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Kimo-kawaii Catharsis: millennials, depression and the empty healing of Sanrio's Gudetama

THEODORE BONNAH

Abstract: Gudetama is a Sanrio product that has been called 'Hello Kitty for Japan's millennials', but whose social significance has escaped scrutiny in Japan and abroad. This article looks at how underneath its official 'healing' function, Gudetama's short video texts reflect Japanese discourses towards millennial dissatisfaction with work, as well as depression. I argue that Gudetama's 'kimokawai' (gross cute) images function like Bakhtin's concept of carnival, allowing a cathartic look at social problems and the discomfort they cause, while its dialogues function as a discourse schema for modeling microagressions against millennials and the mentally ill. In this way, Gudetama functions as capitalistic subjectification in keeping with its corporate origins. This analysis can contribute much to the understanding of such popular cultural products and their function in Japanese society, while reducing the allure of 'weird Japan' explanations for cultural phenomenon.

Keywords: Gudetama, Japan, discourse, work, millennials, mental illness, microaggressions, popular culture, yurukyara, representations

Introduction

Gudetama is the main character of a Japanese short animation from the Sanrio corporation and whose name is an amalgam of the words *gudegude*, or sloppy,[1] and *tamago*, or egg. Gudetama is an anthropomorphic egg yolk, usually depicted as complaining about its lot in life while sitting on a plate of food, being poked by a consumer who cajoles it for complaining or not doing what it is supposed to. Gudetama has become popular in Japan, winning second place in the Sanrio 2013 Food Character Election (Gudetama 2017), as well as seeing a domestic marketing push with products of numerous types on store shelves in Japan. It has also spread abroad, with a Gudetama Cafe in Singapore (Goh 2016: np; Seah 2016: np), and has gained popularity in Taiwan (Sometani 2015: 8), as well as

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Thailand (Coconuts Bangkok). Gudetama has also seen some market success in the west, being picked up by the American analogue of Sanrio, Hot Topic, at 300 stores in the US (Sanrio bei 2015). As Hoffman (2016: np) notes, 'Gudetama's 120,000 English-speaking Facebook followers attest to its popularity outside of Japan, as does its command of Sanrio's largest YouTube viewership.'

Gudetama's vocal protestations against its lot in life would seem to make it an uncharacteristic hit with supposedly tacit and hardworking Japanese people, and are alternately readable as signs of millennial disenchantment with work, as well as symptoms of depression. In recent years, Japan has seen the rise of millennials who eschew engagements with society, such as work or social life. These 'antisocial' Japanese are labeled as shut-ins (*hikikomori*) and NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Additionally, Japan is undergoing an increased reflection on work and lifestyle-related depression (*utsubyou*). The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2011) cites year-long depression at 1–2% of the population and lifelong depression at 3–7%, but acknowledges both the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics and definitions, as well as the recent impression that depression is on the rise. The Ministry also notes that *kibun shougai* or mood disorder is increasing greatly, more than doubling from 433,000 people in 1996 to 10,480,000 people in 2008 (*Utsu byou kanja no shousai*). Gudetama's depressed attitude and negative utterances towards its 'work' thus have deep social resonance in Japan, and the short animations that have popularized Gudetama exhibit Japanese discourses of both millennial work attitudes and perceptions of mental health.

Research on Sanrio cultural products is largely limited to commentary on Hello Kitty, which has become a sort of academic cottage industry, ranging from marketing analyses (Hosany 2013) to pop culture studies as exemplified by Yano's (2013) book *Pink Globalization*. Analyses of characters such as Gudetama includes taxonomies of *kyara* types (Sadanobu 2015) and examinations of their connections to Japanese religious traditions (Occhi 2012), without looking at their contemporary significance. None of these examinations of Sanrio characters delve deeply into their social function or discourses, which is what this research intends to uncover.

The question is, what sociocultural function does a character who exhibits discourses of work dissatisfaction and mental illness serve? In this article, I show that Gudetama's *kimokawai* (gross cute) images function like Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival, which through folk humor allows a cathartic look at real social problems and the discomfort they cause. However, I also look at how this 'kawaii catharsis' comes at the cost of commoditizing work dissatisfaction and mental illness, which is seen in Gudetama's secondary function of modeling invalidating responses, which Sue (2010) terms microaggressions, towards millennials and the mentally ill. This research uncovers how these microaggressive responses are modeled in Gudetama's dialogue, and how these are missed by

both Japanese and western popular reactions to the character's animations. The analysis starts by looking at the conditions of production and reception of the character, before analyzing the work's genre, semiotics, and dialogue. Next, it presents findings, then concludes with suggestions. This research can contribute much to the understanding of such cultural industry images and their production, reception, and functions in Japanese society.

The faces of Gudetama

Gudetama as healing product

To understand Gudetama's societal function, it is first necessary to look at the merchandizing function it was created to fulfill. Sanrio describes Gudetama as 'an extremely healing character for Japanese living these days' (Sometani 2015: 8), and thus the official function of the character is to offer healing (*iyashi*) to Japanese from the demands of contemporary life. This is confirmed by Japanese dance expert Heidi Durning, who notes,

> I think it is a clever silly release. All these healing products are created into products. The song and dance come as a set to promote the sales of the products and the economy moves. I used to teach for the past 18 years product designer students and now sometimes translate their handbooks for foreign students. It is not easy to come up with successful characters. My students call these products unnecessary goods but very necessary in the Japanese society with work, commute, social Kouhai, senpai relationships etc. to overcome and experience.
>
> (Durning 2017: np)

While Gudetama may not be necessary for life, for Japanese it is necessary for living in the modern capitalist system that overlaps Japan's vertical society, with its hierarchical *senpai* (superior) and *kohai* (subordinate) positioning. The Japanese focus on the healing nature is seen in net discourse about the character and its Twitter account, such as Yurumasa (2016: np) who calls Gudetama 'A must see for people tired from work'.

Conversely, English media articles about Gudetama focus exclusively on its twin themes of depression and millennial attitudes towards work, but make no mention of any 'healing' properties. Titles such as Winn's (2016) 'One of Japan's most popular mascots is an egg with crippling depression' and Schmidt's (2016) 'Gudetama the Lazy egg is the Hello Kitty of Japan's millennial generation' foreground these two themes, while backgrounding Japan and Sanrio. Taken collectively, western response seems to be a typically Orientalist attempt to explain a supposedly inscrutable or 'weird' Japanese cultural phenomenon, as evidenced in Abad-Santos' (2017: np) judgement that Gudetama is 'a success story that, on its surface, shouldn't make any sense at all'.

Gudetama's success is unsurprising considering that the character comes from Sanrio, whose marketing 'does not so much create desire as respond to consumer wishes' (Yano 2013: 101). Precisely because Gudetama must also reflect the social reality of consumers to have resonance and thus marketability, it is more than just a healing product made to appeal to Japanese people. Sanrio characters are constructed to reflect the zeitgeist, piggybacking on social resonance to sell. This contradiction allows cultural products such as Hello Kitty and Gudetama to promote discourses, by which I mean linguistic and visual expressions of identity, interaction, and dominance. Amy, the creator of Gudetama, notes that she was inspired by 'modern people who are talented but do not make an effort in this depressed economy of the present' (Sometani, 2015: 18), and it is these two poles of a binary description, ability for work and mental inability or unwillingness to do so, that define Gudetama's identity. Indeed, in Japan and elsewhere, millennials are often depicted as 'lazy' in media, while mental illness has a stigma both in media and public discourse. The discourses of 'lazy millennials' and 'funny depressives' are thus frontloaded into Gudetama from the start, both as objects of its humor and inspirations for its merchandizing. The pairing of these themes of millennial disenchantment and mental health are natural considering that Japanese millennials, like others worldwide, have a higher incidence of alcohol-related disorders, mood disorders, and general anxiety disorder (Kawakami, 2004: 296).

Japanese reception of Gudetama seems to ignore the discursive facet of the character, such as in a post on the Japanese information-sharing website chiebukuro that asks 'Is Gudetama depressed?', and to which the reply is a bland 'It seems no' (Gudetama ha utsu, 2017: np). Gudetama's creator, when asked about her intentions for social satire and merchandising with the character, comments on the latter but not the former (Sometani 2015: 18), implying the priority of market interest over any social significance in its production. Japanese newspaper reports about Gudetama focus exclusively on success as a Japanese cultural product, such as the Hot Topic link up (Sanrio bei de Gudetama no shouhin hanbai, 2015, np). This lack of reflection on Gudetama's millennial criticism or mental health is lamentable, for as Cumings (1993: 35) notes about Japan's postwar speed of development, 'no people has been more aware of the costs and benefits of sharp competition in the world system'.

Gudetama is thus carefully crafted to be Japan-specific in its *iyashi* (healing) function, and has consequently seen a domestic marketing push by Sanrio. Besides appearing on the company website and YouTube pages, Gudetama became a hit when it was broadcast on the TBS television channel show Asachan (Sometani 2015: 10), and is currently available in the Amazon Firestick videos (np). Despite being less visible on the Sanrio website as newer characters are promoted, the marketing push of Gudetama continues, and there are now two Gudetama fan books, a collection of tweets, a cookbook, and a book of Gudetama philosophy. The character has also inspired a wide range of everyday

Figure 1

products from underwear to hats (see Figure 1), as well as figurines and tie-in products (Figure 2). Despite this production push, Gudetama's creator, Amy, has noted the difficulty of translating the character into products (Sometani 2015: 18), and this unsuitability for production implies the significance of its social function in Japan.

This cultural specificity and lack of marketability also make Gudetama 'weird' outside of Japan. Amy has called Gudetama a 'different taste' from most Sanrio characters (Sometani 2015: 18), which also implies that Gudetama does not fit the mold of a Sanrio-made product like Hello Kitty, which has come to symbolize 'Cool Japan' abroad. Yano (2013: 259) defines this global 'brand' of Japan associated with Hello Kitty as follows:

> The 'positive attributes' of Cool Japan may be interpreted as 'Marketable, Youth-oriented, Feminine, Playful, Pop Japan – in short, a government-fueled, top-down version of Pink Globalization in which Hello Kitty plays a key role. Nation branding relies on what Iwabuchi calls 'brand nationalism' – that is, 'uncritical, practical uses of media culture as resources for the enhancement of political and economic national interests, through the branding of national cultures'.

Gudetama seems unsuited to representing 'Cool Japan' – the character can be read as critical of work and the mentally ill, its healing dance is performed by an 'uncool' dancing man in a skintight bodysuit, and the character displays a depression that has baffled western reviewers. As a Japanese cultural export, Gudetama

Figure 2

is not to be emulated like fashionable Hello Kitty, but has instead been appreciated by western commentators as another example of 'weird Japan'. Efforts have been made to improve the character's appeal, such as adding a boy protagonist and other human characters, but these still do not bring it to Hello Kitty's level of wholesome appeal. If Hello Kitty is Sanrio's mainstream success, then Gudetama is its surprise cult hit phenomenon, albeit one carefully curated by Sanrio marketing.

Misinterpreting Gudetama's discursive function

In western and Japanese responses to Gudetama, there seem to be three oversights regarding Gudetama's discourses. First, although the linking of Gudetama and Japanese youth workers is common, Schmidt (2016: np) and other western writers have misunderstood the situation of millennials in Japan. Schmidt states, 'It has been noted that perhaps Gudetama is the antihero that millennials in both Japan and beyond need right now; an exaggerated – egg-aggerated, even – caricature of Gen-Y apathy that lets us laugh at laziness'. Seeing Gudetama as an innocent tongue-in-cheek look at millennials ignores the fact that laughing at them replicates uneven power relations. Millennials in Japan do not choose to disengage from work solely out of laziness, but instead realize the costs of engaging with what Graeber (2013) calls 'bullshit jobs' that will not allow them the stability their parents had. These realizations are evident in such Japanese social phenomena as *kuruma banare*, refusal to get a car, the erstwhile status symbol of the Japanese corporate warrior, and the rise of *soshokudansei*, or 'grass-eating men' who eschew the traditional male role of breadwinner. In this light, Gudetama's response to being devoured by his 'work' makes perfect sense, and represents not so much a choice of millennials as a reaction to the narrow choices foisted upon their generation. Ultimately, normalizing laughter at the expense of millennials obscures the inequality of opportunity their generation faces.

Second, although Gudetama's depression is easily identified and considered part of its appeal, the fact that its mental illness goes undiagnosed, untreated, and met with hostility and criticism instead of sympathy, goes unmentioned in both Japanese and western reviews. This reflects the discourse of mental illness in Japan, especially when it conflicts with productivity. Western reviews of Gudetama have unquestioningly picked up these negative attitudes towards people suffering from depression. Schmidt (2016: np) labels Gudetama as 'lazy', 'grumpy', 'listless' and 'cracked too early on the wrong side of the shell', while Hoffman (2016: np) similarly calls Gudetama 'hilariously offbeat', 'lazy' and 'chronic fatigue lazy'. Nowhere in these responses is there sympathy for Gudetama or his suffering. As Fae (2016) notes, Gudetama commoditizes mental illness in a way that makes light of it and encourages its disparagement, and thus a critical analysis of Gudetama's discourses is necessary.

Last, Western ruminations on the popularity of Gudetama also display the reductionist principle that is a hallmark of Orientalist thought (Said 1994: 205). Hoffman (2016: np) is characteristic of this trend when he states,

> What makes Gudetama stand out even more so is its attitude. While most kawaii characters' personalities range from polite obedience to manic cheerfulness, Gudetama is an underachiever and proud of it. Like a '90s standup comedian, he says what we're all thinking – a revolutionary concept in the highly repressed, work-obsessed Japanese culture. Partially because of this nonchalance, and because of that whole naked butt thing, Gudetama is also

> considered part of a new kawaii subculture called kimo-kawaii, or gross-cute, which is resonating more with underground youth culture than the sweetie-pie characters of yore.

Hoffman's assumption is that 'polite obedience' and 'manic cheerfulness' are normal in Japan, and that Gudetama is abnormal. This ignores acceptable Japanese social displays of disagreement, such as *guchi* (bitching) and *hakidashi* (venting), as well as acceptable 'lazing off' such as *inemuri* (Steger 2016:). These reviews all share the western tendency to understand Japan as usually either 'weird' or 'inscrutable' (Littlewood 1996: 48–49) instead of looking at the big picture of social trends and little details of everyday interaction among Japanese. In Hoffman's interpretation, Japanese innocently enjoy seeing themselves by breaking social norms vicariously through Gudetama. However, in Japanese terms Gudetama is not strictly an underachiever, he has conversely achieved precisely his function as food, but is as unsatisfied with this as millennials are with the low-paying jobs they are expected to give their all at.

The disparaging of Japanese millennials and 'cutification' of depression inherent in Gudetama thus imply the presence of hegemonic discourses regarding millennial workers and mental health in Japan. Detection of these indigenous discourses by western readers demonstrates their resonance globally, as well as their strength in replicating orthodox attitudes towards millennials and the mentally ill. Japan expert Matt Alt (Winn 2016: np) proclaims Gudetama to be not just representative of 'weird Japan', but also sophisticated, which it is in a marketing sense. Yet Alt's opinion ignores the fact that Japanese people and ideas can be mundane and unsophisticated, and that merchandizing can take advantage of this to promulgate hegemonic discourse. For Gudetama especially, anime isn't only showing great creativity, but also reflecting the lack of it in the masses that watch it, and Hosany (2013: 48) links the success of such characters to escapism and the infantilization of society. Entertaining Japan's tired masses, assuaging their own anxiety towards work, and enforcing work's dominance over life through the implementation of practices of laughing at costs in mental health are the true discursive functions of Gudetama. In the next section, by looking closely at the text of Gudetama, this article will show how these discourses are operationalized as microaggressions through the Japanese cultural industry that Sanrio exports worldwide.

Social semiotics and discourse analysis of Gudetama

Selecting the texts of Gudetama

To examine the discursive functions in Gudetama, it is first necessary to choose the best texts for analysis. The main textual expression of Gudetama is split between definitive visual sources (short animation videos) and background

lexical sources (marketing copy text, Twitter posts, and books). Considering that short animations led to its popularity after being broadcast on TBS's Asachan in 2014 (Sometani 2015: 10), examining these would seem the most rewarding.

However, there are over 700 Gudetama videos at present, with more being posted to Gudetama's YouTube page weekly. Additionally, as Gudetama the product has developed, its video format has moved the focus away from these themes with the inclusion of secondary characters and different narrative forms, resulting in its social resonance being diluted in later episodes. For instance, the seventh episode is for Valentine's Day (*Gudetama short anime collection* 2015), a corporate holiday, and introduces a new character, thus exhibiting marketing interests taking precedence over character. The shift of narrative focus is an understandable marketing strategy to keep Gudetama's viewer numbers up by offering more sympathetic characters, but merchandise still largely features only Gudetama, as Figures 1 and 2 show. An analysis of Gudetama's discourses thus needs to see beyond Gudetama-as-product by avoiding the narrative trusses Sanrio has added to increase salability. Additionally, the inclusion of human characters may hold other functions which further muddy the waters of Gudetama's original concept, and thus is outside of my focus.

This analysis is thus limited to the original videos that feature Gudetama alone, and which employ the narrative template of Gudetama's dialogic interaction with his consumer, where millennial and mental health discourses are exhibited most clearly. Videos with this format offer a distilled essence of the character and its discourses through their stark backgrounds and exclusive focus. This visual text analysis of Gudetama is thus performed on the first three stories, and begins by looking at the semiotics of Gudetama's image concept, as well as the genre of anthropomorphic egg character to see the social conventions it reflects. It then turns to an analysis of the dialogue in the short animations, where the discourses of mental health and work are most apparent in the form of micro-aggressive responses to Gudetama's plight, while also commenting on the dance interlude between the dialogues. The analytical technique used is a blend of genre analysis, as derived from systemic functional Discourse Analysis, and modality analysis, distilled from social semiotic and visual analysis owing much to the work of Machin and van Leeuwen (2007). The analysis includes a Critical Discourse Analysis of the power relations inherent in Gudetama's interactions with his unseen interlocutor as per van Dijk (2005) and Fairclough (2001).

Constructing Gudetama – symbol, visuals, lexicon

The construction of Gudetama is integral to both its marketing and discursive functions. As Schmidt (2016: np) muses,

> Why an egg? After all, many characters that have been successful in Japan have never made it across the Pacific to American audiences – have you ever heard

> of Button-nose, Tuxedosam or Captain Willy? How did the artist that drew him (Nagashima Emi, [sic][2] who was fairly new to Sanrio at the time) hit the jackpot, going viral both in Japan and abroad?

As Hosany (2013: 53) has noted, in general neoteneous (i.e. rounded) characters with childlike features are warmly received, as is humor, making Gudetama an attractive product. In a discursive sense, the answer is that eggs have a rich social resonance in Japan, especially in work contexts, where new workers are often called '*tamago*' or eggs, with all the implications of the violence that needs to be done to make something out of them. The creator of Gudetama has stated that the character is based on *tamago kake gohan*, raw egg on white rice (Sometani 2015: 18), the start-up breakfast for workers in Japan. In addition, the creator has also referenced 'lazy' millennials as another inspiration (Sometani 2015: 18), and with regard to millennials and the depressed, the egg can also be used to represent the reality of NEETS and shut-ins trying to stay safe 'in their shell', an image used literally in Gudetama episode 10 (Gudetama short anime collection). This semiotic significance of eggs is just as applicable to millennials and the depressed worldwide as to those in Japan, and thus Gudetama's growing global popularity is not as senseless as Abad-Santos (2017) has suggested.

Besides these direct significations, eggs have rich metaphoric and symbolic potential in terms of the millennial workers that inspired its creation. Gudetama is not a whole egg, just a yolk, implying the selective nature of employment and capitalist valuation, which demands the best of people and discards the rest. Like eggs, people are valued for how they can be consumed, not what they can grow into, and like most eggs in modern capitalist society, Gudetama is born to be consumed. Even if it hatches and makes it to childhood or beyond, the egg or its offspring will be eaten, and thus Gudetama is an apt metaphor for the Japanese worker. Finally, the name Gudetama itself is replete with symbolic associations, and lends itself to Japanese wordplay with *dajare* (puns). The refrain of the title song '*Gude tamatama*' may also be read as 'A good day, just by chance', the implication being that a good day is not guaranteed, especially for Gudetama and the workers it represents. Like all good marketing jingles, this works on a subliminal level, a function which manga satirist Aihara (2002: 133) notes is useful in making media popular despite lack of any story.

The symbolic power of Gudetama is thus exercised in its construction as an egg, both visually and lexically. Gudetama's introduction in the first video 'Encounter' is the embodiment of the *tamago kake gohan* (raw egg on rice) breakfast that both inspired its creator and powered Japanese workers and students behind Japan's economic rise, and thus represents what it takes to fuel competition in Japanese society – complete devouring of the self. This knowledge is at the heart of Japan's work culture, for as Taira (1993: 173) notes, 'The *nation* prospers but the *people* perish! This is a remarkable formulation of the state–society relationship during the period of Japan's miracle

growth.' In the videos, the meals upon which Gudetama sit are both rich and intended for others, but the devoured egg itself is left with nothing. Looking at the rise of *karoushi* (death by overwork), *utsu* (depression) and *pawahara* (workplace harassment) in Japan shows that little has changed, and may be worsening as Japan's post-miracle economic shrinking continues. The biggest resonance with Gudetama for millennial workers in late capitalism is thus the realization that they are all as fragile as eggs, and can be broken to make sustenance for someone else.

Making the character – image and type

In terms of its art style, Gudetama is marked by its 'cute' and simple line drawing, in keeping with the motif of children's anime, but which also allows easy mass production. The simplified facial expression of Gudetama, with slits for eyes and open mouth, make it seem like a ghost or lost soul from a Judeo-Christian standpoint, which is why westerners such as Abad-Santos (2017) and Hoffman (2016) brand it as *kimo-kawaii* (gross cute). For Japanese, Gudetama is instead merely cute and healing, enough so that 'For Japanese living nowadays, one could say Gudetama is the most extreme healing character' (Sometani 2015: 8). Gudetama is also easy for viewers to project emotions onto due to its low modality, which Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 110) define as 'semiotic resources for indicating how true or how real communication content is to be taken', but which also implies that it is not made to be seen as really suffering. The episodically consumed Gudetama can thus be interpreted as an example of Mikhail Bakhtin's 'grotesque realism' style, wherein a character has a non-individual body, is constantly renewed, and whose 'essential principle is degradation' (Morris, 2003: 205). Indeed, Gudetama is constantly renewed in multiple and plural forms from video to video, and degraded in many senses, from the loss of his unborn potential in order to make food, to the degrading comments of his consumer. Gudetama is also reminiscent of the hyperbolic grotesque and oversized food of Bakhtin's carnival (Morris, 2003: 219), implying the utility of its grotesque realism style in inciting laughter and thus catharsis.

As a character type, Gudetama's anthropomorphic form is also significant, hearkening to fairytales and commercials. Anthropomorphism is a common technique in Japanese animation, and Gudetama is not the first anthropomorphic egg made for Japanese audiences. The long-running animated series Anpanman familiarizes Japanese children with a universe of food-related characters, including various egg-themed beings such as Datemakiman (rolled sweet egg man), Chawanmushimaro (steamed egg pudding), and Tamagoyakikarou (fried egg retainer) to name a few. The image of an anthropomorphic egg is thus familiar to most Japanese, and is often used in the merchandising of food in Japan. As Hosany (2013: 48–49) notes, anthropomorphic characters are common in marketing due to their utility in building good brand responses. One example of a

Figure 3

well-known marketing egg is seen in the Higashimaru company's udon soup commercial, featuring a dancing egg character named 'Tsukimi', or Moon Beauty (see Figure 3[3]).

Merchandising demands that products have a social resonance, but one that is not threatening or burdened with negative associations, and Tsukimi is just such a positive character. Unlike Gudetama, who is only a yolk but considered 'lazy' because he refuses the consumer's appeals, Tsukimi uses every bit of herself to appeal to the customer, from shell to white to yolk, thrusting her pelvis and buttocks while she dances in unison with the other ingredients of udon. Schmidt (2016: np) sees Gudetama as 'a self-reflexive comment on the jolly characters who have come before them and countering their gleeful positivity with slack-faced ennui', and Gudetama is certainly an ironic postmodern response to unreflective marketing characters such as Tsukimi. If Tsukimi presents itself for consumption with gusto as the boomer generation expects of the worker, Gudetama's refusal to dance to the dinner plate is more like Japan's consumerism wary youth, who eschew material culture. Viewed in this sense, Gudetama represents the clash of postwar boomer and millennial discourses of work, and like the

generation that includes social 'dropouts' such as NEETS and *hikikomori*, Gudetama does not sell itself as expected, a stance its millennial fans understand very well.

Video narratives dialogue and discourse Schemata

Gudetama was originally introduced in one minute animation videos, little more than adverts for the character. The anime character is thus both medium and product, a PR manga character that advertises itself. As Aihara (2002: 120) notes, 'there's one thing you have to be careful of with regard to PR manga. It can't be interesting. Interesting manga has the useless ability to destabilize the reader's emotional state, so it could have the same effect on the client.' Indeed, the original stories of Gudetama are not 'interesting', in the sense that nothing happens in them except the dialogue between Gudetama and his invisible consumer. The point of these videos is instead their cathartic function for stabilizing the viewer's emotional state. This uninteresting nature of PR manga also explains why Sanrio has added characters and changed the narrative format as the series has progressed to make Gudetama continuingly interesting for viewers.

The early Gudetama videos share the same minimalist narrative format, beginning with a bright yellow background and a font reminiscent of children's writing. The song is sung by children, implying a cartoon world with pedagogic intent. Gudetama sits in food on a plate, whining and lamenting its situation, then a patrician and patronizing male voice from off-screen berates it. The piano repeats, then a man in an egg yolk bodysuit dances while children sing the Gudetama theme song. Gudetama or several reappear and give a final comment, which is again replied to by the unseen male voice. Lest this video format be thought innocent, as Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 107) warn, 'media formats are not value-free, not mere containers, but key technologies for the dissemination of global values and lifestyles'. The focus on Gudetama and invisibility of his consumer hints at the commoditization inherent in modern global economics and attendant media systems of control.

As this analysis will demonstrate, although the imagery and textual background of Gudetama has great symbolic value, it is the dialogue between Gudetama and its erstwhile consumer that displays the values and discourses surrounding millennial job dissatisfaction and depression, namely through the speaker's microaggressive invalidating responses to Gudetama's expressions of depression or dissent. This dissemination of values is seen clearly in the manipulation of perspective in the short videos: although Gudetama is the main character of the original anime, the camera's perspective is that of the unseen consumer, thereby projecting his point of view and lines of dialogue onto viewers. This projection of the speaker's viewpoint and words onto the viewer thus marks Gudetama's dialogue as what Machin and van Leuwen (2007) call a discourse schema, a pattern of response used in media to condition viewers into certain

behavior. The speaker's invalidating phrases serve as a pattern of response for the superiors, colleagues and family of the depressed and dissatisfied millennials. They are particularly visible in the first three stories, when the narrative pattern is set and the discourse schema is thus replicated in each episode. Although the situation of each video is different, as Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 63) explain, 'A discourse *schema*, therefore, takes the form of a more abstract activity sequence, which makes it applicable to all Gudetama's predicaments.

Animation and dialogue analysis

Each animation follows the dialogic pattern of Gudetama initiating interaction with a complaint. By taking the first word, the 'worker' egg is speaking out of turn, and thus the 'superior' consumer is rightfully chastising it according to the logic of Japan's vertical society. The consumer's words are meant to put Gudetama back into working mode, but instead reinforce the futility of any change of its situation. This undercutting of the depressed's feelings is characteristic of responses to Gudetama. Two such dialogic interactions are featured in each video. The repetition of this pattern within episodes of Gudetama and over the series certifies it as a discourse schema as articulated by Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 62–63), in other words an abstract pattern of responses that reinforce values and discourses by dictating social practice.

Story One (see Table 1) begins with Gudetama's comment on his feeling 'sluggish', to which the consumer responds with an exclamation of outrage or incredulity ('What is with this guy?'), not a show of concern. The second dialogue is Gudetama's direct request to be left alone, which the consumer ignores and justifies with his personal motive of being bothered. Whereas all Gudetama's comments are shown on the screen[4] and thus are 'on the record', the consumer's final admission of why he admonishes Gudetama (because he is bothered by him), is without quotation marks. This implies that the customer is allowed to speak off the record, while the worker is not. This is the hallmark of power relations in a vertical society like Japan – the customer is king, and the worker is under constant surveillance. After the dance interlude, the consumer tries again to make *tamago-kake gohan*, revealing his placing of his own needs over that of Gudetama, and the inexhaustibility of the supply of workers.

Table 1 Story One: The encounter 遭遇 (Gudetama = G, Consumer = C)

Action and Imagery	Japanese	English
C's hands crack open egg sees G	C: あっ!?	C: Oh!?
G lands on rice	G: 'んあ。だりぃ～　。。。'	G: 'Ugh. Feeling sluggish.'
Nisetama dance	C: 'なんだコイツ!?'	C: 'What is with this guy!?'
C breaks another egg	G: 'ほっといてください。'	G: 'Just leave me alone.'
G hangs out of broken shell	C: いや～、気になるよ。	C: Nope, you bother me.

The discourse schema for Gudetama is thus as follows:

Complaint → Rejoinder → New Complaint → Final Silencing Rejoinder

Considering that Gudetama is ultimately silenced by the consumer's rejoinders, the values promoted in the animation are those of Japan's vertical society and the hierarchy of work its brand of capitalism requires. Along with this, the behavior suggested is that of policing the depressed or dissatisfied through microaggressions that warn and silence them.

An episode having two microaggressive interactions illustrated in short order might upset the consumer with the realization of their own similarity to Gudetama, and so a dance interlude is included between them. Although the dance seems absurd or degrading on the surface, it has an important cathartic and symbolic function. The dancer has a blank, expressionless face like Gudetama, and wears a skintight leotard suit, a common trope in *enkai* (Japanese drinking party) comedy, a style of Japanese folk humor centered on embarrassment and transgressing hierarchical relations that resembles Bakhtin's carnival. Indeed, in baby boomer culture, young workers are sometimes made to dance or perform other embarrassing acts as at a work *enkai*. To westerners, the dance seems funny yet emasculating, with its forearms extended and limp wrists, while the shaking of the dancer's hips also hearkens back to the 'gleeful positivity' of udon spokes-egg Tsukimi mentioned earlier. However, from a professional Japanese dance viewpoint, such an interval is an appealing part of Gudetama's cathartic function. As Durning (2017: np) notes,

> In traditional kabuki or Noh there is always a release dance or skit in between theater pieces. Of course the choreography is more sophisticated then [sic] gudetama but the audience members enjoy relaxing by viewing or sometimes moving to the rhythm of the music and repeating gestures. I [sic] the past along kamogawa when Kabuki and Noh were done along the river beds I am sure it was a release time for the people from everyday stress.

This inclusion of a familiar interlude thus makes it all the more culturally resonant with Japanese people. Placement of a stress-relieving dance between drama thus alleviates tension that might have built up, which hints at the dual function of (1) catharsis while (2) avoiding emotional instability as in PR anime. At the same time, the dance decontextualizes Gudetama's suffering from the modern capitalist system that causes it, further obscuring its origin and 'normatizing' the discourse schema of criticizing of mental illness and millennial ennui.

As above, the selective use of quotation marks in Story Two (see Table 2) implies that Gudetama's comments are under scrutiny while the consumer's are not. Gudetama is on the record telling the consumer to stop, while only the consumer's surprise is recorded. Post interlude, Gudetama changes to a plate of *makitamago* (rolled omelet) slices, presenting a plural Gudetama that vilifies millennials as a group and accords with the renewing nature of Bakhtin's grotesque

Table 2 Story Two: Give him a poke いじってみる

Action and Imagery	Japanese	English
G being poked by chopsticks	G: 'やめてください'	G: 'Please stop'
dance interlude	C: '!'	C: '!'
G *lying in a row of four on plate*	G: 明日から本気出す	G: 'We'll work starting hard tomorrow'
	C: 今日から頑張ろう	C: Work hard starting today.

realism. In response to this plural Gudetama's final concession and promise to work hard tomorrow, the consumer responds with a crushing off-record lack of understanding. Even when Gudetama promises to try, it is met with microaggression instead of encouragement, as the discourse schema suggests the audience should do.

Only during this third encounter (see Table 3) when Gudetama's complaints turn to existential ennui does the consumer offer any encouragement. However, saying 'Don't give up' to someone depressed at their lack of future, and who is about to be consumed, shows a lack of compassion and understanding of the person's situation. This interchange and its slogan of 'no future' is all the more resonant when read in the context of the Dentsu scandal that dominated media reports in Japan in 2016, where a first-year advertising company worker committed suicide after doing excessive amounts of overtime. The continuation of this pattern of dialogues over the series marks them as a recurrently normalized discourse schema, to whose ramifications I now turn.

Discourse schemas and microaggressions

As we have seen, the dialogues of the Gudetama videos represents two opposing discourses, namely those of depressed or disenchanted egg and chastising consumer. To the consumer, the problem is Gudetama's attitude and whining, while to Gudetama, the problem is the self-destroying work that is forced upon him. These conflicting opinions are at the center of work discourses of *pawahara*, stress, and *karoushi* in Japan. Furthermore, the replies of Gudetama's unseen consumer are examples of what psychologist Derald Sue (2010) calls

Table 3 Story Three: Instant encounter 一瞬の遭遇

Action and Imagery	Japanese	English
G: *lying on tomato rice*	G: 'だりぃー　はぁー 未来見えないー'	G: 'Sluggish, humph Can't see any future'
C: pulls G out of shell dance interlude	:'!'	
G: *lying on tomato rice with flag and ketchup star*	G: 'あー　もう無理ー'	G: 'Ugh, can't go on'
	C: 諦めないで	C: Don't give up

microaggressions, which he defines as 'everyday verbal, non-verbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership' (Sue, 2010: 3). In Japan's worsening economy, the millennials that inspired Gudetama are often public targets of microinsults that disparage their situation, as when the president of Toyota quipped they couldn't ask women for dates without owning cars (Ryall 2017: np). When this type of microaggression is used against sufferers of depression it also constitutes discrimination, and the Japan Association of Psychiatric Social Workers notes that discrimination against the mentally ill is a continuing problem in Japan (dousureba 2011), as it is abroad.

Whereas Gudetama's dialogue depicts microaggressions between strangers, as Gonzales (2015: 234) also notes, chastising words for the depressed can often come from well-intentioned people, and those close to the sufferer. Dialogues with similar reactive patterns to those in Gudetama, and which show these microaggressions towards the depressed from acquaintances, are seen in manga created by actual sufferers of depression. In *The Illness Journal of Oyumi Pai* (2016), a four-panel comic strip which chronicles the depression of the author, we see the same chiding reaction to depression as that given to Gudetama. Each time the author voices her depression, her mother responds with a microaggression that questions and invalidates her experience: 'You're exaggerating… Depression? Maybe you're just imagining it?… Maybe it is just exhaustion built up from studying so hard as a high school student… But it's just a self-diagnosis…' (Pai 2016: np). The mother's incredulity that her daughter could be depressed corresponds to what Gonzales (2015: 235) identifies as 'Microaggressions in which the experiential reality of persons with mental illnesses is invalidated, such as when others act as though the person is simply exaggerating obstacles that everyone experiences'. Similarly, in Harding's (2016) exploration of depression in Japan for the BBC, he presents a manga panel from artist Torisugari's autobiographical manga where the depressed pleads with her mother to not go and leave her alone. The mother replies '*Ii kagen shinasai*!' or 'Pull yourself together!'[5] (Harding 2016: np). The pattern of microaggressive responses to expressions of depression seems to be characteristic of Japanese manga depictions of such interactions, as well as personal narratives of depression sufferers.

There are two important differences between the depictions of interactions with the depressed in Oyumi Pai or Torigusa's manga and Gudetama. First, where the former show microaggressions through a neutral third person perspective, by setting the camera's point of view as that of the microaggressor in Gudetama, Sanrio has viewers see from his point of view. This commoditizes Gudetama's depression for consumption of both the consumer in the anime and the viewer vicariously taking his point of view. Microaggressive words are thus suggested scripts for them, and the desired schema of response is inculcated in

accord with prevailing negative opinions on mental health and millennial objections to work. Last, where Pai and Torigusa show the devastating personal effects of microaggressions coming from a relative, by using an invisible consumer, Gudetama normalizes microaggressive responses to depression. As Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 61) note, discourses legitimize social practices, and the discourse of acceptable microaggression towards millennials and the depressed is thus legitimized by their appearance in the mouth of the viewer's proxy of Gudetama's consumer.

Findings and conclusions

Catharsis in Gudetama

As the above analysis shows, Gudetama videos serve three functions, one cathartic and two discursive. First and foremost, Gudetama's comic visuals and calming dance function as cathartic relief for Japanese who relate to the character's ennui and depression. According to its creator, seeing Gudetama's expressionless face and hearing it utter the complaints they dare not speak makes Japanese people feel 'that there is someone out there worse off than me' (Sometani 2015: 18). By laughing at Gudetama's distress, Japanese viewers displace both dread of their competitive society and fear of becoming depressed, or dealing with the depressed, into the imaginary. Gudetama thus fulfills a Bakhtinian function of carnival, of laughing at ennui and fear and thereby allowing catharsis, which is why Japanese call the character *iyashiikei*, or made-for-healing (Sometani 2015: 8).

Although catharsis is thought of as a healthy relieving of stress, Gudetama's episodic nature belies the fact that its stressors have not been removed, and like Japanese workers it is still subject to the alienations of the capitalist system. Catharsis becomes a false escape when no improvement in stressful conditions is available, just as the newly prescribed government regulations on overtime become an empty gesture when the maximum allowable hours still exceed those worked by the Dentsu employee who committed *karoushi* in 2016, and whose case inspired the current debate about working hours (Okuniku 2017: np). As long as depression and dissent are trivialized and catharsis commoditized in this way, the effects and causes of millennial unease and work-related mental illnesses will remain unaddressed, and no real solution to problems such as death from overwork and power harassment can be expected.

Cutifying depression

Next, in terms of discursive function, Gudetama's construction of catharsis commodifies mental illness by cutifying depression. This encapsulates an irony in Japanese response to Gudetama, namely that although Japanese people may find Gudetama's depressed griping cute, they exhibit prejudice towards shut-ins or

depressed people around them, as the Japan Association of Psychiatric Social Workers attests (*dou sureba* 2011). In this light, Gudetama offers a sanitized representation of depression that lets viewers avoid having to face its far from cute reality, and the 'kawaii' fantasy of Gudetama reframes mental health problems into a palatable product with cathartic value. By making depression and millennia anxiety cute, the Japanese culture industry trivializes mental illness in much the same way that Hello Kitty simplifies genderized femininity. In her exhaustive study of Hello Kitty, Yano (2013: 6) explains, 'The concern arises that the new global cultural capital in cuteness trivializes Japan as infantile and superficial… "[Cute is] a mentality that breeds nonassertion".' Gudetama's cuteness similarly trivializes mental illness and silences sufferers by normalizing nonassertion, and among both western and Japanese reception there seems to be a lack of concern regarding Gudetama's cute depiction of depression.

Furthermore, Gudetama's dialogue specifically promotes a discourse of responding to mental suffering by making light of it, and trains viewers to do the same. As Harding (2006: np) notes, 'Japan's experience with depression shows how closely tied some forms of physical and mental illness are to broader cultural attitudes – about work, for example, and levels of responsibility towards others. Raising public awareness ends up being a complicated, delicate task'. For Japanese, the special meaning of anime/manga is giving a way to look at harsh truths, especially with such a taboo subject as mental illness and workplace dissatisfaction, but at the cost of normalizing the trauma they represent and the microaggressions they incur. This task is complicated all the more when the medium employed is manga, where kawaification of issues acts as a format for pedagogy in Japanese daily life. This adds to the danger that mental illness will be more prejudiced against and hidden, for as Kawakami (2004: 299) notes, 'in Japan… Japanese people deny their psychiatric symptoms to save face'.

Gudetama is thus not only the site of catharsis, but also where abuse, in the form of microaggression, is normalized. This normalization is evident when Durning (2017: np) suggests,

> I think the whole video series, short dance, and little mascot egg dolls you can buy are part of the healing series. I think these Kawaii characters, movement and soft dolls are made to help the Japanese people seniors to children relax. Yes, you feel these eggs have これからがんばろう type lines, stating release from everyday stress. The dance sort of have the morning radio たいそう effect. It's relatively easy to follow with front and back motion, arm and leg motion. You have to practice it but not impossible to learn so you can do it together in a group or as you say as part of a drinking party, undo Kai, nijikai, hoikuen, compa etc. Japanese people love these short dances for exercise, and just to do and have fun with. It's for all ages. It's a release from hard situations in everyday life. A positive release I think.

The exhortations are to 'work hard' (*ganbarou*) and conform to the group practices, yet Sanrio's 'healing' product is for profit, and takes away unease temporarily without fixing its pathology. Ando (2013: 477) notes that 'In contrast to common views about mental illness, low expectations for recovery seem to be specific to Japan', and Gudetama contributes to this by substituting temporary *iyashi* (relief) for long term treatment and recovery, or systemic reform.

The Japanese culture industry and the quest for growth

The final discursive function of Gudetama is to reinforce the quest for economic growth at the cost of youth alienation. Catharsis through a product of the cultural industry like Gudetama serves as a mechanism of control to quell millennial criticism of the inequalities due to the economic status quo. Manga satirist Aihara (2002: 120) notes, 'As manga becomes the main source of media entertainment, it is also becoming the media for product PR, cultural education, and propaganda for government and citizens' movements'. As the Gudetama series progresses, the anguish of its protagonist is buried deeper beneath the new characters and plot actions, just as the anxiety of real people is hidden under the politics and entertainment of media depictions of work. The addition of narrative sales points to Gudetama's videos belies their place in the Japanese culture industry all the more, and underscores the obvious point that profits are more important to Sanrio than any healing Gudetama may provide.

The central irony of Gudetama is thus that its millennial-inspired critique of the alienating effect of capitalism has been reconstructed and repositioned as entertainment. If, as Yano (2013) asserts, 'kawaii' is the forefront of Japan's 'soft power', then Gudetama represents the hidden costs of Japan's rise to power. Japan's 'economic miracle' of the 1990s had a similar arc of western adoration of Japanese 'secrets' (Hein 1993: 99) juxtaposed with ignorance of the 'social deprivation' in which the Japanese lived (Hein 1993: 101). At the center of this contradiction is the irony that this cathartic character is part of the corporate culture that causes depression and stress. As Japanese pop culturist Matt Alt (Winn 2016: np) points out,

> Is it surprising that a corporation created a depressing icon? It's kind of like asking if you're surprised the Navy Seals invented a new way to kill somebody. This is what these guys do. They've been honing their techniques for decades. The reason Gudetama is so popular is, well, the cute design. But also because all of us feel like retreating into our shells from time to time. And he is literally retreating into his shell.

Retreating into a shell is an apt description of NEETS, *soshokudansei* and *kurumabanare* youth, and reflects the dominant view of them as anti-social. Yet Gudetama and his real-world antecedents are not only retreating from society, they are

being told to put up and shut about their anxiety, and get no sympathy or treatment for their material or mental conditions.

Gudetama thus explicitly models behaviors agreeing with the dominant economic discourse, namely deriding millennial critique of the personal costs of economic growth. This putting economic interest before people is not a new phenomenon in Japan, for as Taira (1993: 169) notes about Japan's postwar pursuit of growth, affluence 'became a mixed blessing when it was realized that many desirable things – the environment, amenities of life, price stability, and care for the sick and disadvantaged – were extensively damaged or jeopardized'. With Japan's continued deflation and lowered growth, marginalized groups such as millennials and the mentally ill are once again put at risk, for as Kawakami (2004: 94) notes, 'Japan industrialized rapidly and has been in a prolonged economic recession since early 1990s. Social distress has possibly been reflected in the elevated suicide rate since 1998, which is now at the highest rate in the world.' Although the Japanese government mandated stress checks for workers in 2015 and new rules for maximum hours of overtime in 2017, none of that applies to Gudetama, nor arguably helps Japanese millennial workers in increasingly precarious work conditions where full-time labor regulations often do not apply.

Conclusions

This analysis of Gudetama's dialogue shows how language sets patterns of interaction, reinforces relations of power, and proscribes cultural identity. This is especially true in a high context, vertical society such as Japan, and in such a symbolic medium as anime. By positioning Gudetama's viewers in the point of view of the speaker of microaggressions, Sanrio promotes a discourse schema for responding to depression and millennial dissatisfaction that invalidates suffering to promulgate global values of forced happiness and workplace cheer. Machin and van Leeuwan (2007: 146) note, 'Many lifestyle sociologists and cultural analysts see irony and self-parodying as a key feature of modern lifestyle identities, characteristic of postmodernity', and thus Gudetama's humor can be seen as just another facet of the global spread of Sanrio's commodified 'happiness'. Whereas Bakhtin's conceptions of carnival questions the status quo, through this reframing Gudetama reinforces it.

As Gudetama's success shows, anime and manga are the media through which the Japanese can explore inexpressible truths, such as the trauma of the individual being consumed by work in a vertical society. This makes trauma explorations in anime and manga relevant to Japanese readers and appealing to outside observers of Japanese culture and society. However, for mass market appeal, these truths have to be 'cutified' and made a commodity, undercutting their significance for the sake of cathartic entertainment alone. In particular, Gudetama's discourse schemas constitute training of its audience to invalidate the experiences

of mentally ill and millennials, and its videos are thus both a form of capitalist subjectification and the site of its enactment. Analyzing Gudetama's form and functions allows us to see how values of hegemonic discourse are operationalized. As Foucault (2003: 28) states:

> What happens at the moment of, at the level of the procedure of subjugation, or in the continuous and uninterrupted processes that subjugate bodies, direct gestures, and regulate forms of behavior? In other words, rather than asking ourselves what the sovereign looks like from on high, we should be trying to discover how multiple bodies, forces, energies, matters, desires, thoughts, and so on are gradually, progressively, actually and materially constituted as subjects, or as the subject.

The discourse schemas inherent in Gudetama's dialogues operationalize dominance in Japanese society, supporting the hegemony at the level of the consumer through their catharsis, and thus are worthy of scrutiny.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Sloppy as in 'sloppy' or 'dead drunk', as per the most common collocation given in all dictionaries consulted. However, this is translated as 'lazy' in Gudetama promotional materials and media articles, indicating a discursive function that reinforces the negative attitude towards millennials and the depressed, which has gone unquestioned by westerners and Japanese alike.
2. Katakana rendering is エイミ, correctly romanized as Eimi, but which is also a homophone for Amy, an English name used by the creator.
3. This image is from the Higashimaru website and is their property, used here for educational purposes.
4. Please note that I have put dialogue that was subtitled in Japanese in quotation marks " ". Subtitled dialogue indicates what the creators feel necessary that the viewer understand, while no subtitles implies unnecessary or a side commentary in world. Such dialogue serves the dual function of informing viewers of what the creators deem of value, while guarding the consistency of character and world through the hierarchical importance of dialogue, and as such is worthy of scrutiny.
5. My translation, which is more natural than the BBC translation 'That's enough of that.'

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