

BEYOND KAWAII

DISPELLING JAPANESE FASHION STEREOTYPES

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Japanese fashion. What did you just think of? Probably something cutesy, right? Almost over-the-top cutesy. If you spend enough time on the internet, the word “*kawaii*” may have popped into your head. *Kawaii* is the Japanese word for cute, which encompasses more than the overly cute aesthetic that is reminiscent of anime, as it is so often attributed to. As a Japanese woman living in the U.S., the number of times I’ve been asked if everything is *kawaii* in Japan is getting out of control. Therefore, allow me to properly introduce you to the concept of *kawaii* and its implications.

I will start with a brief exploration of the term *kawaii*. In the 7th century, the definition of the word was “to feel sorry for”. For reasons unknown during the Feudal Era in Japan, the connotation for wanting to take care of something or someone that you felt sorry for sparked the definition’s evolution to how we use it now—something similar to cute. The “pitiable” undertone still exists, as signs of immaturity or imperfection are thought to be more *kawaii*. Because the definition is rooted in a feeling rather than a visual cue, the term *kawaii* can be used to describe a vast number of things.

With the spread of the internet and globalization, anime became widely available to anybody with internet access. Anime fans throughout the world, taking note of the number of times the word is used especially by female characters, added *kawaii* to the internet lexicon with the anime-related connotation attached. Recognized as being the most extensively understood Japanese word throughout the world, many Japanese industries, as well as the government have

made efforts to take advantage of it as a means to raise global interest in Japanese culture. The concept of *kawaii* has been successfully exported through characters such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon, with non-Japanese celebrities such as Katy Perry openly incorporating its elements into their self-brand.

I will not deny the fact that I, being Japanese, have a “*kawaii* barometer” in my head. But the one dimensional view into a very unique aesthetic concept that exists in Japanese culture is somewhat troubling. The concern is not simply about the fear of “cultural appropriation,” but how limiting it can be to women in that culture, both internally and externally. “*Kawaii* culture” has embedded within the Japanese female population the desire to seem helpless and submissive to outside opinions. As mentioned earlier, *kawaii* has the connotation for needing to be cared for, an idolization of immaturity—an inherent need to appeal to a more “powerful, masculine figure.”

Obviously Japan has not been exempt from the general global movement towards feminism. Although I am constantly astonished by how slow-moving it has been for a country as developed as it is, there has been some beacons of light through a number of “fashion tribes” who have reclaimed the term to exclude the notion of male attention, and to enjoy fashion on their own terms.



Photos courtesy of: neoi.jp/culture, lookbook.nu, aliexpress.com, uniqlo.com

NEO GAL

Gal fashion, with so many iterations through the ages—having started in the 70’s—has always been the representation of the cutting edge of young Japanese female fashion. Neo Gals are the newest version of the style, with their culture and influences rooted in social media. This new group of girls pick up trends from all over the world through Instagram and other platforms, and aim to exude a “foreign vibe.” Although their major inspiration comes from their desire to look more Western, they have developed

a distinctly Tokyo look by combining them with details traditionally associated with Gals. Recognizable by their thick eyebrows, bold lips, unnatural hair colors and chunky accessories, these candy-haired girls are not interested in male attention. They, as described by most notable Neo Gal, Alisa Ueno, creative director and designer of FIG & VIPER, reclaim fashion as a tool of self-expression, and aim to reshape some aspects of foreign perceptions of “Japanese culture” through their social media presence.



MORI GIRL

Mori means forest. So this trend is literally called “forest girl.” This does not imply that these girls are into nature or hiking—or spend any time in the forest for that matter. It describes “the kind of girl you might find in a fantastical forest”—like a fairy or a forest nymph. Focusing on lessening curves, the flowy flower-patterned A-line dress is a staple in the Mori Girl’s closet. Layering with numerous drapey pieces, Mori Girls strive for comfort and naturalness. Rather than focusing on trends, they spend their time antiquing and hunting through thrift stores. Mori Girls are interested in DIY and miscellaneous trinkets—things that call for “me time.” Although sometimes criticized to be aloof or unrealistic, the idea of hobby-based fashion is interesting, as it elevates fashion from just clothes to a lifestyle choice.

AOMOJI-KEI

Epitomized by Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, Aomoji-kei fashion is a Harajuku-based style that gravitates towards casualness and creativity. Consisting mainly of creative types such as art and fashion students, stylists, DJs and designers, Aomoji-kei fashion puts emphasis on individuality and personal perception of quality. This also encompasses many of the niche subcultures such as Lolita, Visual-kei

and Decora (and many others that will send you down the Wikipedia spiral). Their interests lie, not in how others would rate their attractiveness, but their ability to display their confidence in their own tastes. Aomoji-kei fashionistas have garnered popularity amongst Japanese women for their accessibility and strong sense of identity.



REAL CLOTHES

The Real Clothes trend may be the Japanese equivalent to Normcore. Opposing with all of the styles addressed above, Real Clothes focuses on dismissing the idea of using fashion as expression. Prioritizing function and comfort over aesthetic, they avoid allowing their style to determine their identity. Brands such as Uniqlo and MUJI are preferred for their simple, comfortable and generic styles. By rejecting the effort, I feel that Real Clothes wearers are diminishing the stakes of reaching the standard of *kawaii* or not *kawaii*; they symbolize the desire to be appreciated by others on more than just looks or ability to subscribe to societal expectations.

While following different trajectories, all these girls are taking a word that not only implies, but encourages self-imposed oppression, and either reject it entirely or use it as a powerful tool of self-expression. I hope this positive trend continues, and will bring a second, more feminist, revolution to the definition of *kawaii*.

