

Cute Character Culture

Lesson Plan: Cute Character Culture

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Keywords: Kawaii, Popular Culture, Characters, Yuru kyara, Mascots



Target Audience:

High School students, Undergraduate students

Duration:

2 classes, 50-60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- World History courses

Background:

Characters or "*kyara*" are a prominent part of *kawaii* culture. Ranging from Hello Kitty to mascot characters for everything from monorail lines to universities, *kyara* represent, instruct, and entertain. *Yuru kyara*, or "wobbly characters" are a subcategory of *kyara* that often represent local regions in Japan. *Yuru kyara* often include representations of local food, landmarks, etc. in their designs.

Learning Objectives:

To learn about character culture in Japan and compare it to other countries.

Core Video Content and Readings:

Excerpt from "S2 E13: Paid Family Leave, Mascots & UK Elections: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." Posted May 26, 2024, by LastWeekTonight. YouTube, 30 min. 4 sec. (clip 22:30–30:00), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5C139Y3hTo>

"Chiitan: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." Posted April 28, 2019, by LastWeekTonight. YouTube, 12 min., 50 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4fVdf4pNEc>

Gudetama videos from the Sanrio Official YouTube channel.

Rilakkuma videos from the San-X YouTube channel or from "Rilakkuma and Kaoru" on Netflix.

Assigned Materials:

Chou, Hsuan-Yi, Xing-Yu Chu, and Tzu-Chun Chen. "The healing effect of cute elements." *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 56, no. 2, 565–596. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joca.12414>

McCurry, Justin. "Japan scraps mascot promoting Fukushima wastewater."

The Guardian, April 15, 2021.

Occhi, Debra J. "Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese *Kyara* with their Anthropomorphic Forebears." *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 1 (2012): 109–132.

Occhi, Debra J. "Kumamon: Japan's Surprisingly Cheeky *Yuru Kyara* Mascot." In *Introducing Popular Culture*, edited by Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, 13-23. London, Routledge 2016.

Occhi, Debra J. "[The Release and Decay of the Japanese Radiation Mascot Tritium Chan.](#)" The Fourth Tohoku Conference on Global Japanese Studies, Tohoku University, GPJS. 2022. pp. 19–26.

Ohkura, Michiko, et al. "Evaluation of Kawaii Feelings Caused by Stuffed Animals to Reduce Stress." In *Advances in Affective and Pleasurable Design: Proceedings of the AHFE 2019 International Conference on Affective and Pleasurable Design, July 24-28, 2019, Washington D.C., USA*, edited by Shuichi Fukuda. *Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing*, volume 952. Springer Cham, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20441-9_23

Steinberg, Neil. "The New Science of Cute." *The Guardian*, 19 July 2016.

Optional Assigned Materials:

"Chiijohn: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver." Posted November 24, 2019, by LastWeekTonight. YouTube, 7 min., 26 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa0oY7LQmtg>

Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Lesson 1:

1. Look at the "mondo mascots" account on social media (Instagram and X). Choose one mascot and do some research on it. Present your

findings to the class.

2. Compare the mascot of a sports team you're familiar with to the mascot of a Japanese team. What words would you use to describe them? For example, cute, funny, crazy, etc. What proportions of these qualities do the two mascots you're comparing use in their goal to make something that attracts fans?

3. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* has done several segments on *yuru kyara*.

Watch a clip from S02E13. How does he introduce *yuru kyara*? How are the mascots made for his show different from Japanese mascots?

Watch the clip "Chiitan." What do you think made Oliver do this segment? How is Chiitan unusual compared to other Japanese mascots?

Lesson 2:

1. *Yuru kyara karuta*: Regional *yuru kyara* feature a few local products or landmarks in their character design. Make cards using color printouts of various *yuru kyara*, then have a student call out the characteristics that define a particular *yuru kyara* one at a time while others in the group compete to be the first to find the image that matches the description. For example, "bear" could mean Kumamon or Melonkuma, but if it's followed by "melon" then the fastest player to find the right card wins!
2. If you made a *yuru kyara* for your hometown, what themes would it express? Describe (or draw!) your own *yuru kyara*.
3. Cute characters are closely connected to the "healing (*iyashi*)" boom in Japan, which has seen a growing popularity in consumer products, entertainment, etc. that help people relax and get rid of stress (see Chou and Ohkura). Watch videos of Gudetama or Rilakkuma. How does the slow movement and speech of the characters affect you? How does the Netflix show *Aggretsuko* present a gendered reading of the healing boom?

Evaluation:

Students can choose one of the featured characters and do further research for a final paper.

Instructor Reference Materials:

De Vries, Nadia. "Under the Yolk of Consumption: Re-Envisioning the Cute as Consumable." In *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, edited by Joshua Paul Dale et al. London: Routledge, 2017.

Stevens, Carolyn Shannon. "Cute But Relaxed: Ten Years of Rilakkuma in Precarious Japan." *M/C Journal* 17, no. 2 (2014): n.p.