

Cuteness & Idols

Lesson Plan: Cuteness & Idols

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Keywords: Idols, Celebrities, Kawaii, Cuteness, Music, Fashion, Fandom



Target Audience:

High School students, Undergraduate students

Duration:

2 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson In:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses
- Media Studies courses

Background:

The body of the class will be devoted to working through arguments about the form and function of idols in postwar Japan. Idols, according to theorist Aoyagi Hiroshi, "reflect and contextualize the concerns of their audience, offer models of attractive lifestyles, and substantiate adolescent identity as a socialization project to make some sense out of how to bring together separate life forces such as age, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 85).

Focusing mostly on young women and their idols, Aoyagi points out the dominance of the "cute style" (p. 73). This then gets reproduced through bodies and populations, or rather affective alliances that organize around the idol and their lifestyle. In the era of the supposed decline of the idol and associated cute style, the 1990s saw the rise of the male idols of SMAP, who modeled new forms of masculinity. Their success suggested that it is not simply the fact that idols are produced to be youthful friends and role models that are "life-sized" that contributes to intimacy with them; instead, the intertextuality of idols appearing across media and material forms leads to viewers knowing, if not caring, more about idols. With the subsequent boom in independent idols, men, women, and LGBTQIA+ folks have seen themselves and their issues represented on stage.

Learning Objectives:

1. To acquire knowledge about and develop an interest in different cultures.
2. To develop cross-cultural knowledge and skills to cooperate as a member of the international community.
3. To think comparatively and analytically about culture and the present.
4. To work in groups and conduct discussions that are critical, collaborative, and cross-cultural.

Core Readings:

Aoyagi, Hiroshi. "The Making of Japanese Adolescent Role Models." In *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in*

Contemporary Japan, 56–85. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.

Rose, Megan Catherine, and Patrick W. Galbraith. "The *LARME* Incident: On Female Idols Speaking Out in Contemporary Japan." *Feminist Media Studies*, forthcoming.

Darling-Wolf, Fabienne. "Male Bonding and Female Pleasure: Refining Masculinity in Japanese Popular Cultural Texts." *Popular Communication* 1, no. 2 (2003): 73–88.

Assigned Materials:

"Matsuda Seiko 'Akai Sweet Pea' (from Seikoland Budokan Live '83)."
Posted September 22, 2022, by Sony Music Japan. YouTube, 3 min., 24 sec.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKDwtvOTsDE>

"The Timers 'FM Tokyo' (Rock Band Goes Off Script on Live TV)." Posted
November 26, 2018, by Hayato Fujisawa. YouTube, 12 min.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3RGxHzn4UE>

"Matsuda Seiko Pocky Commercial." Posted November 5, 2023, by Seiko AI.
YouTube, 32 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruiGpNDG-yE>

"femme fatale 'Daishikyū, Daishuki' (Cute Idols in the 'Post Era')." Posted
March 4, 2022, by femme fatale. YouTube, 3 min., 34 sec.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uywg8FzxWiU>

"BiS 'Nerve' (Performance with Noise Legend Hijokaidan)." Posted August
28, 2014, by avex. YouTube, 4 min., 35 sec.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpjAWcv94ro>

Clip of SMAP's Kimura Takuya Kanebo Lipstick Commercial from "Kimura
Takuya Commercials, 1996–1999." Posted November 28, 2016, by Chris

Cheung. YouTube, 3 min., 30 sec. (clip from 1:09),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wk7U3A1e1dc>

"Secret Guyz 'Trans Magician' MV (LGBTQIA+ Idols)." Posted October 21, 2017, by stardustdigital. YouTube, 5 min., 8 sec.,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpPOodXsm_M

"Kirakira iku sutōrī [music video], Nichoume no Sakigake Coming Out." Posted July 11, 2024, by Nichoume no Sakigake Coming Out YouTube Channel. YouTube, 5 min., 1 sec.,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyhfZQQHILo>

Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Lesson 1:

1. Brainstorm! What comes to mind when you hear the word "idol?" What kinds of performers does this indicate? Put answers onto sticky notes and add them to clusters of like ideas on the board.
2. Group work! It is often quipped that, in Japan, idols are called talent when they have none and are hired by an agency instead of having an agent or any real agency of their own. Why do you think idols took this form in Japan from the 1970s into the 2000s? Instructors should show the class a stereotypical idol performance (recommended: Matsuda Seiko's "Akai Sweet Pea") and contrast it with the infamous performance of The Timers' "FM Tokyo." Once students have an idea of the idol as "image commodity," follow up with idols in adverts (recommended: Matsuda for Pocky).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKDwtvOTsDE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3RGxHzn4UE>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruiGpNDG-yE>
3. Viewing! The idols of Femme Fatale have been called "cute," but they are also carrying messages that resonate with and appeal to girls, women, and more. One member, Senritsu Kanano, went to a

reformatory before coming out and founding a NPO for survivors of sexual abuse. What stands out about their version of cute, which challenges Aoyagi's assumption of the decline of cuteness and idols from the 1990s? (Aside: The instructor might also highlight BiS's performance of "Nerve.")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uywq8FzxWiU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpjAWcv94ro>

Lesson 2:

1. Viewing! Have the class watch Kimura Takuya's commercial for Kanebo cosmetics. What stands out about this vision of masculinity? Refer to Darling-Wolf. Is this masculinity "soft?" Do you see him as "androgynous?" (Show an image of "Takuya Mama," or an image from *Frau* magazine.) How about idols produced and marketed in similar ways, such as BTS? Do you see the "strategic ambivalence" and its "bodies capable of being read or understood in more than one way" (Darling-Wolf, p. 79)?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wk7U3A1e1dc>

2. Group work! Show students examples of music by the queer idols of Secret Guyz or Nichome no Sakigake Coming Out. As a group, seek out other groups and examples. How does cuteness play a factor in the performance?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpPOodXsm_M

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyhfZQQHILo>

Evaluation:

Students can choose one of the featured artists and do further research for a final paper. Or, they could choose an example of a contemporary idol or idol group and write about how they are related to past examples of celebrated cuteness.

Instructor Reference Materials:

Lukács, Gabriella. "The Labor of Cute: Net Idols, Cute Culture, and the Digital Economy in Contemporary Japan." *Positions: east asia cultures critique* 48, no. 4 (2015): 487–513.

Monden, Masafumi. "Being Alice in Japan: Performing a Cute, 'Girlish' Revolt." *Japan Forum* 26, no. 2 (2014): 265–285.

Maffioletti, Andre. "Underground Cuties: Labour and Affect at the Margins of the Idol Industry in Japan." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019):

<https://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol19/iss2/maffioletti.html>

Yuen, Shu Min. "Secret Guyz: Cultural Citizenship." *Japanese Media and Popular Culture: An Open-Access Digital Initiative of the University of Tokyo*:

<https://jmpc-utokyo.com/keyword/cultural-citizenship/>