Consuming “To Have No Self”: Kawaii Consumption in Japanese Women’S Identity Work

Satoko Suzuki, Kyoto University, Japan
Saori Kanno, Komazawa University, Japan
Kosuke Mizukoshi, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Japan
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ABSTRACT
This paper explores consumption and identity using data collected in Japan. We find that consumptions are sometimes used to “eliminate” a sense of self contrary to past researches proposing “extended self.” In the society where self-expression has less significance possessions don’t necessarily define individuals or aid in maintaining their identity.

INTRODUCTION
Bagozzi (2013) claims that “consumption begins and ends with the self” (255). This statement represents a premise that underlines much of the existing research on consumption and identity, particularly those conducted in the U.S. In this perspective, consumers are viewed as those attempting to achieve their identities and to self-actualize through consumption. However, in some cultures, a state of having “no self” is accepted (Doi 1971). In such cultures, consumption may be used not to self-actualize but rather to achieve a state of having no self. Using the data gathered from Japanese female consumers on kawaii (cute) consumptions, we explore how consumption plays a role in identity formation in a culture where self-actualization is less significant.

Although cultural differences in the conceptions of self have been much researched in anthropology and psychology (e.g., Benedict 1946; Heine et al. 1999; Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2009; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Rosenberger 1992), very little research has been done to examine cultural differences in consumers’ identity project (exceptions are Kimura and Sakashita 2013; Suzuki and Akutsu 2012). Given the growing interest in redefining existing consumer theories that are primarily based on data gathered in the U.S. (e.g., Arnould 1989; Joy 2001), this study on consumption and identity in a non-Western culture is appropriate.

This article is organized as follows. In the first section, we briefly review the existing literature on consumption and identity; we then discuss the Japanese concept of self. This enables us to understand cultural differences in the pursuit of self-actualization and to explore the ways in which consumption is related to the Japanese consumers’ identity formation. In the second section, we describe the methodology used in this study. In the third section, we analyze the data and argue that in Japanese culture, consumptions are sometimes used to create “having no self” (jibun ga nai) situations. In the fourth section, we provide suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Consumption and Identity
Past research on consumption and identity has focused on how people use consumption to define themselves and maintain their sense of identity (e.g., Belk 1988; McCracken 1986; see Arnould and Thompson 2005 for a review). For example, Belk (1988) examines how consumers use possessions to extend, expand, and strengthen their sense of self. He concludes that “we are what we have and that this may be the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (160).

Belk’s concept on self and possessions, the “extended self,” has been very influential and has generated many discussions. Soon after its publication, Cohen (1989) criticizes that the concept is imprecise and not fully articulated. For example, Cohen asks whether the extended self is differentiated from the inner “core self.” Belk (1989) replies that “it is not possible or desirable to draw an absolute distinction between things that comprise the inner self and things that comprise the extended self” (129). He continues that “rather than seeking absolute conceptualizations of extended versus core self, a more satisfactory perspective is to regard extendedness as relative” (130). He explains that we could measure the degree to which possessions are perceived to be a part of an individual’s self. Although Cohen and Belk disagree on the necessity of preciseness toward the extended self concept, they agree that people have a self.

Here, consumption is seen as helping define people’s sense of who they are. In short, consumer identity researchers presume that people are active identity seekers and that they use consumption to express their self. Although recent works acknowledge that developing and maintaining a consistent sense of self is difficult today (Ahuvia 2005; Bahl and Milne 2010), consumers continue to be regarded as striving to actualize their selves. Ahuvia (2005), for example, shows how consumers use loved objects and activities to construct a coherent identity narrative in the face of social forces pushing toward identity fragmentation.

In contrast, this research argues that not all consumers are active identity seekers and that consumption is not always used to achieve self-actualization. In some cultures, people choose to have no self in some occasions. In such cases, consumption can be used to “eliminate” the sense of self. This role of consumption has thus far been overlooked by consumer identity researchers. In the next section, to illuminate cultural differences in the sense of self between East and West, the Japanese conceptions of self will be discussed.

“To Have a Self” versus “To Have No Self”
The expression “to have no self” (jibun ga nai) can be found in the Japanese language. Doi (1971) argues that this expression is peculiar to the Japanese, with no equivalent expression in the languages of the West. Furthermore, there is a difference in the use of the first person pronoun between the West and Japan. “In the West, there is a linguistic emphasis on the use of the first person, and the child is awakened to an awareness of self from a very early age, so that expressions equivalent to jibun ga nai have never come into everyday use – the use of expressions similar to it, being confined to clearly abnormal cases, such as schizophrenia” (134). In contrary, in Japan, the first person pronoun is often omitted. In the West, “to have a self” is a norm; however, it is not so in Japan.

According to Doi (1971), “to have no self” symbolizes the type of relationship that one has with others. An individual “has no self” when submersed in a group. For example, when one has no self, he or she agrees with the group even when his or her interests or values do not coincide with those of the group. In other words, “to have no self” is a state in which an individual does not maintain a self in a group. In zen philosophy, “no-self” (muga) is defined as a loss of oneself in the totality (Johnston 1970; Mathers, Millers and Ando 2009) and is accepted as a positive state.
The idea of integrating group into a sense of self is not new in consumer identity research. Relying on social-identity theory (Tajfel 1978), consumer researchers have assessed how consumptions related to social categories, roles, or groups to which an individual belongs allows individuals to unify their everyday actions and make up a global sense of self (e.g., Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1993). However, past research has assumed that social identities contribute to the achievement of an individual’s sense of self. For example, Belk (1988) acknowledges that individuals have multiple levels of self such as individual, family, community, and group; however, all of these levels are considered to be a part of the individual’s self. This study, in contrast, considers cases where the individual’s self is non-existent as a result of submersing in the group.

**Kawaii Consumption in Japan**

*Kawaii* consumption was selected as the specified domain of experience for this study. *Kawaii* has been a major driver of consumer culture in Japan since 1970s, particularly among young women (KinSELLA 1995; Granot, Alejandro, and Russell 2014). *Kawaii* has become a cultural phenomenon that can be seen almost everywhere from fashion to daily necessaries (e.g., cartoon toiletries). Japanese companies, and even banks and government have been using animated characters in their marketing communications to attract consumers.

Whereas the term is literally translated as “cute,” Kinsella (1995) explains that “*kawaii* essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances” (220). She continues that *kawaii* style is associated with acting childish in an effort to partake in some of childhood’s simplicity, happiness, and emotional warmth. *Kawaii* appears to be transitory, imperfect, or immature; however, it includes emotional intimacy that eliminates psychological distance by creating an illusion of closeness. The esthetic to praise “childlike” or “imperfect” things has always been accepted positively by Japanese culture, as indicated by a description related to *kawaii* in the Pillow Book (Makura no Sōshi) which was written by Sei Shōnagon, a lady-in-waiting in the 11th century.

Examining the socio-cultural meaning of the concept of cute, Granot et al. (2014) explains that *kawaii* is “embedded in the culture and manifests itself in social and gender roles, particularly those of young Japanese women” (73). It is important to point out that affection for cute things for women means more than reflecting their preference; it is a reflection of a deep longing for the time when they were girl-ish and young (Granot, Greene and Brashear 2010), or in other words, when they were free and peaceful with no fetters or distress. Hence, we assumed that the *kawaii* consumption would be a good context to study consumption and identity project, particularly among Japanese women.

**METHOD**

This study employed a hermeneutic approach, a commonly used approach in consumer identity research (e.g., Arnold and Fischer 1994; Thompson 1997; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). In-depth interviews with 24 Japanese female informants were conducted. Our sample was composed of various age groups and included high-school students, undergraduate students, working single females, and married females having children (see table 1). The informants were recruited using a research agency. They were given 10,000 yen (about $100) for their participation. The interviews lasted three hours and were audi-taped. The data collection process took place between June 15 and 18, 2006. All the interviews were conducted in the local language (Japanese).

To obtain a first-person description of consumers’ experience, the interview aimed to have a conversation with the informants. Respondents were assured of anonymity (names used here are all pseudonyms). The questions and probes were aimed at obtaining descriptions of experiences and were not intended to confirm theoretical hypotheses. Such attempts were important to capture the true feelings of informants because Japanese people have a tendency not to reveal their true inner feelings (Doi 1971).

We analyzed the text composed from the interviews, moving from a discussion of the part to the whole (Joy 2001; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). We discussed each theme extensively before reaching a consensus, attempting to be open to the possibilities afforded by the text (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

**FINDINGS**

Through the findings section, this article shows that Japanese female consumers sometimes use *kawaii* consumptions to create “having no self” situations. The first section briefly provides the background by introducing the versatility of *kawaii* concept and explains how this contributes to creating a sense of “having no self,” particularly by hiding the core self through sympathizing with others’ *kawaii*. The article proceeds by detailing two themes related with *kawaii* consumptions and “having no self” situations: eliminating the self to gain acceptance in society and the dependency embedded in *kawaii*.

**Versatility of the Kawaii Concept**

Many of our participants use the expression *kawaii* because the word does not have any special meaning to them. For example, Mai, a 17-year-old high-school student, describes *kawaii* as an easy to use word to compliment others. When Mai uses the word *kawaii*, she does not need to provide a meaning herself. Instead, the recipient of communication will provide the meaning. In fact, Mai comments that she does not necessarily like the things or activities that she describes as *kawaii*. Thus, when she says “that’s *kawaii*” to praise others’ possessions, it does not mean that she agrees with their preferences. Here, it is important to note that the recipients believe that Mai also likes things or activities that she refers as “that’s *kawaii*.” In other words, Mai’s true feelings, as well as her core self, remain hidden from others.

Similar to Mai, many Japanese females use *kawaii* consumption to sympathize with others’ *kawaii*. Consider the reflections of Lisa, a 28-year-old working single female. She comments: “When others feel ‘it’s *kawaii*,’ I feel ‘indeed, it’s *kawaii*’ just so that we can talk about the same story.” When asked to talk about *kawaii* objects, Lisa mentioned the lion magnet that she displays at her office. Lisa explains that she received it from her colleague as a gift. She agrees that the magnet is *kawaii*; however, she does not have a special feeling toward it. In other words, she neither likes or dislikes it. If others feel that the lion magnet is *kawaii*, Lisa is happy to display it at her office even though she does not really like it.

**Eliminating the Self to be Accepted by Society**

Many Japanese females associate *kawaii* with a girl’s image. The examples given as *kawaii* consumptions in the Table 1 illustrate this. Many of *kawaii* things are colored pink, a color that symbolizes a girl. *Kawaii* things also represent girlishness. In Japan, *kawaii* is a word that often describes the society’s ideal girl. Therefore, Aiko, a 32-year-old working mother, comments: “Every girl wants to be *kawaii*.” Japanese females also believe that males expect girls to be *kawaii*. Hana, a 27-year-old working single female says, “Girlish ones benefit more. From the male perspective, girlish ones are more *kawaii*."

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)
For Rio, a 22-year-old undergraduate student, kawaii is closely associated with her ideal female image. Rio considers kawaii as a compliment and says that she becomes happy when others think of her as kawaii. Thus, she desires a pink, heart-shaped bracelet watch and a pink bracelet, hoping that others will see her as kawaii when she is wearing them.

When Rio adopts kawaii, she is submersing herself in the Japanese society and its values. Rio is attracted to kawaii simply because the society highly evaluates it. In fact, she does not have her own opinion about kawaii. Nor does she pursue her own uniqueness.

I don’t like doing something that is very unique. I feel kawaii when I am wearing things that others consider as kawaii. I feel good when others think of them as kawaii. Thus, when others feel kawaii toward the things that I feel as kawaii, I am assured that I was not wrong.

### Dependency Embedded in Kawaii

When asked about kawaii consumption, many Japanese mothers mention consumption for their children. For example, Yuko, a 34-year-old mother of a 3-year-old daughter, narrated about her daughter’s photo being taken dressed up like a princess. She explains that she feels happy when her daughter is kawaii. Yuko felt happy seeing her daughter dressed up.

Yuko emphasizes that she gave birth to her daughter, suggesting that she feels a sense of oneness with her daughter. Her kawaii consumption for her daughter suggests that Yuko is consuming things and experiences that she cannot consume herself. Yuko distinguishes adult and children’s worlds, and feels that adults cannot consume kawaii. She mentions that “When I see [my daughter] dressed up, I feel kawaii […] I feel kawaii for those things that I cannot do.”

Here, we see that Yuko is dependent on her daughter and has no self. Doi (1971) argues that the sense of “having no self” is closely connected with the concept of amae (dependency). An individual who is at the mercy of amae has no self or ego. Doi (1971) defines amae as “the attempt to deny the fact of separation” (p. 75) and explains that the psychological prototype of amae is the emotion felt by the baby towards its mother; amae “works to foster a sense of oneness between mother and child” (p. 75). Here, we see amae can also be felt by the mother towards her child and that kawaii consumption plays a role in reinforcing oneness between the two. Yuko recognizes that kawaii belongs to children and not to adults. However, she is consuming kawaii-related objects and activities not only for her daughter but also for herself, as she is experiencing kawaii consumption through her daughter.

### Table 1: Informant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Example of kawaii consumption</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiko</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>pink-colored goods</td>
<td>Part-time job at building maintenance company</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aki</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>manicures</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>pink furnitures</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aya</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seventeen (teen magazine)</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Minnie Mouse keyholder</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emi</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>skirt</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>comic book by Miku Sakamoto</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Hello Kitty goods</td>
<td>Real estate company employee</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iku</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>photo-taking of her daughter</td>
<td>Full-time housewife</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Japanese-taste hair ornament</td>
<td>Administrative staff at highway public corporation</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kana</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>peach</td>
<td>Administrative staff at tableware sales company</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kei</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>heart-shaped cushion</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumi</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>kitten illustrated memo pad</td>
<td>Credit card company employee</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>lion-motif magnet</td>
<td>Administrative staff at construction company</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>fashion</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>hairstyle</td>
<td>Full-time housewife</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misa</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Alice-in-Wonderland motif hair ornament</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nami</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>bear</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rika</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>photo-taking of her children</td>
<td>Full-time housewife</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>pink, heart-shaped bracelet watch</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sae</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Anna Sui fragrance</td>
<td>High-school student</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saya</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>flower-motif hair ornament</td>
<td>Full-time housewife</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuko</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>photo-taking of her daughter</td>
<td>Part-time job at apparel mail-order company</td>
<td>Married, child(ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuri</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>accessory</td>
<td>Administrative staff at apparel company</td>
<td>Not married</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

Revisiting the Centrality of Identity Issues in Consumption

Post Belk (1988), the assertions that identity issues are central to consumption and that possessions are a part of the self have been supported by consumer identity researchers (e.g., Ahuvia 2005). However, this research illuminates the possible boundary condition to these assertions – in some cultures, consumption may not necessarily reflect the individual’s self. During the three-hour-long in-depth interviews with the 24 Japanese informants, the narratives about their kawaii consumption to submerge themselves in a group or society appeared many times. In such cases, the informants possessed kawaii objects and engaged in kawaii behaviors not because they thought of such objects and behaviors as kawaii but because others thought of them as kawaii. The informants possessed kawaii objects not for expressing their selves but rather to be accepted by the group or society. Kawaii objects or behaviors serve not as a means of expressing their selves, but as a socialization tool of blending themselves to achieve the “to have no self” (jiban ga nai) state in the community. In Japan, consumptions sometimes do not reflect the self or help to express a sense of self.

Cultural Differences in Self, Individual Motivations, and Social Strategies

In Western cultures, expressing one’s individuality and uniqueness has an important function in society (Markus and Kitayama 1991). In such cultures, self-expression through extending the self through consumption is a part of individuals’ strategies to be successful in the society (Belk 1988; Takemura 2014). However, in East-Asian cultures, individuality and uniqueness are less valued (Markus and Kitayama 1991), and social relationships are generally determined by environmental and social constraints (Yuki and Schug 2012). In such cultures, self-expression has a relatively weak effect in social lives (Takemura and Suzuki in press). Our findings suggest that consumptions to “eliminate” self or create a sense of “having no self” could function as a useful strategy to be accepted in such societies.

Our interviews with the Japanese females showed that kawaii consumption is often used as an individual’s social strategies. Lisa’s possessing a lion magnet that she herself does not necessarily think as kawaii; Aiko, Hana and Rio’s wearing kawaii clothes and accessories to present socially desired girly images; and Yuko’s dressing up her three-year-old daughter like a princess fulfill social needs such as sympathizing with others, seeking socially praised ideals, and fostering a sense of oneness with others, respectively. Through kawaii consumption, Japanese consumers are striving to “have no self” as a way to be successful in their own culture. Figure 1 explains the cultural differences between East Asia (Japan) and the West in terms of consumption, self, and society.

“Having No Self” and Collective Identity

“Having no self” at a glance seems to be similar to collective identity. However, as mentioned before, we argue that the two concepts are different. In our study, the Japanese females consuming kawaii goods or services did not discuss how family, community, or group play as part of their own selves. Instead, they explained how buying kawaii goods and using them helped them eliminate their selves and submerge into the group. Here, a “no self” is created.

Shau and Gilly (2003) have engaged in a similar yet different discussion in which they introduce the concept of affiliative identity. Using the examples of how consumers use brands and hyperlinks to create cyber self-representations, Shau and Gilly explain the difference between individual and affiliative identities. Individual identity demonstrate “me,” whereas affiliative identity establishes “we.” However, in affiliative identity, people are not sacrificing the idea of an integrated self. In other words, “me” is a part of “we” and thus, “we” is a collection of many “me’s”. In contrast, in “no self” situations, “me” does not exist as part of group identity.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, the objective of the consumer identity project is to actualize a sense of self and answer the “Who am I” question. In this perspective, consumption could be used by individuals to define their identity. However, this research has illuminated cases where consumers are not attempting to actualize their selves. In such cases, individuals may use consumption to submerge in a group and thus to “eliminate” the individual’s self.

This research only assessed female participants, which is its major limitation. We need to further explore consumption and explore the “to have no self” state in male participants, most likely in a different consumption context (i.e., not kawaii consumption).

This study also raises the question of the generalizability of our research findings to people in other East-Asian cultures, such as China, Korea, and Taiwan. Since Doi’s (1971) findings of “having no self” are based on Japanese people, we need to further investigate whether “having no self” state, as well as the role of consumption to create such a state, exists in other East-Asian countries.

Furthermore, since the data for this article were collected in 2006, follow-up data collection in the present context may be necessary to supplement data.

Nonetheless, this article extends the past research on consumption and identity by challenging the universal assertions of the centrality of identity in consumption (e.g., Bagozzi 2013; Belk 1988). It also showed the role of consumption to “eliminate” a sense of self, which has thus far been overlooked by the consumer identity researchers.
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