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The Effects of Cuteness and Brand Status on Brand Attitude

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Abstract

The Effects of Cuteness and Brand Status on Brand Attitude

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Nowadays, many companies are paying more attention to cute products for not only children but for adult consumers; however, there was little research on the effects of cuteness in the marketing context. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the effects of whimsical cuteness on consumers’ brand attitude. Unlike baby schema, whimsical cuteness reminds consumers of fun and humor, and can be applied to a wider category of products because it can be evoked with only color and pattern.

Four empirical studies are conducted to examine the interactive effects of product cuteness and brand status on consumers’ attitude towards brand. First, stimuli for whimsically cute products with colors and patterns were tested in pilot tests. Study 1 proved that the cuteness effect on brand attitudes is mediated by brand image perception (warmth vs. competence). Study 2 examined the moderating role of brand status between cuteness effects and brand attitude and tried to eliminate alternative explanations. In study 3,
the results confirmed that brand image perception mediates the interaction effect between cuteness and brand status on brand attitude. In Study 4, the results from previous studies are replicated in actual market setting. Participants only showed more positive response towards the recently released SK-II lotion with a cute package when the brand status is presented as top-tier. Taken together, the current research confirmed that consumers showed higher brand attitude for whimsically cute products compared to neutral products when the brand status were in high position. Findings through four studies could provide academic and practical implications in terms of expanding the concept and application of cuteness, especially whimsical cuteness.

**Keywords:** cuteness, whimsical cute, warmth, competence, brand status, brand attitude

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a scene where you go to work in the morning and turn on your computer screen. When you see Google’s logo of main page, made up of bright colors such as red and yellow and rounded and friendly fonts, or when the main page of an unfamiliar portal site on which you do not have much prior information consists of the same colors, shapes, and patterns, how would you rate each brand? This study focuses on the “cuteness effect” that can be induced simply by the use of color, pattern, and shape, and aims to reveal the effect of cuteness of product design combined with brand status.

“Cute” products are no longer limited to children’s products in the current marketplace, and a wide range of products that utilize cuteness are now made and sold among general products for ordinary people as well as for adults with particular tastes, such as “kidults,” and from kitchen appliances to expensive products such as automobiles (Patton, 1998; Taylor, 2011). But, studies on cuteness have not been able to catch up with the trend of the real market. Extant studies on the cuteness effect are primarily limited to studies on the baby schema, as per Lorenz (1943): that cute emotions induced by babies are associated with caregiving or attention behavior (Glocker et al., 2009; Sherman, Haidt, & Coan, 2009; Sherman, Haidt, Iyer, & Coan, 2013). However, cute products distributed in the actual market do not always utilize the classic...
cuteness appeal related to babies; instead, a whimsical and lively cuteness that makes consumers feel a sense of fun and humor has been getting more attention in the market recently. Despite this market trend, however, no research has yet demonstrated the role of “whimsical” cuteness in consumers’ attitudes toward products or brands in a marketing context. Therefore, this study aims to reveal how consumers’ attitude toward products or brand changes when companies use whimsical cuteness appeal, reflecting these actual market trends.

When people look at a cute product, even if we exclude preference difference according to individual taste, there will be a difference in the impression of a product that uses whimsical cuteness stimulation from one using the baby schema: in the case of whimsical cuteness stimuli, the product is regarded as less vulnerable or delicate than in the cuteness stimuli associated with babies (Nenkov & Scott, 2014) and hence less prone to be considered an object to worry and care about. In other words, when people look at a product that utilizes whimsical cuteness, they may think it is fun and humorous, but do not find the product’s vulnerability to be prominent. While products using baby-cuteness have a lot of limitations for expanding brand lines, the degree to which consumers intuitively combine products or brands with brand status or functions is weaker in the case of products utilizing whimsical cuteness, and so companies will have a more versatile use of cute whimsical products. Thus, by examining the effects of
whimsical cuteness on psychological and behavioral dimensions, this research provides both theoretical and practical implications.

This study predicts that brand characteristics will affect the perception of even very similar cute products. To connect cuteness type to brand characteristics, I adopted two fundamental dimensions of social perception to model consumers’ brand image perceptions, building upon sociopsychological literature and in particular the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). In the case of whimsical cuteness, a brand using this appeal would be considered warmer than an ordinary product without the cuteness appeal, but there would be no difference in brand competence between a cute product and an ordinary product (Study 1A and 1B). Next, attitudes toward products using the whimsical cuteness were expected to change significantly when the brand status was high. This was investigated by a moderated mediation analysis using the warmth and competence dimension of the brand as mediators (Study 2). In Study 3, the results from Study 2 are replicated with the corresponding brand closeness and brand capability. Finally, in order to confirm whether whimsically cute stimuli can clearly show the expected effect in real market conditions, a real brand, SK-II cosmetics, was investigated in Study 4.
2.THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Two Dimensions of Cuteness

“Cute” is a very frequently used expression, with various meanings and contexts. People use the term “cute” to express feeling toward babies and young animals, and even for young adults or the elderly. It can also describe artifacts of various types, in particular products that utilize design features such as animated characters or colorful or unique patterns. The special aesthetic characteristics of cuteness allow it to be distinguished from beauty or uniqueness, but have also led its marketing value to be overlooked historically. In the past, that is, the negative meaning of cuteness was stronger because it was regarded as synonymous with childishness, whereas in the present it is used in various contexts with negative and also positive meanings (Macpherson & Bryant, 2018). In addition, there is a difference in perception of “cuteness” between Asian and Western cultures. Recently, however, the Japanese term kawaii has come to be widely used, reflecting the characteristics of cartoon characters or mascots, not just a childlike or feminine cuteness, and can be applied to all cultures, including style, fashion, and personality, and extending from the existing vertical caregiving behavior to a more horizontal concept of social connection (Granot, Alejandro, & Russell, 2014; Macpherson & Bryant, 2018; Ohkura & Aoto, 2010; Takamatsu,
Across languages, several terms about cuteness generally imply friendliness in common. In the English dictionary, the definition of cuteness emphasizes endearing loveliness and strong subjective and emotional positive features rather than objective aesthetic features.

Despite the fact that cuteness manifests differently across languages and contexts in real-world usage, existing research related to cuteness has mainly been limited to the cute characteristics of infants or toddlers associated with classical cuteness and the benefits for their survival (i.e., the Kindchenschema or baby schema). A young child’s rounded head, round eyes and face, and chubby cheeks make people feel instinctively tender toward them (Alley, 1981; Lorenz, 1943), and these cute faces, regardless of age or attractiveness, generate a favorable response that includes overall trustworthiness, warmth, and kindness, but also causes negative evaluation of physical and intellectual abilities (Born & McArthur, 1985; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008; McArthur & Apatow, 1984). The cuteness of babies instinctively makes people focus on them, by biological mechanisms (Brosch, Sander, & Scherer, 2007); exposure to kindchenschema cuteness stimulates protective instincts and causes caregiving motivations and behaviors as well as a feeling of tenderness (Glocker et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2009). In this context, several studies show that the characteristics of cuteness can foster prosocial behavior in contexts outside childcare, including marketing.
contexts such as green marketing (Chang, Yeh, & Lin, 2017; Scott & Nenkov, 2016; Wang, Mukhopadhyay, & Patrick, 2017). However, research on cuteness in design and marketing contexts is only beginning to take off, in spite of the tremendous demand for cute products in the market. Despite the fact that research on cuteness is still largely confined to baby cuteness, recent studies have shown the salience of the concept of whimsical cute—frivolity, zany and fun, reflecting the realistic marketing trend (Goggin, Dale, Leyda, McIntyre, & Negra, 2017; Hellen & Sääksjärvi, 2013; Karkun, Chowdhury, & Dhar, 2018; Nittono & Ihara, 2017; Scott & Nenkov, 2016).

In particular, a study by Nenkov and Scott (2014) expands the concept of cuteness from the existing baby schema to whimsical cuteness and proves that there is a type of cuteness evocative of joy, cheerfulness, and fun without causing images related to weakness or care. Therefore, the above researchers argue, whimsical cuteness causes indulgent consumption in pursuit of these emotional rewards, not caring behavior. This cuteness can be seen to be more in line with real-world marketing context and it can be applied not only to character-based products such as Lego and Mickey Mouse but also cute products that do not represent living or sentient creatures but utilize colors, shapes, patterns, and so on to create a cute effect—as seen on products from laptop covers to cars such as the Fiat 500 and Mini Cooper (Goggin, 2018; Marcus, 2002; Taylor, 2011; Wittkower, 2012; Yano, 2004).
Whimsical cuteness has the advantage of clashing less with expendable products than the baby schema and therefore being applicable more widely. Therefore, if cuteness study focuses more on this area in the future, it may make more contributions to the marketing and design fields. Cho (2004) further defined cuteness in terms of various dimensions: size, shape, structure, color, texture, proportion, arrangement, metaphor, and border. The researcher proposed that a combination of elements could produce various types of cuteness, such as a small, simple, and soft thing, or a round and light thing with bright colors. These cute traits apply not only to objects but also to living creatures or robots, and arrangement or behavior of the various features listed above (e.g., bright and protruding eyes, rounded faces, large and rounded ears) has been reported to make subjects look cuter (Angier, 2006).

This study aims to expand the established dimensions of cuteness, focusing on the use of shapes, colors, and patterns to define the cuteness of products in the marketing context. In the real world, the use of cuteness as a feature in products is no longer confined to children’s markets, but can be applied to a variety of adult products—from daily necessities such as stationery and kitchenware to expensive durable goods such as electronics and automobiles. Cross (2004) argues that by connecting cuteness and cool, the cuteness is no longer confined to the characteristics of children but rather becomes attractive to adults. Previous research has proposed that the most evident traits of whimsical cuteness are
fun, playfulness, and humor, and have established that shape and color alone can induce cuteness, classified as whimsical cute in distinction from baby cute (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). Whimsical cuteness preserves the familiar and easily accessed impressions of baby cute but differs from it in providing a fun, cheerful, and humorous feeling without the urge to look after the baby cute subject that stems from its vulnerable and weak features. Even in the context of the market, consumers may be impressed with the cuteness aspect of staplers that have colorful patterns or witty designs, but although they feel that they look fun and enjoyable, they will not regard the stapler as a vulnerable or a caregiving thing. In this context, we can consider the close relationship between the characteristics of cuteness and the perceptions of brand and products, which may lead to a relatively negative association with the performance of the product.

2.2 Cuteness and Brand Perception: Connection to Perception of Warmth–Competence

Almost every brand exists has a corresponding brand image. Consumers have a tendency to apply their social bias to brand images as well, such as stereotypes that we generally have about people when they have a sense of brand image (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012). When making
social judgments about others, people usually share two types of assessments using two different dimensions: *warmth* and *competence*. These dimensions are also applied to brand evaluations, to distinguish warm brands and competent brands under the stereotype content model using warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012). In brands as intentional agents framework (BIAF) model, researchers called the two dimensions “*intention*” and “*ability*” to emphasize the way these perceptions imply a corporate context, rather than using the personality traits of “warm” and “competent” to name the two dimensions of the BIAF. To emphasize the corporate context, this study utilized the concept of brand closeness and brand capability with the corresponding brand intentions and brand abilities. The more positive the intention of the firm, the warmer the image of the brand; and the stronger the ability of the firm, the higher the competency of the brand image. In addition to this, research has been conducted showing that brand warmth and brand competence, or perceptions of both, improve the attitude toward the brand, the purchase intention, and brand loyalty (Aaker et al., 2010; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; MacInnis, 2012). Therefore, how to promote the two dimensions of brand image perception is a very important issue for most companies.

In this study, it is considered that the cuteness of the product, especially whimsical cuteness, can create both warmth and competence in brand image perception. Generally, the cuteness of a
product has a closer connection with the dimension of warmth. Kindness, trustworthiness, and warmth, among the various characteristics of cuteness, can be directly linked to the warmth dimension, and consumers are more likely to feel friendlier and closer to products using cute designs (Nenkov & Scott, 2014; Ohkura, Komatsu, & Aoto, 2014). In contrast, according to extant cuteness research, it would be hard to say that the level of competence is closely related to cuteness. However, this assumption may shift in implications when moving from a traditional baby cute to a whimsical cute concept. The cuteness associated with the baby automatically manifests the mental aspects of vulnerability and carefulness, so when applied to a product, it may be associated with weakness of the product, resulting in low expectations for quality. On the other hand, whimsical cuteness does not reveal any psychological aspect related to quality deterioration of the product, so it does not show any significant difference from ordinary products in terms of competence (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). This aspect is more clearly seen when the brand perception is regarded as a real-world context for brand status, as a moderating variable. When the information is given that the brand status is high, consumers are more likely to prefer cute products to ordinary ones, because just whimsically cute ones enhance not only enhance brand warmth but also brand competence, while ordinary products do not increase brand warmth.

The mental state evoked by the cute product is closely
related to the sense of belonging and the need to connect with others, so that interaction with the product that strengthens the sense of belonging with others or with the personified product, as warm products should, alleviates the negative effects of social exclusion (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Raw, & Vohs, 2010; Mourey, Olson, & Yoon, 2017). Further, consumers can regard products with high levels of whimsical cuteness as not only warm but also competent. In whimsical cuteness, the inherent characteristics of fun, play, frivolity, and humor are linked directly to the characteristic of warmth and at the same time do not cause vulnerability or caretaking associations like baby cute does, so it does not hurt the competent image of the brand. Indeed, as brand image perception of warmth and competence initially originated from the typification of social judgments about people (Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012), some researchers have reported that people perceive humorous people as having higher status in the same situation (Bitterly, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2017).

Therefore, while products using baby cute can lead to the perception of a brand as warm (but rarely as competent), whimsically cute brands can be both warm and competent at the same time. Also, as we appreciate and highly value people who have both these characteristics, because it is very difficult to be both warm and competent, it would be possible but extraordinary to achieve a similar “golden quadrant” in image perception of brands, and would lead to very positive perception of that brand (Aaker,
Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012). Thus, in this study, I predict that brands with whimsically cute products can be recognized as warm and also competent, and that this will change brand attitude positively.

However, this expectation cannot be unconditionally applicable to all products and brands that utilize whimsical cuteness. Although whimsical cuteness is more extensible than baby cuteness, general consumers tend to regard the perception of “cuteness” as a lack of perfection, and differences between concepts of “beautiful and cool” and “cute” can be distinguished. Thus, in this study, I applied a variable of brand status and suggested that the effect of cuteness of the brand image on the attitude toward the brand will change depending on brand status: When the brand status is higher, the cute product will have both warmer and more competent brand image, and brand attitudes will be more positive.
3. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

3.1 Pilot Tests

Prior to main studies, preliminary tests were conducted to confirm whether the stimuli accurately reflect cuteness. Experimental stimuli reflecting whimsical cuteness are designed with reference to the stimuli of Nenkov and Scott (2014), particularly those in which cuteness is clearly distinguished in color and pattern. The purpose of this study is to investigate the difference between brand attitudes when consumers see cute products and products that are not cute (ordinary products), without any distinctions made among kinds of cuteness or other aesthetic concepts. Pilot studies were performed in order to find out whether consumers could actually feel a difference in cuteness between (presumed) cute products and ordinary products based on difference in color and/or pattern.

Method

A total of 236 participants (47% females, $M_{age} = 30.16$ years) and 295 participants (53% females, $M_{age} = 29.83$ years) were recruited for color and pattern respectively from Prolific Academic. This was done based on research findings that participants on this site participate more reliably than those on alternatives such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti,
Studies were performed with a single-factorial design with participants randomly assigned to one of two conditions (color: bright and light vs. dark and heavy or pattern: simple vs. complex). Regardless of gender, stationery goods were used. A stapler product with an ordinary, bland design was changed into various colors and patterns using the Photoshop program. Staplers were either bright and light colors (yellow, pink, red and white) or dark and heavy colors (navy blue, brown and black), and participants were asked about their degree of general cuteness and whimsicalness (Nenkov & Scott, 2014) by rating the extent to which the stapler in color condition reflected whimsical cuteness (whimsical, playful, fun; $\alpha = .92$). Last, participants also assessed the product’s visual cuteness with one item. All measures used a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). White color was found to be low in cuteness and whimsicalness, similar to dark colors, so white was included in the latter group. The specific stimuli are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Degree of color change manipulation of stapler products
As for patterns, differences in consumers’ cuteness perceptions are predicted between simple and complex patterns. To check this and confirm the influence of color, the second pilot study further diversified the experimental stimuli from white solid or patterned products to various colorful patterns. Through these approaches, I tried to confirm that consumers were getting a cuter feeling based on color as well as on pattern. Each pattern was taken from a design website, and Photoshop was again used to change patterns. See Figure 2. After being asked to view pictures of one of the two randomly presented types of products, participants were asked how whimsical/playful/fun the product felt (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) ($\alpha = .93$) and how cute (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Figure 2: Degree of pattern change manipulation of stapler products

Results and Discussion

As a result of the experiment, participants reported more whimsy
with brighter colors ($M_{\text{bright color}} = 3.78, SD = 1.57$ vs. $M_{\text{dark color}} = 1.63, SD = 0.88$; $F(1, 235) = 179.61, p < .001$), and more complex patterns ($M_{\text{complex}} = 5.09, SD = 1.86$ vs. $M_{\text{simple}} = 2.95, SD = 1.84$; $F(1, 294) = 92.41, p < .001$). They also perceived more cuteness with brighter colors ($M_{\text{bright color}} = 3.76, SD = 2.04$ vs. $M_{\text{dark color}} = 1.51, SD = 0.92$; $F(1, 235) = 129.19, p < .001$) and more complex patterns ($M_{\text{complex}} = 4.14, SD = 2.14$ vs. $M_{\text{simple}} = 2.40, SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 294) = 54.62$). The results confirmed that consumers could feel a significant level of cuteness based only on the color or pattern applied to the product. Therefore, in the next main studies, the degree of cuteness was manipulated using the proven stimuli to investigate how brand image perception is different between cute and uncute products and how this difference affects brand attitude.
3.2 Study 1A: Stapler

Method
Study 1A recruited participants from the United Kingdom and the United States using Prolific Academic, which is mainly used by English-speakers. A 2 (condition: cute vs. control) between-participants design was used in study 1A. One hundred eight participants (54% female, $M_{age} = 27.53$ years) completed the experiment.

Stimuli were intended to utilize a general product not subject to gender or age, so I used the staplers with the confirmed cuteness difference from the pilot studies. The dotted, colorful stapler, rated the highest for cuteness, was used as a cute product, and the solid black stapler, lowest rated for cuteness, was selected as a neutral product. The products are shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Cuteness stimuli for Study 1A](image)

In a study on the site called “Study on Product Choice,” participants were asked to imagine a situation where they would
buy a stapler, and they read brief information about its characteristics. The price of the product was $7 across staplers. In order to prevent guessing the performance of the product based on brand, a virtual brand was set. Next, participants were presented with a photo of a colorful dotted pattern stapler or a black stapler, depending on condition, and asked what they thought about this fictional brand (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive, 1 = very bad, 7 = very good, 1 = not favorable, 7 = preferred) (Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Folkes & Kamins, 1999). After that, they were asked for warmth image and competent image of brand, respectively. For this, Fiske et al.’s (2002) brand perception index was revised and used. Participants rated the brand of stapler on trait warmth (that is, to what extent do the following traits describe the stapler’s brand in general: friendly, well-intentioned, trustworthy, warm, good-natured, sincere: $\alpha = .90$) and the brand of stapler on trait competence (capable, competent, efficient, skillful, confident, intelligent: $\alpha = .83$). After reading the scenario, participants provided simple demographic information.

**Results**

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analyzing the effect of cuteness vs. control on brand attitude was conducted. There was a significant effect of the cute stapler vs. the neutral stapler on brand attitude ($F(1, 107)= 9.75, p = .002$). In particular, participants showed more positive brand attitude toward the stapler when the stapler
was cute than not cute condition \((M_{\text{cute}} = 5.24, SD = 1.30 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{control}} = 4.48, SD = 1.21)\).

Next, I analyzed brand image perception (warmth vs. competence) to identify mediation. The difference in warm image for the stapler \((M_{\text{cute}} = 4.96, SD = 1.16 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{control}} = 3.60, SD = 1.19; F(1, 107) = 35.85, p < .001\) was significant between the two products, but there was no statistically significant difference in the perception of competent images \((M_{\text{cute}} = 4.83, SD = 0.89 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{control}} = 4.54, SD = 1.05; F(1, 107) = 2.40, p < .13)\).

**Mediation Analysis**

In order to further demonstrate the mediating effects of brand image perception on brand attitudes, I used the PROCESS macro (Model 4, 5,000 resamples; Hayes, 2018). The bootstrapping results showed that the cute product promoted brand attitude, which was mediated by brand image perception, especially warmth \((\beta = .38; 95\% \text{ CI: } .038, .787)\). Perception of competence did not mediate the difference in brand attitude between cute and neutral products \((\beta = .14; 95\% \text{ CI: } -.034, .353)\). As a result, it was confirmed that “cute” products have a warmer image than ordinary products, whereas competent image has no significant difference from neutral image in the effect of cuteness on brand attitude.
Significant indirect effect of "whimsical cute" through warmth dimension = 0.38, 95% CI [0.038, 0.787]

Non-significant indirect effect of "whimsical cute" through competence dimension = 0.14, 95% CI [-0.034, 0.353]

Figure 4: Result from Study 1A. Mediation model
3.3 Study 1B: Smart Speaker

Method

Study 1B was conducted by repeating the same design as in Study 1A to verify the results. One hundred and ten people participated on Prolific Academic (63% Female, $M_{age} = 30.16$ years). It was run as a single-factor group design (cute vs. control), and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

Figure 5: Cuteness stimuli for Study 1B

Participants were asked to imagine a situation where they would buy the latest smart speakers and read brief product information about the speaker. In this case, the price of the product was given as $100, reflecting the average market price of smart speakers. In order to prevent guessing the performance of the product through the brand, a virtual brand was given. Then, depending on condition, I presented participants with a photograph of the speaker in the colorful zigzag pattern or the simple black speaker and asked what they thought about this fictional brand. As in Study 1A, brand attitudes were averaged over 3 items (thoughts and feelings about...
the brand: negative/positive, bad/good, not favorable/preferred). Afterward, as in Study 1A, I asked for warm and competent image perception of the brand to confirm the mediation (Fiske et al., 2002), and then asked for general cuteness perception of the product for the manipulation check.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of Study 1B showed basically the same pattern to those of Study 1A. Brand attitudes toward speakers were significantly better when they were cute (speakers with colorful patterns) than when they were not \( (M_{\text{cute}} = 4.63, SD = 1.67 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{control}} = 4.16, SD = 1.51; F(1, 109) = 3.45, p = .066) \). In addition, the perceived difference between the warmth of the speaker brand was also significant between the two products \( (M_{\text{cute}} = 4.65, SD = 1.14 \text{ vs. } M_{\text{control}} = 3.66, SD = 1.15; F(1, 109) = 21.60, p < .001) \), but there was no significant difference in perceptions of competence. Afterward, analysis of the mediation of brand image for brand attitude was conducted using the PROCESS macro as above. The bootstrapping result showed that the cute product promoted positive brand attitude, mediated by brand image recognition, especially warm image perception \( (\beta = .299; 95\% \text{ CI: } .019, .700) \). Competent image perception did not mediate differences in brand attitudes between cute and neutral products \( (\beta = .0004; 95\% \text{ CI: } -.218, .209) \).

Thus, Studies 1A and 1B consistently show that “cute” products
have a positive effect on brand image compared to neutral products, mediated by the warm image of the cute product. In the case of cute products using the baby schema, the image would be less competent than that of the neutral product; however, in the case of whimsical cuteness, competent image does not show a significant difference from neutral products. The mediation analysis also shows that the image of warmth positively mediates brand attitude, but the image of competence does not.

![Mediation model](image.png)

**Figure 6**: Result from Study 1B. Mediation model
3.4 Study 2

Reflecting the consistent results of Study 1A and 1B, Study 2 was designed to add to the experiment by applying moderating variables of brand status to approximate a more realistic market situation. In Study 1, since there was no information about the brand, only the effect of the cute product itself was assessed. However, in an actual situation, information about the brand available when the product is selected has a great influence on the purchasing decision of the consumer. In particular, cute products are likely to have negative associations with brand or performance, so it will be important to better understand the relationship between brand status and cuteness. Study 2 aims to verify the moderating effect of brand status on brand attitude for a brand making cute products.

Method

A total of 152 participants from Prolific (56.6% female, $M_{age} = 28.54$ years) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. A $2 \times 2$ (cuteness condition: control vs. cute) × (brand status condition: low vs. high) between-participants design was conducted in Study 2.

To approximate high brand status, the speaker brand was described as a top-tier brand famous for its excellent performance and design. For low brand status, the speaker brand was said to be low-tier, and both performance and design to be ordinary. I then
asked each participant how competent this brand felt (1 = incompetent, 7 = competent) and how high status this brand felt (1 = very low, 7 = very high) for the manipulation check. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenarios: explaining the cute product or not. The degree of cuteness was manipulated as in the previous studies but in this study it was manipulated only by the scenario for greater strictness. In order to prevent difference in individual perceptions, no image of the cute product was provided, just a description of whether it was cute or not. As in the previous studies, participants responded to three items to assess brand attitude on 7-point scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Last, to eliminate alternative explanations, all participants indicated the extent to which they would “feel the product is very unique” and “feel the product has an aesthetic design.”

Results

Manipulation check

A 2 (brand status condition) × 2 (cuteness condition) analysis of variance on cuteness evaluation revealed that the main effect of cuteness condition was significant only ($F(1, 148) = 114.80, p < .001$; $p$s > .10 for other main effect and two-way interaction). When reading the scenarios describing the cute products, participants were more likely to view the speaker as cute than when reading the scenarios for the normal product ($M_{cute} = 5.17, SD =$
2.00 vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.28$, $SD = 1.26$). The same was true through the manipulation check for brand status ($M_{\text{brand status: high}} = 5.72$, $SD = 1.10$ vs. $M_{\text{brand status: low}} = 3.59$, $SD = 0.94$). A 2 (brand status condition) × 2 (cuteness condition) ANOVA on brand status perception through two items ($\alpha = .91$) showed that the main effect of brand status condition was significant only ($F(1, 148) = 162.34$, $p < .001$; $ps > .23$ for other main effect and two-way interaction).

**Brand attitude**

I examined brand attitude in a 2 (product design: cute vs. control) × 2 (brand status: high vs. low) between-participants ANOVA, which revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 148) = 4.06$, $p = .046$). Planned contrasts indicated that in a high brand status condition, participants showed better brand attitude toward the cute product ($M_{\text{cute}} = 5.36$, $SD = 1.27$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.78$, $SD = 1.03$, $t(148) = 2.02$, $p = .045$) than in a low brand status condition ($M_{\text{cute}} = 3.68$, $SD = 1.23$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.92$, $SD = 1.40$, $t(148) = -.83$, $p = .41$). Therefore, the effect of enhancing brand attitude for existing cute products is significant when the brand’s status is high. As for the alternative hypothesis, I asked to what degree the product feels unique and how aesthetically appealing its characteristics are, and found that it was not meaningful to use uniqueness and aesthetics as independent variables instead of the cuteness in the two-way ANOVA ($F(1, 140) = 1.494$, $p = .20$; $F(1, 139) = 1.01$, $p = .420$).
A 3-way interaction with uniqueness also did not show significant interaction \((F(1, 128) = .51, p = .73)\). By combining these results, I was able to eliminate alternative hypotheses such as effects of uniqueness and aesthetic characteristics, and verify the inherent effects of cuteness on brand attitude.
3.5 Study 3

Study 3 was conducted to confirm once again the moderating effect of brand status, as verified previously. In Study 2, the manipulation of cuteness was performed by only scenario for the elimination of the alternative hypothesis; in contrast, Study 3 showed that the cuteness manipulation was more vividly presented through the actual product stimulation utilized in Study 1. In Study 3, it was not appropriate to use the previous brand image perception (warmth and competence) measurements, because I had added a brand status as a new variable to reflect the real market situation. Thus, I tried to expand the moderated mediation using similar mediators that can be linked to brand image perception, such as brand closeness and brand capability.

Figure 7: Study 3. Moderated Mediation Model
Methods

As in the previous experiments, 173 participants were recruited using Prolific (female 49%, $M_{age} = 29.89$ years). A $2 \times 2$ between-participants design was conducted. The brand status and the degree of cuteness had already been verified by manipulation checks in the previous studies. Therefore, I used the speaker brand status manipulation scenario from Study 2 and Study 1B’s cuteness manipulation (colorful pattern speaker vs. black speaker) in Study 3 (See Figure 5).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions according to cuteness and brand status. After that, brand attitude was ascertained by three items using the established 7-point scale ($\alpha = .92$). In order to confirm the mediating effect, I asked about brand closeness (warmth) and brand capability (competence) for each variable associated with brand image perception. When brand status is applied as a new moderating variable, the existing content of the index constituting warmth and competence is sometimes made redundant (for example, sincerity is a subscale of warmth but would be duplicated in a high brand status condition). Therefore, I emphasized the most important content in each dimension with characteristics similar to the respective dimensions of brand image perception used in Studies 1 and 2. Finally, after asking questions about the dimensions of cuteness and the degree of overall cuteness, I collected basic demographic
information such as gender and age.

Results

*Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention*

First, the interaction effect of cuteness and brand status on brand attitude was significant \((F(1, 169) = 3.69, p = .05)\). The results revealed a significant main effect of brand status \((F(1, 169) = 108.47, p < .001)\), but no significant main effect of cuteness \((F(1, 169) = 1.84, p = .18)\). Planned contrasts indicated that high brand status in the cuteness condition led to higher brand attitude than in the neutral condition \((M_{control} = 5.11, SD = 1.06 vs. M_{cute} = 5.59, SD = .96\); \(t(169) = 2.27, p = .03\)). However, there was no significant difference in brand attitude between low brand status with cute and uncute products \((M_{control} = 3.86, SD = .92 vs. M_{cute} = 3.76, SD = .95\); \(t(169) = -.48, p = .63\)).

As for purchase intention, the pattern of this result did not change. There was a significant interaction effect between cuteness and brand status \((F(1, 169) = 4.238, p = .041)\). Simple contrast analysis revealed that participants in the cuteness condition showed significant difference in purchase intention \((M_{brand\ status: low} = 3.36, SD = 1.60 vs. M_{brand\ status: high} = 4.93, SD = 1.56; t(169) = 4.81, p < .001)\) compared to those in the neutral product condition \((M_{brand\ status: low} = 3.83, SD = 1.45 vs. M_{brand\ status: high} = 4.45, SD = 1.55; t(169) = 1.84, p = .07)\).
Moderated Mediation Analysis

To investigate the underlying mechanism of the effect, moderated mediation analysis was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure (PROCESS macro 3.2, Model 8; 5000 resamples; Hayes, 2018). Cuteness (X: 1 = cute, 0 = neutral), brand status condition (W: 1 = high, 0 = low), brand closeness, brand capability (M) in place of brand image perception, and brand attitude (Y) were included in this model. The indirect effect via brand closeness was significant for high brand status ($\beta = .24$, 95% CI: $$.077, .432$$), but not for low brand status ($\beta = -.03$, 95% CI: $$.176, .105$$).

As a result, we can see that brand attitude is more positive when brand status is high because a high status brand is likely to be a closer brand. On the other hand, it was confirmed that brand capability did not act as a significant mediator of brand attitude ($\beta = .08$, 95% CI: $$.129, .333$$). Therefore, these results illustrate that consumers may be willing to more purchase a cute product relative to a neutral product when provided with the information that the brand’s status is high, because they feel the brand closer to them.
Study 4

Study 4 was conducted to verify whether the proposed model could function the same in actual market conditions, with the purpose of providing more practical implications for companies. To do this, I tried to investigate whether the differences between cute and ordinary products affect brand attitude using the recently released SK-II products. Since there is a risk that consumers may feel different about brand status, the study was conducted on Western consumers rather than Asian consumers, as the latter are relatively familiar with and likely have more articulated images of the SK-II brand.

Method

One hundred and fifty participants were recruited through Prolific (56.7% female, \(M_{\text{age}} = 31.45\) years). Study 4 was conducted with a 2 (product design: cuteness vs. neutral) x 2 (brand status: high vs. low) between-participants design; participants were randomly assigned to four conditions, and were given £0.7 (about 1,000 Korean won) as a reward.

Cuteness Manipulation

At the end of 2018, SK-II launched a product line with a new design. Based on collaboration with designers, the company released various versions of cosmetics packages including bright
colors such as pink, yellow, green, and blue in various patterns such as circles and stripes. This design is considered appropriate to represent the whimsical cuteness discussed in this research. I used one SK-II lotion product from this line as a stimulus in Study 4, reflecting the cuteness of products on the actual market. The same lotion in a transparent case with a silver lid was used as a neutral stimulus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neutral Product Condition</th>
<th>Cute Product Condition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Neutral Product" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Cute Product" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Cuteness Stimuli for Study 4

In order to find out whether packaging difference in this actual SK-II lotion successfully induced consumers to recognize the difference between a “whimsical cuteness” product and a control, the manipulation check was first performed using an independent sample \((N = 99, \text{Female } 55\%, M_{\text{age}} = 27.4 \text{ years})\). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two package conditions presented above, and the information about the brand was equally neutral in both conditions (function and price were market average).
Last, the degree of whimsical cuteness and general cuteness were evaluated. Whimsical cuteness was used as an index ($a = .91$), as an average of three items (whimsical, playful, fun) based on previous studies; participants answered “the design of this product is whimsical/playful/fun/cute: 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The results showed that the cute packages were perceived as significantly cuter in general ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.84$, $SD = 1.97$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.76$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(1, 98) = 32.03$, $p < .001$), and higher in whimsical cuteness ($M_{\text{cute}} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.76$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.38$, $SD = 1.29$; $F(1, 98) = 70.97$, $p < .001$). Despite the same SK-II product being sold in the actual market, it was confirmed that consumers recognize different cuteness for different packages.

**Brand Status Manipulation**

SK-II is a Japanese beauty brand; its parent company is Procter & Gamble, but it is better known and better selling in Asian countries than Europe or the US. In addition, because it is a high-priced product, it is not a brand that can be easily found in all retailers in Western countries, so it is common for consumers who are not very interested in beauty or luxury fields to be unfamiliar with the brand. Study 4 focuses on cuteness manipulation, so I provided two conditions—high and low brand status—under the assumption that consumers do not know about the brand information. Participants were asked to read a scenario in the form of a consumer report related to the brand so that they could grasp the status of the brand.
based on only the content of the report (see Appendix 1). In addition to this, because SK-II is not a virtual brand, the detailed information with brand status instead of simply manipulating the brand status as high and low as in the previous studies. Since this stimuli manipulation may not be proper for consumers who already have information or impressions related to the brand status of SK-II, familiarity with the brand was also ascertained later.

Participants were evenly distributed to the four conditions according to the product (cute package vs. neutral package) and brand status (high vs. low). They first read the information in the form of a brief article about the brand and then imagine the situation in which they would like to buy a facial lotion from SK-II brand. After looking at the product package image of each condition, they were asked how much they want to buy this product ("How much would you like to buy?": 1 = I do not want to buy at all, 7 = I want to buy very much). As with the previous studies, the three-items of brand attitude was used as the brand attitude index (α = .943). After that, in order to check whether the brand status was actually high or low, participants were asked the degree of brand awareness and prior information on SK-II they have, and finally the demographic information.

Results and Discussion

Most of the participants did not know about the SK-II brand, but 9 out of 150 respondents did, so the responses of 141 participants
were used for the final analysis. In general, people tend to think of
SK-II as a luxury brand with high status, but there is also a
possibility that some consumers might feel that its brand status is
low because its brand positioning in Western countries is not clear.
Therefore, I analyzed the results only for participants who did not
have prior information about the brand. The results of this study are
as follows. First, the manipulation check for SK-II was successful
\( M_{\text{brand status: high}} = 5.88, SD = 1.13 \) vs. \( M_{\text{brand status: low}} = 3.05, SD = 1.16; F(1, 137) = 233.47, p < .001 \). To be specific, the main effect
of brand status was significant but the main effect of cuteness was
not \( F(1, 137) = .086, p = .77 \) and the interaction effect of
cuteness and brand status was not significant \( F(1, 137) = 3.831, p > .05 \). The calculated interaction effect was marginally significant
at \( p = .10 \), but this can be explained by the fact that the main effect
of brand status is significant.

As a result of contrast analysis, I found that the influence of
brand status on brand attitude was very strong. Specifically, when
brand status was low, the products with cute packages were
evaluated worse than those with regular package \( M_{\text{control}} = 4.17, SD = .97 \) vs. \( M_{\text{cute}} = 3.56, SD = 1.35; t(137) = -2.49, p = .014 \),
while this pattern was reversed when the brand status was high
\( M_{\text{cute}} = 5.29, SD = .91 \) vs. \( M_{\text{control}} = 4.84, SD = .83, t(137) = 1.786, p = .076 \). In the case of the purchase intention variable, a
significant interaction effect was revealed \( F(1, 137) = 8.72, p = .004 \), and the main effect of brand status was significant \( F(1,
137) = 37.57, p < .001), but not the main effect of cuteness ($F(1, 137) = .049, p = .825$). As a result of contrast analysis, the influence of brand status on brand attitude was found to be very strong. Specifically, when brand status is low, the intention to purchase cute products is lower than that for regular packages ($M_{\text{cute}} = 2.70, SD = 1.41$, vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.46, SD = 1.34$; $F(1, 137) = 5.15, p = .025$), while the result is reversed when brand status is high ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.78, SD = 1.38$, vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.21, SD = .25$; $F(1, 137) = 3.65, p = .058$). Thus, the results of empirical studies using actual products and brands in the market are similar to those for virtual brands in previous studies. In the case of Study 4, the effect of brand status on the cute product was very clear as the brand’s status was low and high, despite the fact that it was not possible to control all the conditions by using actual products and brands.
4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that cuteness is a very actively used marketing strategy in the real market, academic research has focused mainly only one side, baby cute. Prior to this study, there was no direct research examining the effect of whimsical cuteness on product selection or brand evaluation in the marketing context, and this study is thus the first to demonstrate whimsy’s effectiveness in marketing context, which can provide important implications.

At this time, warm brand image perception, that is, the emotional dimension of feeling more intimate and closer to the brand, as well as perceived fun and pleasure, can enhance brand competence without hurting brand warmth. In general, it is very difficult and virtually impossible to bring both trade-off images (such as warm and competent or functional and aesthetic) to a brand or company at the same time (Aaker et al., 2012; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). Both sides of this trade-off, however, are compatible with whimsical cuteness, a useful marketing strategy that enhances warm images but does not degrade competent images and thus ultimately fosters and affects brand attitudes and purchase intention. Therefore, it can be argued, it is more effective to use cuteness appeal in a product or advertisement strategy marketed under a high status but not a low status brand. This effect has been proven through a series of empirical studies applied to utilitarian
(stapler and smart speaker) and hedonic (cosmetics) consumption. In the case of SK-II cosmetics, this study also found that attitude toward brand was more positive when packages use whimsical cuteness and brand status was high. In particular, even when the actual function and content of the product are the same, change in the package design may have a significant influence on brand attitude and purchase intention. In addition, as the marketing importance of cuteness in the real market grows, this study will have increasing implications, as the first study to suggest how cuteness can be applied more generally to design and can thereby affect the brand attitude. Overall, the cuteness of a product has been proven to have a positive effect on the brand image of a warm brand with high status, leading to increase in intention to purchase. This may have extensive practical implications for actual marketing as well as theoretical research on brand image perception.

### 4.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

In actual marketing, whimsical cute is more mainstream than baby cute. The fun and humor expressed by whimsical cuteness, however, have been neglected in the research, and can provide practical and realistic implications for marketers. Despite the expected relatively inferior functional evaluation of cute products, the analysis of the phenomenon of people’s preference for these cute products and the underlying mechanism will contribute to
broaden the cuteness research. In particular, if cuteness appeal is proved to have a positive effect on brand image and purchase intention of a competent brand, this has the practical effect of expanding the product categories and brands to which cuteness can be applied in actual marketing.

Further, since the field of cute products is diversifying day by day, it is necessary for marketers to extend applications of cuteness into product categories in which utilitarian function is less important and social functions such as friendship and communication are more important. It is expected that the fun or humor that are expressed by whimsical cute can provide more practical implications to marketers in this regard. In addition, these results may provide a new perspective on brand image perception (warmth and competence) research. Future studies should be applied to advanced marketing strategies in which cute and competence can be emphasized from context to context (such as applying cute appeal to complex electronic products or AI, promoting user—friendliness).

4.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

First of all, the concept and operationalization of whimsical cuteness need to be done more extensively. In this study, we focused on color and pattern among the potential concepts that can be used when discussing cuteness in design and used them as the main stimuli; broader supplementation will be needed. Future research
will try to amplify this study’s contribution to the cuteness of product design by analyzing more closely what factors are important in addition to color and pattern for cute design.

Second, this study does not fully reflect cultural differences in the concept of cuteness. Although culture, products, and services are rapidly becoming globalized, there is still a difference in perception of cuteness between Eastern and Western cultures. This study mainly focused on British and American consumers. In contrast to Asian cultures, Western cultures tend to a greater extent regard cuteness as immature or incomplete. Of course, in comparison with baby cute, this difference in culture can be somewhat reduced in the case of whimsical cuteness, and the interest of Western consumers in cute design is changing toward a positive due mainly to the influence of Japanese culture. Still, these studies were conducted only in specific cultures and did not reveal a universal effect. Future research could fill the gap between two different cultures by manipulating the concept of cuteness more elaborately.
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195–198.


국문 초록

제품의 귀염성이 소비자의 브랜드 태도에 미치는 영향: 브랜드 지위를 중심으로

소비자들의 브랜드 태도 및 구매 의도 형성 과정에서 제품 디자인이 가지는 미적 특징은 나날이 그 영향력을 넓혀가고 있다. 이에 따라 디자인의 미학적 요소에 대한 연구가 다양하게 이루어지고 있으나, 귀여움의 경우 실제 시장에서 차지하고 있는 위치에 비해 마케팅 맥락에서의 적용과 관련된 연구는 아직까지 활발하게 이루어지지 않고 있는 실정이다. 본 연구는 이러한 귀여움이 소비자의 브랜드 태도에 어떤 영향을 미칠 수 있는지에 주목하고, 이때 기존에 주로 연구되어 왔던 베이비 스키마, 즉 아기 같은 연약한 귀여움이 아니라 최근 새롭게 각광받고 있는 개념인 기발한 귀여움 개념을 활용하여 이를 보다 일반적인 제품군에 적용하고자 하였다. 기발한 귀여움은 소비자들에게 보호나 연약한 느낌이 아니라 즐거움과 유쾌함 등을 떠올리게 하며, 컬러나 패턴만으로도 일정 이상 유발될 수 있으므로 보다 넓은 제품군에 적용 가능하다. 이때 기발한 귀여움을 활용한 제품이 브랜드 태도에 긍정적 영향을 미치는데, 이를 매개하는 변수가 브랜드 이미지 인식, 그 중에서도 따뜻한 이미지일 것이라 예측하여 이를 증명하였다. 또한 유능한 이미지 역시 일반적인 귀여운 제품에서 소비자들이 이를 인식하지 않는 경향이 있으나, 기발한 귀여움의 경우 베이비 스키마를
일으키지 않으므로 유능한 이미지를 낮추는 효과가 유의하지 않았다. 이는 특히 브랜드 지위에 의해 조절됨이 증명되었는데, 브랜드 지위가 높은 경우 소비자들이 귀여운 제품 브랜드를 더 선호하였으며, 이는 일반적인 디자인을 사용한 제품에 비해 따뜻한 이미지는 높으나 유능한 이미지 역시 떨어지지 않는 만큼임을 알 수 있었다.

구체적으로, 사전 연구를 통해 기발한 귀여움 자극의 효과를 검증하고, 이후 실증 연구 1에서는 귀여운 제품과 일반 제품의 브랜드 태도에 대한 차이를, 실증 연구 2에서는 조절 변수로 브랜드 지위를 활용하여 브랜드 지위에 따라 소비자들이 귀여운 제품과 그렇지 않은 제품에 대한 브랜드 태도를 다르게 나타내는지를 더 정교하게 보고자 하였다. 이어 실증 연구 3에서는 조절된 매개변수를 활용하여 이 효과가 소비자의 브랜드 이미지 인식 간 차이에서 온을 증명하였고, 마지막으로 실증 연구 4에서는 시장에 출시된 실제 브랜드 및 디자인을 활용하여 이러한 효과가 현실적인 마케팅 맥락에서도 나타날 수 있는지를 보다 엄격하게 검증하였다. 종합하여, 본 연구는 이론적으로 아직까지 한정되어 있는 귀여움의 개념을 좀 더 분명하게 구분, 확장하였다는 점 및 마케터들에게 보다 실용적인 시사점을 제공한다는 점에서 그 의의를 찾을 수 있을 것이다.

주요어: 귀염성, 브랜드 지위, 따뜻한 브랜드 이미지, 유능한 브랜드 이미지, 제품 디자인, 브랜드 태도

학번: 2011-30164
### Appendix 1: Brand status manipulation Scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>low brand status condition</th>
<th>high brand status condition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SK-II is an Asian cosmetic brand, selling skincare and beauty products and has not been selling well in the US and European markets since it is still new in Western markets. The beauty products that SK-II sells are rated as ordinary in terms of quality, and are not widely recognized by many Western consumers. In the high-end cosmetics brand market, market share of SK-II is very low compared to brands such as Estee Lauder, Chanel and Guerlain.</td>
<td>SK-II is a leading luxury cosmetic brand, selling high-end skincare and beauty products, and is successfully sold in the US and European markets. The amazingly immediate effects of SK-II's beauty products is widely recognized among many Western consumers. SK-II is a brand that has high market-share in luxury cosmetics segment and has won various beauty awards by beauty magazines such as Allure and consumer reports. In the high-end cosmetics brand market, SK-II has become a top-tier brand as growth continues to increase.</td>
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