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경영학박사학위논문

The Effects of Cuteness and Brand Status on Brand Attitude

제품의 귀염성이 소비자의 브랜드 태도에
미치는 영향: 브랜드 지위를 중심으로

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Abstract

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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, brand image perception, 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 (with bright red and yellow colors and rounded and friendly fonts) or when the main page of an unfamiliar site, which you do not have much prior information of, consists of the same colors, shapes, and patterns, how do you rate each brand? This study focuses on the "cuteness effect," which is induced by colors, patterns, and shapes. Moreover, it aims to reveal the effect of the cuteness of product design (in combination with brand status) on consumer behavior. In the current market, cute products are no longer limited to children's products. A wide range of products for ordinary people and adults with particular tastes (referred to as "kidults") use the "cuteness effect" for marketing; these products range from kitchen appliances to expensive products, such as automobiles (Patton, 1998; Taylor, 2011).

Cute products distributed in the market do not always utilize the classic baby cuteness appeal; instead, a whimsical and lively cuteness that makes consumers feel a sense of fun and humor is gaining considerable attention. Despite this market trend, no research has demonstrated the role of whimsical cuteness in brand attitude in a marketing context. Studies on cuteness cannot keep up with the trend of the market. Extant studies on the "cuteness effect" are primarily limited to studies on the baby schema; Lorenz (1943) states that emotions induced by cute babies are associated with caregiving or attention behavior (Glocker, Sherman, Haidt, & Coan, 2009; Sherman, Haidt, Iyer, & Coan, 2013). Therefore, this study aims to reveal the changes in brand attitude when companies use the whimsical

cuteness appeal. When people look at a whimsically cute product, the impression of the product differs from the one using the baby schema even if we exclude preference differences. In the case of whimsical cuteness stimuli, the product is considered less vulnerable or less delicate than that with the baby cuteness stimuli (Nenkov & Scott, 2014); 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 numerous limitations for expanding brand lines, the degree to which consumers intuitively combine products or brands with low brand status or functions is weaker in the case of products utilizing whimsical cuteness. Thus, companies have a more versatile use for whimsically cute products. This research provides theoretical and practical implications by examining the effects of whimsical cuteness on the psychological and behavioral dimensions.

This study predicts that brand characteristics affect the perception of similarly cute products. To connect cuteness type to brand characteristics, I adopt two fundamental dimensions of social perception to model consumers' brand image perceptions, building upon sociopsychological literature, particularly the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). A brand using whimsical cuteness would be considered warmer than an ordinary product without the cuteness appeal but would not have a brand competence lower than that of an ordinary product (Studies 1A and 1B). Next, attitudes toward products using whimsical cuteness are expected to change remarkably when the brand status is high. This change is investigated through moderated mediation analysis using the warmth and competence dimensions of the brand with the corresponding *brand*

closeness and *brand capability* as mediators (Studies 2 and 3). The warmth and competence dimensions of a brand hardly coexist, but whimsical cuteness would be high in both dimensions and thus has a positive effect on brand attitude in comparison with the ordinary product stimulus. Lastly, an actual brand, i.e., SK-II cosmetics, is investigated in Study 4 to confirm whether whimsically cute stimuli can demonstrate the expected effect in actual market conditions. Results show that consumers who believe that SK-II's brand status is high show a positive attitude toward the newly launched products with packaging that utilize whimsical cuteness.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

2.1 Two Dimensions of Cuteness

“Cute” is a frequently used expression with various meanings and contexts. People use the term “cute” to express a feeling toward babies and young animals and even for adults or the elderly. It can also describe various types of artifacts, particularly products that utilize design features, such as animated characters, playful colors, or unique patterns (Dydynski & Mäekivi, 2018; Schnurr, 2019). Highly aesthetic features include aesthetic perfection, expertise, and effort, and even increases self-affirmation (Creusen & Schoormans, 2005; Townsend & Sood, 2012; Wu, Samper, Morales, & Fitzsimons, 2017). However, cuteness is more like a friendly attractiveness rather than perfect beauty. 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, the negative meaning of cuteness was strong because it was considered synonymous to childishness, whereas in the present, it is used in various contexts with negative and positive meanings (Cross, 2004). In addition, the perception of “cuteness” differs between Asian and Western cultures (Bryce, 2006). Recently, the use of the Japanese term “kawaii,” which reflects 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), has been widely used and has extended from the existing vertical caregiving behavior to a horizontal concept of social connection (Granot, Alejandro, & Russell, 2014; Takamatsu, 2018). Across languages, several terms for “cuteness” generally imply friendliness. In the English

dictionary, the definition of “cuteness” emphasizes endearing loveliness and 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 been limited to the cute characteristics of infants or toddlers and their benefits for their survival (i.e., *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). These cute faces, regardless of age or attractiveness, not only generate a favorable response that includes overall trustworthiness, warmth, and kindness, but also cause a negative evaluation of physical and intellectual abilities (Berry & McArthur, 1985; Gorn, Jiang, & Johar, 2008; McArthur & Apatow, 1984). The cuteness of babies instinctively makes people focus on them through biological mechanisms (Brosch, Sander, & Scherer, 2007); exposure to kindchenschema cuteness stimulates protective instincts and causes caregiving motivations and behavior, as well as a feeling of tenderness (Glocker et al., 2009; Sherman et al., 2009).

In this context, several studies have shown that the characteristics of cuteness can foster prosocial behavior in contexts outside childcare, e.g., marketing context, such as green marketing (Chang, Yeh, & Lin, 2017). However, research on cuteness in design and marketing contexts has only begun despite the tremendous demand for cute products in the market. Although research on cuteness remains largely confined to baby cuteness, recent studies have shown the salience of the concept of whimsical cuteness (i.e., frivolous, zany, and fun), thus reflecting the realistic marketing trend (Goggin, Dale, Leyda, McIntyre, & Negra, 2017; Hellen & Sääksjärvi, 2013; Karkun, Chowdhury, & Dhar, 2018; Nittono & Ihara, 2017;

Scott & Nenkov, 2016).

A study by Nenkov and Scott (2014) expands the concept of cuteness from the existing baby schema to whimsical cuteness and proves that a type of cuteness evocative of joy, cheerfulness, and fun exists without causing images to be associated with weakness or care. Therefore, they argue that whimsical cuteness causes indulgent consumption in pursuit of these emotional rewards, not a caring behavior. This cuteness can be considered to be in line with the real-world marketing context and can be applied not only to character-based products, such as Lego and Mickey Mouse, but also to cute products that do not represent living or sentient creatures but utilize colors, shapes, patterns 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; Marcus, Kurosu, Ma, & Hashizume, 2017; Taylor, 2011; Wittkower, 2012; Yano, 2004). Compared with the baby schema, whimsical cuteness clashes less with general products and thus is more widely applicable. If studies on cuteness focus on this area in the future, then it can contribute to the marketing and design fields. Cho (2012) further defines cuteness in terms of various dimensions: size, shape, structure, color, texture, proportion, arrangement, metaphor, and border. The researcher proposes 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; moreover, the arrangement or behavior of the 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. Thus, the cuteness characterized by colors and patterns can be distinguished from anthropomorphized products and has unique characteristics of cuteness (Batra, Seifert, & Brei, 2015; Mourey, Olson, & Yoon, 2017). In the real world, the use of cuteness as a feature in products is no longer confined to children's markets; it is already applied to various adult products—from daily necessities, such as stationery and kitchenware, to expensive durable goods, such as electronics and automobiles. Therefore, theoretical and practical implications can be provided to investigate the effect of whimsical cuteness, which remains neglected by researchers. Conducting further research can elucidate the context of how consumers perceive whimsical cuteness and under what conditions the positive role of cuteness can be maximized. Cross (2004) argues that by connecting cuteness with coolness, cuteness becomes attractive to adults. Previous research has proposed that the evident traits of whimsical cuteness are fun, playfulness, and humor and established that shape and color alone can induce whimsical cuteness (Nenkov & Scott, 2014). Whimsical cuteness preserves the familiar and easily accessed impressions of baby cuteness but differs in terms of providing a fun, cheerful, and humorous feeling without associating it with baby cuteness that stems from its vulnerable and weak features. Even in the marketing context, consumers may be impressed with the cuteness aspect of staplers that have colorful patterns or witty designs. Although the consumers feel that the stapler looks fun and enjoyable, they do 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 has a corresponding brand image. Consumers tend to apply their social bias to brand images, similar to 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 and competent brands under the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012). This research also serves as a foundation for the brands-as-intentional-agents framework, which proposes that branding is determined by the intention and ability of the firm and brand (Kervyn et al., 2012). 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, research has shown that brand warmth and brand competence or the perceptions of both improve brand attitude, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. These findings can also be linked to brand image and personality (Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al., 2010; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012; MacInnis, 2012). Therefore, how to promote the two dimensions of brand image perception is a crucial issue for many companies.

This study considers that the cuteness of the product, especially whimsical cuteness, can create warmth and competence in brand image perception. Generally, the cuteness of a product has a close connection with the warmth dimension. Kindness, trustworthiness, and warmth, among the various characteristics of

cuteness, can be directly linked to the warmth dimension, and consumers tend to feel friendly and close to products using cute designs.

Whether the level of competence is closely related to cuteness is difficult to prove. Nevertheless, this assumption may shift in implications when moving from the traditional baby cuteness to the whimsical cuteness concept. Baby cuteness automatically manifests the mental aspects of vulnerability and carefulness; thus, when applied to a product, it may be associated with weakness, resulting in low expectations for quality. By contrast, whimsical cuteness does not reveal any psychological aspect related to product quality deterioration; thus, it does not show any considerable difference from ordinary products in terms of competence. This aspect is clearly observed when brand perception as a realistic context for brand status is considered to be a moderating variable. When the brand status is high, consumers tend to prefer cute products over ordinary ones because whimsically cute products enhance not only brand warmth but also brand competence.

The mental state evoked by a cute product is closely related to the sense of belongingness and the need to connect with others; interaction with a product that strengthens the consumer's sense of belongingness with others or with the personified product alleviates the negative effects of social exclusion (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2010; Mourey et al., 2017). Furthermore, consumers can regard whimsically cute products as not only warm but also competent. In the case of a high-brand-status product using whimsical cuteness, impressions about less competitiveness can be associated with a certain confidence and can maintain the brand image perception in the warmth and competence dimensions. This association can be predicted by referring to studies in which high

recognition in the warmth and competence dimensions give the impression of high status but low competence (Fiske et al., 2002). In whimsical cuteness, the inherent characteristics of fun, playfulness, frivolity, and humor are linked directly to warmth and do not cause vulnerability or caretaking associations; therefore, whimsical cuteness does not affect the competent image of the brand. The brand image perceptions of warmth and competence initially originate from the dimensions of social judgments about people (Fiske et al., 2002; Kervyn et al., 2012); thus, some researchers have reported that people perceive humorous people as having a status higher than those without humor in the same situation (Bitterly, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2017).

Therefore, while baby-cute brands can lead to the warm perception of a brand (but rarely as competent), whimsically cute brands can simultaneously be warm and competent. Moreover, as we appreciate and value people who have both these characteristics, achieving a similar “golden quadrant” in the image perception of brands is possible and can lead to a positive brand perception (Aaker, Garbinsky, & Vohs, 2012). Thus, in this study, I predict that brands with whimsically cute products can be recognized as warm and competent, thereby positively changing brand attitude.

However, this expectation is not 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 the concepts of “beautiful and cool” and “cute” can be distinguished. Thus, in this study, I apply a variable of brand status and suggest that the effect of the cuteness of the brand image on brand attitude changes in accordance with the brand status. The higher

the brand status, the warmer and more competent the brand image with the cute product is, and the more positive the brand attitude becomes. In addition, the warmth and competence of brand image perception are composed of various items. In later experiments, the concept of brand image perception is modified and used to avoid the duplication of the brand status concept and the confusion of participants. In other words, brand warmth can refer to brand closeness (Kim, 2018; MacInnis & Folkes, 2017), which refers to a close feeling toward the brand, and brand capability (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Ratnatunga & Ewing, 2005), which can be associated with brand competence by referring to the brand's ability.

2.3 Cuteness and Brand Status

Brand status depends on how consumers perceive the brand and the company's ability to combine product quality, price, and prestige and how well consumers have the knowledge and experience of the perceived competent and competitive brand (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). In addition, the criteria for determining brand status by consumers are diverse; these criteria include brand awareness, tradition, competitiveness, aesthetics and design, technological excellence, price range of brands, and company size (Kao, 2015; Kirmani, Sood, & Bridges, 1999; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). A highly perceived brand status ensures that the basic level of satisfaction in terms of product quality is met. Such perception can simplify the consumers' information search process during decision-making. In this study, the market share, brand recognition, and brand position (top tier vs. low tier), which are the important and objective measures of various brand status criteria, are presented to consumers. Warm and competent brands can be considered high and low, respectively, depending on what criteria they apply to for consumers. However, warm brands can be considered lower in terms of objective dimensions, such as product quality, in comparison with competent brands. Consumers perceive nonprofit firms as warm brands but do not tend to prefer products made by such firms because they lack competence (Aaker et al., 2010). This phenomenon is also observed in communication between people. High-power consumers tend to use effective message content more than warm messages (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2016). In other words, people think that a person or company with a high-power brand position lacks warmth but exudes competence.

However, in the case of cuteness, the relationship between brand status

and the warmth and competence dimensions must be analyzed in depth. Baby cuteness is closely connected with the warmth dimension, and the brand status tends to be perceived as low by consumers unless specific information is given in advance. However, whimsical cuteness can maintain warmth without compromising the brand's perception of competence; this phenomenon is evident in products with a high brand status. As revealed from the actual brand example of Alessi, we can predict that whimsical cuteness, including humor, can show a distinctive feature that can maintain the warmth and competence dimensions of the brand, especially in a high brand position. Previous research has shown that the successful use of humor is a sign of competence and predicts a person's high status; accordingly, whimsical cuteness that includes humor could act as a signal of confidence and play a positive role in building an improved brand attitude, especially when the brand status is high (Bitterly et al., 2017). Therefore, the subsequent empirical research considers brand status to be a moderating variable and verifies the expanding relationship between cuteness and brand image perception.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

3.1 Pilot Tests: Consumers' Cuteness Perception, Focusing on Colors and Patterns

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 and Measures

A total of 236 participants (47% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 30.16$ years) and 295 participants (53% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 29.83$ 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, 2017). 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 and 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 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 whimsical cuteness 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 general cuteness with brighter ($M_{\text{bright color}} = 3.76$, $SD = 2.04$ 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. $M_{\text{simple}} = 2.40$, $SD = 1.58$; $F(1, 294) = 54.62$, $p < .001$). 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 ordinary products and how this difference affects brand attitude.

3.2 Study 1A: Mediation Effect of Brand Image Perception (Warmth and Competence): Staplers

Method and Measures

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, $M_{\text{age}} = 27.53$ 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 study. 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, Study 1A

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). Since then, we have 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; $\alpha = .83$). Lastly, I conducted a manipulation check for perception of cuteness and simple demographic information.

Results and Discussion

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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 5.24, SD = 1.30$ 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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.96, SD = 1.16$ 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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.83, SD = 0.89$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 4.54, SD = 1.05; F(1, 107) = 2.40, p > .12$).

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 ($\beta = 0.38$; 95% CI: 0.038, 0.787). Perception of competence did not mediate the difference in brand attitude between cute and neutral products ($\beta = 0.14$; 95% CI: -0.034, 0.353). As a result, it was confirmed that “whimsically 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.

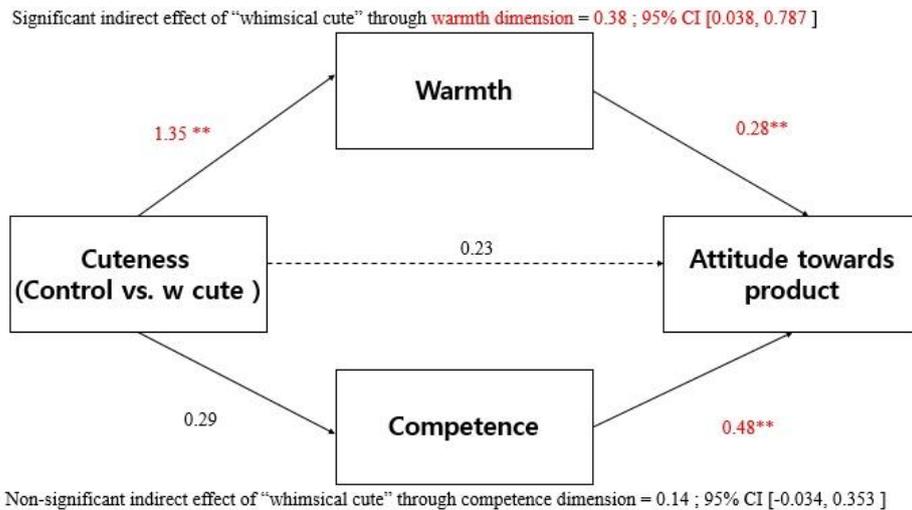


Figure 4: Mediation Result of Study 1A

3.3 Study 1B: Mediation Effect of Brand Image Perception (Warmth and Competence): AI Speakers

Method and Measures

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, $M_{\text{age}} = 30.16$ years). It was run as a single-factor group design (cute vs. neutral), and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

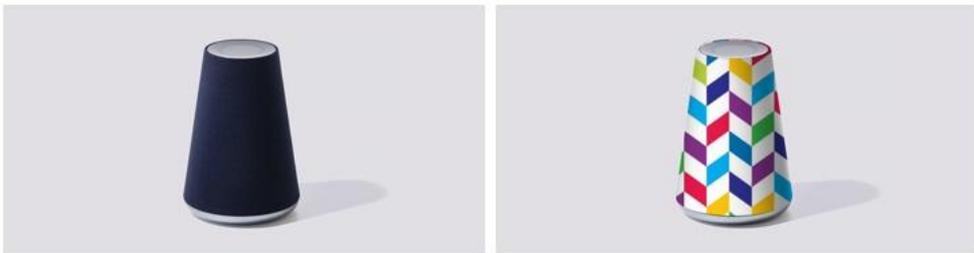


Figure 5: Cuteness Stimuli for Study 1B

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 AI 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. Finally, participants provided simple demographic information.

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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.63$, $SD = 1.67$ 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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.65$, $SD = 1.14$ 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. The mediation analysis also shows that the image of warmth positively mediates brand attitude, but the image of competence does not. 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 ($\beta = 0.299$; 95% CI: 0.0192, 0.6995). Competent image perception did not mediate differences in brand attitudes between cute and neutral products ($\beta = 0.0004$; 95% CI: -0.2183, 0.2088).

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.

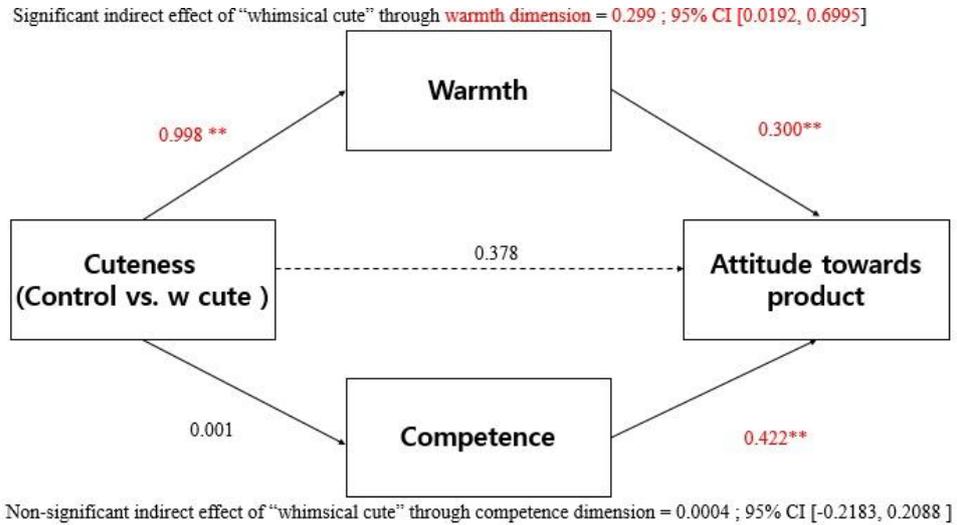


Figure 6: Mediation Results of Study 1B

3.4 Study 2: Moderation by Brand Status and Eliminating Alternative Explanations

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 and Measures

A total of 152 participants from Prolific (56.6% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 28.54$ years) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. A 2 (cuteness condition: control vs. cute) \times 2 (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 which is 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 it was manipulated only by the scenario for greater strictness in this study. 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 and Discussion

Manipulation check

A 2 (brand status condition) \times 2 (cuteness condition) analysis of variance on cuteness evaluation revealed that the main effect of cuteness condition was significant only ($F(1, 148) = 114.80, p < .001; ps > .10$ 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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 5.17, SD = 2.00$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.28, SD = 1.26$). A 2 (brand status condition) \times 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 ($M_{\text{brand status: high}} = 5.72, SD = 1.10$ vs. $M_{\text{brand status: low}} = 3.59, SD = 0.94; F(1, 148) = 162.34, p < .001$); other effects were NS ($ps > .23$). I concluded the manipulations were successful.

Brand attitude

I examined brand attitude in a 2 (product design: cute vs. control) x 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: The Role of Brand Status

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 only 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.

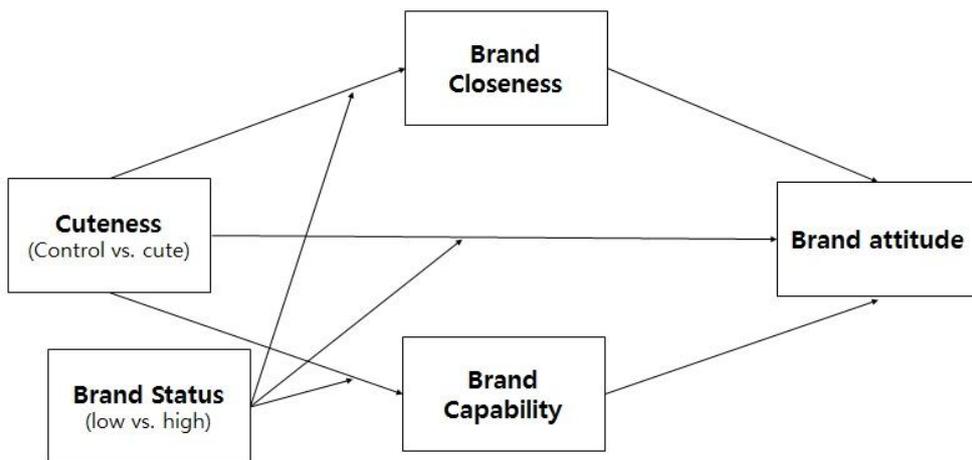


Figure 7: Study 3. Moderated Mediation Model

Methods and Measures

As in the previous experiments, 173 participants were recruited using Prolific (female 49%, $M_{\text{age}} = 29.89$ years). A 2 (product design: cute products vs. general products) x 2 (brand status: high vs. low) 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 mediation 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 and Discussion

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 ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.11$, $SD = 1.06$ vs. $M_{\text{cute}} = 5.59$, $SD = .96$; $t(169) = 2.27$, $p = .03$). However, there was no significant difference in brand attitude between low brand status with cute and ordinary products ($M_{\text{control}} = 3.86$, $SD = .92$ vs. $M_{\text{cute}} = 3.76$, $SD = .95$, $t(169) = -.48$, $p = .63$).

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 ($M_{\text{brand status: low}} = 3.36$, $SD = 1.60$ vs. $M_{\text{brand status: high}} = 4.93$, $SD = 1.56$, $t(169) = 4.81$, $p < .001$) compared to those in the neutral product condition ($M_{\text{brand status: hlow}} = 3.83$, $SD = 1.45$ vs. $M_{\text{brand status: high}} = 4.45$, $SD = 1.55$, $t(169) = 1.84$, $p = .07$).

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: 0.0773, 0.4316), but not for low brand status ($\beta = -.03$, 95% CI: -0.1759, 0.1054).

As a result, we can see that brand attitude is more positive when brand status is high because brand that offer cute products 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: -0.1289, 0.3333). 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: Cuteness Effect on Real Market Situation

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 and Measures

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: cute 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.

Neutral Product Condition	Cute Product Condition
	

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 ($N = 201$, Female 58.7%, $M_{\text{age}} = 31.7$ 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 ($\alpha = .871$), 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 ($M_{\text{cute}} = 4.49$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.74$; $F(1, 199) = 49.89$, $p < .001$), and higher in whimsical cuteness (M_{cute}

= 4.80 vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.23$; $F(1, 199) = 177.90$, $p < .001$). 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. normal 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, 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 ($\alpha = .943$). 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 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 effect 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 effect 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 cuteness being used as an actively used marketing strategy in the market, academic research on consumer behavior has rarely been conducted and focus mainly on baby cuteness. Prior to this study, few studies have examined the effect of whimsical cuteness on product selection or brand evaluation in the marketing context. The present study can provide important implications to demonstrate the effectiveness of whimsical cuteness in the marketing context. A simultaneously warm and competent brand or company image is difficult and virtually impossible to achieve (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2014). However, both sides of this trade-off are compatible with whimsical cuteness, which is a useful marketing strategy that enhances warm images but does not degrade competence. Thus, using whimsical cuteness as a marketing strategy affects brand attitude and purchase intention. Warm brand image perception, that is, the emotional dimension of feeling close to the brand, as well as perceived fun and pleasure, can enhance brand competence without compromising brand warmth. Therefore, this study argues that using the cuteness strategy is more effective for a high-status product in comparison with a low-status one. This effect has been proven through a series of empirical studies applied to utilitarian (stapler and AI speaker) and hedonic (cosmetics) consumption. Overall, the cuteness of a product has been proven to have a positive effect on the brand image of a competent brand with high status, leading to an increase in intention to purchase. This finding may have extensive practical implications for actual marketing, as well as theoretical research on brand image perception.

4.1 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

First, this research suggests a new perspective for understanding the role of whimsical cuteness in the context of consumer behavior and marketing. Although whimsical cuteness has been applied to more general products and services in comparison with baby cuteness, it has been neglected in the academic research field. Cuteness is a complicated concept. People often prefer cute products while predicting that they will be less functional. In other words, an improved analytical approach to the concept of cuteness is required to understand the contradictions in the consumer decision-making process. Furthermore, the concept of whimsical cuteness, which can play a positive and decisive role in consumer brand choices, must be explored. Current studies focus on verifying the role of whimsical cuteness and its underlying mechanism in the consumer context. Such works can contribute to broaden the research on cuteness in association with consumer behavior and provide various ideas for research on the stereotype content model (warmth and competence). Research on brand image perception emphasizes that although warmth and competence can coexist, such condition is hardly achieved. The present study finds that whimsical cuteness can complement warmth and competence. A brand with warmth and competence can positively affect brand attitude and purchase intention; thus, attention to whimsical cuteness can contribute to broaden the perspective of the stereotype content model.

In addition, as the marketing importance of cuteness grows, this research provides managerial implications on how cuteness can be applied to product design, which can affect brand attitude. Many brands that use the cuteness strategy are products related to social functions, such as communication, or products with

limited market segmentation, such as those for kids or women. However, the results of this study show the possibility of using cuteness for a general market. Whimsical cuteness has been proven to have a positive effect on the brand attitude and purchase intention of a competent brand; thus, product categories and brands to which cuteness can be applied can be extended. Furthermore, the range of cute products diversifies day by day; therefore, marketers must extend the application of whimsical cuteness into product categories that focus on social functions, such as friendship and communication, and even utilitarian function. In this regard, the fun or humor expressed by whimsical cuteness can provide practical implications to marketers. Moreover, a cute packaging design can affect brand attitude. In the case of SK-II cosmetics, this research also finds that brand attitude is positive, and brand status is high when packages use whimsical cuteness. Even when the actual function and content of the product are the same, a change in the package design may have a remarkable effect on brand attitude and purchase intention. Lastly, the current findings can be used in prestige brand marketing. Top-tier brands have been reluctant to apply cuteness despite the merits of using cute designs or advertising. However, whimsical cuteness can form a positive brand attitude without compromising function or brand trust and thus can provide implications for premium brand marketers. Therefore, practitioners must consider the importance of fun and humor that result from whimsical cuteness to differentiate their premium brands and strengthen their brand competitiveness.

4.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

First, the concept and operationalization of whimsical cuteness must be verified elaborately. With numerous potential concepts that can be used when discussing cuteness in design, I focused on color and pattern and used them as the major stimuli; thus, a broad supplementation is needed. Future research should amplify this study's contribution by analyzing what other factors are important in addition to color and pattern for a whimsically cute design.

In addition, a rigorous verification of the overall model is required to analyze the relationship between cuteness and brand image perception. In the mediation analysis of Study 3, warmth is high, and competence does not show a considerable difference between cute and ordinary products under the condition of high brand status. The result in which a whimsically cute product showed a similar competence as an ordinary product without lowering the competence in the case of baby cuteness can have meaningful implications. However, a whimsically cute product can possibly increase the brand's competence perception. Further research must explore this specific conditions.

This study also does not fully reflect cultural differences in the concept of cuteness. Although culture, products, and services are rapidly becoming globalized, a difference in the perception of cuteness between Eastern and Western cultures remains. This study mainly focuses on American and British consumers. In contrast to Asian cultures, Western cultures tend to regard cuteness as immature or incomplete to a great extent. In comparison with baby cuteness, this difference in culture can be slightly reduced in the case of whimsical cuteness, and the interest of Western consumers in cute designs is changing toward the positive due to the

influence of Japanese culture. Nevertheless, this study is conducted only in specific cultures and does not reveal a universal effect.

In addition, I attempt to generalize the results by using utilitarian (AI speaker) and hedonic (cosmetics) product lines evenly in selecting a product line. However, in contrast to ordinary speakers, a recent AI speaker advertisement emphasizes communication or experience with consumers and thus, consumers may have considered it a hedonic product line. Therefore, differences between consumer's perceived product lines should be further analyzed in the future studies.

Finally, future studies will focus on developing elaborated whimsical cuteness stimuli and examine mechanisms that can increase not only brand warmth but also competence. Further studies should be applied to advanced marketing strategies in which cuteness and competence can be emphasized from context to context (such as applying the cuteness appeal to complex electronic products or AI to promote user-friendliness).

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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 주목하되, 이때 기존에 주로 연구되어 왔던 베이비 스키마, 즉 아기 같고 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 이를 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 않기 때문임을 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 소비자들 귀여운 제품과 그렇지 않은 제품에 대한 브랜드 태도를 다르게 나타내는지 더 정교하게 보고자 하였다. 이어 실증 연구 3에서는 조절된 매개분석을 활용하여 이 효과가 소비자의 브랜드 이미지 인식 간 차이에서 옴을 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 제공했다는 점에서 그 의의를 찾을 수 있을 것이다.

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

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Appendix 1: Brand status manipulation Scenario

low brand status condition	high brand status condition
<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>In the high-end cosmetics brand market, SK-II has become a top-tier brand as growth continues to increase.</p>