Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume: 02 Issue: 06 June-2026

Signs That Come Before Stories: A Semiotic Analysis of the Creation of Kuromi as a Trend

Sarvenaz Safavi
Near East University. Communication Faculty

Published Date: June 08, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E6/2026-11**

ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the semiotic approach of the construction of Kuromi as a trend that driven consumer icon between children. In spite of many children that not attracted with the media in which Kuromi characters appears, the character's produced has achieved extensive popularity. This research aims to investigate the symbolic signs that are rooted in merchandise and create desire, identity formation, and trend that is independent of narrative familiarity by emphasizing the role of semiotics in children's consumption path. This research focused on identifying recurring semiotic approach, including color schemes, iconography, facial expressions, and poses to investigates how these signs communicate, shape perceptions of identity, and also influence consumer behavior. This research reveal that Kuromi's black and purple color palette, skull motif, and playful gestures function as signs markers of mischief, edginess, and "coolness". The constant use of these motifs across merchandise and promotional things reinforces the character's identity as a stylish, mischievous icon, demonstrating how semiotic strategies shape perceptions and cultural significance. This study shows the power of signs in merchandise-led media culture. Also, showing that semiotic can explain children's trend driven consumption beyond narrative engagement.

KEYWORDS: Kuromi, Semiotics, Qualitative Content Analysis, Children's Media, Merchandise Marketing.

1.INTRODUCTION

In the current culture of media, children's usage patterns are gradually affected not only by the narratives of films and animation but also by the visual representation of characters in merchandise. Kuromi, a new and popular character made by Sanrio, is an example of this phenomenon. Even though many children have no access to the channels in which Kuromi appears, this character has achieved remarkable popularity. This trend shows the importance of visual signs in order to create desire, whiteout knowing the narrative.

Kuromi's characters design with the combination of elements of cuteness and edginess which is a black-and-purple color palette, a jester's hat adorned with a skull, and expressive facial gestures that convey playfulness and mischief. These semiotic codes are intentionally constructed to communicate a remarkable identity that children consider it a "cool" character in contemporary trend culture.

In spite of the commercial and cultural significance of such characters, there is limited academic research on how semiotic codes in merchandise alone influence children's desire and consumer behavior. Most of the studies related to children's media effects has been focus on narrative rather than the power of signs in products and promotion. This research addresses this gap by analyzing Kuromi as the corpus of the research through a qualitative content analysis of merchandise and promotional materials. This research aims to answer two main questions. First, what signs in Kuromi merchandise communicate appeal to children? And second, how do these signs create trend-driven desire independent of media exposure? By considering Roland Barthes' semiotic approach of mythologies and Peirce's model of signs, this research investigates how Kuromi's visual identity functions as a cultural sign that shapes children's consumption practices. The findings contribute to understanding the intersection of semiotics, media culture, and consumer behavior, emphasizing the role of visual signs in creating desire and that can create trend.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Semiotics and Visual Meaning in Children's Media

Semiotic approach has become a valid approach for interpreting cultural products, especially visuals aimed at children. According to Ersan and Çetin (2025) visual signs such as color, icons, and composition work together to communicate deeper meanings that shape young audiences' perceptions. In their study about children's theater posters, they demonstrated how visual and textual elements convey cultural narratives and values, highlighting that seemingly simple images encode layered meanings understood through semiotic analysis.

2.2 Character-Based Consumer Culture

According to research on children's consumer culture, characters have a significant influence on identity formation and purchase intentions. Commercial studies demonstrate that symbolic representation and emotional value have a significant impact on children's preference for character-branded products, despite not being strictly semiotic in methodology (Liu et al., 2021).

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Critical cultural perspectives contend that character merchandising contributes to larger socialization processes, going beyond consumer behavior research. By portraying characters as cultural texts that mediate meaning and desire in a consumer society rather than just playthings, Hains and Jennings (2021) offer a thorough critique of how toy marketing ingrains social and cultural norms into children's lives. This places character products in a semiotic and economic ecosystem where cultural messages are conveyed through design decisions.

2.3 Kawaii Culture and "Cool Cuteness"

Recently scholars conceptualize the culture of kawaii as a developing visual concept that spreads beyond its origins in Japan and becoming a global system of affect, identity, and consumption. From (1995) Sharon Kinsella, positioned kawaii as an expression made and follow by youth for resistance and emotional escape. Nonetheless, more recent researches shows that it is now functions as a complex cultural logic embedded in media and design practices. Current "cute studies" literature shows that kawaii symbolizes a creative tension between vulnerability and agency, allowing individuals and brands to communicate intimacy while maintaining control (Dale, 2016; Nittono, 2022). Based on this, developing research between 2023 to 2025, presents the concept of "cool cuteness," in the way that softness is mixed with irony, subversion, or aesthetic sharpness, particularly in digital culture and universal pop industries. So far, according to researchers, this mixture creates the wider moves from self or individual presentation of cuteness to the strategically performed (McVeigh, 2000; Ngai, 2012; recent studies such as Chen, 2024). Scholars claim that in social media culture, kawaii and "cool cute" concept functions as communicative tools that shape user interaction and emotional engagement, reinforcing their role within contemporary consumer capitalism while also enabling new forms of identity negotiation (Nittono, 2022; Chen, 2024).

2.4 Semiotics of Trends and Consumption in Digital Spaces

The new semiotics analysis of what is called as trends in digital media has occurred of inquiry within media and cultural studies and it is focusing on how meaning is created, circulated, and commodified through online medium. By considering the fundamentals of Roland Barthes (1972) and Jean Baudrillard (1998), more recent semioticians discuss that digital consumption is increasingly driven by symbols instead of material utility, where value is produced through visibility, and cultural relevance. In social media, trends function as rapidly evolving sign systems, with images, hashtags, and memes acting as carriers of shared meaning and identity performance (Highfield, 2016; Leaver et al., 2020). Within last few years, researchers, explained how algorithmic infrastructures shape these symbolic processes and increasing certain aesthetics and behaviors while marginalizing others, thereby influencing what becomes "trendy" (Bishop, 2022; Abidin, 2023).

Based on this context, consumption is not simply economic but communicative in the that users engage with brands, products, and styles as symbolic resources to construct digital selves and belonging (Arvidsson, 2006; Abidin, 2023). Moreover, Zulli and Zulli (2022) underline the role of platform such as short-form video and influencer economies, in accelerating the lifecycle of trends, transforming them into ephemeral yet highly impactful signifiers. Overall, the literature places digital trends as symbolic phenomena at the core of the platform capitalism, where meaning making, identity, and consumption converge in increasingly algorithm-driven and visually mediated environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The semiotic analysis of construction of Kuromi as a trend that driven consumer is studied in this article by using qualitative content analysis methodology. The constructed interpretation of signs, such as colors and icons is made possible by qualitative content analysis, which is especially useful for investigating visual and symbolic meaning in media and merchandise (Ersan & Çetin, 2025). Kuromi merchandise and promotional materials are the subject of the analysis, which takes into account both official Sanrio content and user-driven trends on social media platforms where kids come across these symbols.

3.2 Data Sources

The corpus of this research is the dataset includes visual and textual materials that represents Kuromi in merchandising and marketing contexts. First, the official merchandise images, such as, toys, stationery, clothing, and accessories from Sanrio's online store and affiliated retailers. Second, the promotional content, such as, Sanrio social media posts, advertisements, and packaging design. Third, the trend-driven media exposure that includes short-form videos on platforms like TikTok and YouTube where Kuromi is featured, reflecting popularity and symbolic meaning for children. As a result, total of 50 items was purposively sampled to ensure diversity in product type, visual style, and social media representation.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

For the purpose of this research, purposive sampling technique was adopted to select materials that are:

Visually representative of Kuromi's character designed black, purple, pink, skull motif, jester hat. Widely visible to children in the market, social media, or merchandise promotions. Recently produced or trending (2023–2025) to capture existing semiotic analysis. This confirms the analysis focuses on materials that are relevant to trend-driven consumption rather than historical representations.

3.4 Data Coding and Analysis

A coding framework was developed based on semiotic theory (Barthes, 1972; Peirce, 1931–1958) to identify and interpret visual and symbolic elements:

Category	Code Description	Example Sign
Color	Colors used to convey mood or identity	Black, purple, pink
Iconography	Symbols that communicate personality traits or themes	Skull motif, jester hat
Facial Expressions	Signs of attitude, emotion, or playfulness	Smirk, mischievous smile
Pose/Composition	Body positioning and interaction with props	Leaning, arms crossed, sitting positions
Text/Branding	Words, slogans, or typography that reinforce meaning	"Cool", "Trend", "Kuromi" on packaging

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Table 1. Coding Framework for Kuromi Merchandise

Each item was analyzed for denotation and connotation meaning that follows Barthes' semiotic approach. Peirce's categories of iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs were applied to identify how images function as cultural signs beyond their immediate visual appeal.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

For the purpose of data collection, the researcher gathered images and media representations according to the sampling criteria. And for the initial coding the researcher applies coding framework to identify recurring signs and motifs.

For the thematic analysis, the group codes designed to broader themes related to trend appeal, identity signaling, and consumer desire. And the interpretation of signs relates semiotic approach to consumer behavior, cultural meaning, and trend-driven appeal. For the validity of this research cross-check coding consistency and triangulate findings across different media types (merchandise, social media, promotional images).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All materials analyzed are publicly available through official Sanrio platforms, online stores, and social media. No personal data or identifiable information about children was collected. And the study focuses on symbolic analysis and visual interpretation, adhering to ethical standards in media research.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Semiotic Patterns in Kuromi Merchandise

Kuromi merchandise's visual design constantly emphasizes a unique semiotic approach that combines "cute" and "rebellious." Recurring signifiers can be seen in a variety of products, such as backpacks, keychains, blind boxes, plush toys, and fashion partnerships. Kuromi is positioned as an edgy alternative within Sanrio's aesthetic spectrum by using black and purple color schemes, which are prevalent in Kuromi products and indicate a break from traditional pastel kawaii.

Symbolic motifs: Kuromi's playful yet assertive persona is visually represented by elements such as skulls, mischievous facial expressions, jester hats, and punk-inspired accessories.

Composition cues: Kuromi's placement in promotional photos frequently highlights attitude through dynamic gestures, leaning positions, and close-up facial expressions that imply uniqueness and assurance.

Together, these semiotic patterns create a visual story that appeals to customers looking for non-traditional kawaii and is more in line with current youth identity trends than with simple innocence.

4.2 Trend-Driven Consumption Independent of Media Exposure

Originally, Kuromi is a character created in Onegai My Melody and the existing patterns shows that children and teenagers are attracted with the character mainly through merchandise and social media presence, rather than the familiarity to the story line. The data shows that Kuromi's popularity in merchandise channels and digital culture has outpaced her media exposure because Kuromi's presence in limited edition fashion collaborations with global brands that has raised her profile far beyond the original animated context, linking the character to urban fashion and lifestyle identity markers rather than story-based consumption.

Also, social media trends such as #KuromiCore and dark kawaii aesthetics on platforms like TikTok and Instagram establish that Kuromi's image circulates widely in visual culture as a symbol of individuality, mood, and style, independent of any specific show content.

In the case of blind box culture, where the pleasure of unboxing and discovery becomes part of the appeal, Kuromi is beyond narrative familiarity. Collectors engage with her figure as part of a symbolic transaction, where rarity and visual appeal drive desire. This indicates that children and teenagers want and buy Kuromi products without direct knowledge of the character's narrative content, reinforcing the notion that merchandise signs carry meaning in their own right.

4.3 Social Media Amplification as Cultural Signifier

The effect of social media is essential in constructing Kuromi as a cultural symbol beyond the original media context. Platforms such as, TikTok and Instagram aid as mediating spaces where visual signs circulate, are imitated, and gain symbolic value, especially among youth cultures that emphasize identity expression through curated digital imagery. Hashtags linked to Kuromi and dark kawaii attract millions of views, indicating widespread engagement with her aesthetic and symbolic markers.

Also, Influencers and user-generated content such as, outfit videos, unboxing posts, fashion pairings, and lifestyle posts, generate a feedback loop where Kuromi's image is continually re-signified and re-valued, producing cultural capital for those who participate in these visual exchanges. This supports the argument that Kuromi's symbolism operates within digital consumer culture as a sign system that influences trend behavior and product desirability.

4.4 Commercial and Cultural Shift in Character Merchandising

In the case of market data and brand strategies, Kuromi's merchandising shows that it reflects broader shifts within character licensing and consumer culture. Compared to typical Sanrio characters like Hello Kitty, Kuromi's market presence is connected to subcultural aesthetics and limited-edition drops, which generate urgency and FOMO (fear of missing out) among collectors and trend followers which in this case are children and teenagers.

In some regions, character-themed educational and lifestyle products featuring Kuromi have surged in search volume, reflecting how her image has penetrated not only play but also other aspects of child and family consumer behavior.

The commercial patterns emphasize the idea that Kuromi merchandise functions as a sign system, where visual signs and design elements carry meaning that influences consumer decisions and cultural positioning.

As a summery, Kuromi merchandise employs recurring visual signifiers that communicate an edgy, alternative kawaii identity. Also, Children and teens increasingly engage with Kuromi through merchandise and digital visuals, rather than narrative exposure, demonstrating trend-based consumption driven by semiotic appeal. Social media amplifies Kuromi's symbolic presence, turning her image into a cultural sign of individuality

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and style. And, Commercial strategies reveal a broader cultural shift in character merchandising, where identity and trend dynamics shape consumer demand more than traditional media familiarity.

5. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates how Kuromi functions as a sign system that influences children's trend-driven consumption, highlighting the interplay between visual design, cultural meaning, and marketing strategy. Semiotic analysis of merchandise and promotional materials revealed that Kuromi's distinctive features such as, black-and-purple color palette, skull motifs, jester hat, and expressive poses, operate as visual and symbolic signs conveying edginess, playfulness, and individuality. From a semiotic approach, these signs have both denotative meaning and connotative meaning. This aligns with Barthes' (1972) framework of mythologies and Peirce's (1931–1958) notion of iconic, symbolic, and indexical signs, showing how visual design communicates cultural meaning beyond narrative context.

While Kuromi originated in the Onegai My Melody media franchise, the study finds that children and teens increasingly engage with her merchandise and social media presence, rather than the character's original story. This confirms that semiotic signs alone can generate desire and influence consumer behavior, demonstrating a phenomenon of trend-driven consumption independent of media exposure. Social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, amplify Kuromi's symbolic presence, creating a feedback loop in which her image circulates, is reinterpreted, and gains cultural and social significance. This supports Peirce's concept of indexicality, where Kuromi's image points to broader youth identity and aesthetic trends.

From a marketing and management perspective, the study highlights several strategic implications. Firstly, in the case of product design and branding, the incorporation of semiotic cues such as, color, motif, expression, and pose, can be used intentionally to signal identity traits that resonate with target consumers, enhancing product differentiation and brand positioning. Secondly, in the case of trend-driven marketing, the limited-edition releases, collectible items, and brand collaborations leverage semiotic approach to stimulate urgency, engagement, and loyalty. These strategies capitalize on the symbolic value of merchandise, encouraging repeated purchases and fostering brand attachment. Thirdly, in digital and social Media integration, the platforms where Kuromi is circulated visually play a critical role in reinforcing semiotic signals, building community engagement, and amplifying trend appeal. User-generated content and influencer promotion enhance visibility, contributing to the creation of a semiotic ecosystem that shapes perception and purchase behavior.

Overall, the findings prove that semiotic approach and marketing strategy are deeply interconnected. Kuromi's success illustrates how merchandise can function simultaneously as a cultural text and a marketing instrument, providing both symbolic meaning to consumers and tangible business outcomes for brands. By blending semiotic approach with practical marketing strategies, companies can design products and campaigns that resonate culturally while driving sales, particularly in trend-driven, youth-focused markets.

Finally, this study contributes to marketing and management literature by showing that semiotic analysis is not only useful for understanding cultural meaning but also offers actionable insights for product development, brand strategy, and digital marketing campaigns. Future research could examine cross-cultural differences in semiotic appeal, longitudinal trends in consumer behavior, or compare semiotic analysis across multiple character-driven merchandise lines to further validate and extend these finding.

5.6 Limitations

This research focused only on Kuromi merchandise and social media content. It did not consider the direct interviews with children or parents. Also, the sampling technique in this research was purposive, prioritizing trending and widely visible products, which may overlook less prominent representations.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the semiotic approach for the construction of Kuromi as a trend-driven consumer icon, focusing on how signs in merchandise and promotional materials shape children's want and consumption behavior without watching or knowing the narrative. The qualitative content analysis revealed that recurring elements, like the black and purple colors, skull motifs, and mischievous facial expressions, function as signs that markers of edginess, individuality, and playful rebellion. These signs operate both denotatively and connotatively, signaling identity traits that resonate with children and teens and positioning Kuromi as a culturally relevant character beyond the knowledge about the narrative.

The findings highlight the role of social media and digital trends in showing these signs patterns. Also, the platforms like TikTok and Instagram not only makes the Kuromi's image popular but also participate in the re-signification of the character as a remarkable of style, trendiness, and youth identity. This reveals how merchandise together with digital visibility create a cultural ecosystem in which children engage with characters primarily through visual and symbolic appeal rather than traditional media consumption.

This study contributes to understanding the multidisciplinary approach between the fields of semiotics, consumer culture, and children's media by demonstrating that merchandise can function as a self contained system of meaning. It also highlights the importance of considering visual and symbolic signs in studies of trend-driven behavior, identity formation, and cultural meaning-making in youth markets.

The suggestion for future studies could extend semiotics analysis by examining cross cultural reception, comparing Kuromi with other trending characters, or exploring longitudinal shifts in semiotic approach and trend adoption.

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Corresponding Author: Sarvenaz Safavi

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Corresponding Author: Sarvenaz Safavi