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Scope

“Global Perspectives on Japan” focuses on developing a global perspective on the study of Japan and Asia. The journal promotes innovative, interdisciplinary, inter-regional and transnational approaches to Japanese Studies.

The journal aims to be a venue for scholarship in E.M.E.A. region with a special focus on Turkey and neighboring regions. It especially encourages scholars from the Middle East, Balkans, Central Asia and the Mediterranean but also welcomes scholars from other parts of the world.

GPJ invites papers in the fields of history, humanities, and social sciences including topics of the past and the present. In addition to articles, the journal publishes occasional article size translations, book reviews, and surveys of current trends in Japanese and Asian Studies.

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Kawaii Culture's Influence as Part of Japanese Popular Culture Trends in Turkey

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Abstract

Kawaii is a Japanese adjective meaning cute. The word's meaning evolved and it has turned into a facet popular culture in the 1970s. It can be regarding anything that is cute, innocent, pure or even ugly. Kawaii has been advancing around the globe since the 2000s due to the widespread popularity of Hello Kitty, Japanese *anime* (animation), *manga* (comic books), fashion brands, celebrities and so on. Therefore, Japanese companies and government sections took action to promote this popular culture. Turkey is one of the countries that has been affected by the impact of kawaii. Hello Kitty, considered as the icon of kawaii culture, has become very trendy among Turkish children. The number of teenagers who love and watch anime has been increasing and adults who grew up watching anime are now interested in manga. There are several conventions where people share their interests in Japanese popular culture and join *cosplay* (costume play) contests. People wearing cute accessories or stores that sell kawaii goods and clothes are growing in number day by day. From celebrities to football teams, kawaii culture's impact will be observed in Turkish society.

Keywords: kawaii, popular culture, cute, culture trends, anime, cosplay

Japanese popular culture and kawaii

Popular culture has been a growing subject in Japanese studies since the 1990s. There is an unmistakable increase in Japanese cultural commodities from movies, *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (Japanese comic books) and characters to fashion, music and TV dramas. Japanese popular culture is now in demand and loved around the world. Japanese TV dramas are watched and the adaptations of these dramas are all over Asia. Pokémon has become a global phenomenon, not to mention Hello Kitty goods are found everywhere.

Popular culture has supported the construction of modern Japanese history and Japanese society's attitude and presence. It has helped communication among Japanese people, and has a significant function in Japan's relations with other countries.¹ There are many Japanese popular culture trends that have been spreading around the world, and *kawaii* is one of these trends with a growing influence.

Kawaii is a Japanese adjective meaning cute and sweet in simple terms. The word has a deep history in Japanese society as the appreciation of cute things in life can be traced back to eleventh century in Japan. The affection given to young and small for instance is seen in Japanese literature such as the famous book 枕草子 *Makura no Sōshi* (*Pillow Book*) by Sei Shōnagon.² Surely the word has not always been as popular as it is today. It turned into a part of popular culture during the 1970s in Japan and has gradually become a global phenomenon.

The origin of the word *kawaii* is based on the adjective *kawayushi*, which meant the face blushing due to some kind of excitement.³ Today, however, depending on the purpose of the word's users, *kawaii* can be used to describe anyone and anything with different connotations. Purity, soft colors, rounded lines, weakness or smallness are just a few of *kawaii* characteristics. Even unusual features fall within the scope of *kawaii*. The result is *kawaii* types such as *kimo kawaii* (creepy cute), *guro kawaii* (weird cute), *ero kawaii* (sexy cute) or *busu kawaii* (ugly cute).

1 E. Taylor Atkins, "Popular Culture," in *A Companion to Japanese History*, ed. William M. Tsutsui (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 473.

2 Yomota Inuhiko, *Kawaii Ron* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2006), p.18.

3 Yomota Inuhiko, *Kawaii Ron* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2006), p.33.

The word's popularity in the 1970s was because of cute handwriting that became trendy among young schoolgirls. Companies such as Sanrio took advantage of the situation and produced kawaii stationery items and created cute characters like Hello Kitty. In time, kawaii has become a part of everything from fashion to technology, and the consumption of kawaii things has been an important part of Japanese economy ever since.

Thanks to kawaii's expansion in meaning and people's love of cute things, kawaii culture has reached various areas all over the world as one of Japan's representatives for popular culture. The strength of kawaii culture is that people, no matter where they are from, love small, childlike and sweet things. Furthermore, the versatile nature of kawaii is an advantage for it to spread around the globe. Whether it is an accessory people carry with or a stationery item they use, kawaii can be anywhere in a person's life.

Kawaii culture in Turkey

Repercussions of kawaii culture can be observed in many areas in Turkey. Although most of the Turkish people involve in kawaii culture in their lives without realizing its Japanese background, it does not signify irrelevance to kawaii culture. As Ashcraft argues, Snoopy bags were popular among Japanese teens during 1970s even though they might not have known about the comic Peanuts. Although it might be somewhat ignorant, he suggests that the ability to welcome things without having any knowledge about their authentic context draws attention to the tendency to accepting foreign culture simply depending on attractive visual details.⁴ This is mostly the case with kawaii culture in the eyes of Turkish people. Kawaii culture can be observed in many areas in Turkey.

Anime

The list of animes that have been broadcasted by Turkish TV channels is a long one. Popular animes such as Dragon Ball, Captain Tsubasa, Pokémon and Sailor Moon are some of the first ones that young Turkish people watched in the 1990s and early 2000s. Particularly Pokémon was and still is very famous among Turkish people. First broadcasted in 1999,

⁴ Brian Ashcraft, *Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential: How Teenage Girls Made a Nation Cool*, (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2016), p.104.

it attracted great attention and Pokémon goods were sold all around the country. Newspapers gave trading card games of the series, *tazos* (round discs with a Pokémon on each one) could be found in potato chips' bags and plushies of Pikachu and other Pokémons were sold in toyshops. Even though the series was cancelled because Radio and Television Supreme Council decided that Pokémon affected children's mental health negatively, it was broadcasted by another TV channel after some time. The anime is still loved, and its latest game Pokémon Go has been played by many Turkish people even though it was not released officially in Turkey. Last but not least, the movie Detective Pikachu was in theatres in May 2019 and it was watched by over one hundred and sixty thousand people.⁵

With the increasing access to Internet, Turkish people, especially the younger generation, have had the chance to reach more Japanese popular culture commodities in the last decade. Many volunteers are translating subtitles of popular animes, while those who know English are watching animes on foreign websites and reading mangas.

There is also an increasing interest in purchasing anime and manga figures and collectible products. In Turkey, there are shops where people can get these types of products. These shops are quite remarkable even though they are not many in number. *Gerekli Şeyler* and *Dreamers Figures* in Kadıköy and *Arka Bahçe* in Beşiktaş are some of the popular shops in İstanbul. At first glance, although they seem to target men with action figures and comic books, all these shops also have kawaii anime figurines, and young girl mangas are sold in English. Known as Turkey's first comic shop, *Gerekli Şeyler*, also began publishing manga in Turkish. There are also *Akılçelen Kitaplar*, *Kurukafa* and *Marmara Çizgi* that publish Turkish manga. This is an important step to help Turkish people recognize Japanese popular culture.

Kawaii culture in various animes has influenced the Turkish community for quite a while. Among the animes that have been broadcasted, there are many animes with kawaii lead characters. One important example is *Sailor Moon*, initially a manga by Takeuchi Naoko. It is an anime centered around a junior high school girl named Tsukino Usagi. Having magical

⁵ Box Office Türkiye, "Pokémon Dedektif Pikachu." <https://boxofficeturkiye.com/film/pokemon-dedektif-pikachu-2013974>

powers, she is in fact the princess of the Moon Kingdom, who was re-born on Earth. She becomes the leader of Sailor Warriors, and they protect the universe together. Both versions of Sailor Moon were big hits around the world, including Turkey. First broadcasted by ATV, a nationwide TV channel in Turkey between 1996 and 1998, then the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, TRT in short, between 1999 and 2003, Sailor Moon was watched by thousands of Turkish schoolgirls. As Ueda Miwa, a Japanese manga artist, suggests in an interview with Ashcraft, young girls adore this type of fantasy stories due to the transformation. They turn into cute and beautiful girls with a magical wand.⁶ Sailor Moon's success around the world was thanks to the characters' powerful, cool and kawaii characteristics. Because the Japanese schoolgirl image indicates chances of being young, naive and independent, they attract different nationalities around the world.

Candy Candy, another kawaii anime about an orphan girl, was also one of the most popular animes in Turkey. The name of the anime was Şeker Kız Candy (Sweet Girl Candy). Şeker is an adjective mostly used for things people like or think as cute. It also means sugar or candy, so the word is very appropriate. The main character has kawaii features as well. She is very sweet, polite, pure, helpful and kindhearted. She has got big green eyes, golden curly hair with pigtails, which have red ribbons on. She wears dresses with frills and bright colors, closely related to Lolita fashion style, which is an important part of kawaii fashion. Most Turkish women would remember watching it with their mothers when they were younger.

Conventions

An interest in *cosplay* started to rise because of anime and manga in Turkish society. Even though it is not many, the number of people trying *cosplay* should not be disregarded. The number of conventions about anime, manga and games around Turkey has been rising for the last decade. Especially university students with a passion for Japanese culture come together and form clubs. They usually hold meetings once a year

⁶ Ashcraft, *Japanese Schoolgirl Confidential: How Teenage Girls Made a Nation Cool*, p.190.

and invite other people to discuss anime and manga. The most significant part of these meetings is cosplay contests most of the time.⁷ Surely, these meetings are the small part of the attention to cosplay in Turkey. As it can be seen from Figure 1, cosplay related conventions are generally held in universities and organized by student groups that have interest in sub-cultures, games and animes. It is apparent that the amount of interest in this type of events has increased since 2015 as the number of events grew considerably.

Name of the Event	Place	Active Since	Hosted by
Metucon	Middle East Technical University	1997	Metu Science Fiction and Fantasy Community
İzmirCon Subculture Convention	Tepekule Convention and Exhibition Center	2003	A group of volunteers
YUCON	Yeditepe University	2010	Yeditepe University Science Fiction Club
KUnvention	Koç University	2011	Koç University Fantasy Role Playing Club
Hücon	Hacettepe University Beytepe Congress Center	2015	Hacettepe University Anime Manga, Science Fiction and Fantasy, Electronic Sports Communities
ConBo	Boğaziçi University	2015	Boğaziçi University Game Club
Geek Festival Avrasya	İstanbul Kültür University	2015	Lilium Advertising Firm
HalicoN	Haliç University Sütluçe Campus	2016	Haliç University Science Fiction and Fantastic Culture Club
GIST (Digital Entertainment and Game Expo)	İstanbul Congress Center	2016	GL Events

⁷ Mynet, "Türkiye'deki Cosplay Sanatçılarının Eksiği Yok Fazlası Var."

ConEtü	TOBB University of Economics and Technology	2016	TOBB ETU Science Fiction and FRP Club
İKÜ Cosfest	İstanbul Kültür University Ataköy Campus	2017	İstanbul Kültür University Social Media Club
COMiKON-Istanbul	Harbiye Military Museum	2017	FORUM TAURI

Figure 1. Cosplay Related Events in Turkey

One of the latest conventions is COMiKON- Istanbul, started in 2017, and is attracting great attention in İstanbul. With the collaboration of the Japanese Art Center and the Japanese Consulate, the Kadıköy Municipality, the Kyoto International Manga Museum, the Comic Beam and the French Institute, the event took place in Caddebostan Culture Center in early October 2017 for the first time. Apart from the cosplay, there were screenings of short animes, workshops, speeches by famous manga artists, anime song competitions and so on. The mascot of the event was chosen as fox (*kitsune* in Japanese) as shown in the poster of the event (Figure 2).⁸ It can be clearly seen that the fox was drawn as something very kawaii, which shows us that using something cute is important to get the attention of Turkish people as well.



Figure 2. COMiKON- Istanbul's first mascot on the website's banner
Source: COMiKON- Istanbul's website, 2017

⁸ Frpnet, "Comic Con'un Ülkemizdeki Muadili – ComiKon."

The number of attendants has increased considerably in the later years. As a result, venue for the convention moved to Harbiye Military Museum in 2019. The scale of the events has also become larger with game zones, academic talks and sponsors like TV Tokyo, which is a Tokyo based television corporation. In terms of kawaii culture, the appearance of the convention's mascot has changed into something even more kawaii in 2019. The character became more feminine, yet still possessing the cute animal characteristics such as fox ears and eyes (Figure 3). Surely, other popular culture elements of Japan like *shōnen manga* (dedicated to young males) and games draw great attention. However, the power of kawaii culture in these conventions is undeniable.



Figure 3. New and kawaii appearance of COMiKON- Istanbul's mascot
Source: COMiKON- Istanbul's website, 2019

Another eye-catching kawaii related attraction took place in a Turkish convention. In Figure 4, at Hücon 2015 a group of six students who organized a maid and butler café, which are very popular in Japan as part of the popular culture, can be seen. This kind of organization is an important representation of kawaii culture's effect on Turkish community.



Figure 4. Students who arranged Maid and Butler Café at Hücon
Source: Facebook, 2015

Characters

One important part of kawaii culture is cute characters. Even though counting these characters is a hard job, finding the most popular ones is easy. In 1974, a Japanese stationery company called Sanrio created the icon of kawaii culture, Hello Kitty. She was their fictional British cat character, which later became a global product providing millions of yen just in domestic sales in Japan. Hello Kitty has kept an overwhelming brand power for over forty years ever since her first appearance. In collaboration with many famous companies and celebrities, they made Hello Kitty globally known. Most people around the world recognize Hello Kitty whenever and wherever they see her. The character is also very popular in Turkey. Her face can be seen on many things such as children's backpacks, birthday cakes, clothes and accessories. She attracts many people regardless of their age or gender. An interesting example of her popularity in Turkey is the contract between Fenerbahçe, one of the famous football teams in Turkey, and Hello Kitty brand in September 2016. The general manager of Fenerium, the company selling products of the team, talked about how they wanted to attract women and little girls to the football team with Hello Kitty. As a result, they declared the partnership with Sanrio's Hello Kitty.⁹

In 2010, Japanese consulates started to hold a touring exhibition named *Japan: Kingdom of Characters* in many cities around the world (Figure 5). As they must have noticed the increasing interest in Japanese popular culture in Turkey, they held the exhibition first in İstanbul and then in Ankara in 2013. The exhibition consisted of four sections: first; the display of images, videos of characters that represent each decade, second; Hello Kitty's room, third; images and mascots of characters that were created to represent municipalities in Japan, and lastly a presentation of relations between Japanese people and these characters. On the brochure, there is a girl with pink pajamas with pigtail styled hair and Hello Kitty hanging beside her phone. The same girl is in school uniform on the other side of the brochure. Everything about it including the font style and pink color of the headline possesses kawaii features. The exhibition was a success with many people attending the event.

⁹ NTV, "Fenerbahçe Hello Kitty ile anlaştı."



Figure 5. The brochure of the exhibition Japan: The Kingdom of Characters
Source: Geekstra, 2013

There are many shops in the touristic areas of Turkey where you can buy kawaii character goods. Surely, this is not to say that non-touristy regions do not have shops selling kawaii items. Though fewer in number, kawaii character collectibles can be seen in unexpected places. For instance, purses with Line (a Tokyo-based communication application) characters, Sanrio's Little Twin Stars and Kumamon can be seen in (Figure 6) at a shop in Gaziosmanpaşa, which is a developing municipality of İstanbul, thus not a touristic or elite part of the city.



Figure 6. Kawaii character purses at a shop in Gaziosmanpaşa

Totoro, from the anime *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbor Totoro), is a forest spirit that looks like a huge grey cat. It is probably the most famous kawaii character after Hello Kitty in Turkey. Even though it was made in 1988, the anime is still loved by millions of people around the world. Merchandise about Totoro is so popular that you can even find a bed shaped like Totoro or pajamas Totoro. It is a familiar sight to see a mug or coin purse with Totoro on them (Figure 7). The famous cat draws quite an attention, especially from female customers.



Figure 7. Totoro coin purses at a shop in Kadıköy, Fancy Goods

With the access to the Internet quickly increasing in Turkey, there are several people who have become bloggers and share their experiences and lifestyles on their websites. Most of these people also have Youtube accounts and being a Youtuber is a dream of many children nowadays. One can find many bloggers sharing their thoughts about a product or fashion style. On some of these *vlogs* (video blogs) by Turkish girls and young adults mostly, one can easily find instructions for buying and information about what kinds of things are included in a Kawaii Box, which are surprise boxes full of cute fancy goods. As it can be seen in the (Figure 8), some of the videos for unboxing a Kawaii Box are very popular with 682.000 views. The people who prepare the videos range from teenager girls to young adult women in their twenties or early thirties. Some of these Youtubers also draw lots and give the winner a Kawaii Box as a present. All these videos have been posted in recent years (2016-2018).

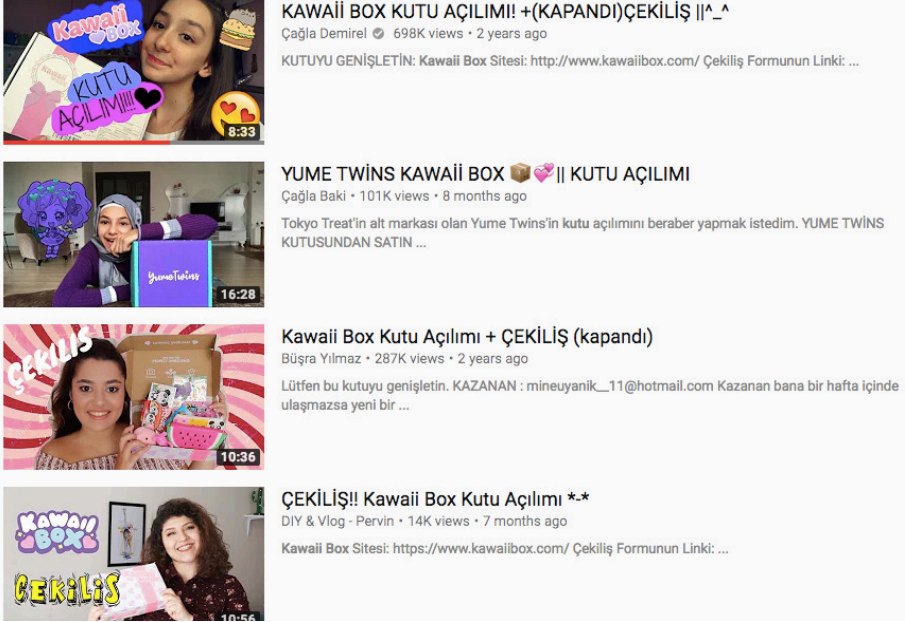


Figure 8. YouTubers introducing and giving away Kawaii Box with videos
Source: YouTube, 2018

Stationery products hold an important place in kawaii culture. This trend is also very popular in Turkey. Cute stickers, pencils, washi tapes, post-its, erasers and anything one can think of are very attractive to Turkish people. For example, there is a website called Minnoş Dükkan that sells cute products at reasonable prices.¹⁰ The word “minnoş” meaning something very small and cute gives us the feeling of something kawaii. Interesting thing is that they use the word “washi” instead of calling them just “bant” (meaning tape) in Turkish. This shows us the fact that there are people who know these products' Japanese background in Turkey and buy them because of it. Moreover, there are also well-known Japanese character goods such as Rilakkuma and Hello Kitty. A cute cat with the name of the company on their website's banner can be seen in (Figure 9).

¹⁰ Minnoş Dükkan, <https://www.minnosdukk.com/>



Figure 9. Minnoş Dükkan’s website banner

Source: Minnoş Dükkan website, 2020

Kawaii stationery’s another important example in Turkey is the company *iwako*. Opened in 1968, *iwako* is a Japanese company that went global in 2017. Famous for their cute and detailed erasers, *iwako* products are distributed in Turkey by Novestro, a Turkish trading company. Besides fruits, animals, cars or food, there are traditional cute dolls such as *kokeshi* dolls and *daruma*, a doll shaped as the traditional Buddhist monk Daruma. The advertisement of the company says, “Beautiful things come in small packages.” This brings to mind Sanrio’s motto of “small gift, big smile.” Encouraging people to buy them for collection or giving them as presents, it indeed resembles Sanrio’s objective. *Iwako* products are sold in many distinguished bookshops and stationers.

Fashion

Fashion is one of the most significant areas where kawaii demonstrates itself. Cute handbags, clothes with kawaii characters, hairpins and many other fashion items can be found in Turkish fashion stores. H&M, one of the biggest clothing companies around the world, sells kawaii clothes. These include sweaters with cute cat sushi, tops with Hello Kitty design for adult women or makeup bags with sparkling Manekineko on them (Figure 10).



Figure 10. H&M's kawaii designed products

Source: H&M, 2017

One of the latest examples of kawaii culture in Turkey is the store called Miniso. Introducing themselves as a Japanese designer brand, Miniso stores have become so popular among Turkish people that many other similar named stores have been opening. Miniso sells kawaii items such as the popular Japanese character Kumamon's plush toys, key chains, pillows and so on (Figure 11). With the first store opened in December 2016, Miniso has 35 stores as of January 2020. Miniso stores attract customers from all ages and genders in Turkey. With their kawaii products for daily use, they seem to get even more attention from now on.



Figure 11. Miniso store and kawaii character pillows in Istanbul

Celebrity Influence

Aleyna Tilki is an important celebrity in terms of kawaii culture in Turkey. At an early age of sixteen, she first became popular with her song *Cevapsız Çınlama* in 2016. Even though she was criticized a lot for performing in bars and clubs while not being of legal age, she has managed to steal Turkish people's hearts quickly. This is mostly due to her kawaii, childish manners and popularity of her videos. Her videos of *Cevapsız Çınlama* in 2016¹¹ and *Sen Olsan Bari* in 2017 became the most watched music video on Youtube in Turkey.¹²

Regarding kawaii culture, cute elements in her videos are particularly noteworthy. *Sen Olsan Bari*'s video caught incredible attention with her cute behaviors and sweet elements. In the video, she is dressed in cute pajamas looking childish with her pigtails. She is accompanied by a big pink bear and everything else in the video is pastel colored including a unicorn (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Aleyna Tilki on her *Sen Olsan Bari*'s music video

Source: Youtube, 2017

11 BirGün, "Youtube 2016'nın En Popüler Videolarını Açıkladı."

12 Seyhanoğulları, "Türkiye'de En Çok İzlenen Klipler."

She was the director of her music video *Yalnız Çiçek*. With the help of her sister, who is only thirteen years old, she edited and directed the video. This also shows Aleyna's own involvement in cute culture. She is seen in a bathroom wearing pink tights and pastel colored sweatshirt. She eats pink donuts, popcorns and takes a bath full of colorful cereals (Figure 13). There is once again a unicorn in the same room.



Figure 13. Aleyna Tilki on *Yalnız Çiçek*'s music video
Source: Youtube, 2018

Her latest song *Dipsiz Kuyum* was also directed by Aleyna Tilki. The music video contains components of a different kind of kawaii. This time, the music video gives the viewers a feeling of what guro and kimo kawaii possess. There is a dark red and black colored room, and a neon pink colored bathroom. She has two outfits, one of which looks like a gothic Lolita costume. The shiny chopsticks, IV bags with pink gems on them, silvery egg and a heart shaped candy are some of the cute elements in the video. There are also scenes where Aleyna Tilki throws up shiny things into the toilet and pours pink liquid into glasses (Figure 14). All these hint at a similarity in characteristics with kawaii culture and they are getting people, the viewers, used to cute details in life.



Figure 14. Visuals from Dipsiz Kuyum's music video
Source: Youtube, 2018

Conclusion

It is significant to keep in mind that being kawaii is not just being excessively cute or get dressed in pink. In order to become kawaii, buying Japanese kawaii fashion brands is not an essential thing either. As Toyoshima argues, kawaii fashion can be the outcome of a mixture of cute clothes that were made in different countries around the world.¹³ Even the smallest things such as pins, key chains or the pencils people use in their everyday lives can be transformed into kawaii. Because the traditions and lifestyles are different in every country, Japan and Turkey are very distinct from each other in many areas. Japanese people have a deep history with being kawaii. Most of the time, it is something expected from women and children. On the other hand, people expect only children of certain age to be cute in Turkish society. These anticipations start to change when children enter puberty. Women in general are required to be more reserved

¹³ Toyoshima, "Kawaii Fashion in Thailand: The Consumption of Cuteness from Japan," p.190.

and mature with their behaviors. That is why; it may be very hard to see a young Turkish woman with an extreme cute style on the streets.

Toyoshima suggests that social norms and environmental conditions affect people's choice of fashion styles.¹⁴ Even if there are usually older people not accepting new styles of fashion, young generations challenge social norms and expectations of society because of the examples of celebrities such as Aleyna Tilki. Nowadays, teenage females wearing men's clothes and boys wearing women's clothes, or interests in unisex fashion items are becoming normal day after day. Furthermore, kawaii culture cannot only be restricted to fashion. Kawaii has already become a part of people's lives with cute and sweet characters from anime and mangas. Most Turkish women have an affectionate memory of watching Candy Candy or Sailor Moon, and some of them still watch these animes. Small children easily distinguish characters like Doraemon and they have knowledge about cute animes such as Pokémon with their access to the Internet. Mangas are being translated into Turkish and events on popular culture are attracting more attention. Hello Kitty, the icon of kawaii culture, is also becoming an important part of Turkish children's lives and it is significant to remember that they will become parents someday.

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