

Jun 8th, 9:00 AM - Jun 12th, 5:00 PM

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Citation

Yix, G., Nguyen, M., and Preston, D. (2026) The 'Cuteness Matrix': Mapping cuteness as an affective strategy for purpose-led communication design, in Simeone, L., Gray, C. M., Verhoeven, A., de Götzen, A., Bakırlıoğlu, Y., Zohar, H., Stead, M., and Buwert, P. (eds.), *DRS2026: Edinburgh*, 8–12 June, Edinburgh, United Kingdom. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2026.1631>

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The 'Cuteness Matrix': Mapping cuteness as an affective strategy for purpose-led communication design

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<https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2026.1631>

Abstract: Cuteness is often dismissed as trivial or decorative. Yet research across neuroscience, psychology, and cultural theory reveals it as a powerful affective force that captures attention, evokes empathy, and encourages prosocial behaviour and well-being. Cute's affective potency also renders it ethically ambivalent, capable of manipulation as much as comfort. Despite its ubiquity, cuteness remains under-theorised in design research, a notable gap for a discipline concerned with communication, emotion, and human connection. Addressing this gap, this study conducts an interpretive systematic literature review of publications from 1943 to 2025, identifying 65 key scholarly sources. Interdisciplinary insights are synthesized into the 'Cuteness Matrix', a diagnostic framework mapping two central tensions in cuteness studies: power and purpose. The study reconceptualises cuteness as a relational affect that can be intentionally designed to nurture empathy, participation, and care. Ultimately, it asks: can cuteness be reimagined as a purposeful and ethical design strategy — *Cute for Good*?

Keywords: affect; cute; design methodology; positive design

1. Introduction

Design, at its core, is concerned with communication, emotion, and human connection. Yet, one of contemporary culture's most pervasive affective languages – cuteness – remains curiously marginal in design research. More than mere child's play or superficial decoration, cuteness is an affective force that shapes how people see, feel, and relate to one another. Research across psychology, engineering, marketing, and cultural theory demonstrates that cuteness commands attention, evokes empathy, and promotes prosocial behaviour (Kringelbach et al., 2016; Nittono, 2016; Sherman & Haidt, 2011). Neuroscience further reveals that cute elicits measurable therapeutic benefits, reducing stress and enhancing well-being (Chou et al., 2022; Kokubun et al., 2025; Ohkura et al., 2020). However, the same affective potency that makes cute emotionally engaging also renders it ethically complex. Cultural theorists critique its complicity with consumerism, infantilisation, and power



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dynamics (Harris, 2000; Ngai, 2012, 2022). Balanced between care and control, pleasure and persuasion, cuteness emerges as an aesthetic of contradiction, simultaneously tender and strategic, disarming and directive.

Despite its cultural ubiquity, cute remains under-theorised in design research. While its affective and relational qualities underpin adjacent concepts such as ‘kansei’, product personality, and affective design, the term ‘cute’ itself is rarely acknowledged in leading design journals. Cute is conceptually present yet linguistically absent, obscured by more technical terminology. This omission signals a disciplinary gap: although design centres on shaping emotion and connection, it has yet to engage critically with one of the most influential affective forces of contemporary life.

This paper addresses that gap by mapping and synthesising interdisciplinary scholarship to clarify how cuteness operates as both affect and strategy. It introduces the ‘Cuteness Matrix’, an analytical and generative framework situating cute along two intersecting dimensions: the power it confers or denies (from powerless to empowering) and the purpose it serves (from economic to ethical). Through this synthesis, the paper advances that cuteness is not a static aesthetic but a relational affect, a designable emotional strategy capable of nurturing empathy, participation, and social connection. This reframing underpins a broader aim to reposition cuteness as a legitimate and ethical methodology within design: a strategy for comfort, care, and connection, what this study terms ‘Cute for Good’.

2. Understanding cute

2.1 Cute and kawaii: Divergent origins, unified global appeal

‘Cute’ and ‘kawaii’ seem synonymous, yet their origins reveal distinct worldviews that shape how cuteness is theorised. The English ‘cute’, abbreviated from ‘acute’, originally meant clever or shrewd, retains undertones of manipulation (Dale, 2017). This lends it an ironic edge of sweetness tinged with suspicion (Harris, 2000; May, 2019; Ngai, 2012). In contrast, the Japanese ‘kawaii’, derived from ‘kawaisou’ (pitiable), has evolved into an approach-oriented emotion denoting affection and empathy (Dale, 2017; Nittono, 2016), deeply embedded in everyday life. English discourse frames cute as ambivalent and manipulative, while Japanese scholarship emphasizes relationality and prosociality.

Despite distinct trajectories, ‘cute’ and ‘kawaii’ converge into a shared global aesthetic accelerated by digital culture. Cute now circulates as an ‘affective vernacular’ that humanises technology and supports online sociality (Hjorth, 2009; Wittkower, 2012). As an emotional shorthand, cute facilitates care, empathy, and affiliation through likes, shares, and playful exchanges. From emojis to avatars, cute forms the affective infrastructure for networked life, a social interface transforming digital interaction into distributed acts of connection.

2.2 Why cuteness matters: Significance, issues, and opportunities

2.2.1 Significance: Psychological impact and persuasive power

Lorenz's (1943) 'Kindchenschema' identifies the biological basis of cute, with infant-like features triggering caregiving responses. Subsequent psychological studies demonstrate that cute enhances empathy, attention, and prosociality (Nittono, 2016; Sherman & Haidt, 2011). Context and relational cues further intensify the perception of cute, transforming it from a visual trait into an affective experience that nurtures coexistence (Cheek & Fernando, 2011; Nittono, 2016). Cute can potentially function as a design principle that strengthens connection and interaction.

Cuteness also embodies play and paradox. 'Whimsical cuteness' promotes playful indulgence (Nenkov & Scott, 2014), while May's (2009) 'uncanny cute' blends the endearing with the eerie. These variations broaden cute's appeal across cultures and contexts. In commerce, cute's affective versatility becomes persuasive power. Diminutive brand names enhance likability (Li & Eastman, 2023). Cute shields brands from consumer backlash (Septianto & Kwon, 2022). It similarly motivates socially beneficial behaviours, including recycling (Wang et al., 2017), waste-sorting (Tan et al., 2023), altruism (Shin & Mattila, 2021), reducing meat consumption (Zickfeld et al., 2017) and sustainable food choices (Marquis et al., 2023). Cuteness further operates as cultural strategy. Japan institutionalises cuteness through 'Cool Japan' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009) with the official appointment of 'Kawaii Ambassadors', and regional 'Yuru-chara' mascots, that foster belonging and project soft power (Nye, 1990). Collectively, these examples show how cute converts emotion into civic or ethical action, aligning with design's aim to cultivate empathy and prosociality.

2.2.2 Issues: Cultural critique and counterviews

Cultural theorists identify significant tensions in cuteness. Ngai (2012, 2022) argues that cuteness aestheticises powerlessness and fuels consumption through an illusion of intimacy. Similarly, Harris (2000) sees cute as inviting both care and control of the 'lovable inferior'. Takashi Murakami, an artist who works with cuteness, claims that kawaii diplomacy 'castrated' Japan's national identity (May, 2019). These perspectives highlight cute's political ambiguity, which reinforces racist (Bow, 2019), sexist (Kanesaka, 2025) or colonial tropes (Ngai, 2022). Yet reducing cute to passivity overlooks its relational and participatory agency. Scholars reframe cute as sociality rather than subjugation: an agentive invitation to harmonious interaction (Dale, 2017) and an approach-oriented emotion grounded in coexistence instead of domination (Nittono, 2016). Japan's post-war 'shōjo bunka' (girls' culture) and the 1970s 'Cutequake' (Slade, 2019) exemplify how kawaii became gentle defiance against authority, redistributing power through self-expression.

Within capitalism, cute can mask labour and exploitation by commodifying emotion (Ngai, 2012). However, ethnographies reveal practitioners actively reinterpret cute rather than passively consume it. Lolita fashion enables emotional escape and feminist resistance (Nguyen, 2016; Pelea, 2020). British maid cafés transform cosplay into affective agency (Thomas-Parr, 2024). Decora fashion's exuberant ornamentation turns everyday life into joyful autonomy (Rose et al., 2020). Across these subcultures, cuteness resists capitalist efficiency and adult rationality. It reclaims emotional expression as empowerment rather than exploitation.

Representation presents further tensions. Cute can infantilise femininity and perpetuate racialised and colonial tropes by conflating innocence with exoticism (Bow, 2019; Kanesaka, 2025; Ngai, 2022). Yet cute can also be reappropriated as resistance. Kanesaka (2025) shows how Asian American communities mobilise kawaii as both critique and care to assert belonging and agency. Lolita, Decora, and cosplay cultures enable self-authorship and joyful resistance (Nguyen, 2016; Pelea, 2020; Rose et al., 2020; Thomas-Parr, 2024). Representation is therefore negotiated not fixed. Cuteness can constrain or liberate depending on context, intention, and participation.

2.2.3 Opportunities: Affective design through cuteness

Cuteness activates empathy and care (Lorenz, 1943; Nittono, 2016; Sherman & Haidt, 2011), making it a powerful tool for affective design. Contemporary design increasingly operates within emotional domains, as seen in emotional design (Norman, 2004; Desmet & Fokkinga, 2025) and Kansei Engineering (Nagamachi, 1995), which translate subjective feelings into measurable design parameters.

Within this affective paradigm, cuteness functions as both design principle and emotional quality that connects object and observer (Gn, 2016). Ohkura's (2019) 'Kawaii Engineering' identifies perceptual triggers (rounded forms, bright colours, soft textures, high-pitched sounds, and playful movements) that evoke delight and attachment. Lee et al. (2021) show that cute interfaces increase engagement. While Hotogi and Hagiwara's (2015) Kansei-based keyword character generator, Cheon and Bussracumpakorn's (2022) fast-food mascots guidelines, Fan et al.'s (2023) analysis of cute's structural elements, and Chen and Zhunag's (2023) study of anthropomorphic proportions confirm cute's reproducible design logic. Marcus et al. (2017)'s 'Cuteness Engineering' codifies visual traits and intangible personality attributes such as awkwardness, naïveté, or kindness, especially when these contrast with a character's appearance.

Cuteness, therefore, exemplifies an affective design model that spans Buchanan's Four Orders of Design (1992; 2001): from symbolic form (Order 1), material embodiment (Order 2), interactive experience (Order 3) and system infrastructure (Order 4). Japan's 'Cool Japan' strategy, revived in 2024, demonstrates how kawaii can operate across these orders to build connection, influence, and cultural identity through design.

2.3 From cute insights to design imperatives

Across disciplines, research shows how cuteness functions as an affective force, raises ethical and cultural concerns, and offers concrete affordances for design. Together, these

perspectives position cuteness as both emotionally powerful and socially consequential, requiring designers to navigate its dual capacity for connection and manipulation. Cultural theory offers two guiding lenses: ambivalence, which sharpens critical awareness of power and representation, and relationality, which supports prosocial and participatory design. In digital culture, cute already mediates interaction and belonging; recognising this affective infrastructure enables designers to shape interfaces, narratives, and communities that foster empathy and inclusion. Whereas, cultural critique establishes ethical boundaries, enabling designers to anticipate harm, recognise bias, and define responsible use. Collectively, these insights underscore the need for a design-specific framework that integrates theoretical, ethical, and practical knowledge, forming the foundational aims of this literature review.

3. Aims of the cute literature review mapping

The affective power of cute highlights its significance not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a deliberately designed experience. Cute's ubiquity is not accidental. Cute is consciously crafted with design expertise, strategically mobilised by commerce, and embedded in everyday communication through media propagation. Paradoxically, despite design's central role in producing and circulating cuteness, the phenomenon remains under-theorised within design studies, which rarely name 'cute' directly or examine its relational dynamics.

Recognising that much of the most insightful theory on cuteness originates outside design, this study contends that such cross-disciplinary knowledge can be productively adapted to inform design thinking and practice. Accordingly, this literature review pursues two main aims. First, it systematically maps the emerging field of cuteness studies to illustrate how psychological, cultural, and design dimensions intersect. This involves analysing how cuteness is defined, perceived, and theorised across disciplines. This aggregates extra-disciplinary theory into conceptual foundations relevant for design.

Second, it translates interdisciplinary insights into an actionable framework for design practice and evaluation. To achieve this, it introduced the 'Cuteness Matrix', a conceptual and methodological framework that synthesises fragmented theory into design-relevant knowledge. The matrix enables comparison across studies by examining how different approaches conceptualise the agency and intention behind cuteness, whether it manipulates, empowers, commodifies, or connects. By exploring how agency (power) and meaning (purpose) are co-produced between creator and audience, the review ultimately asks how cute might be intentionally and ethically designed to do good.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methodology and methods

A mapping review (Grant & Booth, 2009) systematically organises and synthesises interdisciplinary research on cuteness. This method accommodates empirical, theoretical, and critical studies, enabling a holistic visualisation of the field (Jahan et al., 2016). Prioritising conceptual synthesis over quantitative aggregation, it identifies recurring patterns, key tensions, emerging trends, and underexplored areas, an integrative overview

largely absent in current cuteness scholarship.

Sources were classified into five categories: Definition, Psychology, Application, Power, and Purpose, reflecting core theoretical concerns in design research. Their scope is summarised in Table 1 (Appendix). Each study was assessed for its key findings, subject focus (creator, object, or perceiver), situatedness (geographical and disciplinary context), and methodology. Results were plotted onto the 'Cuteness Matrix', a visual and diagnostic framework that charts how cuteness operates across two axes: power and purpose. This interpretive synthesis integrates dispersed insights into a coherent conceptual landscape. Searches spanned Scopus, JSTOR, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect for peer-reviewed English publications from 1943 to 2025, ensuring comprehensive cross-disciplinary coverage.

Inclusion required studies that:

- Define or characterise cute/kawaii
- Investigated cute's cognitive, emotional, or behavioural effects
- Examine cuteness in design/communication
- Offer design-related implications
- Analyse agency or purpose
- Provide English full text

4.2 Finding cute in design studies

To ensure scholarly rigour, the search targeted four leading design research journals (Cash, 2018; Gemser et al., 2012): 'Design Studies', 'Design Issues', 'Journal of Engineering Design', and 'Design Research Society'. Few results explicitly addressed 'cute'. The term appeared only within main texts, rather than titles, abstracts, or keywords, indicating that cute remains conceptually relevant yet linguistically marginalised in design research. This omission is striking given that cute has been empirically examined extensively in neuroscience and psychology. Instead, adjacent concepts such as 'kansei' (Aoyama et al., 2004; Chou & Chen, 2006), product personality (Desmet et al., 2008), and affective design (Wang et al., 2019) indirectly capture cute's emotional and relational qualities in technical terminology (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Countering this gap, the review expanded to include interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives from psychology, neuroscience, and cultural studies. Notably, the 'East Asian Journal of Popular Culture' provides decolonial insight, echoing anthropologist Christine Yano's (2009) 'pink globalization', where kawaii's global diffusion challenges Western cultural dominance. Such perspectives position cute as a plural, participatory language of care, emotion, and well-being across cultural boundaries. This reinforces the need for its explicit theorisation within design studies.

4.3 Limitations

A key limitation is the exclusion of Japanese-language scholarship. While 'kawaii' originates from Japan, focusing on English-language publications aids analytical consistency and accessibility but risks overlooking nuance in Japanese academia. Future research would benefit from bilingual or collaborative approaches.

5. Results and key findings

5.1 Data collection results

65 key scholarly sources were identified, coded, and positioned within five areas of the 'Cuteness Matrix'. See Appendix: 'Manipulative Cute' (Table 3), 'Relational Cute' (Table 4), 'Transformative Cute' (Table 5), 'Instrumental Cute' (Table 6), and 'Central Neutrality and Ambiguity' (Table 7). Each representing distinct configurations of power and purpose. Within each quadrant, studies are thematically grouped and arranged chronologically to trace conceptual developments. This process enables an interpretive synthesis that transcends disciplinary silos, revealing how cuteness functions as a relational and dynamic affective mode rather than a static aesthetic category.

5.2 The 'Cuteness Matrix': Mapping agency and intention

With the conceptual terrain of cuteness established in Section 2, this section examines how scholarship across psychology, cultural studies, and design aligns with the two evaluative axes of the 'Cuteness Matrix': power and purpose. Plotting studies within this framework makes visible how different disciplines emphasise manipulation, care, commodification, or prosociality, and how these orientations shape current understandings of cute. This systematic overview makes visible the distribution of research across the field and highlights gaps that design scholarship is uniquely positioned to address.

Vertical axis – Power ↓↑

The vertical axis represents 'Power', ranging from 'Powerless Cute' that infantilises or objectifies to 'Empowering Cute' which nurtures participation and social engagement. This axis distinguishes whether cute reinforces or subverts power structures, whether political, social, or interpersonal.

Horizontal axis – Purpose ←→

The horizontal axis represents 'Purpose', spanning from 'Economic-driven Cute' serving market goals to 'Purpose-driven Cute' that nurtures empathy and prosocial behaviour. This axis clarifies the intent or function of cute, whether cute serves capital, community, or both.

Instead of a binary definition of cute as good or bad, this matrix provides a nuanced, multi-dimensional map. For each quadrant, core arguments, characteristic mechanisms, and representative sources are synthesised. This mapping is necessarily interpretive, but it highlights major currents and tensions in the field.

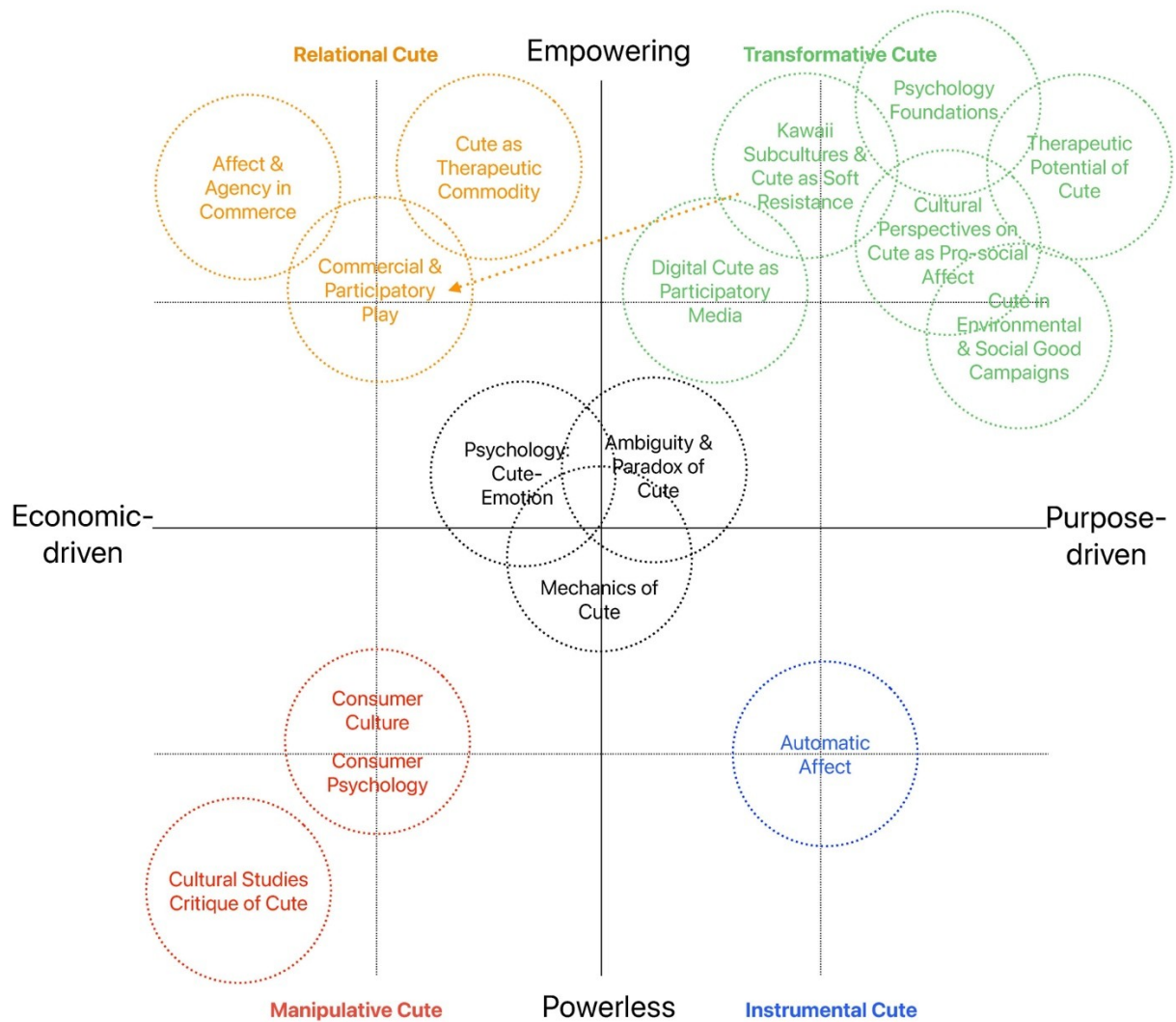


Figure 1 The 'Cuteness Matrix' – Mapping power and purpose in cuteness studies.

5.3 Key findings from mapping review

Quadrant 1: 'Manipulative Cute' – powerless and economic-driven (See Table 3)

Cultural and consumer psychology studies clusters around 'Manipulative Cute', a commodified, infantilised, and exploitative form serving capitalist interests through emotional compliance and uncritical consumption. It aligns with Ngai's (2012, 2022) notion of cute as a consumer aesthetic and Harris' (2000) critique of its powerlessness. Here, cuteness simplifies complexity to mask persuasion. Cute is used on the audience rather than with them. Empirical studies corroborate this dynamic. Nenkov and Scott (2014)'s 'whimsical cute' links affective pleasure to indulgent consumption. Yet, studies in Japan introduces nuance. Kawaii consumption reduces stress, evokes nostalgia, and enhances social connection (Lieber-Milo, 2022). For Japanese women across generations, kawaii functions as self-expression and emotional coping. Similarly, Hosany et al. (2013) note how Sanrio's 'social communication' empire strategically cultivates affective bonds, participation, and

cross-generational loyalty through kawaii aesthetics. According to Yano (2011), Sanrio commodifies emotional intimacy by transforming care, gifting, and affection into marketable forms of connection and national healing. Such marketing strategies demonstrate cute's relational and participatory potential. While 'Manipulative Cute' exploits emotion for profit, its very mechanisms of intimacy and play also enables connection and care, blurring boundaries between commercial manipulation and affective participation.

Quadrant 2: 'Relational Cute' – empowering and economic-driven (See Table 4)

When manipulation yields to participation and mutual affection, cuteness transforms from exploitation to engagement. At this threshold emerges 'Relational Cute', where commercial intent persists, yet the audience gains agency through interaction, identification, and play. Moving upwards on the matrix, 'Relational Cute' captures commercial yet participatory expressions of cuteness that empower emotional connection, co-creation, and shared joy within communities of fans and consumers. Allison's (2006) concept of 'kawaisha' reframes cute as an affective sensibility that nurtures attachment and social connection. The 'Pokémon' franchise embodies this idea. Originating from Satoshi Tajiri's wish to alleviate childhood loneliness, the gameplay centres on care and companionship, even as its slogan "Gotta catch 'em all" suggests acquisitive desire. Despite its commercial success, 'Pokémon' fosters empathy and shared experience, extending into real-world community through 'Pokémon Go', where players report improved well-being (Wang, 2021; Wang & Skjervold, 2021). Similarly, 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' demonstrates how commercial entertainment can become a medium for digital care and emotional healing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rose, 2023). Beyond play, cute circulates as emotional commerce. Baby-cute cues in products can enhance well-being and purchase intention (Chou et al., 2022). Kawaii also functions as a participatory language of identity and visibility, from everyday sociality in Japan (Lieber-Milo & Nittono, 2019) to 'agentic femininity' in influencer cultures (Abidin, 2016). Relational Cute thus unites profit with participation, transforming consumption into co-created affect.

Quadrant 3: 'Transformative Cute' – empowering and purpose-driven (See Table 5)

Psychological research shows cute heightens attention, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (Kringelbach, 2016; Nittono, 2012, 2016; Sherman & Haidt, 2011). Dale (2017) interprets cute objects as possessing an agency that diffuses aggression and invites relational engagement. Extending this affective perspective, Zickfeld et al. (2019) identify 'kama muta', the feeling of being moved, as the core response to cuteness, one that deepens communal bonds and boosts altruism. In digital contexts, cute is an affective infrastructure for community-building (Hjorth, 2009; Wittkower, 2012). Within subcultures, kawaii operates as 'soft rebellion', enabling identity, solidarity, and feminist empowerment from Lolita and Decora to British maid cafés (Kinsella, 1995; Nguyen, 2016; Rose, 2020; Rose et al., 2022; Thomas-Parr, 2024; Winge, 2008).

Increasingly, cuteness functions as an affective strategy in social and environmental communication, shifting persuasion from fear to care. Brecher (2015) traces Japan's move from the fear-based ecological appeals of the 1960s–70s to the kawaii-driven optimism of the 1990s, reframing sustainability as compassion and stewardship. Instead of intimidation, cute encourages audiences to see themselves as caretakers of the planet, making

responsibility emotionally engaging and accessible. This approach extends globally. Australia's rail safety campaign 'Dumb Ways to Die' features a catchy song and a cast of colourful, bean-shaped characters who meet their comical demise in absurd ways. Tonkin (2019) identifies 'Dumb Ways to Die' as a landmark in public health communication, using humour and playfulness to promote behavioural change. Similarly, New Zealand's #EmergencyCute campaign uses cute imagery during earthquakes to alleviate anxiety and foster collective reassurance (McBride and Ball, 2022). However, both #EmergencyCute and Brecher's studies remain conceptual and context-specific. #EmergencyCute relies on practitioner reflection which needs to be supported by empirical audience data, while Brecher's analysis is culturally bound to Japan. Design research can address these limitations by developing practice-based and empirically informed frameworks that intentionally design, apply, and evaluate cuteness as an affective strategy for social good.

Emerging psychological and neuroscientific studies reveal the therapeutic dimensions of cute. Ohkura et al. (2020) found that tactile interaction with kawaii stimuli reduces stress and induces measurable healing. Chen and Peng (2024) distinguish between 'whimsical-cute', which soothes through amusement, and 'baby-cute', which evokes deep emotion (kama muta), beneficial for some but overwhelming for the highly anxious. Neurocognitively, regular kawaii engagement correlates with increased grey matter in empathy and reward regions (Kokubun et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that cuteness is a scientifically measurable affective design promoting healing and mental resilience.

Although the 'Transformative Cute' quadrant is densely populated, its studies stem from disciplines that enrich and support design research: psychology, cultural theory, digital media, subculture ethnography, and therapeutic science. Together, these perspectives expand the possibilities for 'Cute for Good', offering fertile ground for translating interdisciplinary insights into applied, purpose-driven design frameworks.

Quadrant 4: 'Instrumental Cute' – powerless and purpose-driven (See Table 6)

'Instrumental Cute' frames cuteness as a purposeful yet powerless affective mechanism rooted in biologically primed cues. Lorenz's (1943) 'Infant Schema' shows baby-like traits instinctively trigger care, a reflex supported by empirical evidence linking such cues to universal tenderness (Keating et al., 2003; Sanefuji et al., 2007). This automatic response underpins cute's persuasive power in humanitarian and prosocial contexts. Shin and Mattila (2021) found that incidental exposure to baby-like cues evokes tenderness, increasing altruistic giving even towards non-cute causes. Similarly, Lu et al. (2021) showed cute brand imagery fosters trust and green behaviour through emotion rather than reasoning. Thus, cute functions instrumentally: eliciting care and cooperation through reflexive affect. But the response remains one-directional and passive, reinforcing hierarchies like consumer–brand or victim–saviour without redistributing agency or transforming the relational dynamics of care.

Central neutrality and ambiguity (See Table 7)

At the centre lie accounts that emphasise ambivalence and paradox rather than clear moral or ideological extremes. May's (2009) 'uncanny cute' shows how the same aesthetic gesture can oscillate between tenderness and unease, sincerity and irony. This central position also

encompasses the paradoxical duality of cute as both objectifying and empowering. Galleymore (2022) critiques the “cutified, feminised animal” while noting subversive potentials through irony, horror, and camp. Kanesaka (2025) reads kawaii and ‘boba culture’ as sites where desire and disgust, objectification and empowerment, are actively negotiated. Buckley (2016) advances this central position by naming the emotion of perceiving cuteness, both a biological reflex and social signal, as “aww”. Without a recognised term, ‘cute-emotion’ remains diffused and under-theorised. Naming grants conceptual and methodological visibility, linking psychological mechanisms to design intent and making the emotion measurable and ethically designable. From practice, ‘Kawaii Engineering’ reframes cute as an empathetic design value for inclusion and dignity (e.g. cute utensils supporting seniors), illustrating cute’s operational power as an affective interface across commercial and social contexts (Ohkura, 2019). Collectively, these perspectives illuminate cute’s complexity as a relational mode whose effects are co-produced by creators, objects, and audiences. Positioned at the centre of the matrix, cute operates as a double-edged aesthetic: technically neutral yet emotionally charged, capable of charm and critique, comfort and disturbance, empathy and exploitation. This ambiguity is precisely where its most generative and transformative potentials emerge.

5.4 The ‘Cuteness Matrix’ as an analytical and design tool

The ‘Cuteness Matrix’ integrates fragmented interdisciplinary scholarship into a coherent visual and conceptual landscape. By mapping diverse perspectives within a unified structure, it enables analysis of how cuteness operates across a continuum from commercial to purposeful, and from passive consumption to active participation. It makes visible overlaps, tensions, and blind spots while highlighting transitional states that capture the fluidity of cute across contexts. It resists binaries and surfaces hybrids such as the commercial yet empowering, reflective of its real-world application. For instance, Kinsella’s (1995) ‘soft rebellion’ originated as ‘Transformative Cute’ but evolved into ‘Relational Cute’ through commercialisation. Conversely, ‘Instrumental Cute’ initiatives may progress toward ‘Transformative’ through co-design and community engagement. By visualising such movements, the matrix illustrates the relational, ideological, and ethical dynamics of cute.

Beyond mapping scholarship, the ‘Cuteness Matrix’ also guides design practice. It helps designers frame intent, anticipate ethical risks, define affective parameters, and establish criteria for evaluating outcomes. Designers begin by situating a project within the matrix to clarify its intended quadrant of operation. This prompts reflection on purpose (commercial or ethical) and power dynamics (passive or empowering), and on potential risks such as reinforcing stereotypes, infantilisation, or racialisation. Embedding the matrix within an iterative design process encourages continuous reflection through community feedback, representation audits, and affective testing.

In this way, the ‘Cuteness Matrix’ operationalises cuteness as a designable affect rather than a descriptive aesthetic. More than a taxonomy, it serves as a critical apparatus through which designers and researchers can interrogate how and why cuteness is employed and to what ends, transforming cute from a cultural descriptor into a conscious, ethical, and purposeful design strategy.

5.5 Operationalising the 'Cuteness Matrix' through case studies

To demonstrate how the 'Cuteness Matrix' operates in practice, two cases, Kumamon and Luce, illustrate how cuteness shifts across configurations of power and purpose over time.

5.5.1 Kumamon: from commercial mascot to transformative solidarity

Kumamon was created in 2010 to promote tourism and regional branding in Kumamoto Prefecture following the opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen line. Initially, it functioned as 'Manipulative Cute', operating as a commercial asset tied to economic promotion. The 2016 Kumamoto earthquake marked a turning point. In its aftermath, fans circulated images of Kumamon lifting rubble, bandaged, and embracing survivors. These participatory reinterpretations reframed the mascot as a symbol of solidarity, mobilising empathy, resilience, and public support. This shift was reinforced when the Kumamoto government incorporated Kumamon into relief efforts (BBC, 2017), expanding its role from commercial promotion to collective care. Although Kumamon remains entangled in commercial circulation, revenue from merchandise and fundraising campaigns was directed toward disaster-relief (BBC, 2016). Here, the economic mechanisms of cute are redirected toward social good, demonstrating a movement toward 'Transformative Cute'.

5.5.2 Luce: from institutional outreach to participatory reinterpretation

Luce, the anime-style mascot introduced by the Vatican for the 2025 Jubilee, offers a recent example of cuteness in institutional communication. Designed by Simone Legno, co-founder of the Tokidoki, Luce translates Catholic values into a visual language familiar to younger, globally connected audiences. Its large eyes, simplified features, and bright colours signal warmth, accessibility, and emotional appeal. Within the 'Cuteness Matrix', Luce initially occupies the 'Instrumental Cute' quadrant, where cuteness softens institutional messaging and renders abstract religious ideas more approachable. Here, cute functions as a strategic interface between tradition and contemporary visual culture. However, its meaning evolves. As Luce circulated online, audiences generated fan art, memes, and reinterpretations that embedded the character with broader pop culture contexts. Through this participatory engagement, Luce moves toward 'Transformative Cute', where meaning is co-produced rather than institutionally controlled. Cute becomes a relational platform for identity, humour, and cultural dialogue.

5.5.3 Trajectory-mapping: Tracing shifts in power and purpose

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that cuteness is not static but evolves through context, use, and participation. The 'Cuteness Matrix' functions as a trajectory-mapping tool, enabling analysis of how cute shifts across configurations of power and purpose over time. Kumamon moves from commercial persuasion to social solidarity, while Luce evolves from institutional messaging to participatory reinterpretation. By tracing how cuteness moves across quadrants, the 'Cuteness Matrix' foregrounds the dynamic and relational nature of cute in contemporary communication design. Its key strengths lie in capturing changing configurations of power and purpose. In doing so, it introduces a temporal and processual dimension largely absent in existing cuteness scholarship. It also challenges the assumption that cute operates with a single, stable function.

6. Discussion

6.1 From static object to dynamic relation

Plotting studies on the 'Cuteness Matrix' uncovers a shift from treating cute as a fixed aesthetic of submission or control (Harris, 2000; Ngai, 2012, 2022) to understanding it as a dynamic, relational force, co-produced through interaction and participation. Cute can move fluidly along the axes of power and purpose, where commercial motives and affective agency coexist within a single encounter.

6.2 From visual sign to behavioural effect

Scholarship has expanded beyond semiotic description to examine the behavioural impact of cute. Researchers increasingly ask not only what people see in cute, but what they do in response. Evidence shows cute enhances empathy and prosocial orientation (Nittono, 2016; Sherman & Haidt, 2011) and operates as an emotional experience rather than merely a visual style (Cheek & Fernando, 2011). This reframing links perception to participation.

6.3 From commodity to care

Increasingly, cute is theorised as an ethical and affective tool that translates complex or sensitive issues into emotionally accessible invitations to act. Environmental and public-safety campaigns demonstrate a pivot from fear-based messaging to care-based engagement (Brecher, 2015; McBride & Ball, 2022; Tonkin, 2019). Parallel biometric and neuroimaging work shows kawaii can reduce stress and support well-being (Chou et al., 2022; Kokubun et al., 2025; Ohkura et al., 2020). Together, these strands position cute as an affective infrastructure that can bridge awareness and action.

6.4 From creator's perspective to design practice

Examining cuteness from the creator's perspective reveals a different dimension that contrasts with the perceiver-focused cultural critiques (Harris, 2000; Ngai, 2012, 2022). Practitioner ethnographies of kawaii subcultures document agency, identity formation, and soft resistance (Nguyen, 2016; Pelea, 2020; Rose, 2020; Winge, 2008). These works offer valuable insights into the empowering and purposeful potential of cute, offering an early expression of 'Transformative Cute'. However, they are predominantly small-scale, qualitative, and context-bound, limiting their empirical validity and broader applicability.

Design research can build upon these insights by translating qualitative and psychological evidence into practice-based methods that specify how to compose, prototype, and evaluate cute ethically. This study thus extends the discourse from interpretation to application. It repositions cuteness from a passive cultural aesthetic to an active design strategy for social good, transforming the study of cute from theory to practice, from mapping to making.

7. Conclusion and future research

7.1 From mapping to making: Towards a design framework

The 'Cuteness Matrix' shows that cuteness is shaped by how agency and intention are configured. Across quadrants, cute can manipulate or transform, serve capital or community;

often simultaneously. Its ambivalence is not a limitation, but a defining strength that allows it to mediate between pleasure and persuasion, play and participation. The mapping also confirms that, while psychology, cultural studies, and marketing have generated rich insights into affect, representation, and behaviour, design lacks an integrated framework for working with cute as a deliberate strategy. By linking psychological mechanisms (care-giving, empathy) to concrete design affordances (form, interaction, narrative, participation), the matrix provides a starting point for such a framework, foregrounding the ethical choices that steer cuteness toward care, collaboration, and inclusion.

7.2 Why cute needs design studies

Design studies is essential for understanding cute because it translates affective theory into practice, turning emotions into tangible experiences. As a discipline grounded in ethics, design reveals how the same affect can either manipulate or empower, depending on its configuration. Design offers a processual lens that examines the making of cute, bridging theory with prototyping, testing, and user evaluation. This iterative, relational perspective is largely absent from other fields that treat cute as static representation rather than dynamic interaction. Cuteness is realised through design decisions: proportions, textures, sounds, gestures, and interfaces. Without design research, these choices remain intuitive rather than reflective. Studying cute through this lens transforms it from a passive aesthetic category into an active design strategy, a way of designing emotion, relation, and care.

7.3 Why design studies needs cute

Conversely, cute enriches design studies by foregrounding affect as a cultural and ethical force shaping persuasion, participation, and positive design. Cute expands design's vocabulary for understanding how aesthetics move people, beyond visual pleasure to relational empathy. Although rarely acknowledged directly, cute already contributes to design studies through adjacent concepts such as 'kansei', product personality, and affective design. Yet its influence remains unrecognised, as emotion is often reframed in technical terms. Recognising cute explicitly enables a holistic understanding of how emotion and connection are designed.

7.4 Towards an applied research agenda

Most studies still treat cute as an object of analysis or a by-product of instinct and intuition, rarely a conscious, calibrated design strategy. As the 'Cuteness Matrix' illustrates, the same affective triggers that drive consumption can also inspire care, depending on how agency and purpose are configured. Understanding this relational dynamic is key to transforming cute from a mechanism of control into a medium of social connection. This reveals both a conceptual and methodological gap: there is still no framework that translates the interdisciplinary theories of cute into applied design practice. What remains underexplored is an actionable framework that composes aesthetic, behavioural, and ethical elements to produce prosocial outcomes, and then evaluates them empirically. This transition from mapping to making cute leads to the central research question:

How can cuteness be intentionally and ethically designed as an affective strategy to nurture empathy, participation, and prosocial connection in communication design?

Answering this shifts the field from description to prescription, from theoretical evaluation to applied knowledge. It equips designers with conceptual and methodological tools to consciously shape the emotional and ethical dimensions of cute. In doing so, it positions cuteness not as an aesthetic by-product, but as a designable affect – a strategic, relational, and transformative medium for communication.

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