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"CUTENESS" (*KAWAII*) AS *MYTH* IN JAPANESE ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT. ***Cuteness (Kawaii) as Myth in Japanese Advertising Discourse*.** In the present article we intend to explore the values of "cute" as social and cultural artefact depicted in Japanese print advertisements. Like any other discourse, advertising has as a starting point that corresponds to the form, which, in relation to a certain historical framework, will give birth to the myth. For example, the "consumer" of *myths* found in advertising is not captivated by the signs per se, but by the ideas they invoke. Based on this statement, we expose the concept of "cute" (*kawaii*) as *myth* of Japanese daily life, serving as (perhaps) the most efficient tool for preserving group harmony (*wa*) and for persuading the receiver. By focusing on the implications and historical roots of the concept in Japanese society, this paper aims to reveal the "hidden meaning" behind the ubiquitous "cute". The analyzed corpus consists of three non-commercial print adverts created between 2016-2017 for Keio Corporation and Tokyo Metro, two major Japanese transportation operators. The idea of 'cuteness' is perceived by the Japanese as a "time capsule" for it can postpone adulthood responsibilities and prolong childhood innocence. In the context of globalization, *kawaii* has become a totem which continues the centuries-old myth (in the traditional sense) of uniqueness of the Japanese.

Keywords*: advertising discourse, cultural semiotics, advertising language, kawaii, pop culture, culture as social interaction, myth*

REZUMAT. ***„Drăgălășenia" (kawaii) ca mit în discursul publicitar japonez.*** În prezentul articol intenționăm să explorăm valorile „drăgălășeniei" (*kawaii*) ca artefact social și cultural prezent în afișele publicitare japoneze. Precum orice tip de discurs, publicitatea are un punct de plecare care corespunde formei, și care, în raport cu un anumit cadru istoric, va da naștere *mitului*. Spre exemplu, „consumatorul" *miturilor* găsite în publicitate nu este captivat de semnele în sine, ci de ideile pe care le invocă. Pe baza acestei afirmații, explorăm valențele conceptului „drăguț" (*kawaii*) ca *mit* al vieții cotidiene japoneze, servind ca

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(poate) cel mai eficient instrument de păstrare a armoniei grupului (*wa*) şi de persuadare a receptorului. Concentrându-se pe implicaţiile şi rădăcinile istorice ale conceptului în societatea japoneză, studiul propune dezvăluirea „sensului ascuns" din spatele omniprezentului „drăguţ". Corpusul analizat constă din trei afişe cu caracter necomercial, create în perioada 2016-2017 pentru Keio Corporation şi Tokyo Metro, doi operatori de transport japonezi majori. Ideea de „drăgălăşenie" este percepută de către japonezi ca o „capsulă a timpului" deoarece poate amâna asumarea responsabilităţilor şi prelungirea inocenței copilăriei. În contextul globalizării, *kawaii* a devenit un totem care continuă mitul (în sensul tradiţional) unicităţii poporului nipon.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: discurs publicitar, semiotică culturală, limbaj publicistic, kawaii, cultură pop, cultura ca interacţiune socială, mit.*

When structuralism appeared in the earliest 20st century, an inevitable shift arose in many thinker's views and assumptions about subjectivity. The idea that what we as human beings are a free acting, independent subject, exploring the infinite options available is reconsidered in the context of this new paradigm regarding the *self*. Preferences, habits, beliefs are regarded as a mere expression of rituals of a certain culture. According to this theory, the *self* does not shape the world, but vice versa. Thus, every culture functions based on a set of rituals which is passed on and learned by individuals in a community, therefore it can be perceived as ideology in this way.

Early structuralists are following up the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1972), credited with the founder of semiotics. Each sign is comprised of two primary parts: the *signifier* (the word, picture, etc.) and the *signified* (the concept of the thing that the *signifier* is referencing) but, when applying this schema to the deconstruction of signs it seems that there is not a single *signifier* attached to a single *signified*. A single word, or a single sentence has a "surface" meaning that is trying to denote, but the beneath surface reading of what a particular sign is seeming to communicate there are often several layers of different meanings. These multiple meanings are the basis for understanding the complexity of the Universe, but they also distort the perception of reality. For example, reading mythological works as mere stories describing a fictional past comes from the first layer of meaning found in the "surface" of the text. The secondary message found beneath the surface of the text, non-explicitly is the true value of meaning in mythology (Barthes 1991 [1972]). The values of a culture in which the story is being written is found in the other layer of meaning that lies in an entirely different set of signifieds that connect to the original signifiers. For example, the mythological archetype of the "flood" is not unique to Christianity, it can be

found across many mythological works to symbolize the cycle of "death" and "rebirth". Often, in mythologies there are multiple signifieds attached to the original signifiers. According to Barthes *myth* is language (cf. Barthes 1991, 10), not an archaic story, but important elements constructed within a society and delivered through mass media.

Societies, like any structure, imply the existence of a "conceptual order", that is, individuals, as members of a community, act according to a conceptual structure that maps the experience of living in a specific place. Thus, based on the relations of meaning between form and concept, the *signifier*, *signified* and the *sign* give rise to discourse. In the case of news or advertisements, there are often layers of mythology not being explicitly stated. This mythology spans from messages that reinforce credibility, make value judgments, etc. basically shaping, distorting and narrowing world views. A news bulletin is a vast collection of signs: from the anchor's clothing, specific articulation and diction, studio lights, music played, colors etc. Alike classic mythology this combination of signs in this case can be looked at a first level (surface), without any "hidden" meaning, or they can be interpreted as delivering a deeper meaning to the receiver. Scrolling text on the screen during the news bulletin can create a feeling of novelty and exclusivity, but fonts adjust and change the meaning of what is conveyed (cf. Cook 1992, 61). Understanding the deeper mythology found in media can help in "demystifying" culture. Mythology transforms "history into nature" (cf. Barthes 1991, 128), that is, it takes cultural constructions (e.g. the idea of how Japanese are) which are arbitrary and contingent upon history and create the sense of a fixed, unchanged part of nature (essentialist view of the world). When applying these ideas to mass media, there is a fine line between "semiology" (commonly used as "semiotics") and "ideology". Semiotics, as a tool to uncover the second and third level meanings hidden in media, reveals mythology that promotes a particular political ideology (in a wider scope, any message that aims to change worldviews). The mythology found beneath the "surface" of the text is the source to understanding the underlying structures that make up and allow a culture to function. Just like language, culture needs a set of complex arrangements of structures.

Advertising discourse has the capacity to shape and influence individual perceptions, community values and beliefs (cf. Frențiu 2014, 37), thus its analysis proves to be a reservoir of cultural knowledge and sensibility. For example, the values embedded by *nihonjinron,* a type of discourse focusing on Japanese identity and uniqueness which debuted in the later part of the 20th century, are reinforced through 21st century advertisements in a desire to revitalize the "true essence" of being Japanese in the context of globalization (cf. Frențiu 2014, 39). Surprisingly, another type of discourse (*kawaiiron*), focusing on quite the opposite aesthetics proposed by *nihonjinron*, emerged during the same period, gaining popularity

among younger generations in a context of rapid change and identity crisis (cf. Frenţiu 2014, 107). Nonetheless, advertising has both mirrored and shaped this paradoxical phenomena through which traditional values blend with pop-culture in perfect harmony without exclusion. Because of its chameleonic nature and capacity to persuade, advertising is considered a *mass culture* that can reinvent or reinforce certain values or trends (cf. Frenţiu 2014, 92).

By using semiotics to deconstruct signs in media and reveal the mythology implied we can uncover the various structures of culture that are taken as "common" or "encyclopedic knowledge". Mythology is not found at a first layer of understanding, thus in the case of advertising discourse which is constructed around implicit, rather than explicit meaning it cannot be easily perceived. For example, the denotation of "soap" tells that it is a compound of oils/ fats used with water for washing and cleaning, but the receiver (buyer) associates it with certain qualities. Barthes notes that "there is a certain spirituality" (Barthes 1991, 36) associated to the mundane soap. The extra meanings attached to this "compound of oils" are commonly used in advertisements. The language used in adverts when describing soap makes the viewer perceive it almost as a "weapon" because it can "cut through dirt", "destroy dirt", "kill 99, 99% bacteria" and it is also "full of whiteness", and "mama's dream" etc. Moreover, the typical image used, a half dirty, half immaculate white plate, on a deeper level can be read as "bad" and "socially unaccepted" vs. "purity", "natural state of things". Because it is a normal, daily life utility, the mythology behind it is not easily traced, but at an entirely different level of signifies, it is actually about the idea that the world is perceived in binary terms, "clean" vs. "dirty". It delivers specific messages about what is socially acceptable and what is not.

In "Mythologies" (1972, 1991), Barthes gives several examples in this sense, from wrestling to toys or steak and chips in order to emphasize the presence of myths in everyday life their impact on the viewer's perceptions and views of the world. Food, horoscope, advertising, toys, photography, detergents, etc. are elements of a mass culture imbued with ideology providing society with the myths that once came from fables and epics. The starting point of Barthes's reflection was a "feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality" (Barthes 1991, 10), a reality which is undoubtedly determined by history. Basically, this new approach to the study of signs explains the two levels of signification, denotation and connotation, in terms of "convention" and "subjectivity". Thus, connotation depends on the feelings and emotions of the user of the sign and on the interpretative schemes and the values of its culture. For Levi-Strauss (1978), the *myth* is a narrative from the period of founding of a society, with open functionality and with hidden meanings, through which individuals face specific anxieties, whilst for Barthes, it is constructed within capitalist societies

as a chain of complementary concepts whose meanings are understood by its users and assume meanings and natural functioning (cf. Chandler 2001, 143-144). Thus, as well as language, *culture* has a specific underlying structure as well. One of the possibilities to reach the "beneath surface" meaning is by deconstructing media signs.

An advertisement is a selection of signs, a lens, visual standing for authority, credibility, legitimacy, rhetorical motifs constructing a myth, an "unmediated reality". Perceived as a cultural text, when deconstructed, it unveils its myths. The fonts used in newspapers, adverts, do not just reflect meaning, they add it, change it. Nowadays, the "selfie" (a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media), or the "like/love" sign (👍/♥) omnipresent in social media, are a seal of authenticity, showing appreciation and status, thus creating a *myth*, a perpetuation of ideology. Anything can become a *myth*, but it is different from any other form of *connotation*, or second order signification, because it is motivated by *history*. According to Barthes, *history* is an effort to make culture look like nature, thus a *myth* "cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (Barthes 1991, 108). It is an effort to conserve the world "as it is", a politically motivated endeavor that seeks to mask the "cultural" or "historical" ways in which society is constructed in order to feel *natural*, normal, ordinary.

From the "palette" of codes, Barthes's *cultural codes* (*referential codes*) use elements of a media text that have cultural reference and therefore appeal to individuals of a certain culture (country, age, race, etc.). Thus, any piece of knowledge widely accepted by society, that a cultural text uses it to invoke meanings. According to this code, without any referential knowledge or historical context, the message cannot be deciphered, but when used in works of arts, advertisements, etc. these codes can add layers of meaning in order to create a particular narrative for the receiver. Without the influence of *cultural codes* the image of an advert, for example, would be "read" in a simplistic manner, thus the meaning derived from a cultural text heavily relies on the influence of the dominant structures of thought of the society in which they are produced.

The present article intends to reveal the "hidden" message in Japanese print advertisements by applying Barthes's 2nd and 3rd level signification theory. Japanese language and culture is profoundly marked by ambiguity (*aimai*), thus any study targeting literary or linguistic phenomena should operate around this central keyword. Japanese spirituality is based on Shintoism (indigenous tradition) and Buddhism which have major influence on worldview and values. As a result, culture has been shaped by this religious heritage which was the source of inspiration for poems and arts. Appreciation towards nature, Imperfection as beauty ideal, simplicity (*wabi-sabi*), awareness of the impermanence of life and

the transience of things (*mono no aware*), empathy towards small, vulnerable things (*kawaii*) etc. are fundamental aesthetic values which guide the Japanese way of living.

"*Kawaii*" is defined in OED as follows:

(a) Adjective. Cute, esp. in a manner considered characteristic of Japanese popular culture; charming, darling; ostentatiously adorable.

(b) Noun. That which is *kawaii*; cuteness.

The appeal of *kawaii* characters stands in contrast to the American concept of "cuteness" which is straightforward. The idea of "cute" represents "goodness", "optimism" and it is usually associated with the locative terms "right" and "up", as opposed to "ugly", which typically represents "pessimism" and "evil" and is associated with "left" and "down". These values are perpetuated through Disney movies and commercial goods, thus create a specific "fondness" or "likeness", a type of social setting or an ideology (cf. Barthes 1991, 91) that shapes children's perception of the world. "Evil" as *myth* is related to angular shapes, dark colors, whilst "Good" is constructed around round shapes and bright colors. All these particularities are meant to be identified in contrast, as either "Good" or "Evil". In Japan, due to its religious heritage, the dichotomy of universal concepts ("good" vs. "evil"; "black" vs. "white", etc.) is not straightforward as in other Western cultures. Thus, there is a "border zone" in which the imagery of "Good" and "Evil" is intertwined (fig. 1). There are different types of *kawaii* which can combine elements from both zones. For example, the phenomena of *kimo kawaii*, meaning "grotesque cute" (cf. Miller 2018, 57) is a fusion between "Evil" ideology and "Good", *busu kawaii* stands for "ugly cute", while *yuru kawaii* is a relaxed and calm type of "cuteness". According to cartoonist expert, Aya Kakeda, *yuru kawaii* became popular because of the stressful life in modern society. *Yuru* characters are meant to convey a feeling of calmness and security. By being portrayed as "emotionless" (e.g. Hello Kitty does not have a mouth), these characters are like a white canvas on which any viewer can "paint" a wide palette of emotions and stances. Most of the times, this approach to cuteness goes beyond appearances, invoking a reaction. Gudetama, an egg yolk with a gloomy personality, the anthropomorphic embodiment of depression, often expresses his anxiety towards the future and wants to avoid engaging in society: "*Mirai ga mienai*"/「未来が見えない」("Can't see the future"), "*Sottoshite oite agete*"/そっとしておいてあげて ("Leave me alone!"), whilst his conversation partner, represented solely through voice, has the role to lift his spirits: "*Kyō wa ii koto mo aru kamo yo*"/「今日はいいこともあるかもよ」("Today might be a better day"), "*Kyō wa gokigen da ne*" ("You seem in a good mood today!"), etc.

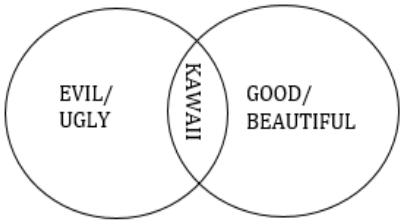

Fig. 1. Evil-*Kawai*i-Good triad

According to Barthes, mass culture has the capacity to construct a mythological reality and encourage conformity to specific values. In the case of Japan, *kawaii* signs in advertising create a sense of "belonging" and fosters the idea of "social and moral responsibility". The concept has been "reinforced" in post-war Japanese society through mass-media in an attempt to regain credibility overseas and as a commitment to peace. The "ideology of the samurai" which shaped Western's perception over Japan has been replaced by the "ideology of *kawaii*", reflecting behavioral and emotional changes of younger generations who did not relate anymore to the values of the traditional warrior (cf. Pellitteri, Bouissou, 2011, 194). The dynamics of this concept makes it difficult to circumscribe it to a specific set of particularities and values, thus its multi-facets permit many "reading" keys and create ambiguity. Often described as a "pacifist revolution", it does not claim independency or have a political agenda, it intends to prolong/return to childhood innocence through a reality escape in a utopic world. These ideas circulated rapidly through mass-media and commercial goods (*fanshī guzzu*/"fancy goods") creating a community having its own slang (mostly consisting of loan words and onomatopoeia) and fictional worldview.

The representation of the Great Buddha wrapping his arms around Hello Kitty on goods and posters is a means for promoting Kamakura temple in Nara. This unexpected association between the most important religious figure in Japan and the representative figure of *kawaii* characters result in "the great statue of Buddha Kitty", thus in a sign of double complexity. New meaning arise from adding extra layers to the existing structure (*signifier* + *signified*). A *signifier*, in this second-level strata, is already a complete, meaningful sign "inherited" from culture which, along a *signified*, or a mental concept, generates a *myth* (cf. Barthes 1991, 115). In this case, the "first-level" meaning generated by simply observing the image in the advertisement would be: "the Great Buddha holding Hello Kitty." The "second-level" meaning could be: "Hello Kitty, the representative of *kawaii* culture is strongly bind to Buddhism teaches and beliefs. Thus, *kawaii* characters too, are a powerful figure, just like Buddha."

Table 1. Japanese lexicon

English word	Loanword (gairaigo)	Japanese word
Lovely	*Raburī*/ラブリー	*Airashii*/愛らしい
Love	*Rabu*/ラブ	*Ai*/愛
Bunny	*Banī*/バニー	*Usa chan*/うさちゃん
Bear	*Beā*/ベアー	*Kuma san*/くまさん
Crown	*Kuraun*/クラウン	*Ōkan*/王冠
Bright	*Buraito*/ブライト	*Akarui*/明るい

Kawaii language (the "language of cute") offers an alternative to standard, formal Japanese (perceived as too rigid and traditional by young generations) by conveying emotions and feelings through words. Many Japanese or Sino-Japanese words (*wago*/*kango*) have been replaced by loanwords (*gairaigo*) in daily conversation and in advertising or *manga* (see Table 1).

The word *kawaii* is widely used to describe the quality of acting like a child (cf. Kinsella 1995, McVeigh 2000, Yano 2013, Dale 2016, Markus et al. 2017, etc.). It mostly refers to "vulnerable" entities and it creates a bond between the viewer and the "cute object" by appealing to emotions and feelings which finally generate a "need-love" relationship (*amae*). During the 1970s it manifested through writing, language use, fashion and behavior. The basis of this current resides in Japan's cultural and religious background of preserving group harmony (*wa*/和) and in the so-called "emotional dependency". Its popularization in the early 70s is due to the younger generations whose needs and expectations were not met anymore by traditional culture (perceived as overwhelmingly rigorous). *Kawaii* culture developed as a promotional tool for the pacifist ideology introduced after the 2nd World War.

Similar to the role played by contemporary *kawaii* signs, in the Kōfun period (300-538 AD), *haniwa* figures (made of clay) used in burial rituals were kept small and plain, with a blank, minimalist face and with no realistic features. These figures were perceived as symbolic indicators of social status and protection in the afterlife (cf. Mizoguchi 2013, 265). The first mentions of the concept appeared around the year 1000 in Sei Shōnagon's "Pillow Book"/枕草子, a book of observations of the Heian court. *Kawaii* is defined in section 155, entitled "Adorable things", as: "anything small" (*nandemo nandemo, chiisai mono wa minna kawairashii*/なんでもなんでも、小さいものはみんなかわいらしい) (Sei 2006, section 144) or anything "childish, innocent and pure" (*kawaii to wa*

osanakute, muku de, junsuina mono/かわいいとは幼くて無垢で純粋なもの) (Sei 1977, 181), thus these characteristics are perceived as being attributed to "an object of affection".

Given that "every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society" (Barthes 1991, 107), "cute" adapted to a specific consumption, or to a "social usage" is a reservoir of different meanings. In the context of globalization, *kawaii* culture is perceived as unique, exclusively Japanese, whose role is to restore the pre-war glory of the nation and to project another powerful national message (cf. McGray, 2009). It is considered an important factor in decision making among Japanese (Japan Foundation official page, 2019):

A-*san*: *Kore ni kimetta!* /これに決めった！ ("I decided on this!")

B-*san*: *E, kore kawaikunai yo. Motto kawaii no wo sagashite kuru kara mattete.* /え、これ可愛くないよ。もっとかわいいのを探してくるから待ってて。("What?! This is not *cute*! Wait until I go and find something *cuter*").

Fig. 2. Sound leakage during commuting, awareness poster, 2015.
Source: http://www.metrocf.or.jp/manners/poster.html

The iconic image of "cuteness" has been depicted in Japanese advertising in several ways especially from the 70s onwards and it was used to represent different ideas and beliefs. *Kawaii* signs often represent a "disguised authority figure" and work as a propaganda tool for the Japanese government (cf. Yano 2013, 5). For example, in figure 2, three fictional characters engaged in different activities are used in a Tokyo Metro non-commercial advert in order to draw attention to commuters upon the importance of respecting the rules. The first character (from left to right) is standing on a rectangular box waving

something with one hand, whilst with the other one is pointing to his mouth with one finger. The second one has curly blond short hair similar to a wig, holds a music player and points up with his finger. The last character, depicted entirely in white, holds tight a bag and sits rather uncomfortably. The "first-level" meaning is obtained by observing the image and the gestures: "three fictional characters in a means of transport engaged in different actions." The signifier "character", signifies "fictional world", "white" signifies "innocence" and by extrapolation "victim" and the "musical notes" signify "sound". The characters depicted in accordance with the characteristics of *kawaii* aesthetics signify friendliness and kindness, thus embody the values promoted by *wa* ("harmony"). By projecting inner characteristics of the viewer onto the "other" (in this case, onto fictional characters), the viewer identifies with that "other". Because of these particular implications, the Japanese citizen tends to relate more to the feelings expressed by the third character which embodies inability and weakness. The motto of the advert: *Shi-! Boryūmu daun de manā appu*/ しー！ボリュームダウンでマナーアップ ("Shh! Volume down, manners up!") has the role to persuade the viewer in condemning a certain behavior, in this case, sound leakage in public transport. The depiction of cute characters in an official transportation advert has the role to reinforce citizens' commitment to social norms. The authority figure, the policeman or the conductor is represented through a small, child-like character wearing adult clothes and acting as one. The overall meaning is generated through parody (comic effect) by appealing to specific signs associated with a concert, such as: "♪♫", orchestra conductor "baton", "hand position", specific "wig" suggesting classical music, etc.

Fig. 3. Sound leakage during commuting, awareness poster, 2016.
Source: https://www.keio.co.jp/gallery/poster/manner_poster/2016_vol1/index.html

The second example (fig. 3) is also a non-commercial advert created for Keio Transport in 2016 and similar to the previous example, it represents the real world through fictional characters. The first order of signification "reads": "an anthropomorphized koala wearing clothes, caught between cartoon human avatars, looking scared". From this first level the viewer cannot withdraw the underlying meaning of the advert. A koala bear wearing human clothes and a bag with the message "HELP" written with capital letters and depicted in the center of the poster is the "reading" from the level of *denotation*. But, as the human part of the process, *connotation* involves the audience's subjective interpretation of it, thus cultural knowledge is essential in interpreting and appreciating the image. The text of the poster (from right to left, vertically): *Aruki sumaho wo suru hito ga tottemo ōsugite, Koara-san wa shikatanaku hashira ni tsukamatte hinan shimashita/* 歩きスマホをする人がと〜っても多すぎて、コアラさんはしかたなく、柱につかまって避難しました。("There are too many people staring at their smartphones while walking, so Mr. Koala didn't have a choice but to grab a pillar to find shelter.") "read" at the first level (*denotative*) means: "an anthropomorphized koala is trying to escape a threat", whilst at the 2nd level it could be interpreted as: "A beloved, vulnerable, *kawaii* koala depends on my goodwill and behavior. It is not possible to disregard its needs because he is **too cute** to be harmed". The anthropomorphized koala is used to represent "the ones in need" and as a reminder of one's civic duty (*giri*) by appealing to Japanese sensitivity. *Omoiyari*, translated as "altruistic sensitivity" is defined as "an individual's sensitivity to imagine another's feelings and personal affairs, including his or her circumstances" (Shinmura 1991, 387) it is a key concept in understanding Japanese worldview. Thus, the "reading" in the 2nd order of signification is dependent on cultural, political, and/or ideological, beliefs. In this case, the koala bear, given its specific depiction according to *kawaii* aesthetics (vulnerable, weak, urging attention, anthropomorphized) does not simply refer to a furry animal, but it bears a wider cultural meaning. The viewer can "read" the poster by linking its completed message (this is a picture of a koala climbing up a scaffold, there are fictional characters, cellphones, etc.) with the cultural theme or concept of *kawaii*. Then, at the level of the *myth*, this Keio Transport poster becomes a message about the importance of preserving the fundamental values of the Japanese society: protecting the weaker, acting for the greater good. *Cute* and fictional characters pass from being simple affect objects (mainly associated to children) and become objects that convey Japanese cultural beliefs and ethics. These meanings are culturally constructed conventions, not natural, inherent properties. Thus, the significance of this *kawaii* koala bear caught in a difficult position will be a product of the

underlying set of conventions which Japanese people use for decoding the meaning. If presented to Western societies (e.g. Romania, Italy, Germany), the "reading" at the 2nd level of signification of this poster will vary considerably.

Fig. 4. Using smartphones on public transport, awareness poster, 2017.
Source: https://www.keio.co.jp/gallery/poster/manner_poster/2017_vol1/index.html

The last example (fig. 4) is also a poster for Keio Transport used to reinforce ideal and expected commuter behavior. At the first level, it is essential to observe each *signifier* used in the image: an anthropomorphized (fictional) rabbit, a sweater, irritated facial expression, bus/train handles, two cartoon characters, smiling face, headphones, musical notes. The meaning created from this set of signs is: "a cartoon rabbit wearing human clothes is riding a bus/train with cartoon people". In the first level, the text of the poster, "*Mawari no oto ga tottemo urusakute, usagi san wa tamarazu mimi wo guruguru tojimashita*" / 周りの音がと〜ってもうるさくて、ウサギさんはたまらず耳を閉じました。("It was so loud and Mr. Rabbit couldn't bear anymore so he "covered" his ears") simply "reads" as: "an anthropomorphized rabbit is annoyed by external noise", whilst in the second level of signification it could be interpreted as: "a vulnerable, *cute* entity's safety and good wealth depends on my actions". Whilst at the first level of "reading" it has no ideological connotation, at the second level of signification it is more complex because it involves cultural/common knowledge. The first meaning (*denotation*), when linked with a specific worldview perception and common knowledge it generates a deeper message: like other *kawaii* characters, when "emptied" of their history (commonly used in comic books or children

goods) they work as an instrument for maintaining social order. When used in public discourses that may or may not involve an authority (government, police, etc.), *kawaii* connotes "legitimacy" and "conflict mediation". In this case too, a transport operator "manipulates" a cultural specific sensibility/aesthetics and appeals to *kawaii* characters in order to assure safety and proper conditions for commuters, thus to maintain social order and harmony. Like all myths, *kawaii* makes cultural values, attitudes and expectations seem natural, incontestable, "the way things are". It gives "natural justification" to a historical intention, in this case to the new "sensibility" and values expressed by the younger generations. The meaning in the first order of signification is not completely erased, but distorted in order to apply to a specific scenario. *Kawaii* is transferred to various discursive spaces, ideas and historical spaces, genres where it gains often different meanings and becomes *significant*. In the Japanese society, when "childish" is replaced by *kawaii* as its signifier, then the signified is no longer "silly and immature", but "appealing and memorable".

Even though the analysis of myth is usually accounted for commercial adverts, myth is often deployed in non-commercial adverts to depict ideal social conduct through counterexamples. Mythology transports the viewer into a wider sociocultural context than that of social behavior alone. Viewing cute characters engaged in mundane social activities, the reader is relocated from reality to fiction, obtaining comfort and relief from reality even for a brief moment (ideas promoted by *kawaii*). In this case, *kawaii* characters, used mainly in *manga* (Japanese comics) and *anime* (Japanese animation), are a device to perpetuate traditional, religious values and represent a "pseudo-demanding" authority figure asking citizens to obey rules and respect social order for the sake of the common good.

Kawaii has come to represent Japan's position on the global scale, a power vector which aims to perpetuate the idea of a pacifist nation and the ideologies of peace and national identity. On the national scale, it has the purpose to reinforce Confucian values and beliefs such as placing the common good before self-interest, group harmony before individual rights and between personal desires and communal norms (cf. Lee 2018, 38).

Myths can be about how a culture understands community, family, or religion, or how it makes sense of liberty and justice, terror and security, privacy and surveillance, science, technology, progress, the environment or education. Breaking the myth down to its constituent parts reveals that *kawaii* works as an "undercover authority" which does not oppress or subjugate, it is an instrument for social cohesion. Mythologies are used to perpetuate an idea, thus *kawaii*, as a social construct, promotes pacifist ideology and Confucian values.

Kawaii characters are a mythical object: removed from the fictional world and introduced to reflect social reality. They become signs of social order and the viewer perceives this connection as natural, not created. Their use, in this case, they became an essential medium for developing a relationship between individuals and authorities. The cartoon characters are not merely fictional characters for children, they represent a "vulnerable", "fragile" category which trigger specific emotions and feelings in the eye of the Japanese viewer.

Meaning is always the result of selections and combinations of symbolic relationships. Thus, culture and literary texts are studied as *language*. *Myth* is emptied of its history and filled with nature, thus understood as "truth". By using *kawaii* signs in public advertising, authorities assure the reinforcement of the Pacifist ideology introduced as a means for reassuring Japan's position on the global scale.

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