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KAWAII (CUTE) SIGNS AND SYMBOLS AS MEANS OF MAINTAINING HARMONY IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

OANA-MARIA BÎRLEA[1]

ABSTRACT. ***Kawaii (Cute) Signs and Symbols as a Means of Maintaining Harmony in Japanese Society.*** This study focuses on the various facets of the Japanese concept of *kawaii* ("cute", "adorable"), as resulting from print advertisements. In the last decade it has been intensively studied by different scholars from various research fields aiming to understand the Japanese worldview. The analysis of pop culture elements, of which *kawaii* is part of, was not an area of interest due to the fact that they were considered inferior to high culture (classical arts and traditions), but the influence of this concept on culture and language, as well as on the way the Japanese communicate and relate is significant. Starting from the idea that the viewer is (often) persuaded through culture-specific signs and symbols, we intend to present the role of *kawaii* ("cute", "adorable") verbal and visual signs in maintaining group harmony (*wa*), one of Japan's core values. Hofstede's (2001, 2003, 2010) cultural dimensions theory was used to identify some of the dominant values in the Japanese society which determine people's expectations and behavior and signs and symbols used in adverts were analyzed from a cultural semiotics perspective. In order to explain the popularity of cute characters and "sweet talk" (*oseji*) in advertisements, we conducted a content analysis based on a corpus of over 200 Japanese print advertisements, covering both commercial and social (public interest) advertising, out of which we have selected four to discuss in this paper.

Keywords: *advertising discourse, cultural semiotics, advertising language, kawaii, cute, cute studies, Japanese, pop culture*

REZUMAT. ***Semnele și simbolurile kawaii (drăgălașe) ca mijloc de menținere a armoniei în societatea japoneză.*** Acest studiu se concentrează pe diferitele fațete ale conceptului japonez *kawaii* („drăguț", „adorabil"), așa cum reies din reclame tipărite. În ultimul deceniu, a fost studiat intens de diferiți cercetători din diferite domenii cu scopul de a înțelege viziunea japoneză asupra lumii.

[1] **Oana-Maria BÎRLEA** is a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Linguistic and Literary Studies, UBB, Cluj-Napoca, under the supervision of Prof. dr. habil. Rodica Frențiu. She is a member of the *Sembazuru Centre for Japanese Studies*. In 2013-2014, she was the recipient of a scholarship which allowed her to study at Kobe University, Japan. E-mail: oana.birlea@ubbcluj.ro.

Analiza elementelor de cultură pop din care face parte și *kawaii* nu a reprezentat un subiect de interes din cauza faptului că au fost considerate inferioare culturii înalte (arte și tradiții clasice), însă influența acestui concept asupra culturii și limbii precum și asupra modului în care japonezii comunică și relaționează este semnificativă. Plecând de la ideea că privitorul este (adeseori) persuadat prin semne și simboluri specifice culturii, intenționăm să prezentăm rolul semnelor verbale și vizuale *kawaii* („drăguțe", „adorabile") în menținerea armoniei grupului (*wa*), o valoare fundamentală. Teoria dimensiunilor culturale elaborată de Hofstede (2001, 2003, 2010) a fost utilizată pentru a identifica câteva dintre valorile dominante din cadrul societății japoneze care determină așteptările și comportamentul membrilor, iar semnele și simbolurile utilizate în reclame au fost analizate din perspectiva semioticii culturale. Pentru a explica popularitatea personajelor „drăguțe" și a „vorbelor dulci" (*oseji*) în reclame, am realizat o analiză de conținut pornind de la un corpus de peste 200 de reclame japoneze în formă scrisă, acoperind atât publicitatea comercială, cât și socială (de interes public), dintre care am selectat 4 pentru a fi discutate în prezenta lucrare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *discurs publicitar, semiotică culturală, limbaj publicistic, kawaii, drăgălaș, studii asupra drăgălășeniei, cultură pop*

1. Introduction

The concept of *kawaii* ("cute", "adorable") has been the object of study of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists in an attempt to understand the Japanese worldview. The analysis of pop culture elements, of which *kawaii* is part of, was not, until recently, an area of interest due to the fact that this kind of culture was considered inferior to high culture (classical arts and traditions), but the influence of this concept on culture and language, as well as on the way the Japanese communicate and relate is significant.

The first significant scientific research on the concept of *kawaii* appeared in the late 20th century and started to develop in the first decade of the 21st century. Among these, some of the most important studies are: Kinsella (1995) *Cute studies*; Riessland (1998), *Sweet Spots: The Use of Cuteness in Japanese Advertising*; Koga (2009), *Kawaii no teikoku* (*The Empire of Kawaii*); Sato (2009), *From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie. A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan*; Botz-Bornstein (2011), *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity*; Yano (2013), *Pink Globalization*, Okazaki & Johnson (2013), *Kawaii!: Japan's Culture of Cute Pink Globalization*; Dale (2016), *Cute studies: An emerging field*; Gn (2016), *A lovable metaphor: On the affect, language and design of cute*; Laohakangvalvit *et al*. (2019), *Kawaii Engineering. Measurements,*

Evaluations, and Applications of Attractiveness. Most of these studies focus on the global impact of "pink culture" (*kawaii*) and the Western view, or focus on its role in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Although the topic has gained more attention since 2000, researchers focus on describing the phenomenon in terms of cultural and/or social implications, but without including a practical application. For this reason, the purpose of this study is, in addition to analyzing the concept of *kawaii* in its complexity, to illustrate through concrete examples its functions and role in Japanese society.

Kinsella (1995) conducts one of the first major studies on *kawaii* and emphasizes the role of Western trends in the development of this new culture. She argues that the popularity of cute goods, handwriting, behavior, etc. among Japan's young generation has to do with "rebelling against traditional Japanese culture" (224). Riessland (1998) is interested to discover how the image of Japan is created through advertisements and starts his study from the following question: "Why [...] do public authorities in Japan deem it neeessary to soften serious topics in their information brochures with a dash of cuteness?" (150). The researcher presents three valences of *kawaii*: "funny, pure, harmless" (132). The rapid expansion of *kawaii* culture worldwide made Yano (2013) investigate the role of Hello Kitty in this process. In her study she concludes that empathy is at the core of *kawaii* culture (57). In an effort to enhance research on this topic, J.P. Dale published in 2016 an article on this new research trend and coined the term "cute studies". He argues that "cuteness is a phenomenon widely experienced yet little understood" (5).

In this study we use the term "social order" to refer to the state of stability within a society, opposed to chaos. Social order is "historically developed ideas, beliefs, and patterns of conduct and of feeling which each culture has evolved as the guides to human conduct and the management of group activities." (Frank 1944, 470)

Advertising discourse has always aimed to persuade the receiver, but starting with the second half of the 20th century it received new values and surpassed its primary function, having a purely economic nature and became a vehicle transmitting values and ideologies. (Frenţiu 2014, 95).

Kawaii ("cute", "adorable") is a key element in maintaining group cohesion (*wa*), a stimulus for counteracting stereotypes, passively condemning the excessive rigors and norms of Japanese society, creating a "refuge" in a utopian world (cf. Kinsella, 1995) and offers the possibility to communicate indirectly. In addition, in Japanese non-commercial, educational adverts, *kawaii* characters and childish expressions draw the attention of the viewer to matters of public concern and encourage cooperative behavior. This is possible due to the viewer's tendency to identify and resonate with the "vulnerable, pure and innocent" (Kinsella 1995, 220).

2. Concepts and methodology

The cultural dimensions model developed by Hofstede (2001, 2003, 2010) is used to determine the fundamental values of a society, that influence the expectations and behavior of individuals. These dimensions look at the fundamental problems and struggles which all societies have to cope with and the correlation of the country scores on each dimension reveals the defining characteristics, tendencies and predispositions of the members, in other words, the cultural model. The estimated scores obtained through these dimensions indicate that worldview, respectively the way in which social reality is represented and order is maintained, differs significantly from one society to another. The main differences derive from the correlation of the estimated scores of the (currently) six dimensions. The scale runs from 0 – 100 and any score over 50 indicates that the culture scores "high" on that scale.

The six dimensions developed by Hofstede (2001, 2003, 2010) are: *power distance*, *individualism/collectivism*, *masculinity/femininity*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *long/short term orientation* and *indulgence/ restraint*. According to the analysis scale, the Japanese society is a borderline hierarchical society (54/100), moderately collectivistic (46/100), one of the most "masculine" societies (95/100), is long-term orientated (88/100), one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries (92/100) members having the tendency to control their desires and impulses (42/100).

Using the estimated scores provided by the cultural dimensions and the observations made by Hofstede *et al*. (2010, 92), according to which Japanese advertisements contain mostly symbols that induce a state of peace, comfort and safety, we intend to present the role and functions of *kawaii* mascots and affect words. The large number of ambiguous assumptions and modalizers such as "*deshō*" ("probably"), "*darō*" ("probably"), "*kamoshiremasen*" ("possibly") used in Japanese advertisements indicate that in collectivist societies, direct confrontations are not accepted and the members act accordingly in order to maintain the harmony of the group. By looking at the cultural patterns derived from Hofstede's dimensions, we argue that *kawaii* signs and symbols are also a direct expression of collectivism. The emotionally loaded expressions and sweet words used by cute (*kawaii*) characters (*kyara*), easily recognizable due to their atypical appearance and clumsiness, instill a sense of security and belonging in the public's mind and create a positive, trusting atmosphere.

As Hofstede illustrates, Japan is one of the most "masculine" societies in the world, thus competition is considered a virtue, but the Japanese focus on being the best as a group, not individually and, in this regard, *kawaii* mascots have an important role because they manage to mobilize everyone by creating

a positive momentum. It is not a coincidence that in many Japanese ads these (often) vulnerable, funny-looking characters make requests in negative-question form in order to preserve group harmony: "~*masen ka?*" ("do you not want to~?"), "~*kudasai masen ka?*" ("would you not~?"), "~ [*de wa*] *nai deshō ka?*" ("is it not~?/isn't it that~?"). These are common expressions used to make an indirect solicitation or request (Hasegawa 2015, 251). Even though in social (public interest) adverts the sentence-final particle "yo", which carries an imperative nuance, is often used, because it appears together with a cute character the communication style is softened. Besides these constructions, the gestures used suggest the same idea.

Even though all six dimensions are very useful for understanding the differences between cultures and how the dominant values influence the overall structure of a society, for the scope of this article we have focused on *individualism*/*collectivism* and *masculinity*/*femininity* dimension, because we believe that the estimated score for these two explain the reason behind the popularity of these apparently insignificant, superficial *kawaii* signs and symbols.

Japanese cultural values also reflect in advertising discourse, perceived as "ritual" (Hofstede *et al.* 2010, 9). Since the second half of the 20th century, as a result of globalization and other changes, there has been a tendency to use more and more neologisms (*gairaigo*), combinations of Japanese words with Anglicisms to suggest novelty and exclusivity, as well as images with *kawaii* characters in order diminish the feeling of alienation.

Starting from the estimated scores provided by Hofstede's scale, we aim to explain the role and functions of *kawaii* ("cute", "adorable") signs and symbols in Japanese print advertisements.

3. Japanese pop culture. *Yuru kyara* (mascots)

Ambiguity, which seems to be one of the main features of the Japanese language and culture according to many studies including Hofstede's cultural dimensions, can be found at all levels and *kawaii* characters are no exception. They communicate indirectly and implicitly, use affective language and appeal to the emotions and sensitivity of the viewer in order to persuade. Most characters and mascots of this type have abstract and unrealistic features, often a neutral facial expression and childish behavior in order to give the viewer the possibility to transpose his emotions and state of mind into the character and feel safe.

By relying on the extraordinary ability of these characters to create long-term relationships with buyers due to the positive feelings aroused, the Japanese company Sanrio has created a wide category of *kawaii* mascots, Hello Kitty (1974 ~) and Tuxedo Sam (1979 ~) being some of the most successful ones, gaining popularity globally. Sanrio has created hundreds of such characters,

offering also a detailed biography, so that the receiver can identify easily with it. Besides their merits in promoting products, the presence of adorable mascots at different events facilitates authority-citizen communication and create an opportunity for the leaders to address taboo issues (such as right/wrong behavior in public, conveying warnings, etc.) and also diminishes the feeling of alienation caused by consumerism.

As a result of the positive effects produced by *kawaii* characters in the consumer goods industry, all institutions and organizations in Japan have begun to communicate with the public through a representative mascot. From museums and schools to prisons, naval forces and the military, each unit has created a "spokesperson" to capture attention and increase credibility. Next, we will analyze some locally and / or internationally recognized *kawaii* characters, in order to understand their symbolism and their role in communication.

Fictional characters (*kyara*) and mascots (*yuru kyara*) are perhaps the most recognizable figures of Japanese *kawaii* culture, both nationally and globally. Their role is not only to promote tourism or local products, but also to educate through entertainment (*edutainment*). *Kawaii* characters have a deep religious and cultural significance, although, at first sight, their comic or sometimes even grotesque appearance hides this symbolism from a viewer unfamiliar with Japanese symbolism. *Kawaii* characters are perceived as descendants of Shintō deities, magical spirits (Altt, Yoda 2007, 12). There is an impressive number of mascots in Japan, around 8 million, hence the comparison with Shintō deities, also referred to as "the forces of nature" (Holtom 2010, 26). Like deities, cute mascots or *yuru kyara* started to have their own followers and consequently several communities appeared in which members identify themselves via specific *kawaii* symbols. These mascots' "life expectancy" depends on their popularity among the community and is established in an annual competition called "*Yuru-Kyara* Grand Prix". According to the official website, all "cute competitors" must meet the following criteria: convey love for a region of Japan, have a biography and an out-of-the-ordinary (unique) behavior, make funny gestures and, last but not least, give the impression that they are relaxed, carefree. The characteristics and attitudes of "cute heroes" (*kawaii hīrō*) are constantly adapted to meet the needs and expectations of the community. Through the analysis of these characters we can understand the core values, the Japanese sensibility and worldview within a given timeframe.

The Japanese word "*yuru kyara*" is formed from the adjective "yurui", meaning "relaxed, calm, light, soft" and "kyara", an abbreviation of the English word "character", thus a literal translation would be "relaxed characters". *Kawaii* products and characters, full of joviality and humor, had reached an unprecedented popularity in modern Japan, being able to de-stress the viewer and create a relationship between mundane *kawaii* objects/characters and the viewer.

A being or an object is considered adorable if it presents specific characteristics. Some of these were synthesized by the Austrian anthropologist Konrad Lorenz in 1943 in a theory called "kindchenschema" ("baby schema"). Although the theory starts from the analysis of the appearance of babies and human behavior when interacting with "cute entities", the researcher also refers to puppies in his theory and argues that for various reasons, they are perceived even more adorable. According to Konrad's study, the main features that arouse empathy and positive feelings in the viewer are: a round face, full cheeks and fleshy lips, large eyes, short and thick limbs (Lorenz 1971). The theory was developed from different angles (Kleck *et al.*, 1974; Koyama *et al.*, 2006; Sherman *et al.*, 2009) and new studies show that "cute stimuli" capture the viewer's attention quickly and trigger the protective instinct. Although the effects produced by cute images, animals, babies, etc. are universal, the way individuals perceive and react differs from one culture to another.

4. Case studies

In the following part we will discuss four non-commercial Japanese print advertisements created during 2014-2020 for different public transport companies. In order to clearly expose the role and functions of *kawaii* signs and symbols we have divided the corpus into separate categories, based on the intended purpose.

4.1. "No eating and drinking on public transport!"

This advert was created for Tokyo Metro in 2014 to draw attention to the importance of keeping public transportation clean and comfortable for all passengers. Surprisingly or not, this (usually imperative) request is conveyed with the help of two anthropomorphized animals. In the image we can see a squirrel wearing clothes and sitting on the train bench, eating some acorns, while observed with pity by a yellow fox with an impeccable outfit, representing in this case the well-behaved, ideal citizen. The utterance placed below the image has an ironic connotation: "*Onaka yori gomi ya nioi ga ippai da yo*" ("Your stomach is not as full as the train compartment is of scraps and smells"). The particle "*yori*" ("-er than") is used to compare two terms, but in this case, the object referred to is not explicit, but inferred from the context. Moreover, the final particle "*yo*", a discursive marker, indicates the speaker's certainty that the conveyed information is indisputably true and thus attracts the viewer's attention.

In the bottom right part of the ad *Miteru-chan* is placed, a little girl playing the role of the authorities, creating humorous effects. The name of the character

was not chosen randomly, but rather deliberately. "*Miteru*" comes from the Japanese verb "*miru*", meaning "to see, to look, to watch", leaving the viewer the impression that he/she is under surveillance and "chan" is an affectionate suffix usually used with children's names. Thus, the name suggests both the idea of being carefully observed and, at the same time, it stirs the public's empathy and arouse amusement. The little girl with blue hair, yellow hat and red dress is portrayed as she is looking through binoculars and right above her cute hat the syllables "*pipīpi*" are written. This onomatopoeia mimics the sound produced by a whistle and suggests that this situation requires the intervention of an authority, namely that of *Miteru-chan*. In this ad, humor results from the association of contrasting elements: the figure of an authority, which is generally perceived as strong, mature and capable, is represented in this case by a child, the duties of passengers are conveyed indirectly through anthropomorphized animals and spoken language so as to create a friendly atmosphere.

As in the other cases, at the bottom of the poster, in small characters and separated from the rest of the text, the same information is reformulated in formal language, using mainly *kango* (Chinese origin words): "*Shanai de no inshoku ni, go-enryo kudasai*" ("Please do not eat food or drink in the compartment"). Unlike *wago* ("Japanese words") and *gairaigo* ("neologisms"), *kango* ("Sino-Japanese vocabulary") are usually used in official documents and scientific papers to give the discourse "weight", a certain objectivity (Waniek 2017, 35). Depending on the way of addressing, the words and expressions used, the stylistic impression created in the mind of the receiver differs. The obligations of the passengers and the regulations are communicated indirectly, in spoken language, using humor and fictional characters, *kawaii*, and, in this manner, the viewer does not feel a sense of obligation or constraint in this regard, but on the contrary, citizens willingly obey.

4.2. "Please refrain from applying make-up on public transport!"

From the wide category of topics addressed through informative posters, we have identified some that are not necessarily common to Western societies. One of these is applying make-up on public transport.

This advert was created in 2014 for Tokyo Metro and is part of an educational campaign. Although the aim is to strengthen prosocial behavior through counterexamples, the harshness and tense atmosphere created by the imperative forms used is diminished through the use of round shapes, vivid colors, friendly-like font and animated characters. In this case too, social order and expectations are expressed through colloquial language and *kawaii* signs. The diversity of stylistic registers and the transposition of reality through

fiction imprint a subjective perspective and captures the viewer's attention due to its resemblance to the style of *manga* (Japanese comics). Through the eyes of a viewer unfamiliar with Japanese language and culture this poster seems to be taken from a children's' book. In fact, stylistic diversity contributes to the originality of the discourse, since:

"The impact of the visual message, which has the capacity to shape behaviors [...] due to the most bizarre interweaving of plastic elements, controversy and fiction [...] provokes more reflecting thinking" (Gîfu 2017, 52).

As seen in the previous advert, the message is constructed based on a pair of antagonistic characters, the figure of the ideal citizen and the anti-model. Like in fables, through anthropomorphization non-speaking beings become able to engage in everyday life and represent positive and negative patterns of behavior. The poster depicts a deer, *Shika-san* ("Lady Deer"), dressed in a chic kimono, looking in a small purse mirror and retouching her makeup, while being closely watched by *Kuma-san* ("Mr. Bear"). At the bottom right of the poster we come across the same "*kawaii* authority" as in the previous example, *Miteru-chan*. Right below this image we find the "warning" message in colloquial Japanese: "*Meiku suru basho koko ja nai yo*" ("This isn't the place to put on your make-up!"). In this case, the use of colloquial language facilitates communication between authorities and citizens and determines a greater receptivity. By using the English-based loanword "*meiku*" ("make-up"), instead of the Sino-Japanese word "*keshō*" ("make-up"), shows the tendency to use neologisms to create a cosmopolite atmosphere and to differentiate new, modern customs or objects from the Japanese ones. Another reason for using many loan words and hybrid constructions in Japanese advertising discourse is related to the fact that sensitive topics, rules and social regulations can be expressed more easily, in an indirect manner (Igarashi 2007, 7). In an advertisement the image is completing the text and in this case, *kawaii* characters arouse amusement and trigger positive feelings in the viewer.

4.3. "Keep quiet!"

The following example was created for Tokyo Metro in 2014 and is part of a series of twelve posters. The purpose of the campaign is to maintain order and ensure optimal conditions for all passengers travelling by public transport. The theme of this poster is related to noise makers (talking loudly on the phone, sound leakage, etc.) As in the previous examples, instead of human characters, anthropomorphized *kawaii* characters are preferred. The illustration of animals traveling by subway is quite surprising and stirs amusement in the viewer. In the case of educational adverts this is a common practice because it allows the

advertiser to "camouflage" the real intention by appealing to the viewer's emotions and feelings. The characters are not randomly selected, but have a special symbolism. Basically, the intention is to create an analogy between the behavior of animals and that of humans: the cow represents rudeness and carelessness, whilst the sheep, vulnerability and innocence. Through this parallel the advertisers makes an allusion and offers indirectly an example of undesirable behavior, inconsistent with societal norms.

The text, "*Denwa no koe ga ki ni naru yo*." ("Talking loudly on the phone can be bothersome, you know?!"). The request is indeed formulated in an imperative tone, but the visuals diminish this authoritarian nuance through *kawaii* aesthetics and humor. The final sentence particle "*yo*" is used to signal new information or to convey certainty. In this context, it draws attention and gives a sarcastic nuance to the discourse because the information conveyed is clearly not new (speaking aloud is generally considered rude), thus the intention of the advertiser is to satirize bad habits. For example, in English this nuance could be conveyed through constructions such as: "Didn't you know?! I'm telling you then!" or, even more harshly, "Good thing I told you!", etc.

4.4. "Wear a face mask!"

The last category of ads deals with a current issue of great global interest: protective measures against SARS-CoV-2 virus. To ensure that all citizens are informed about the new regulations, the Japanese authorities have launched a series of public information campaigns. The way these educational-informative messages are constructed and conveyed differs from one society to another and reflects not only worldviews, but also cultural values. Wearing protective face masks especially during the flu season, but not only, is a common practice in Japan, and this habit is a manifestation of Confucian and Shintō principles that guide the society, namely care and respect for others' wellbeing (*omoiyari*), cooperation (*kyōryoku*) and harmony (*wa*).

This poster is part of a big prevention campaign against COVID-19 virus infection initiated by Okayama city, Japan. It has been displayed in public spaces and on public transport since July. As in the previous poster, the main character which plays the role of the ideal citizens who obey the prescribed safety measures and rules is a fictional character. The legendary figure, *Momotarō*, known in *manga* (Japanese comics) and *anime* (Japanese animation) as "Peach Boy" was the local hero of Okayama Prefecture in the Meiji era (1868-1912). Known for his courage and mission to restore peace, Momotarō's image is used to promote local attractions and the region's gastronomy. In this case, it is used as a tool for promoting prosocial behavior and for initiating a dialogue with

citizens on infection prevention measures. The hero is illustrated sitting on the bus together with a monkey and a pink-haired girl. The illustration looks like a *manga* or *anime* piece because of the character's unusual appearance (big eyes, colorful hairstyle, vivid colors, naïve posture, specific facial expressions, etc.) and the use of speech bubbles.

The slogan, "*Minna de fusegō*!" ("Let's guard against it together!") along with the title "*Shingata Korona Uirusu kansenshō*" ("Infection with the new coronavirus") is placed at the top of the poster. The imperative forms used and the specialized terms create a feeling of anxiety in the viewer's mind, but the colors used and the illustrated *kawaii* characters counterbalance this effect. To the right of the text the virus is also anthropomorphized, looking angry, but in a funny way and this shows the intention to make the message more accessible to the public. Immediately below the three characters wearing masks and respecting social distance are illustrated. The pink-haired girl and Momotarō seem to offer the little monkey advice on how to protect against the new virus. In the speech bubble placed next to the girl another imperative is used to draw viewer's attention: "*Masuku no chakuyō o*!" ("Wear a mask!") and in the one next to it, Momotarō reinforces the first advice: "*Kaiwa wa hikaeme ni*!" ("Try not to chit-chat") [o.t.]. The two essential rules for the fight against the virus are expressed in colloquial Japanese, thus reducing the seriousness of the problem and also facilitating communication. Technical terms and explanations given by specialists are made more accessible to the wide public in this way. As in the previous examples, at the bottom of the poster, the same warning is rephrased in formal Japanese, using mostly *kango* (Sino-Japanese) words and honorific expressions (*sonkeigo*): "*Shanai no konzatsu bōshi no tame, jisa shukkin ni go-kyōryoku kudasai*" ("In order to prevent congestion in public transport, please cooperate and respect the staggered working hours plan). The word "*jisa shukkin*" ("staggered work hours") is written in red in order to attract viewer's attention and signals the most important information.

Usually, the advertiser uses plastic and verbal elements to influence the way the message is interpreted. In this sense, the vivid colors, friendly fonts and dialogue bubbles used, as well as the animated characters makes the overall message more personal and creates a friendly atmosphere. Although technical, formal words and imperative forms are devoid of any emotions, extra-textual markers make the viewer (in this case, the citizen) feel comfortable and safe mainly because of the relaxed (*yurui*) atmosphere created by these cute (*kawaii*) characters.

In any advert, the image complements the text and vice versa, the text having the role to clarify what can only be explained in words. The interaction between *kawaii* visual and linguistic signs makes it possible to communicate

obligations, rules imposed by the authorities easily, in an indirect, jovial manner, thus maintaining group harmony (*wa*), one of the cultural core values of the Japanese.

5. Conclusions

We conclude that the popularity of these *kawaii* characters lies in the possibility to express thoughts, feelings and attitudes indirectly, by generating positive feelings and, implicitly, increasing cooperation among citizens. We have observed how *kawaii* signs and affect words appeal to the viewer's primary emotions and instincts and are used to encourage healthy attitudes, prosocial behavior and responsibility towards others (Nittono *et al*., 2012, 1) in very specific situations, such as using public transport, respecting working hours etc.

The analysis of advertisements offers the possibility to identify cultural patterns and understand worldviews. In other words, ads activate content strongly marked by cultural norms to raise awareness and provoke a certain reaction from the viewer. In this respect, we have shown that the choosing of particular linguistic and visual signs is strongly related to the cultural context in which the advertisement is created.

As seen in the examples above, *kawaii* signs have the power to arouse compassion and consideration (*omoiyari*, *kizukai*, *kikubari*) in the viewer, regardless of gender, age or status. From this point of view, we argue that images and "sweet words" (*kawaii* words) suspend temporarily status differences between individuals and distract the viewer from his/her social obligations (*giri*), "negligence" otherwise fined in a hierarchical society like Japan. We also showed that the strong interest in maintaining group harmony (*wa*), the instinct to protect the vulnerable, small, atypical things/beings reflects clearly in Japanese advertisements and are perhaps the main reasons for which *kawaii* signs and symbols are so popular and used even in educational adverts.

The image of the "oppressed" and the "oppressor" is often illustrated in Japanese informative-educational adverts via *kawaii* characters and the message is formulated in colloquial language, often using childish words and images. Similar to the relationship established between hero and antihero, perpetuated by stories and fairy tales in Western cultures, an interdependent relationship is established between *kawaii* characters and the viewer, the latter becoming the protector of the "vulnerable" and "fragile". Like *kawaii* "imprinted" goods and characters, recognized for their roundness, pastel colors and generally small size (traits that suggest harmlessness), in Japanese advertising this "roundness", metaphorically speaking, resides in the emotional words, rhetorical figures and friendly fonts used.

The analysis of educational-informative posters (especially) shows that the main strategies used to change or strengthen behavioral patterns are closely related to values, norms and psychosocial axioms, in other words, to a country's culture. In Japanese society, the concern for maintaining group harmony (*wa*), cooperation (*kyōryoku*), consideration/solidarity (*omoiyari*, *kokorozukai*, *yuzuriai*) or compassion for the vulnerable manifests in various ways, in art, cultural practices and even in the way people communicate. Starting from this idea, we have shown that in Japanese educational posters, cultural values are suggested and reinforced through emotionally charged words, ambiguous expressions, allusions and anthropomorphization in order to stir humor and relax the viewer.

Cultural differences can be seen from the way reality is inferred through linguistic and visual signs used in advertisements. Through the analysis of these posters, we conclude that in Japanese educational adverts, the message is constructed based on *kawaii* signs and symbols, basically elements which can trigger positive emotions and make the viewer get emotional. Colloquial words and expressions, informal forms of address, pastel colors and the "roundness" of the characters are used to capture viewer's attention and induce a state of relaxation and temporary detachment. In Japanese advertising, the emotions of the viewer are "manipulated" through *kawaii* imaginary and symbolism (Deng 2014, 18). The way affection is expressed or how certain feelings and sensations are suggested differs from one culture to another. In other words, the same signs, interpreted in a different context (cultural and/or situational) will most likely have different meanings.

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