

# Humanizing Twitter in Retail: How Lawson, a Convenience Store Chain in Japan Fused Cute Culture and Social Media

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**Abstract**—Businesses have embraced social media in efforts to gain market share and brand loyalty. Companies take to Twitter to advertise as well as provide real time information and promotions to their ‘followers’. While some companies utilize Twitter as a means of information dissemination tool, maintaining a one-way communication flow; others such as JetBlue engage in two-way communication. In Japan, Lawson a local convenience store chain adopted an approach that fused cute culture with Twitter leading to humanizing their Twitter account. This paper aims to address the elements of cute culture and the integration of cuteness in social media in a Japanese convenience store chain. The features and characteristics of Lawson’s twitter account are analyzed and the findings reflect that Lawson approaches their Twitter account differently, humanizing their social media and further solidifying the importance and appeal of cute culture in gaining brand recognition in Japan.

**Index Terms**—Convenience store, cute culture, Japan, social media, twitter.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Businesses today are faced with the challenges of a volatile marketplace and extremely stiff competition. To remain competitive, organizations have to develop new strategies while incorporating new technology and shifts in consumer behavior. As consumers form relationships with brands, not products, not corporations, it is pertinent that brands establish relationships with consumers in order to gain loyalty and brand equity [1]-[3]. Emotional branding brings a new layer of credibility and personality to a brand by connecting powerfully with people on a personal and holistic level [2]. Feelings and the emotions evoked are the basis in creating successful, smashing brands. Conceptualizing a brand through personalization has become a very powerful way to build brand identity [2], [4].

In retail from established department stores such as Macy’s to home products such as Ikea, most companies have embraced social media as part of a necessary marketing tool. Convenience stores for instance 7-eleven are not left behind and have also jumped on the social media bandwagon. While convenience stores essentially promise convenience, in Japan convenience stores have redefined the meaning to convenience offering a plethora of products and services ranging from fresh sushi, concert tickets to paying income taxes [5]. Lawson, the second largest convenience store chain

in Japan with more than 10,000 shops in Japan and more than 400 in China and Indonesia as well as the US has taken a different approach in managing its Twitter account [6]-[9]. Unlike their competitors, namely 7-Eleven, FamilyMart and MiniStop, Lawson has integrated cute culture in differentiating its Twitter account and creating a character that has since inception seen an increase in terms of number of characters introduced thus cultivating social groups. The next section will examine cute culture and its place in Japanese culture followed by Lawson’s Twitter account.

## II. POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture, or better known as pop culture, refers to the culture of the masses [10]. This is contrary to the image one conjures up when the word culture is mentioned – arts, superior knowledge and intellect. Popular culture is derived from the daily lives of the majority in society. As such, daily aspects such as entertainment, media, music, sports and clothing are key components of popular culture.

Japan is renowned for being a trendsetter and one of the main contributors to the world of popular culture [11], [12]. The massive success and popularity of ‘cute culture’ took the world by storm. Characters such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, Crayon Shin-chan and Sailor Moon became icons of cuteness. Japanese アニメ (Anime) and (漫画) manga have a legion of fans spanning every corner of the globe. Cute culture vocabulary has even ‘invaded’ the world of western music; for instance super ‘*kawaii*’ in Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku Girls (from the 2006 Grammy nominated album, Love. Music. Angel. Baby.).

A myriad of themes and influences generally form the foundation of pop culture. The views, values, practices, concerns and opinion of society – regardless of time; both past and present are reflected through Japan’s pop culture. Through pop culture, we witness the new sub cultures form such as cute ‘*kawaii*’ (可愛い) culture.

### A. Cute Culture

Japan is known as the Country of Cute where cute is ubiquitously found in decorations and illustrations [13]-[14]. According to a survey done by CREA in 1992, ‘*kawaii*’ or cute is the most habitually and widely used in modern day Japan [15]. Popular cute culture icon, Hello Kitty is the epitome of cuteness and has fans both locally as well as overseas.

Cute culture began in the 1970s when Japanese teenage girls started writing in rounded childish letters and characters

[16]. It rose in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s from a fusion of post-modern desire and infantile affectation [17]. However, the psychological need to be cute has long been around in the Japanese culture, in the form of *amae* (甘え) or interdependence indulgence, a concept that is used to describe often a childish behavior that stems from the desire to be loved and to be indulged and taken care of. There is the element of dependence and this persists even into adulthood. The desire to look cute is a typical expression of *amae*; be in the clothing and appearance or even the usage of childlike words that demonstrate the distinction between children and adults has become blurred [18]. The stress of everyday living and space constraints in the city have also been cited as reasons that the Japanese are fixated on cute things and fantasy as a means of escapism [19].

Cute or *Kawaii* has been subjected to various definitions. It has been defined as interrelated dimensions of physical, relational/ emotional, and sexual [20]. McVeigh [21] on the other hand defines it according to different categories: baby, very young, young, maternal, teen, adult, sexy, pornography, child pornography, authority and corporate. Masabuchi [22] lists seven elements that define cute: smallness, naivete and innocence, youth (especially the very young), *amae*, roundness, pastel colors and animal-like qualities.

Core elements of cute are found in more 'negative' traits than positive such as grotesque, neediness, defenselessness, and the inability to stand alone as these evoke a sense of pity, that leads to sympathy, even a maternal feeling and the need of wanting to protect [23]-[26], [19], [20]. Childlikeness where sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances form the definition of *kawaii* is also stressed as a key element [15].

### III. LAWSON AND TWITTER

As companies turn to Twitter to expand their market, various strategies are formulated in order to attain differentiation and attract as well as retain followers. As individuals use twitter to stay in touch and communicate with friends or 'followers' and get real time information and news, most are less inclined to follow companies and businesses or even brands, based on the top 200 Twitterholics based on followers. Celebrities; entertainers and sports stars clearly dominate the rankings. While Comcast and BestBuy used a real person rather than a logo to front their Twitter pages, BestBuy did not manage their tweets well as they were too formal unlike Comcast at @comcastcares [27]. The standard advice given to corporations wanting to successfully manage their Twitter accounts is to be human and this goes beyond having a human face to front the page, corporations need to tweet in a less formal and more 'human' tone in order to establish a relationship with their followers [27]-[30].

Lawson Japan is no stranger to the social media realm as it has various social media accounts ranging from Mixi to Line. Even though they are the second largest convenience store in Japan, the number of their Twitter account followers surpasses that of their main rivals by nearly five fold (as of July 2012) as illustrated in Table I.

TABLE I: TOP THREE CONVENIENCE STORES' TWITTER INFORMATION

Ranking	Store	Joined Twitter	No.of Followers (as of Sept 30, 2012)
1	7-Eleven	11 April 2012	34,009
2	Lawson	1 April 2010	185,727
3	FamilyMart	1 Dec 2009	39,795

Lawson approaches its Twitter account from a different perspective as opposed to its rivals. The following aspects are adopted by Lawson, which sets it apart from its rivals as it manages to humanize its Twitter account.

#### A. Characters

As characters are dominant in Japanese cute culture, Lawson created the main character named Akiko, fondly referred to as Akiko-chan who works at the convenience store. She is introduced as a college sophomore working part-time at the convenience store, as she adores the uniform. Akiko-chan also provides daily horoscope to those who tweet her as well as advice and information on a range of topics from cooking to music and even hairstyles. Akiko-chan is also the face of the other Lawson social media websites. When Lawson first launched its Twitter account, Akiko-chan was the only person introduced. As followers grew, Lawson introduced Akiko-chan's family including extended family like her cousin, friends and coworkers. Each character's information is also provided for instance, where did Akiko-chan meet her friends and their hobbies. Fig. 1 illustrates the network that Akiko-chan currently has.



Fig. 1. Akiko's network

The characters and their backgrounds make them human-like. Followers are introduced to their blogs (Akiko-chan's brother started a blog recently) and this adds more depth to the characters where followers can empathize with the characters.

Recently a vocaloid version of Akiko-chan has been unveiled. Followers are now introduced to this vocaloid named Akikoroid-chan. The surge in vocaloid popularity in Japan is undeniable as Hatsune Miku has staged sold out concerts and has also performed overseas recently. Akikoroid-chan introduces the followers to music and video as well as Lawson channel.

#### B. Human-Like Traits

Akiko-chan and her extended social circles have been

given human-like traits. Their backgrounds, hobbies and in the case of Akikoroid-chan the story of how she was made gives the followers not only a deeper understanding of each character but helps forge bonds with them too. While the focus of the other convenience stores are providing information of the products, Akiko-chan and her team share other kinds of information such as entertainment and beauty that is indirectly linked to the store's products or services. Auditions were also carried out to find the voice for Akiko-chan where followers were given the chance to give their feedback on the voice and the search process was shared with the followers. The selected voice was generally reviewed as cute by the followers as shown in Fig. 2 further substantiating the role of cute culture in humanizing the Twitter character.



Fig. 2. Feedback on Akiko-chan's selected voice.

### C. Tweeting and Blogging Style

Akiko-chan's tweets are in a very informal tone as with the writing style on the characters' blogs. Followers are made to feel as if they are reading tweets and the blogs of college students, having further shape the humanization of the characters. The language used in the tweets and blogs is very casual making it sound as if the characters are 'talking' to their friends and peers. Japanese language has different sets of words and expressions that must be used in formal situations and are completely different from those used when communicating with friends and family. Lawson has opted to use the latter instead of the former and that has appealed more to the customers and followers.

### D. Lifestyle

While Akiko-chan and her friends, family and coworkers have shared their background and stories Lawson goes further in humanizing their social media by incorporating other areas of interests such as music and movies as well as videos. The characters recommend music and videos as well as movies. As entertainment is an important aspect of our daily lives, leveraging on the followers' interests creates more value for Lawson's Twitter as well as other social media accounts. The characters not only talk about upcoming movies and albums but Akikoroid-chan also releases singles and music videos as well as collaborates with singers such as Chatmonchy, a Japanese female rock band. Akiko-chan has also crossed over to the gaming world as she befriended

Light to promote Final Fantasy VII and recently Slime from Dragon Quest X. The merging of various characters further adds a surreal dimension to the characters.

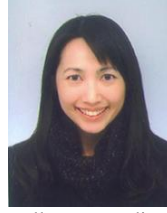
## IV. CONCLUSION

The strategy that Lawson took with managing its social media was not only to fuse cute culture but to develop the characters and create them into your average middle class people who have jobs, school and interests. The blurring of lines between the characters and actual rock singers and gaming characters with the collaboration and crossovers further fuels the humanizing of Akiko-chan and her family, friends and coworkers.

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