

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF B-CLASS CULTURE AND KAWAII CULTURE: A CASE STUDY  
OF PENGSOO AND KUMAMON



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การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบวัฒนธรรม B-CLASS และวัฒนธรรม KAWAII: กรณีศึกษาPENGSOO และ  
KUMAMON



วิทยานิพนธ์นี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตรปริญญาศิลปศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต  
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วัฒนธรรม B-class เป็นวัฒนธรรมที่มีเอกลักษณ์เฉพาะของประเทศเกาหลีใต้ กำลังได้รับความนิยมน้อยแต่แพร่หลายในกลุ่มคนเกาหลีรุ่นใหม่ ในขณะที่เดียวกัน วัฒนธรรม Kawaii เป็นวัฒนธรรมความน่ารักของประเทศญี่ปุ่น ซึ่งได้กลายเป็นแก่นสำคัญของวัฒนธรรมญี่ปุ่นสมัยใหม่ ในปี 2020 “เพงซู” หรือ สินค้าตัวแทนวัฒนธรรม B-class ถูกกล่าวหาว่าลอกเลียนแบบมาสดอคตุเมมมของวัฒนธรรม Kawaii คนส่วนใหญ่เปรียบเทียบในด้านรูปลักษณ์ของสินค้าและกลวิธีการประชาสัมพันธ์ แทนที่จะเปรียบเทียบเชิงวัฒนธรรม งานวิจัยฉบับนี้จะเปรียบเทียบวัฒนธรรม B-class และวัฒนธรรม Kawaii พิจารณาหลักเรื่องการแบ่งชั้น การผลิตและทฤษฎีฟังก์ชันการบริโภค จากข้อมูลเอกสารและการวิเคราะห์ความรู้สึก พบว่า วัฒนธรรม B-class และวัฒนธรรม Kawaii มีความคล้ายคลึงกันในเรื่องการแบ่งชั้นระหว่างกลุ่มคนรุ่นใหม่และกลุ่มคนรุ่นเก่า และทั้งสองวัฒนธรรมมีอิทธิพลอย่างมากต่อการพัฒนาทางสังคม ส่งเสริมการผลิตและการบริโภคทางวัฒนธรรม นอกจากนี้ ในยุคโควิด-19 วัฒนธรรมทั้งสองกลุ่มมีบทบาทสำคัญช่วยเพิ่มความตระหนักรู้เรื่องการแพร่ระบาดของโรคต่อสาธารณชนและช่วยลดความตึงเครียด อย่างไรก็ตาม การตลาด B-class และการตลาด Kawaii มีสื่อ เนื้อหา และกลุ่มผู้บริโภคแตกต่างกัน เมื่อเทียบกับวัฒนธรรม B-class การผสมผสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรม Kawaii กับการเมืองได้รับความนิยมมากกว่า

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CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF PENGSOO AND KUMAMON. Advisor: Asst. Prof.  
YONG YOON, Ph.D.

B-class culture is a unique type of South Korean culture, growing in popularity among the young Korean generation. Kawaii culture is the culture of cuteness in Japan, which has become an essential part of modern Japanese culture. In 2020, B-class representative- Pengsoo was accused of copying the Kawaii mascot- Kumamon. Most people compare them in terms of their appearance and PR strategies instead of their cultures. This thesis compares B-class culture and Kawaii culture based on the stratification, production, and consumption function theories. Through document information and sentiment analysis, B-class culture and Kawaii culture share similar generational stratification between the young and old generations. Also, both have an important impact on society's development, promoting cultural production and consumption. Besides, in the COVID-19 era, they play an essential role in increasing public awareness of the pandemic and helping people reduce stress. However, B-class marketing and Kawaii marketing have different mediums, contents and target consumers. B-class culture is aggressive while Kawaii culture is soft, making it easier to evoke the public's emotions and accept its combination with politics.

Field of Study: Korean Studies

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Research Background

Geographically or historically speaking, there are very close ties between South Korea and Japan. The two countries have relatively similar customs and cultures, as well as languages. From a cultural perspective, South Korea and Japan belong to the eastern Confucian cultural circle. They share many similarities but also have differences that have been formed over a long period.

This thesis compares B-class culture in South Korea and Kawaii culture in Japan. B-class culture is a unique type of South Korean culture, growing in popularity among the young Korean generation. Its contents are mixed with satire, retro, criticism, humor elements showing a strong sense of individualism, anti-authoritarianism, enthusiasm for popular culture, and dissatisfaction with the existing social system. Korean singer Psy and his song "Gangnam Style" are some of the B-class representatives in recent years. Gangnam is one of the wealthiest and most glamorous places in South Korea. It represents upper-class life with considerable wealth and power. In the "Gangnam Style" music video, the cheesy "riding-horse" moves in the music video, and the scenes in the video such as streets, metro stations, and stables are nothing like the Gangnam Style. Being like Gangnam style is

not the point. The point is to make fun of the popular phenomenon of South Korean society advocating upper-class life (Fisher 2012).

Kawaii (Japanese: *かわいい* or *可愛い*) is the culture of cuteness in Japan. Kawaii can refer to many things, including humans and nonhumans that are charming, vulnerable, shy, and childlike. Examples include cute handwriting, manga, and mascots like Hello Kitty and Kumamon. Kawaii has become an essential part of modern Japanese culture in entertainment, clothing, food, personal appearance, and mannerisms.

Last year, the representatives of the two cultures got into a conflict. Pengsoo, a giant penguin character, came to attention in 2019, created and produced by the Korea Educational Broadcasting System (EBS). It is gaining popularity among children and young adults as an "anti-hero" and a relatable character. Kumamon, one of the most representative mascots of Kawaii culture, has a long history. The bear was created in 2010 to promote tourism in Kumamoto prefecture in Japan after the province was connected with a new Shinkansen line. The conflict between them started with a news article written on Daily Shincho, a Japanese weekly news magazine. It was published with a title that Pengsoo is a copycat of Kumamon. The reporter implied that Pengsoo and Kumamon are fundamentally alike in that they are both created by government-related agencies for promotional purposes and are animal puppets with big eyes and other similar features (Jang 2020). Japanese

netizens started casting doubt on Pengsoo's originality, and some openly accused Pengsoo of being a copycat. Resentment among Korean netizens ensued. The conflict nevertheless gained attention across the media between both nations.

As mentioned above, most people compare Pengsoo and Kumamon from their appearances. There are few studies to discuss them from the perspective of culture. Cultures in South Korea and Japan have shared similar cultural deposits, lifestyles, and values due to their historical backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and geographical factors. However, the differences between popular cultures in South Korea and Japan do exist. This research compares B-class Culture and Kawaii culture from the perspective of functions that bring realistic values to societies and individuals. Since this thesis is a small case study, it only focuses on stratification, production, and consumption functions. By using the narrative method and sentiment analysis method, it finds the similarities and differences that lie between the two cultures.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 To compare B-class culture and Kawaii culture from the perspective of functions and find similarities and differences between them.

1.2.2 To explain the significance of the functions in the case study of Pengsoo and Kumamon, especially in political events and people's sentiments towards them.

1.2.3 To find the significance of Pengsoo and Kumamon in the COVID-19 era.

### 1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 What are the people's attitudes towards the combination of popular cultures and politics in the case study of Pengsoo and Kumamon?

1.3.2 What are the functions of B-class culture and Kawaii culture?

1.3.3 How are B-class culture and Kawaii culture different and similar?

### 1.4 Research Hypothesis

B-class culture and Kawaii culture are sharing plenty of similarities due to their similar historical and cultural backgrounds, but at the same time, they are different due to their different economic and political development stages in societies. Pengsoo and Kumamon both bring great economic success, but Japanese people show more positive attitudes towards Kumamon involved in political events than the South Korean attitudes towards Pengsoo.

### 1.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study derived from functions of culture theory. There are seven functions of culture, including communication, perception, value,

motivation, stratification, production and consumption (Mazrui 1996). However, only stratification, production, and consumption functions are used to address the inquiries in this thesis.

### 1.5.1 Related Theories:

Sociologists use the term **Stratification** to describe a society's categorization of its people into rankings of socioeconomic tiers based on factors such as wealth, income, race, education, and power (Cole 2019). It is said that social stratification is inevitable, necessary, and functional because it creates the "incentive systems" needed to motivate and reward "the best-qualified people" for occupying the "most important positions" within a cultural system (Lenski 1994). All cultures develop ways of distinguishing between social groups based on social class (economic stratification), social rank (political stratification), gender, age, and other factors.

**Generation stratification** within sociology has been regarded as a relatively minor dimension of social stratification. Historical impact of different generations on society is in part a consequence of their specificity, that is their particular location in the development of a society or culture. Also, each active generation leaves a profound cultural legacy and brings about significant social change, yet an active generation is likely to be followed by a passive one. The post-war generation (born from 1925 to 1945) was active in bringing new ideas during the 1960s. Still, the



generational effect on social change known as Generation X or the "missing generation" took its place. It suggests that there is inequality between generations throughout time in their power to affect change. When generations can use resources (political, educational, and economic) to innovate in cultural, intellectual, and political life, they change from being a passive cohort (generation in itself) to a politically active and self-conscious cohort (generation for itself) (Edmunds 2005).

**Gender stratification** is an important concept from the feminist perspective in social sciences. It refers to the inequalities between women and men in terms of wealth, power, and privilege. Gender is a socially constructed principle that divides men and women in a hierarchical, asymmetrical, and unequal way. It can be highlighted by the figures of uneven participation of women in the job market, earnings, politics (Danaj 2016). In "The Muse of Modernity and the Quest for Development," Mazrui (1996) stated that gender stratification could be seen in most sub-Saharan traditional cultures where women have three custodial roles. As protectors of fire, women find themselves in charge of firewood. As protectors of water, women have to ensure water supply for the home and the extended family. Furthermore, as protectors of the earth, women are responsible for the fertility of the womb and the soil fertility. Therefore, in many African countries today, women are the majority of farmers. The concept of stratification leads to the production and consumption functions.

## Production and consumption

Over decades, cultural production and consumption have changed significantly as a result of the interactions between social changes, technological developments, and increasing market competition. The boundaries between upper-class culture and popular culture have blurred. The tastes and behaviors of consumers have become more diverse and omnivorous. The changes in cultural audience/consumer interests, tastes, and behaviors and individual and organizational activity influence the development of specific cultural products. The thesis explores the production and consumption of cultural products by involving the economy and politics.

**Cultural economy** is the branch of economics that studies the relationship between culture and economic outcomes (Guiso 2006). It includes all sectors in modern capitalism that meet consumer needs for entertainment, ornamentation, self-affirmation, social expression. These sectors comprise a wide range of craft, fashion, media, entertainment, and service industries with jewelry, perfume, clothing, movies, and music. These outputs have highly symbolic value relative to utilitarian purposes (Lash 1993). Popular culture is a common feature in the cultural economy. It is typically linked with cultural forms that the dominant value system disparages—pop music, magazines, comics. Thus, it is associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered because of gender, age, class, and race. All popular audiences participate in varying

levels of semiotic production, extracting meanings and pleasures from the products of the cultural industries relevant to their social situation. For example, in America, the current popular trend emphasizes youth and health, encouraging American consumers to purchase fitness equipment, go to the gym, and enjoy healthy food. At the same time, companies also use popular trends to attract customers.

**Cultural politics** is studying how culture impacts society and political opinion by influencing people's attitudes, views, beliefs, views, and the media and arts. For example, homosexuality is seen as a disgrace in many African countries, which have refused to increase homosexual rights, and in some cases, have drafted laws to impose sanctions against homosexuals. A study in 2014 gave examples of how homophobia influences society and political opinion (Steph 2014). In February 2014, Gambia's President Yahya Jammeh called homosexuals "vermin" and stated that his government would combat them in the same way it tackled mosquitoes responsible for malaria. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni's new stricter anti-homosexuality legislation stems from similar fundamental notions about infection and distaste. In these two examples, we can see how culture impacts politics (government and the law) with views about homosexuality based on the categories of vermin, infestation, contamination.

## 1.6 Research Methodology and Scope

This research is mixed research, including quantitative and qualitative methods to compare B-class culture and Kawaii culture. Firstly, document information about two cultures was collected and secondary data from books, research, journals, and internet resources. For focusing on the first research question, three groups of sentiment analyses were conducted.

## 1.7 Significance of the Research

Firstly, it provides a more organized and realistic way to compare similar cultural products. Secondly, knowing how popular cultures influence societies and individuals with realistic values, communities or governments can use them to ease social conflict, coordinate social relations, and maintain solidarity.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is conducted to develop concepts and ideas by reviewing various literature on B-class culture and Kawaii culture. More data are available to the Japanese side because Kawaii culture has a long history. Many kinds of research related to Kawaii culture are done by researchers worldwide. However, not many data are available for the Korean side, and most of the data are Korean. Although the quantity of data might be unbalanced for both cultures, it is enough to answer the research questions.

#### 2.1 Literature Review on B-class Culture

The term B-class is widely used in Korean society, particularly after Korean singer Psy proclaimed that he is an icon of B-class music. In the book *B-class Culture Raids Korea*, it is said that the rise of B-class culture is the most destructive atomic bomb thrown at the traditional "A-class culture" enjoyed only by the upper class in South Korea. After the "IMF Crisis" in 1997, social resources in South Korea tend to be more firmly concentrated in the hands of the famous families who have been monopolizing the political and economic power of South Korea. Many young people can no longer use hard work to improve their living conditions and social status. Over

time, South Korean society has developed a strong "anti-traditional and anti-exquisite" social mentality and has used the social network as a medium to fight against the "A-class" elites (Lee 2013).

Lee (2013) also mentioned concepts of "Gangnam leftist" and "Gangnam B Class". Gangnam leftist is a group of people from the upper class holding the view of distributing more wealth, resources, and rights to more society members. Many of them are politicians who advocate social reforms and desire economic and political democratization. While Gangnam B Class is a group of people who mock the A-class culture and convey B-class culture in arts and cultural products that can resonate with most people. To put it differently, "Gangnam B Class" is pursuing cultural democratization.

The trend of combining B-class culture with marketing (B-class marketing) has become stronger since 2020. B-class marketing has become a popular strategy to attract the MZ generation or people in their 20s and 30s. In contrast to traditional marketing, B-class marketing focuses on being humorous, unexpected instead of delivering products and functions. The workman show and the popular character Pengsoo are examples of B-class marketing. They have B-class cultural elements, such as rustic, unnatural, relaxing, and fun, attracting young people. It is expected that B-class marketing on social networking will be expanded in 2020 (Pyon 2020).

However, B-class culture also receives lots of criticism. B-class culture is spreading throughout society, not just for the younger generation. It is worrying that it has a negative influence on consumers with excessively stimulating content. If B-class culture becomes a mainstream culture for a new generation who will carry Korea's future, it might promote a division between generations and ignore existing generations and order (Kim 2020).

## 2.2 Literature Review on Kawaii Culture

Since the 1990s, Japanese popular culture such as manga, mascots, and video games began to be exported to the world. Kawaii has also been exported to many countries. It also becomes a representative keyword for Cool Japan, a Japanese cultural phenomenon that includes anime, fashion, and popular foods outside Japan. The primary type of Kawaii research done by Japanese and foreign scholars is summarized below.

### The origin of kawaii as an aesthetics

The source of kawaii was firstly argued to originate from Pillow Book by Seisho Nagon. The translator of Pillow Book translated the term うつくし (美し) into English as pretty. うつくし (美し) also corresponds to someone innocent, an

infant, pure, and someone who needs the protection of an adult. After the development through the Edo kabuki popular novels, the original Japanese aesthetic has changed toward small, fragile things and needs to be protected from others (Yomota 2006).

Some scholars also advocate that the source of kawaii was related to the shōjo (girl) culture. It was formed at the end of the Meiji period and persisted until the beginning of the Taisho. In terms of each period's media and customs, the basis of Kawaii culture is the Pre-war girl's culture related to the style of western young ladies and Japanese youth culture after World War II (Koga 2009).

Although the origin of Kawaii is considered to be Pillow Book, it can also be considered a form of being developed through the Japanese reception of Western culture around the Taisho era when the reception and criticism of Westernization were mixed.



### **Kawaii as a female culture**

As is previously mentioned, the source of kawaii culture was primarily related to girl culture. Despite this, the concept of kawaii seems disadvantageous to modern Japanese women at first glance. Many would argue that it further perpetuates gender stereotypes that women are subservient to men or seek men's approval.



Yomota (2006) mentioned in his book "Kawaii" ron ("Kawaii" Theory) that although men use "cute" to judge women, they will feel confused and even distressed when they are described as cute. For them, "cute" is like a label, more suitable for women. To some extent, Kawaii is seen as a survival strategy that women have always adopted. When a woman presents a cute posture, it has a flattering, passive, and protected meaning. Therefore, in Japanese society, the perception that "An unlovable one is not a woman" is just an expedient measure to keep women struck in the dependent position.

However, others hold different views that the modern kawaii can challenge and disassemble established understandings of femininity, which can benefit both men and women by opposing rigid gender lines (Christopherson 2014). Kawaii culture acts as an opposition to modern standards for how people behave in society. Christopherson (2014) believed that the kawaii phenomenon arguably underscores a third-wave feminist movement that women can utilize to uplift themselves on an individual and social scale.

Besides, some think Kawaii is not a female culture but a culture for all. In essence, Kawaii is neither subcultural nor countercultural but emotional and personal (Brecher 2014).

### **Kawaii as an immature culture**

Kawaii culture is an immature feature native to Japan. In the 1980s, Kawaii essentially refers to things that are childlike, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, vulnerable, and inexperienced social behavior and physical appearances (Kinsella 1995).

Kinsella (1995) stated that childhood is an ideal world for the Japanese for most of the twentieth century. Kawaii romanticized harsh and high-pressure adulthood, helping the Japanese move away from the social restrictions imposed on them, including self-discipline, responsibility, tolerance.

Others hold different ideas on Kawaii as an immature culture. Kawaii is closely related to the search for human dignity and liberation. It challenges pre-established social norms passively and unconsciously (Botz-Bornstein 2012).

All in all, both Kinsella and Botz-Bornstein contended that kawaii culture includes immaturity and aspire to deviates from social rules.

### **Kawaii as a regionalized and globalized culture**

As a diffused and acculturated culture in foreign countries, kawaii is considered a Japanese diplomacy tool. Inside Japan, Kawaii is also a keyword for regional development and social solidarity.

Hello Kitty is a successful example that kawaii cultural artifacts spread Japan's foreign diplomacy across the globe. The global reach of kawaii has successfully promoted the "soft power" image of Japan. The concept of "soft power" is the ability to influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means indirectly (Nye 1990). Cuteness provides global currency in a market trade of youth culture that spreads worldwide (Lewis 2015).

As a regional culture, Kawaii plays a vital role in developing regional development and social solidarity. In the efforts to further developing domestic tourism, local cities and prefectures have introduced characters called Yurukyara (ゆるキャラ) that represent their towns. Yurukyara means "loose character" and is referred to as mascots with Kawaii (cuteness) and rough design. Yurukyara appeals to a certain percentage of society, and it is one of the most effective methods of increasing domestic tourism among young adults (Tan 2014). Besides, commercially successful characters are also attributed with healing and enjoyable effects. A survey about the psychological benefits of being with character figures was conducted in 2007. It showed that being together with characters relaxes the spirit and can effect healing, followed by protection, escape from reality, regression, self-realization, hope for transformation, health, and mood changes (Aihara 2007)

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains in detail the whole process of research design. This research is done through the narrative method and sentiment analysis. As a whole, the chapter is going to be divided into four sessions. They are research design, data source, data collection, and data analysis.

#### 3.1 Research Design

This research is mixed research that compares B-class Culture and Kawaii Culture in the case study of Pengsoo and Kumamon. Firstly, document information of two cultures was collected along with resources such as news, reports, and interviews. The narrative method was used to explain the similarities and differences between the two cultures. For the first research question, three groups of sentiment analyses were conducted.

## 3.2 Data Source

### 3.2.1 Primary Data

The primary data are the results of sentiment analyses of comments related to Pengsoo and Kumamon in political events, which is the answer to the first research question.

### 3.2.2 Secondary Data

The secondary data of this research are the document information about the two cultures. Books, documents, journals, and credible online databases are required. The secondary data are mainly used to answer the second and third research questions.

## 3.3 Data Collection

For the primary data, three groups of sentiment analyses were conducted. Sentiment analysis is the most common text classification tool. It helps identify an incoming message, tells whether the underlying sentiment is positive, negative, or neutral (Gupta 2018). It has been used as a Natural Language Processing task at different levels of granularity. Starting as a document level classification tool (Turney 2002), it has been applied in the sentence level (Hu 2004) and more recently in the phrase level (Wilson 2005). The role of sentiment analysis has been growing

significantly with the rapid spread of social networks, microblogging applications, and forums. Microblog data can be found on different social platforms, like Twitter, on which users share their real-time reactions and leave their comments about everything. Mining these opinions helps understand collective human behavior (Carvalho 2021).

In this research, three groups of comments were collected from the most popular social platforms in South Korea and Japan. Korean data are from Naver News. According to local market research firm Nielsen Koreanclick, Naver ranked as the most popular social media app with a total of 19.48 million users in Korea in 2019, with nearly half of users are aged 39 years or younger (Oh 2020). While Japanese data are from Twitter Japan, the third of the top social media networks in Japan following Line and YouTube. Compared to Line and YouTube, it offers many more social features and possibilities for the young generation (Bugajski 2021). Six different kinds of datasets were divided into three groups, including meeting with political figures, election propaganda, and congress proposals. Top 100 popular comments of each news, a total of 600 comments were collected from April 2019 to November 2020. Then, Python was used to conduct sentiment analysis.

For collecting the secondary data, the narrative method was applied. A narrative is an interpretive approach applied in social sciences, including sociology, organizational studies, gender studies, and education studies. It involves storytelling methodology,

which makes the story an object of research emphasizing how people or communities make sense of events and actions in their lives (Mitchell 2003). Researchers use ethnographic methods such as observation and interviewing to capture the story of the informant. Some of the early and recent research include the reconstruction of classroom meaning in terms of narrative unities in the lives of classroom participants (Connelly 1986), understanding organization's culture as text (Brown 1991), and using a narrative method to get a detailed and comprehensive picture of the influence of influencers (Pramono 2021). The narrative is considered the most appropriate method to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the human condition. The secondary data were from the literature, including books, papers, journals, and reliable online databases, especially up-to-date statistics, agency posts, and other online resources. Then the storytelling methodology was used to explain the functions of B-class culture and Kawaii culture and their similarities and differences.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The analysis chapter for this research is divided into two parts in chapter IV and chapter V. This thesis is analyzed using the stratification function, production, and consumption function theory explained in the conceptual framework. To answer the

research questions, some essential points are discussed in chapter IV and chapter V.

Afterward, the analyses are done using the theory above to support the argument.





## CHAPTER IV

### CULTURE AND STRATIFICATION

Social stratification refers to the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically superposed classes. Its basis and essence consist in an unequal distribution of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, social values and privations, social power and influences among the people of a society. (Sorokin 1998). Social stratification can be reflected in economy, politics and culture.

#### 4.1 B-class Culture and Stratification

B-class culture is different from the mainstream culture in terms of art techniques or ways of consumption. It serves generations that are excluded or marginalized by mainstream society. Generation X, who were born between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, created B-class culture. They were sensitive to democracy, the same as the 368 Generation who were politically active and were influential in the 1980s democratization movement in South Korea. Generation X had a solid aversion to totalitarianism, collectivism, and rankism left behind in the democratization movement of the previous generation. However, they also struggled to make a living due to the IMF economic crisis. Even now, many of them are saddled with high

house rent and children's education costs. With their dissatisfaction with high-pressure society and passion for popular culture, B-class culture was born.

While the main body of consuming B-class culture is young people in their 20s or 30s, known as the MZ Generation. Their lives are even harder in South Korea. The term "Hell Joseon" is the best description of their situation in Korea. It is a satirical South Korean term that is used to criticize the socioeconomic situation in South Korea (Kim 2016). This term is widely used among the younger Koreans due to their dissatisfaction with high unemployment, challenging working conditions, and growing inequality in South Korea. No matter how hard they tried, it did not seem to be enough. Youth unemployment was at an all-time high, job competition was tough, and for those who were employed, long working hours and competitive workplace conditions made their days a "living hell."

Moreover, in South Korea, all social interaction is decided by the Confucian value of hierarchy. Age and rank are crucial in the Korean social hierarchy. When Koreans meet new people, they have to know people's age to decide whether to talk in honorific form or not. In Western culture, coworkers address each other by name, but Koreans call their coworkers by rank: Assistant manager, manager, director, executive director. Young Korean have to be conscious of age and rank in everyday life, which stresses them out.

The crucial reason why B-class culture can win the hearts of the 20s and 30s is to challenge traditional social norms. As for the case study's subject-Pengsoo, many believe that it succeeds because of becoming young people's proxy. Pengsoo says only what it wants to say and does what it wants to do, making struggling young people feel satisfied. The most iconic moment of Pengsoo is to call its boss's name directly. This behavior is considered unimaginable and rude in hierarchical Korean society, where age-based hierarchies play a significant role in social environments like schools and workplaces. If Pengsoo does not like the working conditions, it immediately refuses to work and greets everyone with "Peng-ha!". Young people are enthusiastic about the appearance of Pengsoo, who proudly revolts against condescending people in South Korea.

Furthermore, Pengsoo is a genderless penguin with a mixture of non-traditional identities: having a deep, rough voice that people sometimes compare to a middle-aged man. Jeon, editor-in-chief of Nylon magazine, pointed out that Pengsoo is breaking the boundaries of gender. She designed a December 2019 edition of Nylon magazine, in which Pengsoo – often misgendered as male, given its low, rough voice – is shown styling makeup, dresses, and nail polish (Jimin 2020).

Figure 1 Pengsoo in NYLON KOREA



(Source: [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_3179974970\\_pbd8a913a02700ovx5.html](https://k.sina.cn/article_3179974970_pbd8a913a02700ovx5.html))

When Pengsoo was asked to answer gender issues, its answer "what is so important" is even meaningful in the current society, where the backlash against traditional gender roles has grown. Gender conflict has emerged as an essential social issue in South Korea. However, Pengsoo encourages people to look at gender issues in a dichotomous way and dress themselves up by wearing whatever they like. No matter what criticism it receives, Pengsoo continues to break through social hierarchies and traditional social norms.

B-class culture has apparent generational stratification. Whether Generation X or the MZ Generation, economically, they face an employment crisis and threat of dismissal. Politically, they are influenced by the democratization movement and anti-authoritarianism. Culturally, they are enjoying popular culture, hedonism, and

consumerism. Economically, politically and culturally, they are highly motivated and highly individualistic, unlike the conservative sixties. After experiencing the Korean War, the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, and the Cold War, the generation over 60 years old was deeply influenced by submissive, anti-communist, and Confucianism ideas. They valued collectivism more than individualism. The conservative sixties cannot accept such an aggressive culture.

#### 4.2 Kawaii Culture and Stratification

The Japanese are born into Kawaii and raised with Kawaii. They dress up with cute clothing, to eat cute food, and even after they pass away, their ashes would be placed in cute urns.

Figure 2 Cute urns from Tokyo-based Memorial Art Ohnoya



(Source: [https://soraneews24.com/2019/09/21/cuteness-goes-beyond-death-in-](https://soraneews24.com/2019/09/21/cuteness-goes-beyond-death-in-japan-with-super-cute-memorial-urns)

[japan-with-super-cute-memorial-urns](https://soraneews24.com/2019/09/21/cuteness-goes-beyond-death-in-japan-with-super-cute-memorial-urns) 【photos】

The aesthetic of cuteness is linked to generation and gender with consumer culture in contemporary societies. With similar cultural and historical background to South Korea, Japan is formed with a culture ruled by regimental uniformity and patriarchal values. Freedom of individual expression is limited and of a woman reduced to a subservient role, either as a housewife or an office lady (Lewis 2015).

In the 1970s, when Japanese teens, mainly girls, started using an informal and "cute" writing style, the modern term *kawaii* formed. Using a left-to-right format and many English words, this new style was more Westernized than typical Japanese. Things such as hearts, smiling faces, and multiple exclamation marks decorated the writing. There were also plenty of slang terms produced by using childish pronunciations of standard words during this time. This modern "cute writing" and expression was not welcomed by most people, which was seen as a rebellion against traditional Japanese culture (Kinsella 1995).

Japan has been known as a highly competitive and high-stressed society since the bubble burst on the Japanese economy in the early 90s. According to a 2014 White Paper by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, a survey conducted by the ministry targeting men and women from their 20s to 80s on their awareness about health showed that the younger the generation is, the lower their happiness levels are (JFS 2015).

Many young people find life too harsh and strict, bearing too much responsibility and pressure. They cherish being cute and childlike as a means to resist responsibility and pressure. The most obvious appeal of cuteness to the Japanese is childhood. Now, young Japanese people have a strong reluctance to grow out of this prepubescent point. As adults in Japan, they are expected to adhere to strict social rules and high expectations. Therefore, to deal with the complex realities of adulthood, many Japanese turn to cuteness.

Maybe this is why Japanese people adore cute mascots so much. There are now more than 1,500 mascots in Japan. In 2008, Yurukyara (mascot) was selected as the annual word in Japan. It is believed that mascots carry the characteristics of their hometown. Whenever people see mascots, it reminds them of their hometown and brings people back to childhood life, a haven for grownups who want to live in childhood and escape from real life. Also, mascots often act unexpectedly and interestingly, bringing lots of joy to people. Kumamon is the best example. As the "god of good fortune" in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kumamon symbolizes the region and a means to promote tourism and agricultural products. Unlike another typical cute cartoon character, he comes from the land of fantasy with a playful streak. It went viral when his images were captioned with "Why? For the glory of Satan, of course!". Depressed young people love such a playful and rebellious character, and it has become an outlet for them to release pressure.

Figure 3 Why? For the glory of Satan, of course!



(Source: <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2016/03/osaka-overrun-for-the-glory-of-satan-of-course/>)

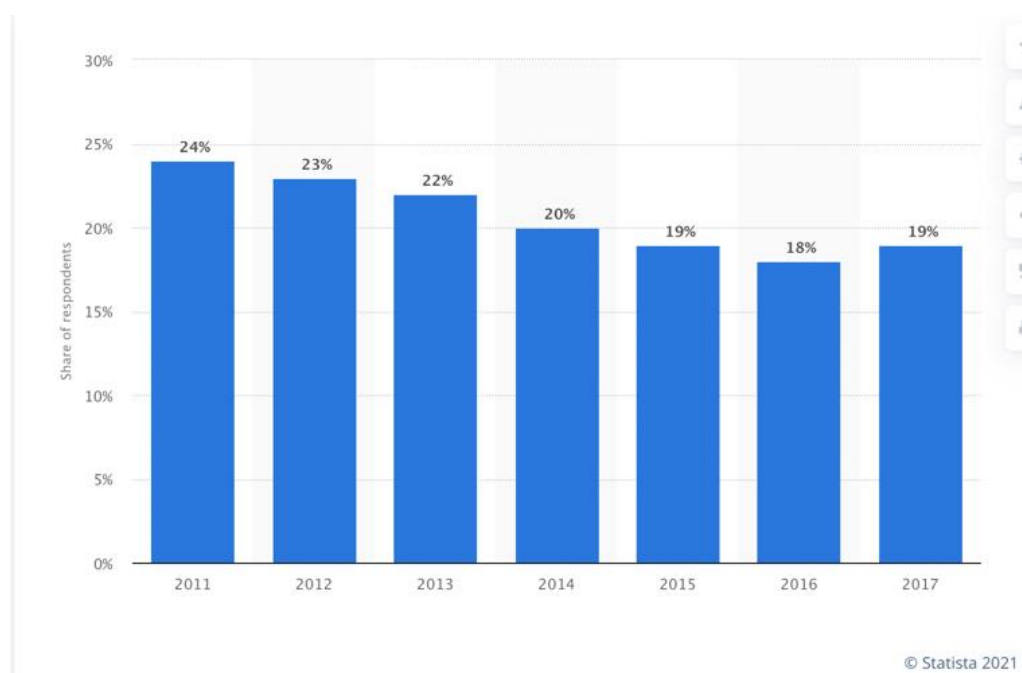
In Japan, being cute is acceptable for both men and women. According to a 1992 study by Sharon Kinsella, 71% of young adults in Japan between the ages of 18 and 30 liked or loved kawaii-looking people, and 51% liked kawaii attitudes and behavior (Kinsella 1995). However, Kawaii has apparent gender stratification based on its roots, form of expression, and consumer groups. Men are inspired by Kawaii culture, but they do not hold a dominant role. In a survey conducted by Yomota (2006), men often used "cute" to judge women. However, when they were described as cute, they felt confused and even distressed because they considered "cute" was like a label, which was more suitable for women.

From the economic performance, Japanese women are the primary consumers of kawaii culture. The chart below presents the share of young Japanese women who



prefer to shop for kawaii ("cute") clothing between 2011 and 2017. Young Japanese women have become the leading force in consuming kawaii products.

Figure 4 Share of young women aged 20 to 39 in Japan who like to shop kawaii ("cute") fashion from 2011 to 2017



(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/892686/japan-share-young-women-preference-kawaii-apparel/>)

Japanese women in their 20s and 30s prefer the "cute look" of a "childish round face." In order to better play out this idea of cuteness, women often pursue an innocent appearance. Since having large eyes is associated with innocence, many Japanese women try to make their eyes bigger. Women can use large contact lenses, fake eyelashes, dramatic eye makeup, or even have double eyelid surgery to make

themselves look innocent (Riri 2012). For them, being cute is a tool to confirm themselves. Most of them like to dress up the same way as others, and they want something others have. Eventually, everyone tends to look the same. Under the guidance of similar aesthetic tendencies, once they find something lovely, they can easily resonate with each other, and their friends will confirm that they are the same type of people and get a sense of belonging.

#### 4.3 Comparison and Discussion

B-class Culture and Kawaii Culture have similar generational stratification. In Korea, Generation X established B-class Culture, which promotes consumerism, individualism, and anti-authoritarianism. They utilize B-class Culture to express unhappiness with today's high-pressure society, advocate political and cultural democratization, and vent frustration with the high-pressure culture. On the other hand, B-class culture may appear rude and unacceptable to those over 60. During the 1960s, they were heavily inspired by subservient, anti-communist, and Confucianism ideas. Individualism was less important to them than collectivism. Such an aggressive culture is intolerable to the conservative generation. Kawaii Culture has grown popular in contemporary Japan, yet the major customers are still the younger generation. Kawaii evokes childhood memories and is seen as a haven for young people seeking to escape the harsh realities of modern life. Although advocating

Kawaii is seen as a form of resistance to traditional Japanese culture, it is passive and unconscious, making distinctions between the two cultures.

In addition, there is a clear gender stratification in kawaii. Both men and women are free to be adorable in Japan. However, Kawaii has apparent gender stratification based on its roots, form of expression, and consumer groups. Men are inspired by Kawaii culture, but they do not hold a dominant role. Young Japanese women are the major consumers of kawaii. Kawaii has an impact on how they dress, act, and behave.



## CHAPTER V

### ECONOMY, POLITICS AND CULTURE

Every day we are surrounded by popular culture. It is the beliefs and practices that groups of us have in common. Meanwhile, culture defines what we produce and consume. This concept is well applied in the market. As a mirror of consumer behavior, popular culture promotes consumer behavior and guides product production and updates in marketing methods.

The development of this concept has been satisfied with promoting people's consumption of cultural products and extended to the political level. For a long time, politics and popular culture have been intertwined and inseparable. In South Korea, this connection has reached an unprecedented height in the 2012 election. For this reason, press and social media seized the audience's interest and published a large amount of content that combined politics and popular culture during the elections. At the same time, politicians also take advantage of the connection. They use entertainment to disrupt serious politics and attract new voters, which effectively increases their approval ratings.

This thesis analyzes the similarities and differences between B-class culture and Kawaii culture by comparing their economic and political performance.

## 5.1 Culture and Economy

### 5.1.1 B-class Marketing

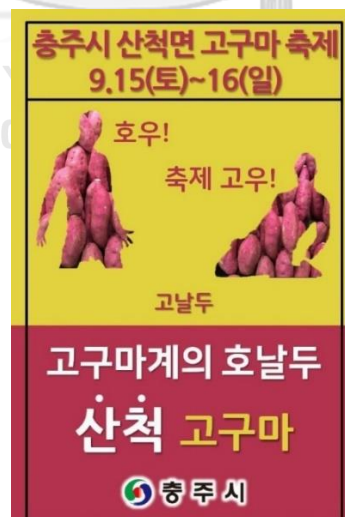
The concept of B-class comes from transforming American B-class movies in the 1920s and 1950s. The double movie system has appeared in the American movie market to attract the audience to the theater. Two movies are arranged to be shown at one time in the evening, while the ticket price remains the same. In these two movies, one is often an "A" movie with colossal investment and excellent production, and the other is a "B" movie with low investment and relatively rough production. Over time, people habitually call them "A-class movies" and "B-class movies." As the concepts expressed as "A" and "B" were interpreted as "class" in South Korea, the concept of "B-class" was expanded to symbolize a low-level subculture and was recognized as a new culture against mainstream culture. B-class culture is no longer about the quality of the art itself but the direction and the aim of the culture. For example, Korean traditional percussion music, 'samulnori,' has become a classic of B-class culture because they lead the trend but do not try to make it mainstream (Lee 2013).

B-class culture has become a popular culture in South Korea because of its humor and sensitivity to Internet trends. Combined with marketing, B-class marketing was born. B-class marketing became a keyword of e-commerce marketing in South Korea, and its influence on SNS will continue to expand in South Korea (Pyon 2020). Unlike traditional marketing, it focuses on being humorous, unexpected, moving away from

the typical marketing that only delivers products and functions. B-class marketing targets the MZ population, which accounts for 39% of South Korea's population and spends 70% of its time on mobile content. Companies are now boldly using B-class marketing on social media to capture the MZ Generation.

B-class marketing is widely used in the fast-moving consumer industries such as the food, cosmetic and entertainment industry. One of the famous cases is the 2018 Sweet Potato Festival advertisement in Chungju city in Korea. The poster, which is different from the local festival guides we have often seen, began to go viral because it looked somewhat rustic. Making three-line poems (Korean word game) and Gollum's painting of sweet potato became a hot topic among the younger generation. As a result, the number of visitors to the sweet potato festival doubled that year.

Figure 5 Sweet potato festival poster



(Source: <https://bankrupt.tistory.com/entry/올해도-어김없이-화제를-몰고-온-충주시-고구마-축제-포스터>)

고구마-축제-포스터)

Not to mention our big shot, Pengsoo is sweeping the local retail market, with sales rocketing. GS25, a convenience store chain in South Korea, launched its collaboration products with Pengsoo is hitting record sales. It launched four Pengsoo-themed fresh food products, including tuna sandwiches and seaweed rice rolls, as well as two umbrellas and four socks on March 27, 2020. With the advertisement on social media, there were more than 200,000 orders from the GS25 stores on the first day of the launch-the highest number of food products launched in the previous year. Over 500,000 food items were sold in less than a week, showing a sales rate of 90 percent. In the same period, the number of umbrellas sold increased by 30 percent over the previous month's total sales on sunny days. After the launch of the Pengsoo socks, total sales increased by 250 percent compared to 2019 (Jo 2020).

Figure 6 Pengsoo-GS25 collaboration



(Source: <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200402000638>)

This marketing method has successfully secured young customers and is an important driving force for the growth of traditional companies. For bedding companies, 2020 was a challenging year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past, bedding companies' primary customers were the middle-aged with the family as a unit. However, sales dropped significantly under sluggish domestic demand due to the pandemic. Many of them adopted B-class marketing to attract potential young customers.

Ace Bed is forming a B-class emotional consensus using actor Park Bo-gum as a model, taking a step further from the traditional advertisement that emphasized the beds' function. In the new advertisement, Park Bo-gum was excited by the music and danced in front of the bed, expressing a pleasant experience after waking up. This advertisement of Ace Bed recorded 58 million views on YouTube. Ace Bed officials said that they try to bring young customers a pleasant experience (Da 2020).

Another brand, Jangsoo Bed, has built up trust among the middle-aged for a long time and is also trying to expand the young customers' market. It is famous for posting a B-class advertisement clip named "Five Stars" on YouTube and recorded 1.16 million views. Chairman Chang-Hwan Choi laughs openly and shouts "five stars" repeatedly in an addictive melody. Responses such as "strong addiction," "fashionable," and "you should buy it at this point" came out online (Da 2020).



Although the influence of B-class marketing is gradually expanding, it might cause social controversy or discomfort. It should not be neglected.

Figure 7 Ace Bed's advertisement video and Jangsoo Bed's advertisement video



(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mbqe631lPk0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFl0iYW2cxs>)

### 5.1.2 Kawaii Marketing

Kawaii plays a significant role in Japanese consumer culture for decades. Products can be more appealing by adding cute features, such as hearts, flowers, stars, and rainbows, stimulating pleasant feelings and increase the consumer's positivity. Cute elements can be seen everywhere in Japan, from big businesses to corner markets and national government, ward, and town offices.

Kawaii has developed into a significant and remunerative market segment with soft power. Soft power is the ability to influence events and people. Anything can have soft power. For example, many companies use cute mascots to present their

wares and services to the public. Cute mascots are made to be marketing tools, creating approachability and familiarity that is not possible between two people during the company events. This familiarity can make people feel a strong connection with the products. Therefore, people will be willing to consume products, similar to celebrity endorsements attracting fan groups.

After the appearance of Pokémon in 1996, All Nippon Airways launched the first Pokémon Jets on 1 July 1998. In the next 25 years, 11 Pikachu-themed Boeing planes were launched one after another, and the Japanese public welcomed them. Passengers on the Pokémon Jets got the whole Pokémania experience. Headrests, flight attendant caps, food bins, in-flight entertainment, and souvenir packs were all decorated with Pokémon patterns, as were the aircraft and flight crews. All Nippon Airways reported an increase in passengers' number due to the Pokémon Jets' operation (Avella 2004).

Figure 8 Two Pokémon Jets of All Nippon Airways, March 2006



(Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pokémon\\_Jet#/media/File:Pokemon\\_Jets.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pokémon_Jet#/media/File:Pokemon_Jets.jpg))

Usually, kawaii products target almost exclusively young women and children. Due to Japan's shrinking youth population, more and more companies are attempting to expand their target market to other potential consumer groups, such as mature women. To expand their markets by finding other potential age groups, for example, Sanrio worked with Swarovski's luxury jewelry brand, releasing a series of objects, including rings, bracelets, paperweights, and decorative statuettes, depicting Hello Kitty.

Figure 9 2021 Hello Kitty Crystal Balloon



(Source: <https://www.swarovski.com/en-AA/p-5301578/Hello-Kitty-Balloon/>)

Kawaii has also begun to spread out of Japan and into the rest of the world. An overwhelming number of items feature kawaii themes, ranging from anime and manga to actual buildings. The Internet has made it possible for people in other countries to become involved in kawaii culture, and companies marketing the products have started to take advantage of this. Moreover, Kawaii is an important drive for economic growth during the pandemic. Kawaii goods sales remain strong despite the sluggish economy. For example, the sales of products featuring "Kumamon" rose for the ninth straight year in 2020. Sales of stuffed Kumamon and stationery featuring the character fell both at home and abroad last year. However, face masks and other sanitary items featuring the mascot and food items performed well. Sales surged 7.6 pct from the preceding year to 169,879 million yen, with those

of food products buoyed by demand from people staying home amid the virus crisis. Sales abroad dropped 1.0 pct to 6,459 million yen. Since 2011, total sales of Kumamon products have totaled 989.1 billion yen (Nippon 2021).

### 5.1.3 Comparison and Discussion

B-class and Kawaii culture are widely used in business and politics. B-class marketing, which targets young adult groups with amusing, sarcastic, and surprising content, is gaining popularity on social media platforms. It differs from traditional marketing in that it focuses solely on the products and functions. Since the 1990s, Kawaii marketing has grown in popularity in Japan and abroad, targeting young ladies and children and families with charming characteristics like hearts, flowers, stars, and rainbows. Giving adorable items soft power to trigger pleasant sentiments and boost the consumer's optimism is the secret to Kawaii marketing's success. The distinction between the two forms of marketing is that B-class marketing is a social media product.

On the other hand, Kawaii marketing is traditional Japanese marketing that does not require the use of the Internet. It can be found all across Japan. Furthermore, the two have different content and target markets. Nonetheless, these forms of marketing have successfully attracted young clients and are an essential source of development in a stagnant economy, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 5.2 Culture and Politics

### 5.2.1 B-class Culture and Politics

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of being "B-class" among Korean politicians. They call themselves Gangnam leftist who enjoys high social and economic status while advocating social reforms and desire economic and political democratization. They tend to label themselves as supporters of B-class culture when they seek the support of young people. The iconic examples are "Park Geun-hye's bikini photo" and "Moon Jae-in's abs photo" before the 2012 presidential election. Park Geun-hye recorded the SBS talk show "Healing Camp" and revealed photos of her wearing a bikini when she was young and jokingly praised her figure, which later became a popular topic in social media. It was said that she deliberately used "nudity" to catch people's attention and achieved great success. Park Geun-hye once complained in a speech that people were more interested in her bikini photos than her political opinions (Lee 2013).

Figure 10 Park Geun-hye in bikini by sea



(Source: <http://english.sina.com/entertainment/p/2013/0207/559742.html>)

South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, also showed his charisma to the voters during the 2012 presidential campaign. His photo of his abs was shown to the public during the recording of "Healing Camp", highlighting his sexual appeal and breaking traditional political figures' images. Lee (2013) once commented in his book, "the gentlemanly Moon was also a handsome man and an idol with wild muscles." His comments reflected the B-class strategy Moon used in the election.

Figure 11 Moon Jae-in's abs photo



(Source: <https://www.koreaboo.com/stories/korean-president-moon-jae-good-looking-young/>)

### 5.2.2 Kawaii Culture and Politics

As a diffused and acculturated culture in foreign countries, kawaii is considered a Japanese diplomacy tool. Inside Japan, Kawaii is also a keyword for regional development and social solidarity. Furthermore, mascots, as a vital part of Kawaii, are the key to everything. The positioning of the mascots in Japan is primarily aiming at



economic or political purposes. Each of Japan's 47 prefectures characterizes its cute mascot, official organizations like the Japanese Defense Forces, and Japan's police mascots.

Figure 12 An image of 47 prefectures' police mascots



(Source: <https://injapan.gaijinpot.com/play/culture/2010/10/26/japans-police-mascots/>)

Kumamon, officially, is a civil servant of Kumamoto prefecture as well as the minister of business and minister of happiness. He is responsible for various publicity activities in Kumamoto prefecture. He uploads tweets about his everyday life on his official Twitter account, which attracts over 100,000 subscribers.

Such institutionalized characters have long been used in Japan to win hearts and soften the image of authority. Mascots at official events are played by people wearing costumes and can interact with the people around them. These events



specifically promote the connection between the mascot and the people, aiming at children and families. Authorities feel it is easier and less threatening to use characters to get the public to accept them rather than explains the facts (The New York Times 2007).

### 5.2.3 Comparison and Discussion

In this part, tweets and news comments are analyzed to find people's sentiments towards Pengsoo and Kumamon in the political news. Six datasets are divided into three groups, including meeting with political figures, election propaganda, and congress proposals. The sentiment results show the polarity (positive, negative) of tweets and news comments. All results are visualized on the charts for better understanding.



#### Meeting with Political Figures

As the idol of South Korean youth, Pengsoo is a character created by EBS (Educational Broadcasting System), but his role is positioned as an entertainment trainee from Antarctica. Its goal is to be bigger than BTS (one of the world's most famous boy groups). It seems that it has nothing to do with politics. Nevertheless, on

June 6, 2019, a shaking-hand picture of Pengsoo and Kang Kyung-wha, the Foreign Minister of South Korea, went viral on the Internet.

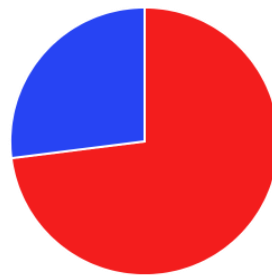
Figure 13 Pengsoo shakes hands with Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha



(Source: [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2021/06/175\\_278762.html?RD](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2021/06/175_278762.html?RD))

Top 100 popular comments were collected from two highly relevant news about the meeting of the Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-WHA and Pengsoo. One news is from The Hankkook Ilbo (Park 2019), with the title "The success of Pengsoo in government departments has led to sickness". The other is from Busan Ilbo (Jang 2019), with the title "Pengsoo made a surprise visit to the Ministry of Foreign affairs. The Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha was full of laughter". Based on the sentiment analysis results, the comments of this picture received a positive average of 73% and a negative of 27%, most of the comments were supportive and proud of it, only a few negative comments.

Figure 14 Sentiment analysis of comments about Pengsoo and Kang Kyung-wha



Positive (73.0%)  
Negative (27.0%)

Figure 15 Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko stood next to Kumamon



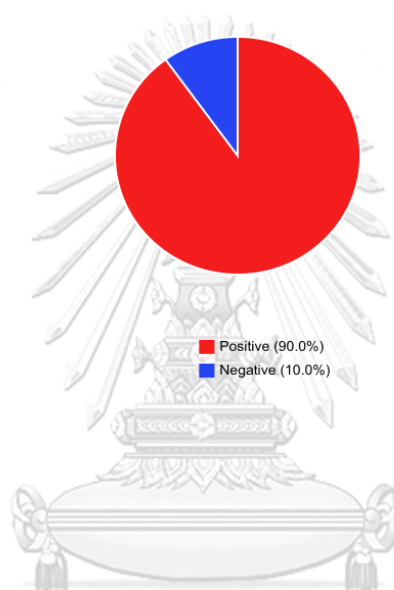
(Source: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/377008/japan-imperial-couple-meet-man-sized-bear>)

In this picture taken on Monday, Oct 28, 2013, (from right) Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko stand next to Kumamon, Kumamoto prefecture's black bear mascot, as they visited the Kumamoto prefectural office in Kumamoto.

2019 was the last year of the Heisei era (へいせい). Japanese netizens on Twitter made this event come into sight again. Top 100 popular comments were

collected from one of the popular tweets, "The emperor questioned Kumamon in the corner. #One of the most puzzling occasions of the Heisei era" (Mei 2019). This tweet got 20,000 retweets and 50,000 likes. Analysis of the results on datasets shows that the Japanese news received a positive average of 90% and a negative of 10%.

Figure 16 Sentiment analysis of comments about Japanese royal family and Kumamon

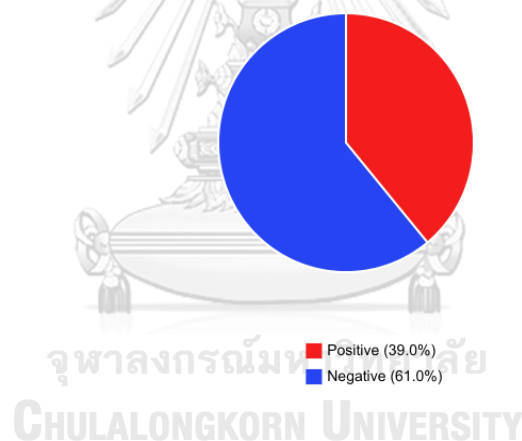


### Election Propaganda

On February 5, 2020, SBS News published a new titled "Pengsoo models for the Central Electoral Affairs Commission, helping 140,000 youth voters". It got 146 comments, 67 likes, and 223 dislikes. The news mentioned that Pengsoo had become a publicity model for the Central Electoral Affairs Commission. An officer of the Electoral Affairs Commission said that for the first time in 21 parliamentary elections, the voting age was lowered to 18. Therefore, through the cooperation with Pengsoo, the understanding level of high school students' voters on the election is improved, and the election precautions are effectively conveyed. The official

campaign will begin after the start of school. Social media such as YouTube, which is easy for teenagers to access, is being actively planned (SBS 2020). The relevant news sentiment results show that it received a positive average of 39% and a negative of 61%. The top 10 comments on the news were all negative, believing that the leftist politicians were using Pengsoo for their political purpose of attracting young voters. In contrast, others believed that it was an excellent way to encourage teenagers to vote.

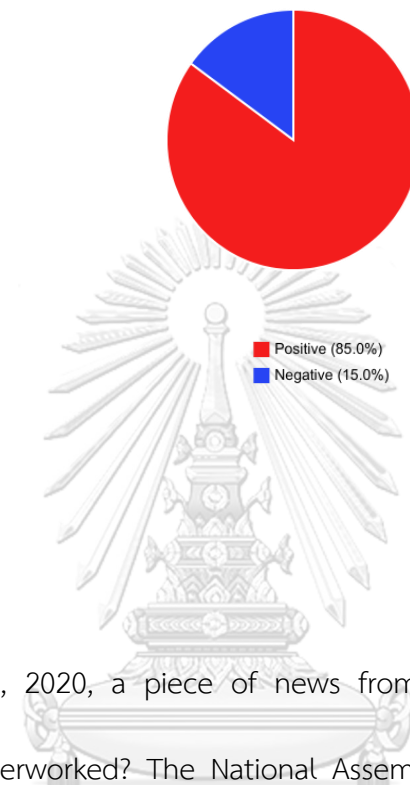
*Figure 17* Sentiment analysis of comments about Pengsoo modeling for the Central Electoral Affairs Commission



Taisuke Ono, a 2020 Tokyo metropolitan assembly election candidate, was a former governor of Kumamoto prefecture. During the election campaign, he was less famous than other candidates initially, but the propaganda of his most significant achievement- Kumamon's copyright free of charge helped him gain great popularity. On June 26, 2020, Taisuke Ono posted a tweet once again mentioning the great success of Kumamon (Taisuke 2020). This tweet got 593 retweets and 1500 likes.

Analysis of the datasets shows that the Japanese news received a positive average of 85% and a negative of 15%.

Figure 18 Sentiment analysis of comments of Taisuke Ono's tweet

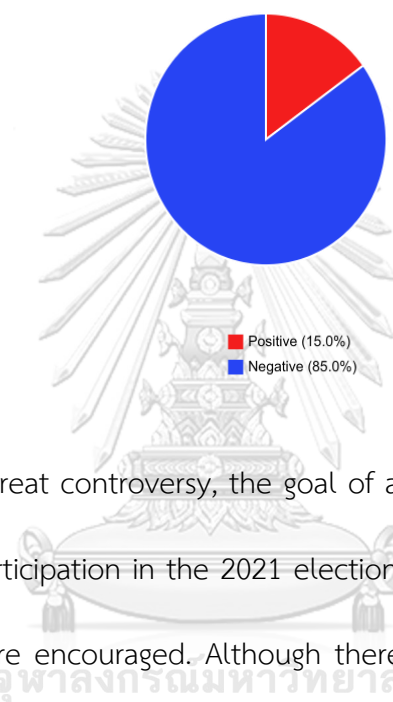


### Congress Proposals

On September 24, 2020, a piece of news from The Chosun Ilbo was titled "Pengsoo, are you overworked? The National Assembly invited Pengsoo to audit". Pengsoo had been invited to audit its company, South Korea's Educational Broadcasting System. Pengsoo would be allowed to attend the hearing in character, according to the news. Hwang Bo Seung-hee, a lawmaker with the main opposition People Power Party, said the National Assembly summons Pengsoo to check whether the penguin was not being exploited in the office environment (Kim 2020). It became controversial on the Internet when it was reported because if Pengsoo attended the hearing, it might need to reveal its actual identification-the actor insides the toy suit. The news got 1780 comments, 42 likes, and 3855 dislikes. It received a positive

average of 15 % and a negative of 85%. It also received 2855 dislikes with only 42 likes. The top 10 comments were showing strong negative attitudes towards the National Assembly, such as "The official is insane!", "Do not touch Pengsoo!" and "We people are not stupid!".

Figure 19 Sentiment analysis of comments about Pengsoo being invited to audit

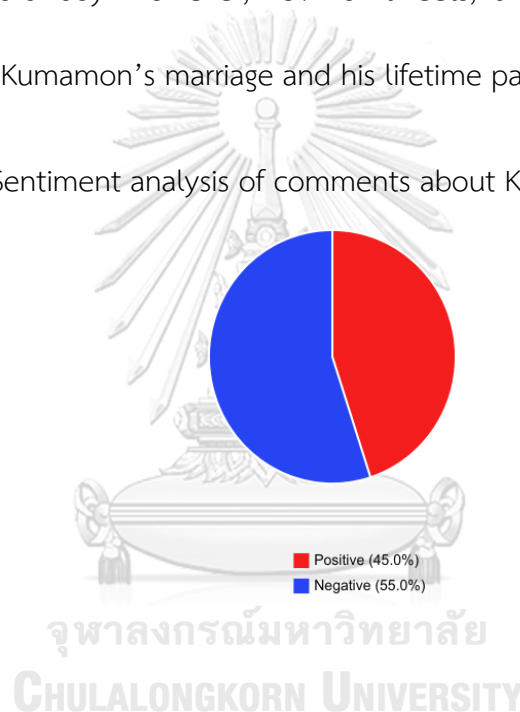


Though it caused great controversy, the goal of attracting people's attention was achieved. As far as participation in the 2021 election is concerned, the target group, 18-year-old voters were encouraged. Although there were many negative voices in the comment section, the election advertisement was liked and supported by many young people on platforms like Instagram and YouTube.

Tetsushi Sakamoto, a member of the House of Representatives in Japan, proposed Kumamoto prefecture's mascot, Kumamon, to get married and become a father to deal with the low birth rate in Japanese society. When his remark was reported, one of the Kumamoto prefecture officers denied having such a plan (Yahoo 2020). The original news report was posted on Yahoo Japan's official website. It got

deleted when it attracted great attention, leaving only a short tweet in Yahoo Japan's official Twitter account. This tweet got 197 retweets and 270 likes. Analysis of the results shows that it received a positive average of 45% and a negative of 55%. 55% of tweets disagreed with the official's proposal, arguing that it was a joke to deal with the low birthrate issue in Japan and Kumamon should maintain his character-an innocent 10-year-old boy. However, 45% of tweets, almost half tweets showed excitement about Kumamon's marriage and his lifetime partner.

Figure 20 Sentiment analysis of comments about Kumamon's marriage



The research results show more positivity about the Japanese people's attitudes towards Kumamon involved in political events than the South Korean attitudes towards Pengsoo. Most Japanese gave positive tweets about Kumamon, and even in the controversial marriage proposal event, almost half tweets were positive. Meanwhile, Korean show stronger negative attitudes towards Pengsoo involved in political issues.



Several aspects may answer this research result. In terms of characteristics, B-class culture is characterized by a strong sense of out of order and anti-authority. It does not always go well with its consumers - the MZ generation who dreams of possessing wealth and high social status in society while being dissatisfied with the existing social system led by wealth and power. Therefore, they are always on the edge of being divided. Suppose young people find that politicians use B-class culture to show their empty political propaganda or hypocritical politics to gain popular support. In that case, it may exacerbate the MZ generation's internal division, making their anti-authoritative tendency more obvious. The stronger people counter authority, the stronger the anti-authority of B-Class Productions is. Unlike B-class culture, Kawaii emphasizes cute, childlike, charming, and vulnerable, which is softer than B-class culture. Moreover, Kawaii is not only a female culture but a culture for all. In its essence, Kawaii is neither subcultural nor countercultural but emotional and personal (Brecher 2014), making it easier to evoke the public's emotions and accept its combination with politics.

Secondly, it is worth noting that South Korea and Japan have had quite different political experiences for the last 70 years, despite many similarities between them. Korea experienced much political turbulence and political upheaval. In contrast, Japan has been able to maintain its constitutional order for the last 70 years. There

has never been an interruption of the order. Besides, Due to frequent coup de tat and revolutions, the Korean public tends to have a stronger sense of anti-authority.

Also, surveys have found that the public profoundly mistrusts prosecutors in South Korea who often have corruption and political scandals. In the Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, the South Korean public was pessimistic in several regards. 62% of interviewees disagreed with the statement, "most elected officials care what people like me think". 49% interviewees disagreed with the statement "the state is run for the benefit of all the people". 68% of interviewees said they were pessimistic about how the political system works (Jeremiah 2020).

On the contrary, Japanese attitudes towards government have historically been shaped by Confucianism. Japan often has been defined as a Confucian country, but loyalty is more important than benevolence. Leadership stemmed from the government and authority in general, and businesses looked to the government for guidance. These attitudes allowed the government to influence business. There was a national consensus that Japan must be an economic power and that all Japanese's duty was to sacrifice themselves for this national goal (Dolan 1994).

### 5.3 Under the COVID-19 era

#### 5.3.1 Raising Public Health Awareness

Public figures have substantial social influence and behavioral demonstration effects. Successful international experience has shown that using celebrity effects to increase public awareness of the epidemic is an effective means of communication. Pengsoo released a video about preventing Covid-19 on YouTube, hitting millions of views and getting 40000 likes. In the comment section, netizens strongly advocate epidemic prevention measures and show gratitude for its encouragement. Kumamon also posted tweets about prevention during the Covid-19 time and kept updating pandemic prevention notices offering the community comfort and a sense of security.

Figure 21 Images of pandemic prevention from Pengsoo YouTube channel and

Kumamon Twitter account



(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-rhqWpjVag&list=LL&index=2&t=5s>)

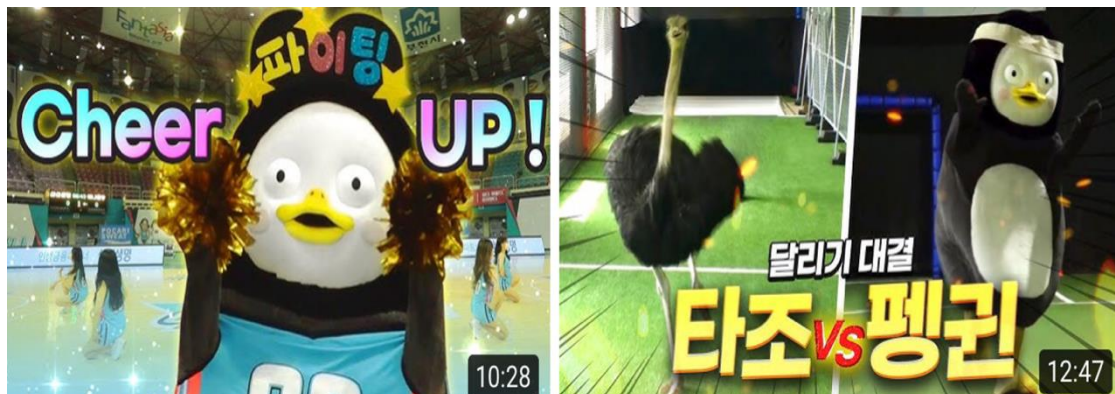
[https://twitter.com/55\\_kumamon/status/1252944547937529856](https://twitter.com/55_kumamon/status/1252944547937529856))

### 5.3.2 As a tool of healing

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on our lives. Many of us face challenges that can be stressful, overwhelming, and cause strong emotions in adults and children. Public health actions, such as social distancing, are necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but they can make us feel isolated and lonely and increase stress and anxiety.

In South Korea, the number of video plays and the duration of watching videos has increased with people staying long hours at home. Therefore, the consumption of content like Giant Pengsoo's TV has increased. Giant Pengsoo's TV is strongly linked to the values of social integration, self-dignity and reasonable individualism, anti-authoritarianism, and gender equality, which people need the most during the pandemic. Exciting and heartwarming content brings joy and laughter to people who are facing tremendous pressure.

Figure 22 Images from Giant Pengsoo's TV Channel



(Source: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtckgmUcpzqGnzcS7xEqMzQ/videos>)

Kumamon has always been perceived as a rescue bear mascot in Japan. Like other yuru-kyara, it is not only on behalf of prefectural governments and offices to promote tourism and commerce primarily for locally produced goods, but also being considered icons of Japanese cultural myth. Myth can be our attempt to explain the world of nature in stories, a repository of stories that contain allegorical instructions, or poetic fantasy. However, perhaps most essentially, myth serves to solve problems (Lévi-Strauss 1955). In real life, the myth gives suggestions to those faced with anxiety, responds to wishes, and offers comfort to insecurity. Through interaction with these mascots, people evoke powers in their lives.

Though initially created as a marketing tool, Kumamon has evolved into a character who helps and even heals people. After the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011. Kumamon first visited a local kindergarten, followed by his visit to “Future Shopping Mall,” a temporary shop built near the relief housing center for those who had lost their homes (Maynard 2018).

Figure 23 Kumamon visited people who had lost their homes



(Source: <https://responsejournal.net/issue/2018-06/article/kumamon-rescue-bear-mascot-mythical-roots-and-modern-reach>)

Furthermore, this year, Kumamon has received around 5,300 postcards for the new year, including overseas. "I miss you" and "I want to see you this year" were among the messages sent to the beloved character, who has largely refrained from making public appearances since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Using animated gestures, it expressed hopes of spending more time with everyone in 2021 and making it an exciting year. According to the prefectural government, over 80 percent of the postcards came from outside the prefecture (Kyodo 2021). Kumamon has offered his fans a form of hope, a spiritual hope, a spiritual guide as belief in its powers helps rescue people from misfortune and pain worldwide.

Figure 24 Kumamon received postcards



(Source: <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/01/ad57ba2912c1-kumamon-receives-over-5000-new-year-postcards-for-2021.html?phrase=Hayao%20miyazaki%20hollywood&words=>)

In the COVID-19 era, communities or governments can use these famous public figures to raise the public's safety awareness of the epidemic. Simultaneously, they can interact with people isolated at home through social media to relieve people's mental stress and give people spiritual comfort. To a certain extent, they ease social conflict, coordinate social relations, and maintain solidarity.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This research aimed to identify the similarities and differences between B-class culture and Kawaii culture from stratification, production, and consumption functions. Although the quantity of data might be unbalanced for both cultures, it is enough to answer the research questions.

#### 6.1 Conclusion and Discussion

##### 6.1.1 People's Attitudes Towards Pengsoo's and Kumamon's Political News

In the case study of Pengsoo and Kumamon, the sentiment results indicate Japanese people hold more positive attitudes towards the combination of culture and politics, even encountering controversial political issues. Meanwhile, Korean tend to have stronger negative attitudes towards it.

##### 6.1.2 Functions of B-class culture and Kawaii culture

B-class culture and Kawaii culture have become cultural phenomena sought after by most society members. They subtly influence the public's behavior and thinking in their lives, especially the values and lifestyles of the younger generation. They have become a bridge for the young generation to communicate.



Moreover, B-class culture and Kawaii culture reflect social stratification between social groups, such as generation stratification and gender stratification. Last but not least, both have significant impacts on society's development, causing cultural production and consumption.

### 6.1.3 Comparison of B-class culture and Kawaii culture

Both B-class culture and Kawaii culture reflect a high degree of stratification. First, they have similar generational stratification. In Korea, B-class culture is regarded as an active and aggressive resistance to Korean society. The MZ generation uses it to vent dissatisfaction with the high-pressure society and pursue cultural and political democratization. However, for the older generation, B-class culture is rude and unacceptable in society.

In Japan, Kawaii is reminiscent of childhood and is considered a haven for young people to escape the harsh and high-stress adulthood. Meanwhile, Kawaii is also seen as a way to challenge pre-established social norms. Although advocating Kawaii is viewed as a resistance to traditional Japanese culture, this resistance is passive and unconscious, making differences between the two cultures. Also, kawaii has an apparent gender stratification. From the economic performance, Young Japanese women have become the leading force in consuming kawaii products. From a cultural perspective, the source of kawaii culture is largely related to girl culture.

B-class culture and Kawaii culture are well applied in the economy, becoming essential driving forces for future growth in a sluggish market, especially during the Covid-19 epidemic. The difference between the two types of marketing is that B-class marketing is a product born under social networks. In contrast, Kawaii marketing does not necessarily need to be spread through the Internet. Moreover, the content and target market of the two are different. They are also in different development stages: Kawaii marketing has a long history and spreads worldwide, while B-class marketing is only an emerging marketing in South Korea.

B-class culture and Kawaii culture are used to increase the approval rating of politicians or government. However, under similar political events, Japanese people show more positive attitudes towards Kawaii and politics while Koreans hold strong negative attitudes towards B-class culture and politics. In terms of characteristics, B-class culture is aggressive while Kawaii culture is soft, making it easier to evoke the public's emotions and accept its combination with politics.

Under the COVID-19 era, B-class culture and Kawaii culture have played a role in raising public awareness of the epidemic, raising health awareness, and comforting people.

## 6.2 Limitation and Suggestion

Since the sample of sentiment analysis is small, the results can only show a rough picture of people's attitudes towards popular cultures and politics. Future studies could collect more data such as age, gender, income, and education. To do such research, researchers will need plenty of time and effort to collect data from different social media because the data are scattered and quickly deleted. It is suggested that researchers collect as much data from different sources for the Korean side because data from the literature review is a bit insufficient compared to Japan's data



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