

## DENIMALZ MASCOT PLUSH DESIGN: A STUDY ON CUTE CHARACTER DESIGN PRINCIPLES

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**Abstract:** *This research explores the role of visual design in enhancing the appeal of character mascots, especially cute characters. Cute mascots are often more favored by audiences, as seen in the evolution of characters like Mickey Mouse, whose design has become increasingly childlike, in line with the principles of Kindchenschema. While previous existing study has explored what visual elements make mascots appear cute, most studies examined different types of mascots. This research focuses on a single mascot series that has undergone several subtle design changes over the years, Denimalz, a mascot of South Korean Pop Rock Band Day6. The research aims to identify which visual features make a character look cuter to audiences by using a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected through a survey of 129 participants including both fans and non-fans, along with open-ended questions, visual analysis of Denimalz plush versions, and a comparison with existing design theories. The findings show that facial expression and proportion or ratio are the two dominant features that determine cuteness. Future studies are recommended to explore cultural differences in cuteness perception, particularly how audiences from different regions interpret the same design elements.*

**Keywords:** *cute character design; mascot; kindchenschema; Denimalz*

### Introduction

The fulfillment of spiritual needs is often linked to consumerist culture. According to Marwati et al. (2024), there are several factors that drive fans to purchase merchandise products, one of which is the desire for self-satisfaction and social recognition through their collections. This phenomenon creates significant business opportunities, prompting many companies to design mascots not only as promotional tools but also as the foundation for developing additional products such as plush toys, clothing, and decorations to

boost sales (SendPoints, 2019).

One emerging approach in product design is emotional design, which focuses on creating an emotional connection between users and products. Unlike traditional design approaches that prioritize form or function, emotional design enhances the user experience by addressing three emotional levels: the visceral level, which elicits instinctive responses through sensory elements such as color and form; the behavioral level, which focuses on the effectiveness and usability of the product; and the reflective lev-

el, which engages users through symbolic meaning, personal relevance, and cultural associations (Yusa et al., 2023). These elements can significantly increase user satisfaction and brand loyalty, making emotional design an essential strategy in today's competitive product markets. A study by Hong Fang (2019) also found that most consumers are willing to pay more for products featuring their favorite characters. This highlights the importance of good mascot designs, as a well-designed mascot can strengthen brand identity and capture the audience's attention (Novica et al., 2020)

One of the key factors contributing to a mascot's success is the application of the Kindchenschema principle, a concept introduced by Konrad Lorenz in 1943. This theory explains that certain infant's physical traits, such as a large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, small nose and mouth, chubby cheeks, short thick limbs, and plump body are perceived as cute and can trigger positive emotional responses, such as the instinct to nurture and protect (Glocker et al., 2009). Research has further explored this principle in consumer behavior, showing that cute product designs can enhance emotional engagement and drive impulsive purchasing decisions (Öztürk et al., 2021).

Research by Borgi et al. (2014) found that this preference is not only limited to human infants but also extends to animals like dogs and cats that exhibit Kindchenschema traits. Their study further revealed that children aged 3–6 years show a strong visual preference for faces with pronounced Kindchenschema characteristics, both in humans and animals, with a primary focus on the eyes and mouth as key features that enhance perceived cuteness and appeal. These findings suggest that the attraction to cute and Kindchenschema-based visual features emerges early in life and is universally applicable.

In animal mascot design, implementing the Kindchenschema principle has been shown to enhance a character's appeal. Dydynski (2017) highlighted that mascots featuring these characteristics tend to be more popular among audiences, particularly those with large eyes, rounded protruding cheeks, soft bodies, and large head relative to body size. One of the most prominent examples is Mickey Mouse, the iconic mascot of The Walt Disney Company. Since its initial appearance, Mickey Mouse's design has undergone various transformations, with its features becoming more and more child-like to strengthen its attractiveness to a broader audience (Gould, 1979).

Aside from Kindchenschema, animal mascots are frequently given human-like characteristics, a design approach referred to as anthropomorphism (Hart, 2010). Incorporating human gestures, expressions, and behaviors into non-human entities helps strengthen their familiarity and emotional resonance with audiences (Novica et al., 2020). Other studies also suggest that visual aspects such as body proportions and facial expressions contribute to heightened consumer interest in mascot-based products (Chen & Zhunag, 2023).

One company that has successfully incorporated mascots as part of its merchandise marketing strategy is JYP Entertainment, a South Korean entertainment company and record label. JYP introduced the Denimalz mascots as part of the official merchandise line for the pop-rock band Day6 (JYP Entertainment, n.d.). Sungjin, the leader, vocalist, and guitarist of the team, is represented by BANG, a bear character. Jae, a former member in charge of vocals and guitar, is represented by JJE, a chicken character. Young K the bassist and vocalist of the group is symbolized by KE, a fox character. Wonpil the keyboardist and vocalist is represented by PIL, a rabbit character. Lastly, Dowoon

the drummer is represented by DON, a dog character.



Figure 1. Evolution of Denimalz plush 2018–2024.  
Image compilation from official accounts and online marketplace

(Source: x.com/theJYPshop, x.com/day6official, x.com/hyebooboo, and x.com/seungkwanbns. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

The Denimalz mascots, as can be seen in Fig. 1, were first introduced on June 17, 2018, as part of the official merchandise lineup for Day6’s first world (The JYP Shop, 2018). However, the term “Denimalz” was first introduced on January 3, 2019, after it was officially registered as a trademark. As of 2025, several minor modifications have been made. This study seeks to compare the design modifications made to Denimalz plush and evaluate them in relation to audience responses and the principles of cute character design. By conducting this analysis, the research aims to identify the most visually appealing features or elements that enhance the cuteness.

## Methodology

The research consists of three main stages, audience perception surveys, visual analysis of the mascot plush design, and comparison with cute character design theories. Primary data will be collected from the survey and visual analysis, while secondary data will be sourced from academic literature on cute character design.

First, a survey-based study will be conducted to assess audience preferences regarding which year’s mascot plush design is perceived as the cutest. Participants will be presented with different versions of the mascot plush and asked to choose which version they think is the cutest. Additionally, open-ended questions will be included to explore the specific visual elements that contribute to their perception of cuteness. Participants were asked to explain why they selected a particular version of the Denimalz mascot as the cutest and the responses collected through the open ended question were analyzed using a thematic coding approach. These responses were read carefully and coded to identify recurring keywords, phrases, and descriptive patterns. Common themes such as “expression”, “proportion”, “round face”, and “color” were noted, and the frequency of each theme was counted across all responses. This will provide insight into the psychological and aesthetic factors that make a character design more appealing.

Following the survey, a comparative visual analysis will be conducted to examine the transformations in Denimalz plush. The findings from the survey and visual analysis will be compared with theoretical principles of cute character design to determine which design aspects align with audience preferences. By employing this methodology, the study aims to identify essential elements for cute character design.

Result

The survey was conducted anonymously using Google Forms and distributed over a two-week period, from February 28 to March 16, 2025. The form was shared across various platforms, including Reddit, Instagram, Twitter and Discord. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no compensation offered and participants were all informed that their response was being collected for research purposes.

To understand the background of survey participants, data on age, country of origin, and whether they are fans of Day6 were collected. This information helps provide context for the survey results by identifying the diversity of participants and potential biases.

Table 1. Participant Demographics (Source: Personal research documentation)

Category	Details	Qty.
Country	Indonesia	67
	USA	20
	Singapore	6
	Philippines	6
	Australia	5
	Canada	5
	Malaysia	3
	New Zealand	2
	Other countries (1 each)	11
	Blank	4
Total		129
Age	13-19	20
	20-29	75
	30-39	30
	40-49	3
	Above 50	1
Total		129
Fan of Day6	Yes	91
	No	33
	(blank)	5
Total		129

The survey gathered responses from 129 participants from a diverse range of backgrounds. The data from Table 1 shows that most participants are from Indonesia, followed by USA. In terms of age distribution most participants came from the 20-29 age group, followed by 30-39 and 13-19 age groups. This will offer a broad perspective on preferred design. Additionally, a significant portion of the participants are fans of Day6, which allows for an analysis of whether familiarity with the group influences their choices.

In the forms, participants were presented with images showcasing the evolution of each Denimalz mascot plush over the years, as can be seen here in Fig. 2. Participants were asked to compare and select the version they liked the most. For each part, open-ended questions are included to allow participants to explain the reasons behind their choices.



Figure 2. Evolution of BANG plush 2018–2024. Image compilation from official accounts and online marketplace (Source: x.com/theJYPshop, x.com/day6official, and x.com/hyebooboo. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

Table 2. Preferred Versions of BANG by Fan Status. (Source: Personal research documentation)

Overall	129
2018 BANG	13
2019 BANG	57
2020 BANG	22
2022 BANG	9
2024 BANG	28
Fans of Day6	91
2018 BANG	7
2019 BANG	43



2020 BANG	16
2022 BANG	6
2024 BANG	19
Non Fans	33
2018 BANG	6
2019 BANG	11
2020 BANG	5
2022 BANG	3
2024 BANG	8
Not Specified	5
2019 BANG	3
2020 BANG	1
2024 BANG	1

The survey results as shown on Table 2, show that the 2019 version of BANG was the most favored overall, receiving 57 votes out of 129 total responses. This preference was consistent across different participant groups, with 43 votes coming from Day6 fans, 11 from non-fans, and 3 from those who did not specify their fan status. The 2024 version followed with 28 votes, including 19 from fans, 8 from non-fans, and 1 from an unspecified participant. The 2020 version ranked third with 22 votes, followed by 2018 with 13 votes and 2022 with 9 votes. The visual evolution over the years, can be seen here in Fig. 2.



Figure 3. Evolution of JE plush 2018–2024. Image compilation from official accounts and online marketplace  
(Source: x.com/theJYPshop and x.com/day6official. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

Table 3. Preferred Versions of JJE by Fan Status.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Overall	129
2018 JJE	5
2019 JJE	90
2020 JJE	34
Fans of Day6	91
2018 JJE	3
2019 JJE	65
2020 JJE	23
Non Fans	33
2018 JJE	2
2019 JJE	21
2020 JJE	10
Not Specified	5
2019 JJE	4
2020 JJE	1

As shown in Table 3, the 2019 version of JJE was the clear favorite, receiving 90 of 129 total votes. Version 2019 was preferred by both fans and non-fans, with fans contributing 65 votes and non-fans 21. Followed by the 2020 version with 34 votes, 23 from fans, 10 from non-fans. The 2018 version received the fewest votes. The visual evolution over the years, can be seen here in Fig. 3.



Figure 4. Evolution of KE plush 2018–2024. Image compilation from official accounts and online marketplace  
(Source: x.com/theJYPshop, x.com/day6official, and x.com/seungkwanbns. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

Table 4. Preferred Versions of KE by Fan Status.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Overall	129
2018 KE	2
2019 KE	38
2020 KE	60

2022 KE	16
2024 KE	13
<b>Fans of Day6</b>	<b>91</b>
2018 KE	2
2019 KE	29
2020 KE	40
2022 KE	11
2024 KE	9
<b>Non Fans</b>	<b>33</b>
2019 KE	8
2020 KE	18
2022 KE	3
2024 KE	4
<b>Not Specified</b>	<b>5</b>
2019 KE	1
2020 KE	2
2022 KE	2

The survey results, as shown in Table 4, reveal that the 2020 version of KE was the most preferred, receiving 60 out of 129 total votes and was the highest votes from both fans and non-fans,. Followed by the 2019 version in second place, 38 votes with 29 from fans, 8 from non-fans, and 1 unspecified. The 2022 and 2024 version came third and fourth place, with 16 votes and 13 votes. While the 2018 versions only got 2 votes. The visual evolution over the years, can be seen in Fig. 4.



Figure 5. Evolution of PIL plush 2018–2024. Image compilation from official accounts and online market-place  
(Source: x.com/theJYPshop, x.com/day6official, and x.com/seungkwanbns. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

Table 5. Preferred Versions of PIL by Fan Status  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

<b>Overall</b>	<b>129</b>
2018 PIL	5
2019 PIL	27
2020 PIL	33
2022 PIL	13
2024 PIL	51
<b>Fans of Day6</b>	<b>91</b>
2018 PIL	3
2019 PIL	23
2020 PIL	23
2022 PIL	10
2024 PIL	32
<b>Non Fans</b>	<b>33</b>
2018 PIL	2
2019 PIL	3
2020 PIL	9
2022 PIL	2
2024 PIL	17
<b>Not Specified</b>	<b>5</b>
2019 PIL	1
2020 PIL	1
2022 PIL	1
2024 PIL	2

The survey results, as shown in Table 5, indicate that the 2024 version of PIL was the most favored overall, receiving 51 out of 129 total responses. This preference was consistent across different participant groups, with 32 votes coming from Day6 fans, 17 from non-fans, and 2 from those who did not specify their fan status. The 2020 version followed with 33 votes, 23 from fans, 9 from non-fans, and 1 unspecified. In third place, the 2019 version received 27 votes. The 2022 version ranked fourth with 13 votes, followed by 2018 with 5 votes. The visual evolution over the years, can be seen in Fig. 5.



Figure 6. Evolution of DON plush 2018–2024. Image compilation from official accounts and online marketplace  
(Source: x.com/theJYPshop, x.com/day6official, and x.com/seungkwanbns. Denimalz © JYP Entertainment.)

Table 6. Preferred Versions of DON by Fan Status.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Overall	129
2018 DON	20
2019 DON	30
2020 DON	38
2022 DON	22
2024 DON	19
Fans of Day6	91
2018 DON	15
2019 DON	25
2020 DON	27
2022 DON	11
2024 DON	13
Non Fans	33
2018 DON	5
2019 DON	4
2020 DON	11
2022 DON	8
2024 DON	5
Not Specified	5
2019 DON	1
2022 DON	3
2024 DON	1

The survey results, as shown in Table 6, indicate that the 2020 version of DON was the most favored overall, receiving 38 out of 129 total responses. It was preferred by 27 Day6 fans, 11 non-fans, and no unspecified participants. The 2019 version followed closely with 30 votes with 25 from

fans, 4 from non-fans. The 2022 version ranked third with 22 votes. Meanwhile the 2018 and 2024 version is almost tied with 20 and 19 total votes. Unlike other Denimalz mascots, DON showed a more balanced distribution of preferences, with no version standing out. The visual evolution over the years, can be seen in Fig. 6.

To gain deeper insight why a certain version is favored than the other, open-ended responses were asked to allow participants to notice the small changes made in each mascot plush and identify the most appealing characteristics that made one design stand out over others with similar forms. This approach aimed to identify recurring themes in participant responses and determine whether the mentioned features aligned with cute character design theory, without informing them about the theory beforehand.

Table 7. Commonly Mentioned Features.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Mentions Features	Qty
Expression	231
Proportion & ratio	119
Blush (2019 JJE)	61
Look alike	42
Color	36
Shape	31
Material	17
Teeth (2024 PIL)	16
Round	14
Clean	13
Eyes	12
Facial feature	11
Cheek	8
Big head	4
Details	4

From the open-ended responses, a few similar answers stood out. The most frequently mentioned aspect was expression, cited 231 times, indicating that expressions played a central role in shaping perceptions of cuteness. Followed by pro-



portion and ratio, 119 mentions.









Table 8. Most Mentioned Features.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Denimalz	Expression	Proportion & Ratio
BANG	62 mentions	27 mentions
	2019 (33)	2020 (9)
	2024 (13)	2024 (7)
JJE	12 mentions	13 mentions
	2019 (7)	2020 (9)
	2020 (4)	2019 (4)
KE	46 mentions	28 mentions
	2019 (21)	2020 (21)
	2020 (13)	2024 (4)
PIL	52 mentions	22 mentions
	2024 (18)	2024 (10)
	2019 (16)	2020 (7)
DON	59 mentions	17 mentions
	2022 (16)	2020 (8)
	2020 (14)	2019 (4)





To further explore the design elements that participants found most appealing, a comparative visual analysis will be conducted across mascot plush versions.





Table 9. Mascot Plush Visual Analysis.  
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Version	Details
BANG 2018  	- smallest body among all
	- round face shape
	- facial features are large and fill most of the face area, with the widest spacing but still centered on the head
	- snout is aligned with the lower part of the eyes
	- smiling expression with closed mouth
	- legs are the farthest apart





<b>BANG 2019</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- facial features are close together and centered on the head</li><li>- snout is positioned slightly below the center of the eyes</li><li>- smiling expression with open mouth</li></ul>
<b>BANG 2020</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- facial features are the closest together and centered on the head, leaving a lot of empty space on the face</li><li>- eyes are slightly smaller than the other versions</li><li>- snout is slightly above the center of the eyes</li><li>- smiling expression with closed mouth</li></ul>
<b>BANG 2022</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- facial features are close together and centered on the head, leaving a lot of empty space on the face</li><li>- snout is in the center of the eyes</li><li>- neutral or frowning expression</li></ul>
<b>BANG 2024</b>  	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- facial features are slightly farther apart but still centered on the head</li><li>- snout is aligned with the lower part of the eyes</li><li>- surprised expression with open mouth</li></ul>






<b>JJE 2018</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.75</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- facial features are larger and fill the face, closely spaced and centered on the head</li> <li>- beak is positioned below the eye area</li> <li>- largest wattles size</li> <li>- legs are close together</li> </ul>
<b>JJE 2019</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- facial features are close together and centered on the head</li> <li>- beak is positioned right below the eyes</li> <li>- additional blush detail on the cheeks</li> <li>- medium-sized wattles</li> </ul>
<b>JJE 2020</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- facial features are smaller, close together, and centered on the head, leaving a lot of empty space on the face</li> <li>- beak is positioned right below the eyes</li> <li>- smaller wattles size</li> </ul>
<b>KE 2018</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5, the largest head size</li> <li>- rounded hexagon face shape</li> <li>- biggest distance between the eyes and nose</li> <li>- nose is located below the eye area</li> <li>- smiling face with closed mouth</li> </ul>

<b>KE 2019</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.75</li> <li>- oval face shape</li> <li>- facial features are centered on the face</li> <li>- nose located below the eye area</li> <li>- smiling with an open mouth</li> </ul>
<b>KE 2020</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.75</li> <li>- rounded hexagon face shape</li> <li>- smallest facial features, placed at the center of the face, leaving a lot of empty space</li> <li>- nose located right below the eye area</li> <li>- smiling with a closed mouth</li> </ul>
<b>KE 2022</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.75</li> <li>- wide oval face shape</li> <li>- eyes are farthest apart than other version</li> <li>- nose is located right below the eye area</li> <li>- surprised expression with open mouth</li> </ul>
<b>KE 2024</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.75</li> <li>- facial features are centered on the face</li> <li>- nose located right below the eye</li> <li>- smiling face with closed mouth</li> <li>- desaturated color</li> </ul>

<b>PIL 2018</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.4</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- ears positioned on top of the head and tilted to the sides</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- long distance between the mouth and nose</li><li>- closed smiling mouth</li><li>- closest distance between the legs</li></ul>
<b>PIL 2019</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.4</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- ears positioned on top of the head and tilted to the left and right</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- long distance between the mouth and nose</li><li>- round, large eyes with one eye winking</li><li>- closed smiling mouth</li></ul>
<b>PIL 2020</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- ears positioned directly on top of the head and pointing straight up</li><li>- shortest distance between the eyes</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- closed smiling mouth</li></ul>

<b>PIL 2022</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- ears positioned on top of the head and tilted to the sides</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- open smiling mouth</li></ul>
<b>PIL 2024</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- ears positioned directly on top of the head and pointing straight up</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- open smiling mouth with visible teeth</li></ul>
<b>DON 2018</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.5</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- eyebrows, eyes, and nose are the largest in size</li><li>- nose is located near the lower part of the eye area</li><li>- open smiling mouth</li><li>- legs are positioned far apart</li></ul>
<b>DON 2019</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.6</li><li>- round face shape</li><li>- eyes and nose are slightly larger</li><li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li><li>- closed smiling mouth</li><li>- legs are positioned farthest apart compared to other version</li></ul>

<b>DON 2020</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.6</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- eyes and nose are smaller than the previous version</li> <li>- nose located in the middle of the eye area</li> <li>- open smiling mouth</li> <li>- legs are positioned close together</li> </ul>
<b>DON 2022</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.6</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- eye and nose size are the same as the 2020 version</li> <li>- distance between the eyes is wider</li> <li>- nose is located near the lower part of the eye area</li> <li>- tongue is sticking out</li> <li>- a mole near the eye</li> <li>- legs are positioned close together</li> </ul>
<b>DON 2024</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- head-to-body ratio: 1:0.6</li> <li>- round face shape</li> <li>- eye spacing is the same as the 2022 version</li> <li>- nose is located near the lower part of the eye area</li> <li>- mouth shaped like the number 3</li> <li>- a mole near the eye</li> <li>- legs are positioned close together</li> </ul>

## Discussion

As shown in Tables 2 to 6, the two most preferred versions of each mascot were consistent across both fans and non-fans. BANG was most favored in its 2019 and 2024 versions, JJE in its 2019

and 2020 versions, KE in 2020 and 2019, PIL in 2024 and 2020, and DON in 2020 and 2019 versions. Minor differences only appeared in lower ranks, suggesting strong overall agreement on which designs looked the cutest. Although there is “look alike” factor as seen on Table 7, where a mascot’s design resembles the band member it represents and is likely more recognizable to fans, the overall results remained solid, with consistent top two choices across both groups.

Based on the collected data, the most frequently mentioned features were facial expression and proportion/ratio. As we can see on the data in Table 8, for Bang the most favored expression appeared in the 2019 version with 33 mentions out of 62 mentions, BANG 2019 version characterized by an open-mouth smile that convey happy expression and friendliness. Meanwhile, the 2020 version was most mentioned for its proportions with 9 out of 27 mentions, featuring a 1:0.5 head-to-body ratio, smaller eyes, and closely placed facial features where the snout is located slightly above the center of the eyes. This layout created more negative space on the face, enhancing the roundness and chubbier cheeks.

In case of JJE plush, the 2019 version was most liked for its friendly facial expression with 7 out of 12 mentions. This plush also has distinctive blush detail on its cheeks, which is also a form of expression that got 61 mentions as seen on table 7. In terms of proportion, the 2020 version was slightly more preferred. The 2020 has 1:0.5 head to body ratio, smaller and closely grouped facial features. Just like BANG plush, this layout increased its facial roundness because of its larger negative space.

For KE, the 2019 got mentioned 21 times out of 46 mentions for its expression which is smiling with an open mouth. For proportion and ratio, the 2020 version

got the most votes with 21 mentions out of overall 28 mentions. This version has 1:0.75 head to body ratio, rounded hexagon face shape, and centered features with lots of negative space around the features, that gave the illusion of fuller cheeks.

With PIL, both the most favored expression and proportion/ ratio were found in the 2024 version. It featured a smiling mouth with visible teeth, which got special mention 16 times as seen on table 7. It has a 1:0.5 head-to-body ratio, paired with a round face and centered features.

Lastly for DON plush, even with the most balanced distribution of preferences still has some slight difference. The 2022 version received the highest number of mentions for expression with 16 mentions out of 59, largely due to its tongue-out smile which gave out a more playful personality. However, the 2020 version was preferred for its proportion/ratio, with a 1:0.6 head-to-body ratio and smaller facial features.

When compared to established cute character design theories or principles and previous research, mascots featuring open-mouth smiles, visible blush, or tongue-out expressions consistently ranked among the favorites in participant responses. These expressive elements conveyed emotions such as friendliness, playfulness, and approachability traits that fostered a stronger emotional connection with viewers. This finding supports existing studies by Novica et al. in 2020 and Chen & Zhunag in 2021, which emphasize the role of facial expression and anthropomorphic gestures in enhancing character relatability and audience engagement.

For proportion and ratio, there are several consistencies along with some slight differences. Previous research by Dydyński (2017), which explored perceptions of cuteness in animal mascot characters, observed that not all features outlined in Lorenz's Kindchenschema theory

were equally emphasized. While elements such as a protruding forehead is not mentioned by the respondents while listing cute features on animal mascot characters, features like large eyes, round body shapes, protruding cheeks, soft textures, and large heads were more commonly associated with cuteness.

In contrast to Dydyński (2017), in this study, some participants expressed a preference for mascots with smaller eyes. This may be due to the visual impression created by smaller features creating the illusion of tighter spaced and centered facial features, which increases the negative space on the face. This layout contributes to a more chubby and rounded appearance.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study, based on survey responses from both fans and non-fans indicate a consistent agreement regarding the features that contribute to cuteness in character design which are facial expression and proportion or ratio. Expressions that conveyed happiness or playfulness were especially favored. Additional details such as blushes, open-mouth smiles with teeth, winks, or tongue-out gestures were often cited as features that enhanced a mascot's charm. These elements reflect the use of anthropomorphism in mascot design, where non-human characters are given human like traits to increase relatability. By incorporating expressive gestures typically associated with human emotion, designers are able to create mascots that feel more familiar, approachable, and emotionally engaging to the audience. This human-like traits not only strengthens the emotional connection but also enhances the perceived personality and appeal of the character, making anthropomorphic design a powerful tool in developing effective mascots.



In terms of proportion and ratio, the most preferred designs closely reflected the principles of Kindchenschema, particularly the use of large head-to-body ratios, round shapes and soft body. However, this study also revealed that participants often favored smaller eyes, as long as the proportion looks better. Based on the findings, facial features that were tightly grouped and centered on the face is more preferable than just having larger eyes. This arrangement increased the negative space around the features, which in turn amplified the perception of roundness and fullness, contributing to a chubbier and softer appearance. These findings suggest that while classical cuteness principles still hold value, audience perception is also strongly influenced by facial proportion.

These results offer clear, practical insights for designers working in the development of character based products. The strong audience preference for certain proportions and expressive features highlights how small design choices like adjusting the space between facial elements or adding subtle details or changing the expressions can significantly affect how a character is perceived. For designers developing mascots for merchandise, attention to visual balance and emotional cues is essential. These findings also underscore the importance of iterative testing, visual refinement, and attention to proportion and details when developing mascots.

However, as most participants were from Indonesia, cultural preferences may have influenced the results. Perception of cuteness may vary across regions, as preferences for round shapes, gentle expressions, or certain stylistic cues may reflect regional interpretations of cuteness influenced by local media and aesthetics. As such, while the findings align with established design principles, they may not fully represent global perspectives. Future re-

search with more culturally diverse samples is recommended to validate whether these preferences apply universally.

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