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Commentary: The underlying kawaii culture that reinforces Japanese masculinity

What appeal does a soft toy character like Hello Kitty have for a 67-year-old man? Deborah Shamoon discusses the kawaii culture behind news of Masao Gunji's Guinness world record for having the largest Hello Kitty collection.



Masao Gunji, a retired police officer, stands at an entrance to his pink-painted Hello Kitty house with his wife. (Photo: AFP/Yoko AKIYOSHI)

SINGAPORE: Retired police officer Masao Gunji made news headlines worldwide recently, after breaking the Guinness record in November 2016 for owning the world's largest collection of Hello Kitty memorabilia. [Gunji's story](#) grabbed attention in a way the previous record holder Asako Kanda did not.

Asako Kanda is a Japanese woman in her forties who today on first glance still looks young enough to pass off as a 20-year-old. Masao Gunji looks like his 67 years.

We expect women like Kanda to collect Hello Kitty toys. But Masao Gunji challenges our ideas of masculinity, consumerism and cuteness. It's not surprising that this story has received a lot more attention overseas than in Japan. Many readers worldwide wonder what appeal does a soft toy character like Hello Kitty have for a 67-year-old man?

THE KAWAII CULTURE

Japan has long been seen as a purveyor of cuteness and Hello Kitty has been a character who has helped introduced people all around the world to the concept of kawaii. Yet, kawaii doesn't carry the same connotation as cute.



The mascots of Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel at the Hello Kitty Run in Singapore. About 17,000 participants joined the fun run to mark the Sanrio character's 40th birthday in 2014. (Photo: Pink Apple)

Both cute and kawaii are relatively recent terms, only coming into widespread use after World War II with the rise of teen culture. Cute in English is derived from the word acute and still carries the connotation of doing something clever or cunning to achieve an effect, sometimes to gain an upperhand. For instance, to get cute means to be cheeky.

But kawaii comes from an old Japanese term *kawayui*, which means to be red-faced or to be blushing with shame. To say a person or object is kawaii can mean that the person or object is pathetic or helpless, arousing compassion or pity, and in need of care and protection.

Kawaii implies a social relationship between a subject and the object of his or her affections, where the subject feels a sense of compulsion to care for the object, in the same way a parent would care for a vulnerable, delicate young child. So those that find Hello Kitty endearing and delicate may also see Hello Kitty as unthreatening, which becomes an important part of the character's charm.

Yet the relationship is mutually beneficial, for the parent derives warmth, satisfaction and happiness from caring for the child. Likewise, a person who buys cute Hello Kitty soft toys engages in those same emotions on a smaller scale – and the feeling of caring for something stirs up positive emotions.

Engaging in kawaii culture also helps recreate a sense of childhood – as people seek comfort in pretending to be a child once again.



Gudetama is the latest beloved Sanrio character - he represents a lazy egg who doesn't want to get out of bed.

To most people in Japan, childhood is seen as a time of freedom and innocence. Expressions of nostalgia for childhood are common in Japanese film, television, music and just about everywhere.

Elsewhere around the world, especially in North American culture, childhood is seen as a time of restriction and familial regulation, and individual freedom and personal fulfillment are attained only with adulthood. This is one reason why it's more socially acceptable in Japan for adults to buy kawaii goods than in the US.

WHEN MEN GIVE IN TO KAWAII CULTURE

While Hello Kitty goods are predominantly marketed to girls, there are many licensed products for adults, such as appliances, clothing, furniture, diet pills, condoms, sex toys, car accessories, high-end jewellery and handbags, and even guns. Some of these are purchased by men.

We may think of the Japanese male archetype as an emotionless salaryman or a samurai of sorts, but these are stereotypes. In fact, the Japanese describe their culture as “wet”, one that is emotional and group-oriented, in contrast to Western culture which is “dry”, and seen as cold and individualistic. These terms are often used in describing management practices in big corporations in the 1980s and 1990s.

Amae (dependency) is a Japanese term used to describe an emotion related to *kawaii* that is a central part of Japanese culture, for men as well as women. Amae refers to the behavior of children when they try to get their parents to take care of them, and can include both cute and annoying traits, such as clinging and begging. Psychoanalyst Takeo Doi claims that in the West, parents discourage this behavior, but in Japan, amae behavior continues into adulthood.



Adults who dress up in cosplay sometimes also display amae behaviour, when they fake-cry in posing for cameras. (Photo: AFP)

Amae is a way of expressing helplessness and externalising a desire to be loved. There is something about the expression of *kawaii* and child-like traits that triggers a protective, “masculine” reaction in people, especially men. Even in professional relationships, it’s understood that senior staff (*sempai*) have a responsibility to take care of junior staff (*kohai*).

Iyashi (healing) is another Japanese term used to describe a related emotion expressed by men as well as women in Japan. Iyashi literally means healing, but since the 1990s, it more specifically refers to a mentally soothing sensation or the healing of emotional distress. In reaction to the stress of contemporary life, and particularly Japan’s long economic stagnation, there has been a boom in iyashi products. Anything soothing or reassuring can be described as iyashi, from manga to music to facial expressions of anime characters.

Hello Kitty is iyashi, not only because she is small and child-like. Her neutral expression is like Buddha, allowing the consumer to project their emotions onto her.

“The reason I like Hello Kitty is because of her expression. For some reason, when I’m sad, she looks a little bit sad as well, and when I am happy, she looks happy,” said Gunji, our 67-year-old collector, in a news report. Gunji also explained that collecting Hello Kitty is a form of iyashi for himself in dealing with the stresses of a demanding job as a police officer. Now he uses his collection to share his iyashi with visitors.



Thousands of fans gathered in end-May at Changi Airport to watch Sanrio characters perform.

WHAT ABOUT RIDICULE?

Yet, what explains why Gunji is not afraid to declare his love for Hello Kitty publicly? We tend to think of Japan as a conformist society, embodied in the saying *deru kui wa utareru* (the nail that sticks up gets hammered down). In some ways, Japanese society is very rigid, when it comes to the school system and in the workplace.

But at the same time there is also a love of eccentrics – especially the artistic, the creative and people outside the system – who embody a freedom of expression, including the freedom from the fear of ridicule or judgment. These include children, teenagers and old people.

So Gunji could go public with his collection because he is retired, and no longer has to conform. As an elderly person, he is also seen as *kawaii*, a kind uncle sharing his happiness and personal healing with others.

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