain immature or nurtures an aversion to adulthood among the Japanese. Another aspect which tends to be censured is that it excessively flaunts sex.

Yuko Hasegawa sees a link between *kawaii* and infantilisation resulting from the changes in Japan's post-war culture, which may be attributed to a lack of self-confidence. One can understand the concerns voiced by the critics of *kawaii*, who fear its negative impact on the Japanese youth and society. Simultaneously, it must be acknowledged that the love of the "cute beauty" endorsed by *kawaii* is already firmly embedded in Japanese culture since it is present in the advertisements, hoardings, posters, promotional images, or information signage found in public transport (underground, railway, buses), shop windows, visual information systems. It is even featured in the markings and branding of public services, such as the firefighters or municipal cleaning services, whose vehicles are decorated with "sweet characters" to promote their activities and service to the residents.

The same aesthetic is taken advantage of by local businesses: ice cream parlours, cafés, florists, bakeries, beauty and hairdressing establishments, but also owners of private homes who, after all, are not compelled by anyone to place *kawaii* figures on their premises to greet visitors and passers-by. The municipal authority of Tokyo also prefers this form of interaction with the public, using an entertainment formula drawing on comic books, where serious content, announcements and notices are accompanied by depictions of manga characters. A similar mode of communication is used by Japanese politicians running for election, who are portrayed on the election posters alongside well-known popular culture figures.

Conclusions

In 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed the "*kawaii* ambassadors" (*kawaii* taishi), including three Japanese popular culture celebrities: Misako Aoki (a model involved in promoting the so-called lolita fashion), Yui Kimura (singer) as well as actress and model Shizuka Fujioka. Their only role was to travel and endorse *kawaii* to young people around the world. In the context of *kawaii*, one also invokes symbolic consumption, a trend which originated in the 1980s, when the Japanese began to pay more attention to the design of the objects they purchased rather than their utility (Burdzik 2015, 160).

Nowadays, *kawaii* is no longer an unwanted product of youth subculture but an important element of mass culture; one may disapprove of it, reject its candy-coloured, "saccharine" aesthetics and infantile substance, but one thing cannot be denied: it has been able to promote Japanese popular culture and, which is its chief

strength, it continues to gain enormous popularity around the world, eliciting exclusive associations with Japan (Korusiewicz 2011).

Researchers of Japanese culture find that *otaku* and *kawaii* resemble practices previously known in the kabuki or bunraku theatre. This culture "undermines the boundaries between the child and the adult, fantasy and reality, consumption and creativity, human and animal worlds, the virtual and the real, the ancient Japan and the present-day land (…), between Japanese Japan and Americanised Japan" (Bator 2014, 205). This subculture bears all the hallmarks of hybridisation, a combination of Japan's Edo past and the late Showa period (1980s) with American popular culture.

Pursuing the "Cool Japan" programme, the Japanese government has skilfully applied its soft power, betting on an original culture that continues to exert a powerful impact. The world has been fascinated by Japanese culture for many years, and its influence has long since spread beyond Asia. The internet and social networks have helped Japan "cease to be the land of cherry blossoms, geishas and samurais and become the land of cool, the source of Japanese style, under whose label we can buy more or less successful imitations of the urban style from the streets of Tokyo" (Bator 2014, 212).

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