

# Following Domo-Kun: The Commoditization of Cultural Objects in the Global Market

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes and attempts to bridge the gap between popular culture's aesthetics, popularized by Camille Paglia and her work *Sex, Art and American Culture: Essays* (1992), and international marketing culture's aesthetics, as described by Schmitt and Simonson (1997). Popular culture and marketing rarely share the same realm of research. However, these theories start to influence each other, which are especially visible when compared with international marketing as the framework. In order to analyze the gap between popular culture and marketing culture, the author followed a cultural object, Domo-kun, as it entered the US market. Domo-kun gradually changed, including its marketing aesthetics, its significance, and meaning within popular culture after it entered the market. These meaning changes are through the process of commoditization, emotional value, and how they are reinterpreted within cultural frames and reference groups.

## Keywords

Commoditization, cultural frames, reference groups

This paper presents the initial research findings for a project investigating the culture-specific semiotics of material culture objects that become part of global market economies.

There is a significant reason to study the misunderstandings that arise when objects enter the global market. When a person does not interact with a substantial amount of other cultures, it may not cause problems. However, when policymakers also have these misconceptions, significant problems can arise. For example, Japan's government has a project called Cool Japan, which spans multiple ministries, whose aim is to increase goodwill, public relations, and Japan's soft power<sup>1</sup>. It has run into some complications in recent years because of unanticipated cultural misunderstandings (T. Watanabe, personal communications, April 23, 2013). While it is important for policymakers, it is also increasingly important for the average person as well. The more

people have a chance to connect with the help of technology like the internet without a chance to understand or have context, the more cultural misunderstanding can arise.

These miscommunications can start when people are young. Director Shibata of Kenshin Kindergarten said: "young children don't know outside their own world, and what they do know of America is Disney and 'happy ending'" (personal communication, April 18, 2013). This paper focused on the younger children and their misconceptions. It mainly follows Domo-kun, a character who was originally a mascot for NHK, Japan's national broadcasting company<sup>2</sup>,

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and its movement to the U.S. and how this movement caused Domo-kun to be commoditized and thusly how the commoditized Domo-kun's meaning changed. Finally, these changes in meaning are brought on by framing and reference groups from the consumers' culture.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Modern theories of cultures and economies have been studied together since the beginning of the twentieth century, with the beginning of the conversations attributed to Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Max Weber can be especially useful with his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2005) in relating a person's (religious) culture and prosperity and the concept of contrasting economic prosperity against different cultures.

These foundations laid the ground work for modern analysis of economics and cultures, and the current base models: self-interested, social, and moral. The definitions and history are laid out by Richard Wilk in his book *Economies & Culture: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (Wilk 1996). Another applicable introduction into society and marketing together is *Economy/Society: Markets, Meanings, and Social Structures* by Bruce Carruthers and Sarah Babb (Carruthers and Babb 2000). The book addresses the meanings commodities possess and that "the meaning of things plays a central role in modern capitalist economics".

Marketing analysis focuses on profitability of an item and its ability to be sold when moved from one market to the other, and the aesthetics that work in any, every, or different cultures. Marketing aesthetics claims that customers have immediate associations and immediate feelings about products. Those feelings can overcome functionality as a factor in purchasing and that the aesthetics such as the shapes of a commodity become associated with a product of company through repetition (Schmitt and Simonson 1997).

This claim of immediate association and immediate feelings is, in part, the study of semiotics in cultural studies and the fact that meaning can arise from simple everyday things (Paglia 1990). This connects to the concept of imprinting, a "combination of the experience and its accompanying emotion" that leaves a forever unconscious impression which shapes people's lives and creates the person, a concept in psychology first applied by Korand Lorenz (Rapaille 2006). As a child, people experience a lot of new experiences in his or her own culture, imprinting the experiences and shaping the person within the culture.

Most companies and marketing campaigns deal with conversion to localization when moving a product abroad. Companies such as MacDonal change many things about themselves as they go abroad. It moved from a quick grab-and-go mainly drive-through place in America to a safe place for high school children to relax and meet after school Hong Kong (Watson 2006). However, MacDonal still had a similar function when moving abroad. The core was still food and eating, despite the change of pace. Another example of a commodity being marketed for a local culture, localization, is the main protagonist's name being changed from Satoshi to Ash in moving from Japan to the U.S. (Iwabuchi 2004).

There is a small but currently growing push in the opposite direction of people wanting authenticity of the original item or the least changed possible (Allison 2006), such as manga that has been translated, but kept its reading orientation right-to-left as originally printed in Japanese. Even so, even when objects, such as characters Mickey Mouse or Hello Kitty, go abroad and their image essentially does not change, but the meanings behind the image can change, and the author argues that the authenticity does as well. This, in part, is because without the original culture to the "ground", the object becomes commoditized and thus adopts new meaning in the target culture's market.

Allison (2006) argues in her book *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*

that it is because these objects crossing borders are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Hello Kitty “was given an English name when first designed in the 1970s because—as its creator has explained—anything American was faddishly popular in those days”. However, once she went abroad, consumers, knowledgeable consumers knew she came from Japan, while unknowing consumers did not know her country of origin. For the consumers who knew she came from Japanese that despite being “English”, she has come to symbolize Japan.

One of the things that facilitating the commoditization of products entering global markets and thus the miscommunication between the members of two different cultures are the sociology concepts of cultural frames (Goffman 1986) and reference groups (Shibutani 1955). A cultural frame is a cultural social structure people use to make sense of things. And reference groups are when “(t)hrough direct or vicarious participation in a group one comes to perceive the world from its standpoint”.

This research studies this change and that particular gap between cultural studies and marketing aesthetics through these objects in global economics and how it commoditized the objects. In particular, the author has followed Domo-kun’s adventure from a network mascot to a globally recognized character that was used to sell 7-Eleven Slurpee’s in the U.S.

## RESEARCH

### *Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty*

The author interviewed children in Japan and the United States about popular commoditize products from both countries: Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse. These two particular characters are already global and have transcended their original culture. This means that these characters were known by almost all the children and were good starting points for this research.

For the first interview, the author worked with children at Kenwood Elementary School in Michigan<sup>3</sup>. She did it electronically with the help of local teacher, Ms. Katie Kunze. The children were five years old and in kindergarten. Not every child answered every question and the children were encouraged to verbally answer “yes” or “no” to every question. Occasionally, a child said “I don’t know”. Additionally, children could and did say yes to conflicting answers, like Hello Kitty being from America and Japan. The first set of questions was about Hello Kitty. Most children, 14 out of 16, said “they liked Hello Kitty”. Six out of 18 said “yes” to Hello Kitty being Japanese and eight out of 18 said “yes” to her being America. The next set of questions was about Mickey Mouse. When the author asked if they like Mickey Mouse, 15 out of 16 children said “yes”. None of the 13 children said “he was Japanese” and 10 out of 12 children said “he was American”.

The author visited Kenshin Kindergarten in Saitama<sup>4</sup>, Japan on Saturday, December 1, 2012, to conduct an interview with Japanese children with the help of Mr. Shigeki Shibata. The author used a stuffed Mickey Mouse and a figurine Hello Kitty for visuals. There were 20 participating children, 10 of them were three years old and the author did not count their responses. The other 10 children were five years old. The questions were identical to the ones she asked the American children except for being translated into Japanese. This time, however, instead of individually asking each child, the author asked the children as a group and for most of them to raise their hands if the answer was yes, as well as being allowed to verbally say answers. As with the America children, the Japanese children could and did answer affirmative multiple times for seeming contradictory information. When she asked if they like Hello Kitty, nine children raised their hands. Eight of the children said “Hello Kitty was Japanese” and eight children said “she was from the U.S.”. They were the same eight children. When the author asked about Mickey Mouse, again,

nine children raised their hands to say “they like Mickey Mouse”. All 10 children said “he was Japanese while only four said he was from the U.S.”.

### *Domo-Kun*

Domo-kun was selected for a variety of reasons, but one of the most influential reasons was that Domo-kun was not initially marketed to the U.S. Marketing localizes an object entering the market, even if it is kept to a minimum. Average consumers only see an altered version even before re-interpreting it. However, in the case of Domo-kun, he was introduced to the U.S. market before localization, so it helps show that all re-interpretation is not the result of localization. The current Domo-kun has indeed been marketed in the U.S.

The first known instance of Domo-kun coming to the U.S. was in 2001 and was not associated with any marketing campaign. This first image of Domo-kun was with some English phrases which was first seen on Fark.com, according to *The New York Times* (Walker 2007). It was essentially a juvenile joke and was not related to Domo-kun’s image back in Japan. Domo-kun was eventually licensed to Target stores in 2008 for Halloween and some merchandise can still be bought from them online. 7-Eleven licensed Domo-kun in 2009 after Target and produced commercials to sell Slurpees and Domo-kun items (Picchi 2009). Nickelodeon also had a deal to run short, two-minute, Domo-kun clips in 2006<sup>5</sup>.

In order to better understand the perspective from the U.S., without actually being there, the author analyzed marketing blurbs on Amazon.com, YouTube comments, the official site, and various blogs.

In March 2013, the author did a YouTube search of “domo collection” and there were over 23,400 results, the top of the most relevant list is a video by user “sillysaaammage”. It has a young girl describing and showing her collection of Domo-kun related products. It has over 41,000 views and hundreds of comments. The comments are all in English and the

ones related to Domo-kun typically fall into four categories: positive remarks about Domo-kun, information about Domo-kun, what else can be bought, or the desire to buy more Domo-kun related products. Domo-kun was being viewed as unique and was initially hard to acquire Japanese object. This is because before Domo-kun products were being marketed in the U.S., Domo-kun was mainly available in Japan and through online sites.

A picture-based blogged, vulgarly titled fuckyeahdomo. tumblr.com, illustrates Domo-kun’s image progression from the blogs inception in June 2009, the mostly classic character that was brown and fuzzy to a character that comes in multiple colors, iterations, and designs by the latest post in November 2013.

Domo-kun’s official English website<sup>6</sup> was established in 2005, a few years after Domo-kun was introduced to the English speaking world, but before he was marketed through companies like 7-Eleven. Domo-kun’s description on DomoNation, “a gentle soul with a body of pure fluff”, is very similar to the original Domo-kun’s description on the NHK’s website<sup>7</sup>.

After Domo-kun became more popular in the U.S., some other manufactures, such as Licensed 2 Play, acquired the rights to produce Domo-kun products that sell on the U.S. Amazon.com mirror. The manufacture’s description of Domo-kun on Amazon.com use words such as “typical teenager, obstinate, sulky, shy, and rock music”<sup>8</sup>.

### *Perspectives on Domo-Kun*

In order to get a perspective and analyze Domo-kun’s travel from a NHK mascot in Japan to a Slurpee seller in the U.S., the author asked college-age students in Japan, who were around the age of six when Domo-kun first appeared in Japan, to analyze either images or short videos of Domo-kun from each country to get a comparison on how the aesthetics changed. The author had all the groups using open

discussion because she wanted the answers to inspire other answers. All the students she interviewed attend Keio University, SFC. Additionally, many of them have lived abroad.

The first group of respondents had 12 members, 10 of them have lived outside of Japan. There were six females and six males, aged from 18 to 22. The author showed them YouTube clips of the original Domo-kun shorts compiled together and asked them to vocally comment on what they thought the videos. Next, they were shown the first commercial released by 7-Eleven, U.S. of Domo-kun advertising Slurpees and again she encouraged them to vocally comment on the video.

The author handed them a print out with a Venn-Diagram on top and they were asked to fill in each section with attributes of the American Domo-kun, the Japanese Domo-kun, and attributes seen in both videos. They could include the attributes they talked about beforehand or come up with their own. Some of the repeated answers for the Japanese Domo-kun were “at home”, dark, dull, dim, and inside. There were also repeats of words related to *aikyo*, or the ability to be loved. Some of these words include *kawaii* (cute), warm, and charming. The answers for the American Domo-kun had repeated words such as, dynamic, lively, outside, colorful, energetic, cool, cocky, and psychedelic. They also mentioned that the animation style was smoother and more western.

The second group of respondents had 12 members, seven males and five females. These students are in a remedial English language class, where they conduct the class in English to help them learn the language as well as the topic, so the students were not fluent. The author showed them two pictures of Domo-kun: One was from the original NHK promotional material and the other from a 7-Eleven commercial. She asked them to discuss, come up with, and write down as a group of adjectives that described the picture of Japanese Domo-kun and the American Domo-kun and

also adjectives that described both. Some of the words for the Japanese Domo-kun were empathetic and friendly while some of the words for the American Domo-kun were active and wild.

The third group of respondents had six members, three males and three females. The author asked them to look at the same videos of Domo-kun as the first group and write the differences and similarities in a Venn-Diagram. They contrasted the Japanese Domo-kun being associated with family, *kenage* (praiseworthy or pure), and *nonbiri* (easygoing) with the American Domo-kun being associated with individualistic, aggressive, and active.

## RESULTS

### *Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty*

The kindergarten children in both countries were unsure about Hello Kitty’s origin. There was no country that was a majority for the American children and the same eight children in Japan answered both countries. They were also unsure of how to answer. The Japanese children were especially hesitant to answer but most answered in the affirmative to the question. This is highlighted by the fact that *The Atlantic Wire* published a story titled “Kitten-Sized Controversy: Is Hello Kitty From London or Japan?” (Adelstein and Stucky 2012), indicating adults might not be completely sure themselves.

However, the children, in contrast, were both confident that Mickey Mouse came from their own country. All of the children in Japan and 10 out of 12 children in the U.S. thought that Mickey Mouse came from their own country. A theory for this reaction is that both countries have a Disney Land which could be considered as Mickey Mouse’s “home”.

While it is speculative on how the children interpret the origins of Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse, it is not speculative that they reinterpret what they find because there is nothing the

children inherently understand as either Japanese or American. These commodified products are interpreted within the cultural frames of reference these children have.

### *Domo-Kun*

The Japanese college students observed that original depictions of Domo-kun brought out thoughts of warmth or calmness. The general impression is that while Domo-kun is a monster, he is a lovable monster and produces a feeling of home or family. They also mentioned how the animation itself seemed slower.

The Japanese students described this “new” Domo-kun as well. While he had similar qualities, like being cute, he was now loud, colorful, and psychedelic. This description, added with the YouTube comments and marketing strategies showed how much Domo-kun’s image had changed from the original intention when he was designed as NHK’s mascot. It also shows that the interpretation changed not only when Domo-kun when abroad, but it also alternated how he was perceived coming back to Japan.

Domo-kun’s transition to the U.S. marketplace shows how his connection as a NHK mascot was either lost or downplayed. This resulted in the commoditization of Domo-kun as he became just another Japanese character, albeit a relatively popular one. His image was always linked to Japan with American consumers, but the character when from being a “gentle soul” to being “obstinate” because cultural frames and how American’s viewed him.

Localization has been around as long as importation. However, beyond localization, what stays the same is reinterpreted as well when a character goes global, whether the creator designed it that way or not. Hello Kitty and Pokémon were purposely marketed abroad and pre-interpreted locally before being introduced. However, Domo-kun was marketed retroactively based on how the audience already interpreted him.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper is only a beginning exploration into the possibilities with marketing culture and pop culture studies. Near future possibilities and research include larger focus groups of quantitative analysis for statistical data and overall comparisons, expand beyond children to young adults and adults, and follow a newer arrival into the international market that has not completely been saturated with it. All these options along with more exploration of already written works allow for more understanding in international marketing and the possible misinterpretations exposed when cross-examined with cultural studies. The next step is to find a pattern on how these characters are reinterpreted, as if there are misunderstanding consistencies when things go abroad. When this pattern is isolated, it can help develop a program that could potentially counteract the misunderstandings that arise. The program’s aim is not to eliminate alternative interpretations, but instead gives people the ability to recognize multiple meanings.

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## Notes

1. Retrieved from [http://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono\\_info\\_service/creative\\_industries/creative\\_industries.html](http://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono_info_service/creative_industries/creative_industries.html).
2. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domo\\_%28NHK%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domo_%28NHK%29).
3. Retrieved from [http://www.edline.net/pages/kenwood\\_elementary\\_school](http://www.edline.net/pages/kenwood_elementary_school).
4. Retrieved from <http://www.pluto.dti.ne.jp/kenshin/maruyama/>.
5. Retrieved from <http://www.icv2.com/articles/news/8608.html>.
6. Retrieved from <http://www.donation.com>.
7. Retrieved from <http://www.nhk.or.jp/domo/>.
8. Retrieved from <http://www.amazon.com/Licensed-Play->

Domo-Plush-Novelty/dp/B003CTH3TW/ref=sr\_1\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1369129884&sr=8-2&keywords=domo.

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