STRUCTURE OF KAWAII TREND IN ITS CATCH-UP AND SPREAD

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Abstract: There are lots of studies on surface of the kawaii aspects but still no research on kawaii detail such as the trend transition process. This paper aim to observe the kawaii trend transition in terms of its catch-up and spread, adaptation and innovation to other places that concern on the background during the process of transition. To obtain the study’s objective, the survey on the similar and dissimilarity of kawaii image is done on fashion area between regions taken Japan and Malaysian as an example. 12 respondents are chosen to evaluate the kawaii image in 30 samples of the latest attires. Data collected is analyzed by MDS and s-stress graph showed the potential 2 axes. In relation, perceptual maps to show the attires’ groups based on cluster analysis also is studied. A comparative study is done on each trend’s intimacy group and its structure in trend transition. As the result, 3 kinds of trend structures transition pattern is observed. First is the new trend which innovated to suit with own culture. Next is the trend that enhancing similar existing trend. Lastly, the trend that transited to be a new group in existing trend. Then, trend transition pattern is also compared among each other in terms of its impact and adaptation.

Keywords: Kawaii, Catch-up and spread, MDS

1. Introduction

Recently, kawaii, one of the Japan pop-culture has been spreading to all over the world. Japan character merchandise, fashion and decorative item of the kawaii design such as Kitty, Pokemon, and Sailor Moon, has been popular among young women in Asia such as Malaysia (Figure 1). This kind of market scale is about 2 million yen, which leads to a big meaning for the cultural goods of consumer society [1].

Furthermore, kawaii goods design has been accepted by various ranges of Japanese, including young and middle age. This scenario leads to the increasing of kawaii merchandise sales in 2010 for about 40 percent better than the year before. In relation, kawaii trend also has a direct connection with the consumer behavior [2]. With the increasing of the kawaii sales, it contributes to the increasing in Japan economic growth.

Lots of studies discussed on kawaii terms such as its meaning [3] and usage and its effect [4], evaluation [5] and transition [6]. Nonetheless, less research studies on the deep of kawaii design to be as information to support other design area for example in car. Kawaii trend has been catching up and spread in several countries such as in Taiwan, Korea and America [7]. However, detail on the way of the trend transition, its adaptation and innovation with the new place’s culture is still unclear.

Figure 1. Kawaii trend transition to Malaysia
2. Former studies on kawaii term

There are lots of studies on kawaii term. In the linguistics, the study on one word is broadly broken into three subfields such as language meaning, language form and language in broader context [8]. Language form is including usage and language broader context is including the origin of language. Kawaii term is studies further to achieve three subfields as explained below:

a) Kawaii meaning

Kawaii is the Japanese sensitive and special value which has a wide range of meaning such as tiny, little, cute, pretty, lovable, lovely, sweet, adorable and so on [9]. It also has a unique connotation that is not fully translatable into other languages. Kawaii also brings means such as helpless, weak, loose, slow, and familiar. In a behavioral study, kawaii is believed could bring a positive emotion which related to the social motivation for protecting and nurturing others. It is used less often than charming or beautiful in the written language, but is rated as the most used [10].

b) Kawaii usage and history

Kawaii appeared as an altered form of kawayui in Edo era (ca.17-19 centuries). The origin of kawayui is thought to be kawa (face) - hayu (flushing) - shi (adjectival suffix), which meant “ashamed”. In middle ages (ca.12-16 centuries), it is used in sense of piteous, with connotation of something that one “could not stand to look at”.

By the late of Middle Ages, the term was also used to suggest or evaluate the sense of affection that derived from feelings of pity toward weaker members of society, like women and children. In the late Edo era, the connotation of pity disappeared and only the sense of love and affection remained. Moreover, kawaii or kawayui came to be used for describing lovely small things as an attribute adjective. In principal, kawaii signifies the affection of superiors toward inferiors. However, the meaning of a word varies across historical ages. Nowadays, kawaii is also used for describing some elderly people as a kind of compliment [9].

Kawaii word has connection with a Japanese play-hearted behavior such as the eager to ‘fill in the blanks’ or to makes something looks cheerful to entertain themselves in whatever things they involves. They started do and innovate interesting things, regardless whether it is similar to other people or not and whether it is rational or not, even unthinkable to surprise others [11]. Lots of former studies on surface of kawaii terms such as its meaning, usage and evaluation However, research on detail of kawaii trend consider the background of its transition structure is still has not been research yet.

3. Research Objective

This research studies on the kawaii trend transition structure among regions. To what extend the kawaii culture is catching-up and spread in other kind of culture area with its new understanding that concern on the background of new region is the target of this study which can be expressed through kawaii trend transition structure. Malaysia is taken as an example of the transition area due to it has different culture with Japan so that the difference aspect within regions could be observed clearly. Then, fashion area is selected due to this kind of trend is transited easily throughout the world, faster than other products. This study is believed to be one of the examples to show the several kinds of trend catch-up and spread pattern which can be used in other products trend forecast too.

4. Kawaii Survey

a) Overview and pre-research

To obtain the research objective, the kawaii image survey is done by 2 kinds of stages. First is the pre-research to get the wider kawaii meaning and its potential key-words for guidance in this study. Other stage is the kawaii image survey on its similarity to observe the way of the trend transition structure happens.

Kawaii term is investigated through the view point on merchandise. In the pre-research stage, the kawaii samples are collected from the internet, books and magazines in several groups such as animal, stationery, fashion and women. The selected samples were advised by 6 students by a several group discussion. The target of this pre-research is to know the wider meaning and the potential key-words of kawaii so that it can be used for the similar kind of situation in other area for example in fashion.

As the result, several view point are raised for the hypothesis on kawaii such as [neutral – un-neutral], and [obvious - natural]. 16 groups have been raised to show various kawaii elements and key-words. Groups for stationery are [characteristic] and [stand-out]. Groups for fashion are [floral] [mori-girl] [shocking pink], [mis-match], [colorful], [boyish] and [Lolita]. Groups for animal
are [behavior], [characteristic] and [weird-color]. Groups for women are [childish], [adult], and [humanization]. (Fig. 2)

Then, to prove the relevance of this hypothesis, an interview session on the kawaii aspects in various aspects such as product, fashion, animal and women has been done by laddering method. The interview session is attended by several Japanese students who familiar with latest trend.

In this activity, kawaii evaluation is target to get attribute and its value. Data collected groups into 5 key-words such as [obvious], [natural], [un-neutral], [neutral] and [feeling or thinking]. Then, both pre-research and laddering data is compared again in terms of its similarity and dissimilarity.

As a result, kind of similarity in its main group key-words which are [obvious], [natural], [un-neutral] and [neutral] (Figure 3) is determined. These key-words have the potential to be used as an initial guidance for the survey on kawaii image in other products such as in fashion, which is the main sample for this study.
b) Categorization kawaii image intimacy among attires

Human knowledge structure is generated by the building of the dependence in intimacy category [13]. By this, user’s perception towards any product can be understood by studies on the structure of the internal information in the human memory, for example the judgment on the similarity of product is able to be analyzed by MDS. The psychology position relation among the product can be expressed in the perceptual map showed by the classification in intimacy category [14].

Based on that, as this paper aims to study the kawaii trend transition among regions in fashion, it is a need to know the respondent’s perception towards kawaii image in attire, to be able to determine the overall structure of kawaii image in both regions’ respondents. In detail, the judgment of similarity in kawaii image in fashion attires between Japanese and Malaysian is done to get the potential data for further analysis.

c) Respondents and samples

30 attire samples are chosen from the latest magazines and internet which is believed could represent the latest fashion trend for young Japanese with the advice from several Japanese women in 20s who has neutral opinion in fashion trend. In this survey, for each question, a pair of sample of kawaii image of fashion attire is shown for a comparative study in 5 like-ert scale from [totally similar] to [totally different].

Respondents are from 3 categories of regions who are Japanese, Malaysian who live in Japan and Malaysian who live in Malaysia. Female respondents who are age between 20 to 25 years old is chosen due to in this range of age they has higher desire on the latest trend. The respondents are 6 Japanese, 3 Malaysian who lives in Japan and 3 Malaysian who lives in Malaysia. A few numbers of respondents is believed to give the expected result due to this survey is target to know the similarity of kawaii image which needs a basic evaluation [12].

Basically, younger Japanese respondent is chosen to know further and wider understanding on kawaii culture. Furthermore, they have the clear idea on how to use the word and express the kawaii into their own way. Observing the understanding of kawaii among Malaysians who live in Japan is believed to open a possibility of understanding the middle process of the trend transition with better understanding and information level compare to the Malaysian who is living in Malaysia. Respondent Malaysian who lives in Malaysia is the final one who got the information of trend in certain duration of time through internet, book, and magazine.

d) Survey Method

For each respondent category, data collected is arranged in square symmetric matrix in similarity ordered class and analyzed by MDS. The potential axis number is shown by s-stress graph is 2 dimensional solutions (Figure 4). Then, cluster and perceptual map is analyzed for further studies [14]. There are 3 kinds of perceptual maps that represented each respondent group understanding towards kawaii fashion image.

![Figure 4. S-stress with 2-axes](image)

5. Survey result

a) Trend analysis among respondents groups

As this survey respondents are Japanese and Malaysian who lives in Japan and who lives in Malaysia, there might be some similarity and dissimilarity point of view towards kawaii image of Japanese attires among each group. So, this survey is not only to observe kawaii image judgment among respondent from different countries, but also to determine the similar and dissimilar point of view of same race but in different living place. Moreover, this survey also will reveal the background of point of view of each respondents group.

For Japanese, due to kawaii trend is in their culture, it is believed that they able to group kawaii image of attires into several groups which represented the kawaii fashion trend that has been popular in Japan. However, for Malaysian, due to kawaii trend is from other region culture, their categorization on the kawaii image attires might be similar or dissimilar to Japanese. So, to what extend their view point on this trend with relation with their own culture background will be explained too.
i) Japanese (Figure 5-1)

Japanese categorized the *kawaii* fashion aspect into [adult-childish] and [dressy-casual]. Due to they are the one who creates the *kawaii* aspects, they able to give detail idea through four groups known as [adult-*kawaii*], [dressy], [elegant] and [mote-*kawaii*]. [Adult-*kawaii*] is a unique category in Japanese *kawaii* fashion. This fashion trend is more to attire wear with pants, by women in late 20s and so on, which concern to be beautiful, sexy with feminine style. In other words, [adult-*kawaii*] is for women who are not losing any passion to keep themselves grown-up *kawaii* with their age appropriateness [15].

[Mote-*kawaii*] fashion is a very popular category among women in early 20s. They prefers over pink baby doll dresses, white lace dresses, and other cute, feminine clothes. This cute style has become a favorite look for dates and parties alike, that aim to catch the men’s attention. This look has been dubbed into [mote-*kawaii*] trend which comes from the words *moteru* (to be sought after) and *kawaii* (cute). [Mote-*kawaii*] girl is popular among members of the same and opposite gender [16].

[Dressy] group is divided well into 2 categories which are [Lolita] and [ordinary]. [Lolita] group is very popular in Japan with own innovation such as using very soft color and *kawaii* design. However, in Europe such as France, most of Lolita outfit were in black color and very Gothic in style, which was unique to European fashion. They were wearing a jumper skirt without a blouse, showing some skin. However, recently they dressed in the same way as the Japanese [17]. [Elegant] trend attires are mostly more an attire to fit certain events. There are also several attires that wearing a hat known as “celebrity looks” which has elegant impression [18].

ii) Malaysian in Japan (Figure 5-2)

Overall, for Malaysian either who lives in Japan or who live in Malaysia, they categorized the *kawaii* fashion...
into [adult-childish] and [hot-cool]. The detail groups in the perceptual map are [adult], [heavy], [ayu], and [rare]. [Adult] fashion is grouped to attire that wear with pants, which is almost similar to Japanese [adult-kawaii] group.

[Heavy] is the attire that comes with several layers of cloth including which known as [Lolita] fashion. This kind of attire is very new to Malaysian and rarely seen. There are very few young people who has preference in this attire because several aspect such as the cost and there are very less shop offers this kind of trend in Malaysia. However, this trend absolutely has already been transferred, adapted and innovate in Malaysian young generation and might be become bigger fashion prospect in future trend. (Figure 1)

Ayu term bring a meaning such as beautiful, soft and attractive which more towards characteristics [19]. In daily life, ayu mostly use for Malay women who keep up their fashion in feminine style, soft look and well-manner with the influence of Islamic culture. Moreover, recently, the [ayu] fashion getting more popular with incompliance to the Islamic women fashion guideline but innovated to be more stylish and modern look.

[Ayu] attire mostly more towards traditional attire, which comes with long skirt and blouse that in pair. Most of Malaysian enjoys order-made tailor for this kind of attire in various styles and colors (Figure 5). [Rare] fashion is mostly not wear in everyday lifestyle in Malaysia which some of the attire is use for certain occasions and the material is less fit to Malaysian culture and weather.

iii) Malaysian in Malaysia (Figure 5-3)

[Adult-childish] and [hot-cool] is the categorization for the axis with the several groups such as [stylish], [ayu], [teen] and [rare]. [Stylish] group is more to attire that wears with pants as a chic style which are similar to [adult-kawaii] and [adult]. [Ayu] attires are similar as explained before, which towards feminine style and soft look. [Teen] and [rare] group is for attire with layers such as Lolita, which this kind of attires has been adapted and innovated but still rarely seen in Malaysia.

iv) Conclusion

Japanese and Malaysian people realized whether the kawaii fashion is adult or childish. The Japanese know detail on kawaii fashion and absolutely understand and could differentiate their attires trend according to several good groups. For Malaysians, due to kawaii is actually from other culture which is the Japanese, so, their understanding is based on the information level they get. Both Malaysian respondents consider the weather such as cool or hot, and whether the attire suit with their culture or not. They focus on the attire material such as suitable for hot or cold weather, and also focus on familiarity of attires image which they relates with their own fashion attire trends and culture. Explanation on trend transition from Japan to Malaysia, and its adaptation and innovation on each group in the perceptual model is further studies.

b) Structure of trend transition (Figure 7)

From the observation on each group respondents, the
other point of view in this study is to observe the kawaii trend structure transition in terms of its catch-up and spread, its adaptation and innovation. The potential idea is to determine the changes of the groups’ shape and position that occur during the trend transition from Japan to Malaysia. By observing this structure, there is a potential to see the different types of trend transition base on the certain background such as culture.

i) Dressy

[Dressy] trend in Japan is categorized into [Lolita] and [ordinary]. The basic criteria in this group is the attires that have several layers. For Malaysian in Japan, those attires called [heavy] and [rare]. For Malaysian in Malaysia, the similar attire with [dressy] is in [teen] and [rare] group. The structure of trend transition is compared. The position for attires in all groups has similarity and dissimilarity. Then, position of all groups on the map is almost similar which showed a heap shape. Shape direction for both Malaysian groups is changed to left direction which different with Japanese. As this trend can be seen in Malaysia, it is has been greatly transferred, adapted and innovated to Malaysia from Japan and gives big impact to Malaysia fashion area (Figure 7). Japanese has detail idea on this trend so they able to differentiate the trend into [Lolita] and [ordinary] groups clearly. For Malaysians, they differentiate the attires based on the familiarity such as whether they had seen or not this kind of trend in daily life. With the Islamic influenced, Malaysian teenagers especially Malay, innovated this trend into combination with long pants and scarf (Figure 6).

ii) Adult-kawaii

[Adult-kawaii] is another one of special kawaii trend in Japan. For Japanese, one of the criteria to group attires for this fashion based on attires which suit with of pants. For Malaysian in Japan, the similar attire is understood most as [adult] and only one kind of attire as [rare]. For Malaysian in Malaysia, the same attire group most as the [stylish] and only one kind of attire in the [ayu] group.

All groups’ shape are different among each other, from heap to change into a kind of enhance shape. The position of group for [adult-kawaii] attire for all respondents is almost similar which is at the left side of the map. Then, position of the attires for all respondents has a similar and dissimilarity. It can be said that [adult-kawaii] trend also has been in Malaysia but known as [adult] and [stylish].

In Malaysia, this trend is believed has been transferred and popular. This trend is the most easy to wear in daily life, which need some re-arrangement of the existing attires for example, by wearing it with accessories for more kawaii look. For example, in 2004, Malaysian started innovate their traditional attire called baju kebaya towards modern looks and wear it with long pant. (Figure 6)

iii) Mote-kawaii

[Mote-kawaii] trend is very popular in Japan which has been modernized recently. For Japanese [mote-kawaii] attire is grouped mostly towards dress with light and pale color. For Malaysian who lives in Japan, this kind of attires is grouped mostly into [ayu] with few attires in [adult], [rare], and [heavy] groups. For Malaysian in Malaysia, the similar attire with [dressy] is mostly grouped into [ayu] and few attires in [stylish] group.

All groups’ shape are different among each other. The Japanese [mote-kawaii] group is in a heap shape, changed to be a u-shape for Malaysian who live in Japan and finally for Malaysian in Malaysia, it becomes a heap shape again. The position of all the attires is almost similar in all groups. For Malaysian in Japan, it is believed that they have better information than Malaysian in Malaysia, that they could differentiate the [mote-kawaii] attire to be more specific. [Ayu] fashion trend is popular in Malaysia which more to traditional attire is wear in daily life depends to the style, simple one is seldom use in daily life but the particular one is wear in certain events. It is believed that [mote-kawaii] has been transferred to be one of the new groups in [ayu] fashion. Recently, [ayu] trend has also become more kawaii in terms of material, color and style. For example, attire which in soft color that mix with brighter color to suit with Malaysian preference (Figure 6).

iv) Elegant

[Elegant] in Japanese fashion trend is more towards attire that fit special events which is rarely seen in everyday lifestyles. For Malaysian in Japan, the attires which similar in [elegant] is grouped just in two kind of groups which are mostly in [ayu] and only one attire in [adult] group. For Malaysian in Malaysia, the similar attires in [elegant] is dispersed in several groups such as [stylish], [ayu], [teen], and [rare]. Overall, the shape of group in the map are changes from heap shape into a disperse shape (Figure 7). It is believed that Japanese kawaii in [elegant] trend might not yet been transferred to Malaysia due to less information
and understanding in Malaysia. Furthermore, in Malaysia, [elegant] trend are more to office attire which has less kawaii elements, and get influenced from British and Islamic cultures. (Figure 6) However, for Japanese, kawaii trend is concerned in wider area including in [elegant] fashion trend.

6. Conclusion

Overall of the trend transition in terms of its catch-up and spread structure between regions is observed. There are 3 kinds of trend structures as the finding for this research. In Figure 7, these trend transition structure are from Japanese attires called [dressy], [adult-kawaii], and [mote-kawaii]. However, [elegant] trend do not show a good result in its transition structure. The explanation on each structure changes from origin region which is Japan and new region which is Malaysia aim to give better understanding on the structure meaning and its background. Comparative study on all structures is done too, to see the similarity and dissimilarity between each structure type. Fashion is the typical trend and easy to understand by most of the society level and it gives fast influence to other countries than other product. This trend structure of fashion is believed to be one of the examples to see the types of trend transition structures that really happen around us (Figure 8).
i) New trend

[Dressy] is one of the trend that is believed showed a new inspiration in fashion trend (Figure 7). It is well transferred, adapted and innovated with the preference of culture in the new region such as culture. This kind of trend is also believed gives big impact to the new region due to there is no similar kind of this trend in the new region. Furthermore, compared to other trend transition types, it can be said that other kind of trend has been used in the Malaysia and the impact is lower. However, as this kind of trend is still very new, the usage of this trend is still low might be due to some economic limitation such as there is very few choice of this attire in the market that resulted into higher price of the trend.

Furthermore, as Malaysia is still a developing country country, the economic power is still lower than Japan. There is very less Japanese shop for this trend in Malaysia. Oppositely, in Western area, there are so many Japanese shops that offers this kind of trend due to certain background of cultures. For example, almost similar attires to this trend has already popular in Western but has less kawaii element. However, to the higher demands for the Japanese kawaii attire from Western people there, this kind of attires shop such as “Baby, The Stars Shine Bright (a.k.a. Baby) opened branch in Paris in February 2006 [20].

ii) Expand the existing trend

[Adult-kawaii] is one of the Japanese trend is similar to the existing trend in new region. It is transferred to enhance in the existing trend (Figure 7). The similar kind of attire has been used in new region in daily life. Of course in new region which is Malaysia has slightly difference in terms of the attire presentation or coordination but by looking at overall shape and the way of the arrangement of this fashion, it is believed that this fashion has almost similar to the existing Malaysia fashion trend which called as [adult] and [stylish].

Compared to other trend transition types, this trend transition has less impact then [dressy] trend transition style but gain the most preference to be used in daily life. This is due to this trend style is easy to be re-arranged with the existing attire style. Even there is less Japanese fashion shop for this trend, the local shops also can innovated this kind of style in their attire to look alike [adult-kawaii] trend. In other words, this new trend can be developed by expanding the existing trend is certain aspects for example by adding more kawaii accessories such as lace.

iii) New type in existing trend

This kind of trend transition type came from the structure of [mote-kawaii] trend in figure 7. Based on the background of this trend that has strong connection with [ayu] trend in Malaysia, this trend is believed to be transferred as a new group in [ayu] trend. In other word, this trend is transferred to give new essence in the existing trend. Compared to [dressy], and [adult-kawaii] trend transition type, this trend has lower impact than those trends. However, [mote-kawaii] has better usage preference in the new region compare to [dressy] and less preference compared to [adult-kawaii].

[AYU] trend in use in varies level of condition such as suitable to be wore in daily life activities such as shopping, visiting families and even for office attires, depends on how is the arrangement of the material, attire style and colors. Nonetheless, this [AYU] trend style cannot be simply re-arrange due to this kind of attire is a kind of suit attire, which means the upper and bottom is in pair. Mostly Malaysian women loves to have order-made for this kind of attire to suit with their own style and body size. Therefore, the [mote-kawaii] trend is positioned under the [ayu] group in Malaysia.

iv) New trend with less understanding

This trend called [elegant], and its trend transition structure in figure 7 showed that this new trend has very low acceptance. The trend structure changed from heap to be dispersed in several small shapes. Malaysian in Japan can understand and categorized this trend to be into two groups which are [ayu] and [rare]. Malaysian in Malaysia understood this kind of trend that separated into other 3 groups such as [ayu], [rare] and [stylish]. This kind of the trend transition structure showed a kind of incomplete transition process. It might be due to the different meaning of [elegant] in Japan and Malaysia. Furthermore, it is believed that the kawaii aspect in [elegance] trend has very low information transferred to Malaysian people in Malaysia that contributed to the less understanding on this trend.

It is hard to compare Japanese [elegant] trend transition structure to other new trends transition structure in figure 8, due to this kind of trend transition structure showed dispersed kind of structure in Malaysia. However, in future, once the [elegant] kawaii trend information transferred and understands well in Malaysia, this kind of trend
might be gives big impact and have certain level of user preference since the [elegant] style of Malaysia often use in the office attire. Nowadays, Malaysian women have high involvement in the career and perhaps they will have more buying power to invest in their daily needs including the office attire that will contribute to the development of various kinf of [elegant] office attire.

7. Future Work

Based from this study, other kinds of product such as stationery and car will be investigated to get its trend transition in terms of its catch-up and spread structure. By this study, the possibilities other kind of trend transition structure that will be occurred will be observed.

References