

# Sexuality and Femininity: the Paradox of the Cultural-Aesthetical *Kawaii* Movement\*

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## Abstract

*Kawaii*, an adjective in the Japanese language meaning “cute”, is part of Japan’s aesthetic movement that stems from the Meiji Era. However, since the 1970s and 1980s, this *kawaii* movement takes a more pluralistic turn by breaking certain gender stereotypes within a capitalist structure focused on the democratization of media production and creation. This environment is predominantly feminine, with women being the primary creators and consumers. Furthermore, there is also some prejudice against men who partake in this cultural movement, labeled “otaku”, who can be envisaged as deprived of masculinity. Accordingly, from this framework flow several controversial issues encompassing sexuality, relationships, prejudice, and aesthetics. The conclusion is that *kawaii*, as a movement, is incongruent. Although it incorporates certain elements that could be seen as offensive to women or even illegal, it also opens a window to express more feminine, childish, individual and playful behaviours. This comes in opposition to a more standardized movement intrinsically connected with what could be envisaged as more masculine behaviour and a commitment to rules and social expectations.

**Keywords:** *Kawaii*, *Otaku*, Pop Culture, Sexuality, Prejudice, Aesthetics.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, a part of the world's population started to reap the benefits of technological development and increasing access to goods, which also includes access to pop culture (Feilizen, 2002). As a consequence of a consumerist society, a number of people grow up and spend their time with animations, videogames, and comics of their favorite virtual and fantastic characters.

Within the world of pop culture, Japanese products have continued to grow as a relevant global commodity and an increasing aspect of Japan's soft power (Gushiken; Hirata, 2014). Animation, comics, music, dances, and costumes spread across the globe in ways probably unimaginable until the mid-20th century. *Pokemon* is an example of the impact of Japan's pop culture, which encompasses games, books, comics, animation, theatrical presentations that influence people's behavior beyond Japan's borders (Tobin, 2004). The international literature on Japanese pop culture usually focuses on the consumerist aspects of post-modern capitalism and how Japan's pop culture flows from this system (Kam, 2013). Another part of the academic literature turns to a psychological analysis of contemporary Japanese society seeking to understand certain aspects of Japan's pop culture (sometimes in comparison with other nations).

For example, Anne Allison (1996) analyzes Japan's pop culture within gender studies and psychoanalytical frameworks. From a different perspective, Patrick Galbraith (2011b) follows ethnographical work together with philosophical theories, especially from Hardt and Negri (1999). There is also a media studies theory focus, which seeks to understand the global impact of certain aspects of Japanese pop culture (Lamarre, 2009; Kawasaki, 2007). Within this specialized literature, there are also sociologically centered works from scholars such as Sharron Kinsella (1995), Laura Miller (2004), and Anne Allison (2009). Moreover, some publications follow a political and international relations-based analysis of Japan's "*kawaii* politics" and soft power (Miller, 2011; Heng, 2014). Although still limited in numbers, Brazil follows the same research trends (Issa, 2016; Oliveira, 2014; Gorgatti, 2004).

Narrowing down publications on the *kawaii movement*, the literature focuses on criticism of a perceived childish society (Akita, 2005), ethnographical studies on *otaku*, or a historical account of the development of the *kawaii* movement. Accordingly, there is a gap in the literature on the social-cultural context that makes the *kawaii* movement possible and popular (Kinsella, 1995). In Brazil, *kawaii* studies are still in their infancy. Although it is possible to highlight some important and cutting-edge works from scholars such as Professor Okano (2014), it is still an incipient area with few academic publications.

Thus, this article seeks to add to the foreign and Brazilian literatures analyzing the *kawaii* movement within a framework that stresses its positive aspects without shying away from recognizing and addressing its negative elements. The main argument of this paper is that, as a social outcome, *kawaii* is incoherent. Although one can highlight aspects within this movement that can be interpreted as offensive to women – or even illegal –, it is also possible to stress positive elements. In a positive light, the *kawaii* movement allows for feminine expression and behavior coupled with ludic, individual, and childish aspects that come as a countermovement to a traditional culture that embraces masculinity, seriousness, and commitment to rules and social expectations.

## 2. *Salaryman* and Women

The workplace before and soon after the Second World War was a male-dominated space. Women, in those days, were commonly restricted to domestic work or informal jobs. Although still limited and with several challenges compared to wages and opportunities for men, there is slow but gradual access of women to the male-dominated workplace (Tzannatos, 1999; Cain, 1986; Pettit; Hook, 2005). In Japan, as with other nations, the scenario is not different. The access of women to full-time and corporate jobs is increasing but still slow (Takeishi, 2016). Although there have been some policies to encourage women's access to formal employment, there is still a clear division of labor grounded on gender, whereby women are in charge of most of the unpaid domestic work (Tsutsui, 2016). Although the gender disparities have lessened since the end of the Pacific War,

there are still cases of gender segregation in the labor force and wage differences between men and women (Komagawa, 2016).

According to Confucian tradition, virtuous women should respect three men during their lives: their father during childhood, their husband when grown-up, and their son when elder. According to Smith (1987), this view that women were legally incompetent was also a source of cultural influence. However, it is noteworthy that although men were the legally established heads of the family with decision powers and control at their homes in ways unimaginable to women, the Japanese Civil Code from 1898 provided for the possibility of women filing for divorce. Although there were legal challenges for that form of divorce, it was nonetheless a possibility (Smith, 1987).

From Meiji Era (1868-1912) until the Pacific War, the slogan “good wife, wise mothers” (*ryosaikembo*) summarized the role of women in society: raised to get married and, after marriage, have kids and take care of the kids and husband, and be in charge of all domestic work (Smith 1987). However, this reality does not entail that women did not participate in the workforce. The fast industry development happened in part due to female workers; especially single women from rural areas who believed factories offered better working conditions than farms (Smith, 1987). It is important to highlight, though, that the workplace was not a welcoming environment for women, as society was strongly patriarchal (Smith, 1987).

Similar to other nations, Japan went through legal reforms after the Second World War seeking to crystalize an equal society between men and women, establishing a rupture – albeit still *en course* – with more patriarchal legal principles. Article 14 of the Japanese Constitution of 1947 enshrines that all are equal under the law and there would be no discrimination based on race, belief, sex, social status, or family origin. Article 24, by its turn, provides that marriage should be based on mutual consent and maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife. The same article establishes that laws regulating the choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family should be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.

One of the basic human rights enshrined in the Constitution’s bill of rights, the equality principle, influenced the Japanese family structure and called for a revision of its Civil Code (Smith, 1987). Similarly to Western nations, the impacts on people’s lives concerning gender relations due to changes to the legal framework were gradual and asymmetric (Smith, 1987). Although the government has indeed developed policies seeking to encourage more significant participation and entrepreneurship of women in the workplace (Abe, 2013), there still exists a disparity between men and women in the home life and the workplace, as previously mentioned. This division is noteworthy in middle-class and heterosexual family structures whereby women commonly hold the responsibility of raising children without any preponderant male assistance (Allison, 1996). Indeed, there is still a noticeable division in the middle-class family organization. It is based on the idea that men hold outside of home white-collar jobs (known as the “salaryman”). Meanwhile, women work at home or in part-time jobs, usually as a secretary or in non-managerial positions – women who hold these non-managerial jobs are commonly known as “OL” or “office lady” (White, 1987; Allison, 1996).

Men’s social paradigm, on the other hand, is to enter the workforce after passing a rigorous selection process as a full-time white-collar worker with lifelong employment right after graduating from college. Although changing depending on historical contexts in Japan, *salaryman* refers to middle-class employees who work in corporations and enjoy a certain degree of job security and working conditions allowing them their consumption lifestyles (Shibata, 2007). The *salaryman* is arguably what could be socially envisaged as the typical idea of a male person, which is in contraposition to the ideal of a woman. Dasgupta, for example, affirms that

Moreover, although a large proportion of men do not (and never did) work for those (predominantly) white-collar elite organizations centered around institutions like life-time employment, seniority based wages and promotions, and corporate paternalism, it was male employees of precisely these types of organizations who came to represent both the corporate “ideal” and the masculine “ideal”. The salaryman was one side of the duality of the dominant

discourse of gender, the other side being the *senkyō shufu* (full-time housewife) he would ideally marry (Dasgupta, 2000).

Dasgupta (2000) argues that the image of a *salaryman* crafted in the post-Second World War is that an ideal of masculinity, of a hard-worker employee, fully committed to the job and his corporation. By contrast, the ideal of femininity is that of a housewife, a dedicated wife (White, 1987). Certain cultural and political groups do question this gender vision based on socially established functions and expectations. Although grammatically speaking, *kawaii* is an adjective that qualifies something as “cute” or “pretty,” it can also be a counter-cultural movement that questions these previously mentioned gender stereotypes. Profoundly impacting Japan’s pop culture, *kawaii*, as a movement, is bottom-up; that is, it was born in society and gives political, economic, and social voice to one particular way of seeing and interacting with the world.

### 3. *Kawaii* Culture

The Anglo-Saxon literature points out that *kawaii*, as a contemporary cultural movement, came to light in the 1970s in Japan and reaching a more nationwide status in the 1980s (Cheok; Fernando, 2012). *Kawaii* or cute essentially means childlike.<sup>1</sup> Kinsella (1995:220) adds that *kawaii* culture celebrates “sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances”. It is a style that denies maturity replacing it for innocence sometimes coupled with an effort to act stupid, dependent and weak (Kinsella, 1995).

Some scholars assert that the creation of a child-like writing style by women, which later became a nationwide phenomenon in the 1970s, is the starting point of the current *kawaii* aesthetics (Cheok; Fernando, 2012). Difficult to read, this cute handwriting used rounded characters, foreign words, drawings and cartoon pictures (Cheok; Fernando, 2012). According to Kinsella (1995), this popular writing style had different names to describe it, including *marui ji* (round writing), *kaneko ji* (cat writing), *manga ji* (Japanese comics or *manga writing*) and *burikko ji* (fake-child writing).

Not long after the development and popularization of cute handwriting, teenagers and young adults, especially women, started to create new slangs purposely used to sound childish (Kinsella, 1995). There was, for example, the deliberate mispronunciation of words to mimic the sounds of a toddler and the creation of new expressions altogether such as *nyan nyan suru* (to meow, meow), which meant sex. Cute and childish words and expressions led to the creation of a whole clothing and fashion accessory industry carefully designed and thoroughly envisaged to give people a childish, innocent and young appearance. In the 1980s, cute fashion also added androgynous and eccentric looks to the childish aesthetics (Kinsella, 1995).

Cute handwriting and cute behavior broadened their scope as part of contemporary media and capitalist structure, that is, a childlike aesthetic to writing, dressing and talking, paved the way to a cute nationwide phenomenon that encompassed clothes, a variety of accessories, television shows, animations, comics and music. Food can also be modeled to target the demands of cute culture (Granot; Brashear; La Toya, 2014). *Kawaii* food focuses on sweetness (*amai*), softness and milk with childlike connotations (Kinsella, 1995). Current cute food also includes other non-sugary ones such as pancakes, but with equally childlike elements such as cute drawings with ketchup or animal shaped food.

In the 1980s, the music idol phenomenon helped consolidate the power of the Japanese *kawaii* culture throughout the country. Idols, especially girls, teenagers and young adults, need to have the same general elements of *kawaii* culture in general. Idols, especially the women, need to dress in colourful and childlike fashion, talk using childish slangs and look innocent, pure and charismatic. Music idols do not have to sing, dance or perform well, indeed, they do not have to be perceived as talented; they have, male or female idols, to be perfect in the eyes of their fans, even if

<sup>1</sup> *Kawaii*, in Japanese, is a type of adjective called “i” “adjective.” Moreover, this paper does not discuss language differences in adjectives such as *kawaii*, *kirei* and *bijin*, which all could be translated as “pretty”. To simplify and differentiate from other adjectives, I will use the word “cute” as a synonym for *kawaii*, although there are idiomatic differences.

that is a fabricated imagery (Ashcraft and Ueda, 2010). The prototype for whole idol industry most likely started with Matsuda Seiko in the 1980s (Kitagawa 1991). In the words of Kinsella (1995:231):

Matsuda was a flat-chested and bow-legged and on TV she wore children's clothes, took faltering steps and blushed, cried, and giggled for the camera... Every one of her 23 singles, released between 1980 and 1988, became number one smash hits... Matsuda gained her popularity by being childish. She published several books for her fans, filled with large wobbly handwriting, small words and 'heart warming' poems.

Expertise in dance and singing were not fundamental requisites to become an idol. In the 1980s, the producer Aizawa Masahisa of Sun Music turned the unknown Sakai Noriko into a popular idol celebrity not due to her singing voice, but by "using a soon-to-be-widely-imitated childlike handwriting and an infantile speech style known as *Noripii-go* ("Noripii language", a play on her first name) that changed Japanese popular culture" (West, 2006:178). In Japan, idols normally work for agencies (*jimusho*) that are entertainment management companies producing and promoting them (Galbraith; Karlin, 2012; Marx, 2012). These agencies "train, employ, nurture, schedule, protect, and manage entertainers" (West, 2006:181). These agencies commonly look for people with the "right attributes," that is, that portray aspects socially linked with notions of sweetness, cuteness, childishness, and that stay away from tabloid scandals. West (2006:182) quotes one agent looking for a cute and childlike girl who affirmed that "[a]s long as she's not tone deaf, stupid, or in a wheelchair, we can teach her everything else".

The aesthetics of the contemporary *kawaii* movement incorporates foreign elements that are not traditionally part of Japanese culture. Since the development of cute handwriting in the 1970s, *kawaii* culture incorporates, blends and transforms the local and the foreign seeking to escape from adult reality. Therefore, the focus of cute culture is on illusion. That is, it is based on an illusion of innocence, childhood and a return to an uncomplicated time. Accordingly, *kawaii* portrays a romantic view of childhood and shields away from images and actions that, although arguably connected to childhood, are not envisaged as cute such as bed-wetting, diapers and legal restrictions stemming from being a minor. However, *kawaii* representations could be coupled with violence targeting the cute character or person, usually female, and commonly sexual (Allison, 1996). Dark and scary imageries could, therefore, be associated with the *kawaii* aesthetic (Korusiewicz, 2011).

*Kawaii* aesthetics can place an ideal of innocence and childishness above the artists' individual freedoms. Idols, for example, commonly have to sign contracts with clauses prohibiting drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking, and dating (Galbraith; Karlin, 2012). Idols who break these contract rules can be fired or face punishments such as having to write apology letters or even shave their head.<sup>2</sup>

The producer Akimoto Yasushi formed the extraordinarily popular idol group AKB 48 (Ashcraft; Ueda, 2010). This idol group's innovation lies in the commercialization of a *kawaii* fantasy of fans meeting their idols, which was summarized with the Japanese sentence *ai ni ikeru aidoru* (idols you can meet). The group's success rests on what Galbraith and Karlin (2012) called the affective sensibility of fandom. *Kawaii* becomes even more profitable when, beyond selling a fantasy and escape from reality, a notion of intimacy and affection also gets to be part of the musical group's merchandise (Galbraith; Karlin, 2012).

### 3.1. *Kawaii* and *Otaku*

According to the literature, *kawaii* is rooted in contemporary youth movements in Japan. Following the steps of Sharon Kinsella (1995) and this literature trend, Korusiewicz (2011) affirms that the *kawaii* aesthetics, which blends elements of Western pop culture, primarily American, with Japanese aspects, spread through Japan in the mid-1970s reaching the top in the following decade.

<sup>2</sup> See AKB48 POP STAR SHAVES HEAD AFTER BREAKING BAND RULES. BBC News, Asia, 1 February 2013 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21299324> - Access: 17 Feb. 2016]. JAPANESE POP STAR SHAVES HEAD IN APOLOGY – FOR NIGHT WITH BOYFRIEND. The Guardian, Asia: Japan, 1 February 2013 [<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/01/japanese-pop-star-apology-boyfriend> - Access: 17 Feb. 2016].

However, according to Michiko Okano (2014), the *kawaii* aesthetics transforms and adapts in relation to the historical and social context. As a movement, what can be considered *kawaii* and how it is produced and consumed changes and adjusts in accordance with social demands and historical specificities. Furthering Western literature, Okano (2014) divides *kawaii* culture into three different movements based on the work of artists during different periods of Japanese history. The first – and more traditional – movement started during Heian Era (794-1185). The second movement, developed in modern times, goes from the Meiji Era (1868-1912) until Taishō (1912-1926). The third movement, contemporary, starts in the 1970s. Consequently, the *kawaii* aesthetics is not a creation of Japan's social and political opening to the world coupled with the capitalist system of a post-Second War society. These are not elements that spawned this movement but aspects that modified, empowered, and granted international relevance – at least to a certain extent – to an already existing aesthetic-cultural vision within Japanese culture. Okano (2014) mentions illustrations from Nakahara Jun'ichi as examples of this pre-1970s *kawaii* aesthetics. Nakahara's works from 1932 already portrayed *kawaii* elements such as roundish faces, delicate strokes, and visuals that could be envisaged as soft and childish.

Michiko Okano (2014) adds a fourth stage of *kawaii*'s history that goes from 1983 onwards. This latest cute culture's unfolding is contemporary to the third generation. The fourth stage comprises a “complexity of ‘relationship models’ within which the *otaku* phenomenon appears with the introduction of sexuality and a common representation of an apocalyptic world” (Okano, 2014:8, translated by author).

The term “otaku”, that Okano (2014) mentions, is commonly used to refer to avid fans of Japanese animation (anime), Japanese comics (manga), games, idols and Japanese popular culture in general (Hiroki, 2009). An old term, originally, *otaku* means “you”, “home”, and “your home” (Hiroki, 2009; Morikawa, 2012). This word resurfaced with a different meaning in the 1980s (Hiroki, 2009; Morikawa, 2012). It is not by accident that Michiko Okano points out that 1983 was the beginning of *kawaii*'s fourth stage. The contemporary meaning of *otaku* surfaced in 1983 when *Manga Burikko* columnist Nakamori Akio in his column entitled “Otaku Research” (*otaku no kenkyū*) criticizes people that line up to get into theaters to watch animated films, are train enthusiasts, idol chasers and science fiction fans. All of them are grouped under an invented category of “otaku” (Galbraith, 2015).

Although his general statement was gender neutral and included a variety of fans, according to Galbraith (2015:26), however, Nakamori particularly criticized “men sexually attracted to fictional girl characters”. Nakamori calls this sexual attraction a “two-dimensional complex” (or *nijigen konpurekkusu* in Japanese) arguing that *otaku* cannot talk to women and focus on idol singers or animation characters who do not display femininity (Galbraith, 2015). Ironically, although criticizing *otaku* and their love for idols and fictitious feminine characters (calling it “Lolita complex”), Nakamori's article was published in the magazine *Manga Burikko*, which from that year, was already fully dedicated to the *otaku* market focusing on feminine and *kawaii* animation and manga characters commonly in erotic portraits (Morikawa, 2012). Nonetheless, Nakamori seemed bothered by the connection between men and a more feminine culture and the attraction to a more childish aesthetics.

The spread of Japanese pop culture abroad and the embrace of *kawaii* culture by the government and companies as part of the “Cool Japan” soft power could have influenced the *otaku* image within and outside Japan (Yiu and Chan, 2013, Cheok and Fernando, 2012)<sup>3</sup>. Thiam Huat Kam (2013), after talking with Japanese students, derived the “reality rule”. For some people, *otaku* are the ones who have “failed reality” in some way. Commenting on the view of these interviewees, he affirms that “in their conception, the following people are ‘otaku’: 1) those who are devoted to their hobbies to the extent that they can no longer see ‘reality’; 2) those whose hobbies' subject matter is not ‘reality’; 3) those who confuse fantasy with ‘reality’; and 4) those who escape from ‘reality’” (Kam, 2013:159). According to this perspective, being an *otaku* is a question of degree. It is socially acceptable to watch anime, read manga, play games and enjoy *kawaii* culture in general as long as someone can enjoy cute culture without disturbing their social obligations, which includes

<sup>3</sup> On “Cool Japan” see Allison (2009).

working and fitting into established gender roles (Smith, 1987). *Otaku* are perceived as problematic precisely because they break with social paradigms related to gender and culture when they embrace the *kawaii* movement.

Women play an important part in the *kawaii* movement due to their role as both producers and consumers. Cute girl characters seen in *shōjo manga* (girl's manga) and *anime* were drawn mostly by women and impacted the whole *kawaii* culture, including *Manga Burikko* (Galbraith, 2015). Women were essential in organizing *manga* and animation conventions in the 1970s. From these conventions and works, fan-made creations such as “boys’ love manga” (BL or *yaoi*) came to life when young women altered the framework of works targeting female consumers breaking taboos and barriers (Kinsella, 1998). This style is almost always focused on the aesthetics (appearance and emotions) of the characters instead of emphasizing narrative structures. According to McLelland and Yoo (2007:94), “boys’ love manga” also comprises “highly sexualized depictions of male homosexual relationships between good-looking young men and boys.”

Masculine representations in “boys’ love manga” are a common element in this genre of fan-made work whereby these male characters are usually portrayed young looking (childlike) and in highly sexualized scenarios, which can include sexual harassment and rape, as long as these depictions minimally follow the Japanese censorship rules (McLelland; Yoo, 2007). Many heterosexual (or asexual) female readers accept this expression of masculine same-sex love as a form of self-expression or compassion between characters regardless of gender attributions (McLelland; Yoo, 2007). Fans of *yaoi* are labeled *fujoshi*, which transformed the Japanese word for ladies into a homonym meaning “rotten girls” (Galbraith, 2011a).

Following the same trend seen in *yaoi* – which focuses on “cute boy characters” (*bishōnen*) –, *bishōjo* or cute girl characters and cute eroticism (*kawaii ero*) surfaced in the late 1970s in magazines such as *Manga Burikko*. Western literature asserts that *bishōjo* started with Azuma Hideo when he mixed the aesthetics seen in *shōjo manga* characters with a roundish drawing style from Tezuka Osamu (Galbraith, 2014).

However, the *bishōjo* aesthetics could be flow from or be included in drawing styles older than those from Azuma Hideo and Tezuka Osamu. Nakahara Jun’ichi and Matsumoto Katsuji already followed a roundish drawing style (as Tezuka) and a stroke similar to that seen in girls’ manga. The difference is that in the 1970s, this cute drawing style found its way to new media forms (*manga* and animation), reached global popularization, and made increasingly recourse to sexualized depictions based on harmonization or transgression of censorship laws (the current censorship laws are interpretation-based rules that basically prohibits depictions of male or female genitalia) (Trager; Obata, 2004; Parini, 2012; Mcllelland, 2014). The current *bishōjo* aesthetics can have characters deprived of sexuality (inciting a desire in the viewer/reader), or are in scenarios that place them in sexual or violent situations. Accordingly, it is possible to juxtapose the innocence of *kawaii* culture with sexual or violent acts (Korusiewicz, 2011).

The popularity of *kawaii ero* led to writings on a “lolicon boom” (*roricon bumu*). *Lolicon* is a contraction for Lolita Complex, which can be used to refer to the desire for cute girl characters. Accordingly, this term refers to the attraction (usually amorous and/or sexual) to the *kawaii* aesthetics, including the childish element that characterizes it (Galbraith, 2011b). In Japan’s pop culture, there is a word, *moé*, which designates the desire for such cute characters that could have been specifically designed to produce such feelings or, differently, such effects happened unbeknownst to the producers or artists. Therefore, *moé* avoids imprecisions that the expression “lolicon” can encompass, excluding *ab initio* the possibility of any illegal relationship between human beings.

Lamarre (2013:136), for example, affirms that *moé* “might be glossed as ‘wow!’ or ‘cute!’ or ‘hot!’ The image strikes the viewer, and perception gives way to affect”. *Moé* is a consequence of the viewer’s response to *kawaii* aesthetics. Consequently, it is the desire, affectionate or sexual, towards images of cute characters. Galbraith (2014:7) talks in terms of response, a verb. He asserts that *moé* is an “affectionate response to fictional characters”, that is, is not the character itself but the response to it (Galbraith, 2009; Yiu; Chan, 2013).

Dating simulation games or *ren'ai shimyuēshon* (in Japanese) form a significant share of electronic games in Japan. Relatively obscure in the United States, Europe and Latin America, these are computer games or videogames focused on romance and relationships (with or without erotic elements). Dating simulation games are divided in subgenres, which among them, it is possible to highlight: *bishōjo* games (the ones that the player is a male who has to interact with different cute girl characters), GxB or *otome* games (the ones that the player is a female who has to interact with different cute boy characters), and BL or “boys’ love” (games that focus on male romantic relationships). Among many subdivisions of simulation games, the most popular are *bishōjo* games (Jones, 2005).

*Bishōjo* relationship games utilize *kawaii* elements from animation and *manga*, generally in 2D (two dimensional) images, to create stories that give the player development options. These options will influence how the story unfolds and impact the ending (generally, each game has several different endings that vary in accordance with the choices the player makes during the game) (Taylor, 2007). As the stories and the structure can vary from game to game, there are subgenres of subgenres of relationship games. Some games focus on how the main player can select his or her character and develop a virtual relationship. Others make use of violence and pornography, including incest and rape, as part of their storytelling. Although there are variations and different genres, the *kawaii* aesthetics of the characters is a constant element.

From a personality standpoint, female characters are weak and dependent on male support (Taylor, 2007). Taylor (2007) used the word *shōjo* to qualify the female characters as they act like girls instead of women by being *kawaii*, inexperienced, cute, childish and emotional. Accordingly, relationship games are constantly grounded on *kawaii* aesthetics with *moé* effects linked to inexperienced girls in a fantasy world wherein characters have little to no expectations or willpower.

*Loveplus*, as a smashing hit relationship game in Japan (Demetriou, 2011; Bosker, 2014; Fondi, 2014), is a typical example of *kawaii* elements in relationship games. The company Konami developed *Loveplus* for the Nintendo DS videogame console. This game is officially unavailable in Brazil, Europe, or even in the United States. The only official version is in the Japanese language sold only for the Japanese market. Consequently, the only way to acquire the game in the West is to import it from Japan together with the Japanese version of the videogame console. Moreover, foreign players need to have Japanese language ability to play the game.

Different from other simulation games, pornography is not part of *Loveplus*. The game is based on the perspective of a high school male student who interacts with three different girls: Rinko, Nene, and Manaka. All three girls differ in appearance and personality. Takane Manaka is lonely, intelligent, loves tennis and likes to cook. Kobayakawa Rinko feels alienated from her stepmother, and loves punk music and French fries. Finally, Anegasaki Nene likes domestic work and horror movies.

However, the game does not end when the male player meets and gets a love confession from the girl of his dreams. It is quite the opposite. The relationship continues indefinitely. The game’s artificial intelligence system is programmed to answer millions of different questions, has voice and face recognition systems, has an input microphone to allow conversation between the player and the game character, and has the ability to send messages and schedule dates with the player. Accordingly, the girl characters are programmed to have typical expectations and idiosyncrasies of a human person (for example: if a date was scheduled at a specific time and her “boyfriend” fails to show up or is late, she will be angry and disappointed). In 2014, a Japanese university student “married,” that is, had a marriage ceremony with the *Loveplus* character Nene (Bosker, 2014). Konami has also organized trips and tourist attraction packages for *Loveplus* players and their virtual girlfriends.

#### 4. Violence, *Kawaii*, and Gender Issues

Women and youngsters spearheaded the *kawaii* movement clashing with certain established social concepts and expectations. In a social structure in which responsibilities are intrinsically connected to adult life, adulthood can be perceived as a limitation of individual freedom. It is the idea that during childhood, it is possible to live freely without adulthood’s obligations and

responsibilities. In this line of thought, growing up entails taking over expected and demanded obligations from adult life. That is, women should follow work-related obligations and marriage life, and men should enter the workforce, desirably as a “salaryman” (a white collar-worker).

*Kawaii* disrupts societies that value harmony and social cohesion, that place growing importance on adulthood with gender-based obligations and expectations focusing on masculine work and patriarchy. *Kawaii* emphasizes child-like aspects, seeks an appearance and behavior that stresses an imaginary and utopic perspective of what could be envisaged as belonging to childish aesthetics and attitudes. It is a movement flowing from and based on women’s visions. The prejudice that masculine fans of all things *kawaii*, the *otaku*, face, at least in part, flows from the fact that they rely upon and embrace more feminine and childish aesthetics instead of accepting social expectations and commitments. On the same token, female fans of *kawaii*’s same-sex or erotic representations face similar prejudice for failing to follow social gender-based prescriptions of heterosexual marriage.

Accordingly, *kawaii* breaks away from the dominant paradigms of sexuality and aesthetics, questioning what could be considered adult, pretty, sexually attractive, masculine, and feminine. On different lenses, *kawaii* can also sexualize anything child-like, which could arguably contribute to a child abuse culture. This view stems from the argument that the popularization of sexualized depictions of young-looking women in different media forms carries a danger of causing abuse (United Nations, 2016).

The criticism to *kawaii* culture that focuses on the dangers of sexualization of child-like aspects needs to address two points when demonstrating the risks of this aesthetical movement. First, virtual depictions in games, animation and *manga* are, as the name portrays, fictitious and, consequently, without the participation of humans. Second, although morally questionable or reprehensible, it is not unlikely to see women themselves as the creators of sexually leaning *kawaii* products, that is, these depictions are not necessarily an exteriorization of male sexual fantasies. Galbraith (2017:9), for example, mentions an interview with Fujimoto Yukari, a feminist and specialist on *shōjo* manga, who affirmed that:

As a result of dividing up the market by gender and age, comics by and for girls and women deal with issues that are important to them. The market is massive and supported by girls and women, who are the primary producers and readers. These works have contained depictions of sexual violence since the 1970s.

Galbraith (2017) asserts that women were creating depictions of sexual violence in comics spread in the 1980s as part of fan fiction movements (amateur works created by fans) targeting women. This grassroots artistic movement reached mainstream status in the 1990s.

Accordingly, even in controversial aspects of the *kawaii* movement, fans participate as producers and consumers of products following this movement’s aesthetics. Arguably, as masculine and feminine fans are co-creators and consumers, it would be difficult to assert the view of a male imposition within the *kawaii* aesthetics and representations. *Kawaii* fosters a more democratized approach to culture and aesthetics, minimizing gender divisions and breaking with paradigms and certain social expectations. Male *otaku* fans of *kawaii* products do not necessarily wish to follow a “salaryman” lifestyle dedicated to gender-based work division. Women, with the *kawaii* aesthetics, can express their own voice not imposed by society or men. Beyond child-like, *kawaii* is also essentially feminine and encompasses an aesthetical approach to food, music, clothing, speech, writing, and representations in comics, animation and games.

## 5. Conclusion

Although with roots in the Heian Period, *kawaii* as an aesthetical and cultural movement was reformulated in the 1970s in ways to be strongly connected with capitalist consumerism and the *otaku* lifestyle. This reimagined *kawaii* is grounded on individual liberty and gender equality based on child-like and feminine attributes replacing aspects perceived as belonging to an adult lifestyle and responsibilities.

During Meiji Era, the state's institutionalized vision was of a gendered divided society whereby women were responsible for child raising and husband support. After the Second War, women kept in the role of mother and wife despite several social progresses and an increasing access to the job market. On the other hand, men were encouraged to pursue the "salaryman" ideal, that is, of a dedicated worker as their main priority. Accordingly, adult life can be perceived as composed of gender-based social obligations.

A refreshed *kawaii* movement emerges within this context. It arguably contributes to more plural understandings of genders, breaking social paradigms as part of a capitalist structure focused on consumerism and dialogue between producers and consumers. This consumer and production environment was and, arguably, still is predominantly female. In the feminine aspect of *kawaii* stems the prejudice some men – the so-called *otaku* – who join this movement face. *Kawaii* culture also sparks controversial and diverse views on sexuality, relationships and aesthetics. However, even when controversial, *kawaii* as a cultural-aesthetical movement represents a rupture from Meiji Era and post-Second War values by stressing child-like, feminine and innocent aesthetics and rejecting adulthood and stereotypical masculinity.

Therefore, as a cultural-aesthetical enterprise, *kawaii* is paradoxical. On one side, it is a women-driven movement that questions previous gender and sexual paradigms. On a different side, it could pressure women into acting in accordance with the *kawaii* aesthetics when they will reproduce behaviors and consume products that are submissive and childish. Following this reasoning, *kawaii* arguably changed the way to view the female gender in Japan. Moreover, it shows the existence of a threshold that, to a society connected to the "salaryman" perspective, men cannot cross without being labeled failed (Galbraith, 2015): men should not follow a *kawaii* behavior or aesthetics. Furthermore, adding to the complexity of the issue, it is not uncommon to find Japanese comics (*manga*), videogames, and animations depicting cutely drawn characters as victims of the most extremes forms of sexual violence (e.g., incest and rape).

In a nutshell, the *kawaii* movement is paradoxical: it distances itself from certain gender stereotypes while crystalizing others; it is a female-driven movement, but also builds an aesthetical and behavioral framework that can compel women to fit into it; it was created and developed by fans, but it became intrinsically part of contemporary capitalism; and it is grounded on freedom of imagination, sex, and thought, but at the same time can objectify and sexualize what could be envisaged as female and childish.

Despite some criticism and doubts on legal and moral grounds of certain aesthetical representations of cuteness, the *kawaii* movement can be considered part of a counterculture that emphasizes individual expressions, feminine and child-like behavior and, consequently, shakes crystalized notions of gender and social expectations.

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