

Why Do We Get the Urge to Squish Cute Things?

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Research Questions

What leads to the urge to superficially squeeze, bite or crush cute things, despite not wanting to hurt them?

Abstract

People often express superficially aggressive behaviour such as squeezing, biting and crushing in response to cute things, a desire known as cute aggression. This review gathers the available

literature to demonstrate what is known so far and the areas for further research. The literature suggests that when we see cute things, our reward system becomes activated which releases a strong, positive emotional response. Cute aggression serves to prevent becoming overwhelmed with these strong, positive emotions by balancing them with negative expressions. Since this is a new area of research, it can benefit from large-scale direct replication studies to further verify the findings.

Approach

I conducted a review of the literature on the topic of cute aggression and relevant background information. I used the search tool Omni to access scholarly resources from the York and Omni libraries. I evaluated and selected sources based on their relevance to the research question, credibility, and influence on the scientific community. The findings of the selected sources were examined to determine the pattern of results, any contradicting evidence, limitations, and gaps in literature.

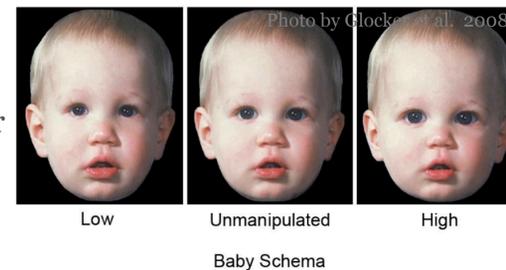


Literature Review

WHAT MAKES THINGS CUTE?

1943

Ethologist Konrad Lorenz proposed that when we see something with “baby-like” characteristics, such as big, wide-set eyes, a round face, and a small mouth and nose—characteristics formally called “baby schema”—our minds interpret it as adorable which makes us want to take care of it.



CUTENESS ON THE BRAIN

2008

Melanie Glocker and her colleagues provided the first experimental evidence that faces with high baby schema are perceived to be more cute and induce more caretaking urges.

2009

Glocker and colleagues investigated the neural response to baby schema using fMRI. They found that baby schema activates the brain's reward system which releases a strong, positive, emotional response and motivates us to want to protect it.

EMERGENCE OF “CUTE AGGRESSION”

2015

Cute aggression was coined by Oriana Aragon and her colleagues from Yale University who authored the first research published on the topic. One of the major findings of their study was that cute aggression was mainly present in those who reported feeling overwhelmed after seeing cute photos, indicating that it serves to regulate emotions.

2018

Katherine Stavropoulos and Laura Alba investigated the neural mechanisms of cute aggression using electrophysiology. As with the original Yale study, it was depicted that those who experienced cute aggression had more reward and emotion related brain activity leading them to become more overwhelmed compared to those who did not.



Conclusion

Based on the available research, it appears that cute aggression may serve as a mechanism to regulate positive emotions. Results show that those who experience cute aggression have an overwhelming amount of reward and emotion related brain activity in response to cute things. For these individuals, cute aggression may serve to dilute these strong positive emotions and prevent them from becoming overwhelmed. Promptly regulating the caretaker's emotions can improve their ability to support the infant, which is a possible reason this regulatory function may have developed.

Since the origin of this term in 2013, there have only been a few academic papers on this topic, limiting the reliability and generalizability of the conclusions. This topic holds clinical potential by studying how this phenomenon translates to those with disorders relating to reward and emotion. However, since this is a new area of research, it can benefit from large-scale direct replication studies before moving forward to its clinical applications.