

Viewing Cute Things May Boost Your Work Performance

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You may think cute things such as images of baby animals or childlike fancy goods are not suitable in the workplace. These items are often thought to be distracting, or, at the very least, pointless. Despite this popular notion, our recent study showed that viewing cute images of baby animals during a break can improve performance in subsequent tasks that require concentration. Published in scientific journal PLOS ONE on September 26, 2012, our paper reported three experiments with 132 university students. In the first experiment, 48 students performed a fine dexterity task using tweezers (the children's game *Operation*) twice. Between sessions, they were asked to sort seven pictures of animals according to their preference within 90 seconds. Half the students worked with images of baby animals (puppies and kittens), whereas the other half worked with images of adult animals (dogs and cats). This short break improved the first group's performance. Specifically, the number of pieces the students successfully picked up increased from 7.5 to 10.0 (out of 14) on average after viewing the images of baby animals. The mean time to complete the task also increased from 136 to 151 seconds. In contrast, participants who worked on the images of adult animals did not show a statistically significant increase in either measure (from 7.7 to 8.3, and from 138 to 139 seconds). The result suggests that viewing cute images makes people behave more deliberately and perform tasks with greater time and attention.

In the second experiment, 48 students performed a non-motor visual search task twice. The task was to search for a designated digit in a random array of 40 digits and give the number of times the digit appeared as quickly and accurately as possible. Students were randomly assigned to three conditions in which they were asked to sort seven images of: baby animals, adult animals, or delicious-looking foods. As shown in Figure 1, the number of correct answers given within a time limit of 3 minutes increased from 22.8 to 26.4 after viewing baby animal images. Adult animal and food images had no effect. Together with the result of the first experiment, the data indicate that improvement was associated with both a decrease and an increase in performance speed, depending on the nature of the task.

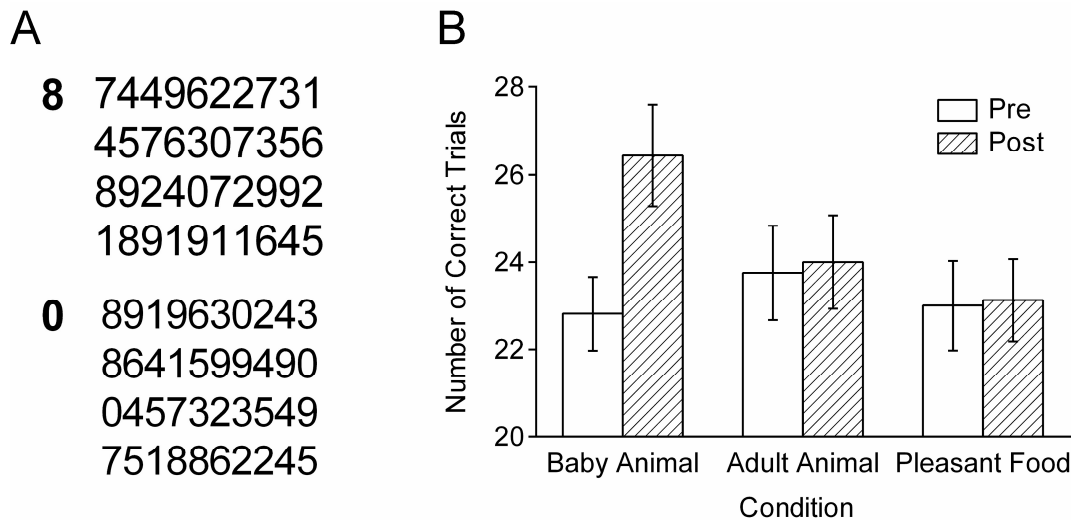


Figure 1. Examples of numerical arrays used in Experiment 2 (A) and the mean numbers of trials in which students gave the correct count before and after viewing three types of pictures.

Source: Nittono et al. (2012). The power of *kawaii*: Viewing cute images promotes a careful behavior and narrows attentional focus. *PLoS ONE*, 7(9), e46362. Figures 2 and 3.

In the third experiment, 36 students performed a global–local letter task, which is often used for assessing the breadth of attentional focus. Each stimulus was a larger letter composed of smaller letters. Generally, humans process the global feature of a stimulus faster than its local feature. However, the processing time difference between global and local features of the letter stimulus was reduced after viewing cute images.

The results indicate that attention becomes more focused after viewing cute images of baby animals, and that this tendency may facilitate performance of subsequent tasks that require concentration. These effects are interpreted as a consequence of the function of a positive emotion induced by cute things. When we see a cute thing, we are motivated to get closer to it and know its details. This action tendency is associated with a narrower attentional focus. This tendency appears to last for a while (at least three minutes in this study), and influences subsequent task performance.

Further research is required to determine how long this effect lasts and what individual differences exist. Interestingly, we did not find gender differences in performance improvement, although women rated both baby and adult animal pictures cuter than men did. It is also worth examining whether the observed effect is specific to images of babies and infants. The present study did not distinguish between the perception of infantility and the feeling of cuteness. If viewing cute things that are not babies (e.g., a picture of an iguana for a lizard-lover) has a similar effect, one can claim that the effect is due to the feeling of cuteness.

This study provides insight into why people like to have cute things on their desks, PC screens, or walls of the cubicle, even though they are unrelated to work. The simplest answer may be because they are funny and make them happy. However, perhaps people may unconsciously know these items are also helpful in work. Cute things are generally considered childish, and thus their value is underestimated in Western countries. However, socially desirable habits and customs do not always fit with our inherent human nature. In contrast, Japan is in a world-leading position in terms of the social acceptance of cute things. Various anime and character goods, such as *Hello Kitty* and *Pokémon*, are produced and exported to many countries. The

word *kawaii* (which is a rough Japanese equivalent of “cute” or “adorable”) is probably one of the most frequently used expressions in daily conversation. Perhaps this love for cute things may have a cultural-historical background in common with the craving for details and precision which is characteristic of Japanese people.

Last but not least, there is one important caveat. Cute stimuli capture attention. One cannot concentrate on mundane office work amid eye-catching pictures. Following the procedure used in the current study, one should view cute things only during a work break.

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* For a closer analysis please refer to Nittono, H., Fukushima, M., Yano, A., & Moriya, H. (2012). The power of *kawaii*: Viewing cute images promotes a careful behavior and narrows attentional focus. *PLoS ONE*, 7(9), e46362. <http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0046362>. The research has been financially supported by JSPS Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI) No. 23330217.