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## LA ESTÉTICA KAWAII EN EL DISEÑO DE PERSONAJES ARGENTINOS

# KAWAII AESTHETICS IN ARGENTINE CHARACTER DESIGN

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the transcultural circulation and local reinterpretation of *kawaii* aesthetics, originally rooted in Japanese visual culture, within contemporary character design practices in Argentina. Drawing on cultural hybridity theory, visual semiotics, and affective design studies, the paper analyzes how *kawaii* visual codes have migrated from their origins in manga, anime, and consumer media into new cultural contexts.

### KEYWORD

*Kawaii* aesthetics; argentina; character design; visual culture

### RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la circulación transcultural y la reinterpretación local de la estética *kawaii*, originalmente arraigada en la cultura visual japonesa, en las prácticas contemporáneas de diseño de personajes en Argentina. A partir de un marco teórico que integra la teoría de la hibridez cultural, la semiótica visual y los estudios del diseño afectivo, el trabajo analiza cómo los códigos visuales del *kawaii* han migrado desde sus orígenes en el manga, el anime y las industrias culturales hacia nuevos contextos culturales.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Estética *kawaii*; Argentina; diseño de personaje; cultura visual

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary global culture, globalization operates through complex networks that enable new forms of cultural convergence and interconnection. The proliferation of digital technologies and the expansion of mass communication platforms have facilitated the rapid transnational circulation of cultural signifiers, resulting in the continual transformation and hybridization of local identities (Appadurai, 2007; García Canclini, 1995). Within this context, normative cultural frameworks and community-based values are no longer static; they are actively reconfigured in response to global flows of meaning, media, and aesthetics.

In recent years, Argentina has undergone significant cultural transformations under the influence of these global dynamics. The penetration of mass media and the intensification of transnational cultural exchanges have contributed to the emergence of new visual languages and design practices. One particularly illustrative case is the adoption and adaptation of Japanese *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentine character design. This phenomenon exemplifies how aesthetic codes originating in one cultural context can be translated, recontextualized, and imbued with new meaning in another, thus functioning as powerful tools of symbolic communication and identity articulation.

## ARGENTINA

The Argentine Republic, founded in 1816, is in the southern cone of South America and ranks as the continent's second-largest nation in terms of landmass. With a population shaped by successive waves of immigration, primarily from Italy and Spain, followed by Asian countries over the past fifty years, Argentina exhibits a rich and complex demographic makeup. While Spanish remains the official and dominant language, other languages such as English, Italian, French, and the Indigenous Quechua are still spoken in various regions, further reflecting this cultural plurality (González & Ramírez, 2018).

Buenos Aires, the capital city, functions not only as Argentina's political and economic hub but also as a leading center of cultural production in Latin America. Its syncretic identity, formed through the convergence of European, Indigenous, and more recently, Asian cultural traditions, positions Argentina as a particularly fertile site for visual hybridity. Since the widespread adoption of the Internet in 1995, over 30 million Argentinians have gained online access, contributing to the rapid circulation of transnational media content and the intensification of global cultural flows (INDEC, 2020s).

Digital platforms have introduced new aesthetic sensibilities and modalities of consumption, enabling Argentine audiences, especially younger demographics, to engage with foreign media cultures in increasingly immersive ways. Among these influences is the global proliferation of Japanese visual culture, including *manga*, *anime*, and, significantly, the affective and symbolic system of *kawaii*. Initially circulating within subcultural communities, *kawaii* aesthetics have since expanded into broader creative domains, becoming visible in Argentine design, illustration, and visual merchandising.

The localized adaptation of *kawaii* aesthetics can be seen as part of a broader process of cultural hybridization (García Canclini, 1995, p. 65), whereby foreign symbolic codes are rearticulated through local sensibilities. Argentine designers do not simply imitate *kawaii* tropes; rather, they reinterpret and transform them through contextually relevant practices. This dynamic reflects both the soft power of Japanese cultural exports and the agency of local creators in producing new hybrid visual identities.

The migration of *kawaii* aesthetics into Argentine visual culture thus serves as a compelling case study of transcultural visual negotiation, wherein global aesthetic regimes are localized and re-signified. This study therefore examines not only the formal features of *kawaii* aesthetics but also the cultural, emotional, and political implications of their presence in contemporary Argentine character design.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 GLOBAL CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND HYBRID AESTHETIC FORMATION IN ARGENTINA

The effects of globalization on cultural production are profoundly uneven. In South America, Argentine-Mexican sociologist Néstor García Canclini has offered a foundational theory of hybridization to explain the region's cultural dynamics. He conceptualizes *globalization* as an interplay of homogenization and fragmentation, a process that reorganizes but does not dissolve cultural difference (García Canclini, 1995). Rather than flattening diversity, globalization recasts symbolic hierarchies, producing new formations of identity and representation that reflect both continuity and rupture.

Arjun Appadurai extends this analysis by describing globalization as a set of disjunctive flows, through which cultural forms travel and morph. He emphasizes that the intensification of transnational exchanges does not lead to cultural uniformity, but rather to the proliferation of new, hybrid «cultural forms» (Appadurai, 2007). These emergent forms often undergo processes of deterritorialization (detachment from their original cultural contexts) and reterritorialization (reembedding into new localities), giving rise to novel aesthetic expressions in peripheral or semi-peripheral zones such as Argentina.

These global circuits are not neutral. As Homi Bhabha (1994) notes, cultural exchange is frequently shaped by asymmetries of power, wherein symbolic appropriation allows dominant cultures to influence or overwrite local narratives. Nonetheless, such exchanges can also enable acts of creative adaptation and resistance, particularly when imported aesthetic forms are recontextualized to express local sensibilities.

In this context, Frédéric Martel (2010) introduces the notion of «mainstream popular culture» to describe cultural products that achieve global circulation through media industries. Unlike vernacular forms of popular culture, shaped by oral traditions, localized performance, and ritual, mainstream culture is driven by digital infrastructures and transnational platforms such as streaming services, podcasts, and social media. These infrastructures have accelerated the flow of symbolic material, enabling aesthetic forms originally developed in one culture, such as Japanese *kawaii*, to be rapidly consumed, adapted, and re-signified in others.

Since the widespread adoption of the internet in Argentina in 1995, digital networks have played a crucial role in facilitating cultural exchange. Argentine audiences, particularly youth, now routinely engage with international media forms, including anime, manga, and *kawaii*-inspired visual aesthetics. These interactions reflect a larger process of hybridization; whereby global signifiers are translated into local design languages. The resulting cultural products are neither wholly foreign nor entirely indigenous but rather situated within what García Canclini (1995) calls a «remixed modernity», a space where traditional and imported symbols coexist and generate new meanings.

This hybrid condition is particularly evident in the field of character design, where imported aesthetics, originally developed for contexts like Japanese consumer culture, are repurposed to speak to Argentine cultural realities. Thus, the evolution of contemporary visual culture in Argentina cannot be understood without recognizing how globalization, mediated through digital platforms and mass media, has reshaped both the aesthetic and affective landscapes of local creative practices.

Within these global circuits of cultural exchange, specific aesthetic forms emerge and travel across cultural boundaries. One of the most influential examples of such transcultural circulation is the Japanese aesthetic construct known as *kawaii*.

## 2.2 THE TRANSCULTURAL TRAJECTORY OF *KAWAII* AESTHETICS: FROM JAPAN TO ARGENTINA

The aesthetic and cultural construct of *kawaii* has evolved significantly over the past decades, transforming from a localized linguistic sentiment into a globally recognizable visual idiom. Etymologically, the term derives from the classical Japanese expression *kawayushi* (可愛ゆし) historically associated with emotional states such as shyness, fragility, pity, and endearing smallness—qualities often attributed to youth or inexperience (Kinsella, 1995). While traces of *kawayushi* appear in early twentieth-century Japanese lexicons, *kawaii* did not become culturally dominant until the 1970s.

This shift coincided with the rise of *shōjo* (少女) culture, referring to adolescent girls who became both producers and consumers of a distinctive aesthetic regime. One of the clearest manifestations of this phenomenon was *burikko-ji* (ぶりっ子字), or «childlike writing» a stylized script developed by teenage girls that transformed conventional Japanese writing into rounded characters embellished with hearts, stars, and smiley faces (Okazaki in Kinsella, 1995). Far from being merely decorative, this practice functioned as a form of visual agency that allowed young women to express affective identities within a highly gendered cultural environment (Ito, 2005).

By the 1980s this visual language had permeated popular media, including manga, fashion magazines, advertising, and idol culture, consolidating *kawaii* as a widely recognizable aesthetic register embedded in everyday consumer life. Sharon Kinsella (1995) interprets this development as both an aspirational engagement with Western consumer imagery and a subtle departure from it. While Japanese youth admired aspects of American and European popular culture, *kawaii* aesthetics articulated an alternative sensibility centered on emotional openness, softness, and childlike innocence.

Importantly, scholars such as Kinsella and Yano (2013) argue that *kawaii* should not be understood simply as aesthetic infantilization. Rather, it operates as a form of symbolic resistance to rigid social expectations within Japanese society, where adulthood is often associated with discipline, hierarchy, and emotional restraint. By embracing vulnerability and playfulness, *kawaii* aesthetics temporarily suspend these norms and create space for alternative modes of expression.

The emergence of *kawaii* must also be situated within broader transformations in post-industrial media cultures. As Ito (2005) and Allison (2006) observe, the expansion of media technologies and character merchandising transformed cuteness into a communicative strategy within global consumer economies. In this context, *kawaii* operates not only as a visual style but as a mechanism of affective communication capable of generating empathy, familiarity, and emotional attachment across mass-mediated platforms.

As *kawaii* aesthetics circulated globally through anime, manga, merchandising, and digital media, they began to influence visual production beyond Japan. In these transnational contexts, *kawaii* no longer functioned solely within its original cultural framework but was reinterpreted through local artistic traditions and consumer practices. One domain where this transformation becomes particularly visible is contemporary character design.

## 2.3 AFFECTIVE SEMIOTICS OF *KAWAII*

Beyond its historical emergence, *kawaii* aesthetics can also be understood through the lens of affective semiotics, the study of how visual forms produce emotional responses. Western scholarship has frequently approached *kawaii* through interdisciplinary frameworks that combine evolutionary psychology, semiotics, and media studies.

One of the earliest theoretical discussions appears in John T. Sanders's essay *The Aesthetics of Cute as a Product of Natural Selection* (1997), where the appeal of *kawaii* forms is interpreted as an extension of evolved caregiving responses. Drawing on earlier work by John

Morreall (1991), Sanders identifies recurring morphological traits associated with cuteness: large cranial proportions, low-set eyes, rounded facial features, plump bodies, short limbs, soft textures, and behaviors suggesting vulnerability or clumsiness. These features correspond closely to what ethologist Konrad Lorenz described as *Kindchenschema*, or «baby schema», a configuration of infantile traits that triggers protective and nurturing instincts in human observers (Lorenz, 1982).

Lorenz conceptualized these features as perceptual “releasers” capable of activating innate releasing mechanisms within the viewer. Yet later scholars have emphasized that such responses are not purely biological but mediated by cultural and symbolic frameworks. Gary Genosko (2005), for instance, demonstrates how characters such as Mickey Mouse were progressively redesigned throughout the twentieth century by enlarging the eyes, shortening the limbs, and rounding the facial structure, transformations that aligned the character with evolving expectations of cuteness across audiences.

From this perspective, *kawaii* operates simultaneously as morphology and semiotic strategy. Its visual features function as emotionally legible signals that communicate vulnerability, friendliness, and approachability while also participating in broader systems of visual culture and media production.

Natalie Angier (2006) further expands this interpretation by situating cuteness within a neuroscientific framework. She argues that *kawaii* imagery activates reward-based emotional responses similar to those associated with pleasurable experiences, producing sensations of comfort, attachment, and protective empathy. Unlike traditional ideals of beauty, which emphasize proportion, elegance, and distance, *kawaii* aesthetics privilege softness, awkwardness, and emotional proximity.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that *kawaii* functions as both a visual morphology and an affective modality. Its power lies in the combination of perceptual simplicity and emotional immediacy, enabling characters and objects to establish rapid affective connections with viewers. This capacity for emotional communication explains why *kawaii* aesthetics have proven highly adaptable across different cultural contexts and media environments, including contemporary character design practices in Argentina.

## 2.4 THE EVOLUTION OF CHARACTER DESIGN

Although this study focuses on the appropriation of *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentine contemporary character design, it is necessary to situate this development within the broader trajectory of character design in animation and visual communication. While related, traditional and contemporary character design differ in their origins, purposes, and cultural logics.

As articulated by the founders of Pictoplasma<sup>1</sup>, a Berlin-based platform dedicated to character culture, traditional character design emerged from the industrial needs of classical animation. Its primary function was to define fixed, geometric forms that ensured consistency in character reproduction across animation studios, thereby enabling global outsourcing and standardization of visual language in animated media (Thaler and Denicke, 2005). These designs were often shaped by commercial imperatives, responding to branding, marketing, and consumer targeting strategies.

In contrast, since the early 2000s, Pictoplasma has championed a paradigm shift toward what it terms «contemporary character design». This emergent, post-industrial practice is characterized by aesthetic experimentation, symbolic play, and cultural hybridity. Contemporary character design circulates in diverse media environments, including social media, public

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<sup>1</sup> Webpage: <https://pictoplasma.com>

installations, and product packaging, and is marked by global visual fluency and transnational accessibility (Pictoplasma, 2015).

As noted in *Characters in Motion*, «industrial production conditions have created a universal visual vocabulary, which has standardized and shaped the world of animation for the past seven decades» (Thaler and Denicke, 2005). However, contemporary designers have broken away from these constraints, embracing emotionally evocative and symbolically rich aesthetics.

A significant influence on contemporary character aesthetics is the work of the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, whose *Superflat* movement integrated the visual grammar of *kawaii* with postmodern critiques of consumerism and media saturation. Murakami's work helped catalyze the global dissemination of *kawaii* culture beyond its Japanese origins, transforming it into a recognizable visual language within global youth and design subcultures.

In Western design contexts, *kawaii* aesthetics have been reinterpreted to highlight emotional expression, visual simplicity, and playful forms (Napier, 2007; Yano, 2013). This shift parallels the transformation of character design from an industrially constrained craft into a more open and affect-oriented creative practice.

## 2.5 THE INFLUENCE OF *KAWAII* AESTHETICS ON MAINSTREAM AND INTERGENERATIONAL CULTURE IN ARGENTINA

The integration of *kawaii* aesthetics into Argentine visual culture must be understood within the broader framework of global media flows and cultural hybridization. As Martel (2010) stated, current globalized cultural formation merges entertainment, ideology, and aesthetics through the mechanisms of soft power. In this system, states and cultural industries encode their values into globally appealing formats that, once internalized by broad audiences, become “mainstream” not merely in popularity but in their role as symbolic norms.

In Argentina, Japanese manga and anime served as primary vehicles for the introduction of *kawaii* aesthetics. Beginning with early broadcasts of series like *Astro Boy*, *Speed Racer*, *Candy Candy*, and *Heidi* in the 1970s and 1980s, Argentine children were exposed to stylized narratives and visual languages that emphasized cuteness, sentimentality, and emotive storytelling. These cultural imports were initially perceived as a unified genre, despite their gender segmentation in Japan, and were consumed widely within domestic popular culture.

This widespread reception laid the groundwork for the gradual normalization of *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentina's media and design spheres. By the 1990s and 2000s, a growing otaku subculture emerged, composed of youth who were not only consumers of anime and manga but also creators of fan art, zines, and cosplay communities. British anthropologist Sharon Kinsella (1995) describes this trend as part of the «Japanization of European youth», a cultural realignment wherein Japanese media aesthetics redefine consumer identities and lifestyle orientations across global youth cultures.

Over time, this youthful affectivity extended into adulthood, giving rise to a generational consumer segment now referred to as *kidults*, adults aged 20 to 40 who retain aesthetic and emotional attachments to childhood media and behaviors (Bernardini, 2014; Fernández, 2019). This demographic, largely composed of Generations X and Y, played a crucial role in re-legitimizing *kawaii* in Argentina's cultural and commercial sectors. Their consumption habits, ranging from collectible toys to *kawaii*-inspired clothing, reflect a broader transformation in the relationship between maturity, affect, and design.

As Jean Baudrillard (1994) argues, consumption is not merely the satisfaction of needs but a symbolic act embedded in systems of fantasy and identity. The *kawaii* object functions as a signifier, not just of youth, but of *nostalgic escape* and *emotional refuge*. Argentine branding strategist Facundo Bertranou suggests that such consumers are not immature, but rather seek comfort in affective universes that contrast with the uncertainties of adult life (Bertranou, 2020). In this sense, the aesthetic logic of *kawaii*, its softness, roundness, and emotive intensity, resonates with deeper cultural desires for emotional security and playful expression.

This symbolic economy is also gender-inclusive and cross-generational. Murasawa (quoted in Kageyama, 2006) describes the consumption of *kawaii* products as an intentional act of «not growing up», a way of reasserting autonomy through affect and aesthetic choice. Within Argentina's contemporary design landscape, the enduring presence of *kawaii* thus reflects not only Japanese cultural influence but also the localized reimagining of cuteness as a legitimate and resonant visual language. From youthful fandoms to adult collections, *kawaii* persists as a vehicle of identity, emotional navigation, and intergenerational cultural memory.

### 3. CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The corpus analyzed in this study consists of character designs produced by the Argentine studio DGPB and the illustrator PumPum. These creators were selected because their work represents two distinct approaches to the adaptation of *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentine visual culture: one characterized by playful grotesque experimentation and the other by minimalist emotional expression.

This research employs a qualitative and comparative approach that combines morphological analysis of character design with sociocultural interpretation. The analysis focuses on visual elements such as proportions, facial features, color palettes, and expressive cues in order to examine how *kawaii* aesthetics are reinterpreted within local design practices. By comparing these visual characteristics across the selected works, the study identifies how global *kawaii* conventions are transformed through local aesthetic sensibilities.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 FROM COMICS TO CHARACTERS: ARGENTINE VISUAL STORYTELLING AND THE FORMATION OF DESIGN CULTURE

To understand how *kawaii* aesthetics became integrated into Argentine character design, it is necessary to situate contemporary practices within the longer history of the country's visual storytelling traditions. Argentine comics and illustration culture created the graphic and narrative infrastructure upon which later global influences, including *kawaii*, could be reinterpreted.

Long before the arrival of *kawaii* aesthetics and global character design currents, Argentina cultivated a rich visual tradition in comic art, or *historietas*, which provided fertile ground for contemporary character design. Serialized comic strips began appearing in national newspapers in the early twentieth century, evolving into a fully developed cultural industry by mid-century. By the 1940s and 1950s, comics had become a key medium of mass communication, shaping public opinion, conveying ideological positions, and offering aesthetic alternatives to imported cultural products.

This period, often referred to as the «golden age» of Argentine comics, coincided with an expansion of the national cultural industry and the institutionalization of graphic design as a professional discipline, formally introduced into university curricula by 1984. Comics such as *El Eternauta* by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López, and *Mafalda* by Quino, not only established distinctive graphic identities but also critiqued societal conventions, authority structures, and political repression. Their characters became vessels

of national discourse, capable of condensing complex social values into accessible visual formats.

The visual logic of Argentine historietas emphasized exaggerated facial expressions, narrative economy, and symbolic compression, traits that would later resonate with the principles of character design found in global *kawaii* culture. Through satire and visual exaggeration, comic artists transformed everyday social tensions into legible graphic forms, allowing characters to function simultaneously as narrative agents and vehicles for cultural commentary. These practices contributed to the development of a visual literacy that prepared audiences to engage with stylized, emotionally driven characters.

In this light, the trajectory from historietas to character design in Argentina reflects not a rupture but a gradual convergence. While international movements such as Superflat and Pictoplasma have introduced new aesthetic grammars, Argentine design culture has retained its socially embedded narrative sensibility. Contemporary character designers continue to draw upon the symbolic density and communicative clarity inherited from comics, repurposing it within globalized frameworks of visual culture and consumer experience.

These visual strategies not only shaped Argentine storytelling traditions but also produced iconic characters that embodied the nation's cultural tensions and political imagination.

#### 4.2 NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION IN ARGENTINE COMIC CHARACTER DESIGN

Argentina's tradition of comic art has served both as a crucible for national visual identity and as a space for political critique. As early as the 1940s, comic characters became symbolic actors within the Argentine public sphere, visually encoding shifting understandings of rurality, indigeneity, urban modernity, and popular resistance. Through humor and satire, these figures contributed to the formation of a distinctive visual culture in which characters condensed complex cultural tensions into accessible graphic forms.

Among the earliest and most iconic figures is Patoruzú, first published in 1945. Portrayed as a noble Tehuelche chieftain, the character embodies a romanticized vision of Indigenous virtue physically powerful, morally upright, and closely associated with nature. His exaggerated anatomy situates him within global cartoon traditions while simultaneously constructing a localized representation of Indigenous masculinity (Rivera, 1985). The character's design reflects the contradictions of Argentina's colonial imagination: Indigenous identity is idealized as a moral reference point while also rendered culturally distant through humor and exaggeration.

A different articulation of rural identity appears in Inodoro Pereyra, created in 1972 by Roberto Fontanarrosa. This comic parodies the epic gauchesque tradition by transforming the heroic gaucho into a solitary and self-reflective figure. Through visual simplification and expressive caricature, the character operates as a vehicle for questioning myths of criollo authenticity. As Fontanarrosa's graphic style evolved toward minimalist clarity, Inodoro Pereyra increasingly functioned as a symbolic commentator positioned between tradition and parody.

Political consciousness emerges with particular force in Mafalda, the internationally recognized child protagonist created by Joaquín Salvador Lavado Tejón (Quino) in 1963. Set in a middle-class Buenos Aires environment during the Cold War, Mafalda articulates political critique through the voice of a child. Her design combines graphic simplicity with high emotional expressivity, allowing the character to address social injustice, political hypocrisy, and generational conflict. By placing a politically aware child at the center of public debate, the character articulated a form of cultural critique that resonated both locally and globally.

Finally, Clemente, introduced by Carlos Caloi Loiseau in 1973, represents a more abstract

and experimental approach to character design. With an ambiguous and hybrid form, Clemente departs from earlier representational models and embraces visual minimalism and anthropomorphic ambiguity. This design strategy expanded the interpretive possibilities of comic characters, allowing Clemente to function as a flexible commentator on Argentina's political and economic crises while embodying a distinctly porteño popular sensibility.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how Argentine comic characters operate as symbolic mediators of cultural memory and national identity. Through exaggeration, caricature, and narrative condensation, they translate complex social tensions into emotionally legible visual forms. These traditions of symbolic compression and expressive exaggeration also anticipate visual strategies later mobilized in contemporary character design, including the affective minimalism characteristic of *kawaii*-inspired aesthetics.

#### 4.3 FROM LOCAL COMIC TRADITIONS TO INTERNATIONAL CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER DESIGN

Argentina's long tradition of comic illustration established a visual culture grounded in exaggeration, symbolic condensation, and graphic experimentation. As discussed in previous sections, these narrative practices accustomed audiences to interpreting characters as condensed carriers of social meaning. This visual literacy later facilitated the reception of new aesthetic languages emerging from global character design.

Alongside comics, another important site of character production developed within Argentina's advertising and branding industries. Commercial mascots were designed primarily to generate immediate emotional recognition and brand identification, privileging clarity and affective appeal over narrative complexity (Fernández, 2019). Although more constrained than comic characters, these figures contributed to the normalization of character-based visual communication in everyday media environments.

A major transformation occurred with the formal integration of graphic design into Argentine university curricula in 1984. Design education reframed illustration as a field of conceptual exploration rather than merely a tool of commercial persuasion. Within this framework, character design increasingly functioned as a medium for visual storytelling, affective communication, and cultural commentary (Margolin 2002; Julier 2010). At the same time, digital technologies expanded the visual vocabulary available to designers and facilitated the circulation of international aesthetic influences.

Within this context of globalization, *kawaii* aesthetics, introduced through *anime*, *manga*, and character merchandise, began to shape local visual imaginaries. Their adoption, however, did not occur through simple imitation. Argentine designers integrated *kawaii* visual strategies with pre-existing traditions of satire, caricature, and symbolic narration. As a result, contemporary character design in Argentina operates at the intersection of global stylistic flows and local cultural practices, producing hybrid forms that combine affective minimalism with socially embedded visual storytelling.

#### 4.4 THE MULTIPLICITY OF *KAWAII* EXPRESSIONS IN ARGENTINE CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER DESIGN

The emergence of *kidults*, adults who actively embrace childlike aesthetics, behaviors, and products, has transformed the visual economy of design in Argentina. According to Mariela Mociulsky, CEO of the research agency Trendsity<sup>2</sup>, this demographic views life as an act of "personal construction," valuing adolescence as a phase of creativity and identity exploration rather than merely a transitional stage. Designers and marketers seeking to connect with *kidults* have increasingly turned to *kawaii*-inflected strategies, using visual cues to trigger emotional intimacy, playfulness, and nostalgia.

<sup>2</sup> Webpage: <http://www.trendsity.com>

This shift has led to the proliferation of consumer objects marked by *kawaii* features: small scale, soft materials, and anthropomorphic forms that invite tactile interaction and affective projection. Visual simplicity, exaggerated proportions, minimal facial details, and rounded silhouettes function as emotional shorthand for innocence and vulnerability, engaging instinctive care responses (Sanders 1992; Lorenz 1982). Empirical studies in affective design further support this mechanism. Research conducted at the University of St. Gallen (Miesler, Leder, & Herrmann 2011) demonstrates that visual features aligned with *kawaii* morphology—such as plumpness, symmetry, and soft textures—consistently activate positive affective responses in consumers. As Genosko (2005) argues, the affective potency of *kawaii* increases in proportion to the exaggeration of infantile traits, stimulating empathy and attachment.

Within this context, contemporary Argentine character design demonstrates a multiplicity of *kawaii* expressions that range from hybrid grotesque forms to collectible designer toys and tactile plush objects.

#### 4.4.1 HYBRID *KAWAII*: DGPH AND PUMPUM

In the Argentine context, contemporary character designers have selectively integrated *kawaii* aesthetics into their visual vocabularies, demonstrating sensitivity to the emotional resonances of form, color, and minimalism. Studios such as DGPH and local artist like Pum-Pum stand at the forefront of this localized adaptation, fusing the symbolic density of *kawaii* with the playful abstraction characteristic of global character culture (Thaler and Denicke 2006; Pictoplasma 2006).

DGPH and PumPum's character designs embrace *kawaii* morphology while often adopting zoomorphic or monster-like forms. Their characters typically feature soft edges, non-saturated pastel palettes, and symmetrical body plans. A notable strategy is the omission of expressive facial features such as mouths, producing emotionally *neutral* figures that operate as affective screens for the viewer's projection [Figure 1 and 2]. This design choice echoes the principle of «empty expressivity» noted by Kinsella (1995), whereby characters evoke emotional engagement precisely by withholding explicit cues.



Figure 1: Campaign made for Nike at the opening of Tokyo 2008/ Render of the Ganesh doll to be made with Red Magic/ Illustration made for SaruKid).



Figure 2 (from left to right) 2014 Agenda Cover, Promotional stickers and handkerchiefs produced by the company for sale to the public (<https://www.facebook.com/holapumpum>). Intervention at Hotel Home Buenos Aires, CABA (<http://homebuenosairesblog.com/tag/pum-pum/>)

The affective efficacy of these designs lies in their capacity to compress emotional density into highly economical visual forms. In this context, *kawaii*'s appeal extends beyond cuteness alone, functioning instead as a visual language of vulnerability, intimacy, and gentle subversion. These characters invite viewers to suspend rational interpretation and engage with character design as an emotional encounter.

#### 4.4.2 TACTILE KAWAII

Plush toys emphasize tactility and softness, typically relying on textiles such as fleece, minky, or felt. While historically associated with children's stuffed animals, contemporary plush toys increasingly occupy a space closer to collectible sculpture, often produced for adult audiences as emotionally expressive objects.

Argentine artists DGPB and PumPum have adapted their graphic character designs into plush forms, translating *kawaii* aesthetics into new material languages. DGPB's plush figures, frequently monster-like creatures, feature symmetrical silhouettes, oversized heads, and compact limbs that reinforce infantile morphology and emotional accessibility. Their rounded forms and absence of sharp contours create a visual invitation for both physical and emotional interaction.

Both inflated designs [Figures 3 and 4], by contrast, lean toward surreal abstraction. While sharing the same material softness, her characters often adopt less anthropomorphic proportions and maintain the visual ambiguity present in her graphic work. Nevertheless, the use of soft textures and compact dimensions continues to activate affective responses associated with care and nurturing (Miesler et al. 2011).



Figure 3 Collaboration for Momishtoys (<http://momishtoys.com/pum-pum/>)



Figure 4 DGPH. Inflated character design made for the campaign for Nike at the opening of Tokyo 2008

By combining physical softness with emotionally coded minimalism, these plush toys function as affective agents—objects designed to be held, protected, and emotionally engaged with. Their appeal lies less in functional utility than in their capacity to evoke tenderness and intimacy, reinforcing *kawaii*'s emotional logic within contemporary material culture.

#### 4.5 THE SOCIAL VALUE OF *KAWAII* AESTHETICS IN ARGENTINE SOCIETY

The symbolic codes of *kawaii* aesthetics perform a dual function in Argentine visual culture. On one hand, they reveal the stylistic grammar of *kawaii* itself, its forms, textures, and affective modalities. On the other, they reflect the demographic, psychological, and cultural profile of the audiences who consume, reproduce, and reinterpret these codes. The widespread integration of *kawaii* within Argentine graphic design therefore operates both as a mirror of global cultural diffusion and as an indicator of local identity reconfiguration.

Argentina's cultural fabric has long been shaped by waves of transnational influence, owing to its immigrant heritage and cosmopolitan urban culture. Within this heterogeneous symbolic landscape, the rise of *kawaii* aesthetics coincides with broader transformations in communication practices, affective consumption, and social values. As a globalized visual idiom, *kawaii* found fertile ground in Argentina through the country's participation in transnational media networks and cultural markets, where aesthetic forms and commercial strategies circulate continuously (Kinsella, 1995).

Such conditions foster a form of «visual literacy» among audiences, the ability to decode and emotionally respond to hybrid aesthetic messages. As Argentine consumers, designers, and artists adopt and adapt *kawaii* idioms, they participate in a process of semiotic negotiation that reshapes both the national imaginary and the emotional economies of everyday life (Miesler et al. 2011).

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai offers a useful framework for understanding this process. In *Loose Cannons*, he describes globalization not as simple cultural homogenization but as a condition of disjunctive connectivity, characterized by overlapping flows of people, media, images, and ideologies (Appadurai, 2007). Within this perspective, aesthetics such as *kawaii* do not circulate unchanged; they are recontextualized by local actors according to their own historical and cultural frameworks. *Kawaii* in Argentina thus emerges not as a passive import but as a visual idiom subject to reinterpretation and hybridization.

This ambivalence is central to understanding *kawaii* as more than a benign aesthetic. As Natalie Angier (2006) notes, cuteness evokes affection, vulnerability, and comfort while simultaneously operating as a subtle mechanism of domestication. Its visual language can both soothe and discipline, framing emotional attachment through forms that appear harmless and playful.

Accordingly, in the Argentine context *kawaii* operates as an aesthetic apparatus saturated with multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. It signals transnational engagement, consumer desire, symbolic softness, and emotional control. At the same time, it remains a site of creative experimentation, reflecting Argentina's ongoing negotiation between global cultural flows and localized reinterpretations.

In this sense, *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentina illustrate how global visual languages can be transformed into locally meaningful forms of play, identity, and cultural expression.

#### CONCLUSION

The influence of *kawaii* aesthetics on contemporary character design in Argentina is both profound and multidimensional. This study has examined how the formal grammar of *kawaii*, characterized by infantile morphological features (Lorenz 1982; Sanders 1992), affective semiotics (Genosko 2005; Angier 2006), and visual adaptability across media platforms, has been reinterpreted within the Argentine design ecosystem. Rather than replicating Japanese templates, Argentine designers and studios have localized *kawaii* sensibilities, generating hybrid visual languages that resonate across national, generational, and emotional contexts.

The findings demonstrate that *kawaii* in Argentina operates as a culturally mediated aesthe-

tic rather than a simple stylistic import. Consistent with Arjun Appadurai's (2007) understanding of globalization as a field of disjunctive cultural flows, global visual idioms are reconfigured when they encounter local symbolic systems. In the Argentine case, *kawaii* aesthetics intersect with the country's traditions of comics, illustration, and graphic experimentation, producing new forms of character design that combine global recognizability with locally situated meanings.

Through the analysis of designer toys, plush figures, character-based street art, and independent illustration practices, this research has shown how *kawaii* functions as an affective infrastructure within contemporary visual culture. These character forms operate not merely as decorative images but as vehicles for emotional communication, structuring attachments related to nostalgia, playfulness, and vulnerability. Their appeal extends beyond children to a growing demographic of «kidults» whose consumption patterns reflect shifting relationships between memory, identity, and affect in contemporary consumer culture (Bernardini, 2014).

This study contributes to the understanding of Latin American visual culture by demonstrating how Asian-derived aesthetics are negotiated within regional creative industries. Drawing on Néstor García Canclini's concept of cultural hybridity, the Argentine case illustrates how global design languages are transformed through processes of reinterpretation and localization. Rather than dissolving local identity, transnational aesthetic flows can generate new symbolic forms that articulate both global belonging and cultural specificity.

More broadly, the findings highlight the role of contemporary designers as cultural mediators who translate international visual trends into locally meaningful expressions. In this sense, *kawaii* aesthetics in Argentina exemplify how globalized visual languages can be mobilized to produce new narratives of identity, emotion, and social belonging within the expanding circuits of the creative economy.

Ultimately, studying *kawaii* as a semiotic and affective system reveals how seemingly playful visual forms participate in broader cultural transformations. By examining how cuteness operates across contexts of globalization, design practice, and consumer culture, this research opens new avenues for understanding the circulation of hybrid aesthetics and the evolving role of character design in shaping cultural imaginaries in Latin America.

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