Gyaru Goes Global: The North American Gyaru Community

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Introduction: Thirty Years of Defiance – The Globalization of the Gyaru Subculture

The political and economic state of Japan during the 1990s is often referred to as the "Lost Decade", as it was characterized by a record low growth rate compared to other developed nations. Some of the reasons for this economic hardship included an aging population and a workforce that was becoming smaller and smaller, the severity of the situation being exemplified by the fact that 181 banks went bankrupt.[1] This period of recession, turmoil and change, interestingly enough, made subcultures of Japan bloom. During this period of uncertainty, some groups were going the process of finding, reinventing and understanding themselves. These changes entailed challenging the present norms of accepted behavior and appearance, and reinventing what was thought to be quintessentially Japanese. I would go so far as to say that this specific period was the "Found Decade" to those participating in the variety of subcultures that emerged at this time. Now that more than 30 years have passed, it seems as though the torch has been passed, as some of the subcultures that originated around this period, such as the Gyaru, have become globalized and now exist outside of the Japanese context they had their inception in.

The Gyaru subculture is one known for its participants' affinity for a "combination of dark, tanned skin, bleached blonde hair, heavy makeup and platform shoes…"[2]. The term itself stems from the English word girl[3], but became a *wasei-eigo*[4] expression through its transliteration and adaptation into the Japanese language.

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[1] Yoshino, N. "Naoyuki Yoshino and Farhad Taghizadeh-Hesary." *Monetary Policy and the Oil Market* 131 (2016): 3-9

[2]Park, Judy. "An investigation of the significance of current Japanese youth subculture styles." International *Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education 4*, no. 1 (2011): 16

[3] Although Gyaru is the most common way this subculture is referred to in English, the term gal is sometimes also employed and used interchangeably

[4] Wasei-eigo (和製英語) describes words or expressions in Japanese that are based on English words, such as are Japanese-language expressions that are based on English words, such as スキンシップ, "skinship" (physical contact between friends or lovers) or ペーパードライバー "paper driver" (car drivers who haven't driven for a while or never)

The majority of the literature written on the Gyaru subculture so far has been done in its Japanese context. But another approach is now necessary, as we're observing the blossoming of what were thought to be Japan-specific subcultures in countries all around the world. Scholars who have researched the Gyaru in Japan vicariously have questioned how this subculture would develop and change years ago. As Laura Miller states in her 2004 publication:

"Kogal[5] aesthetics and images have had significant popularity in other parts of Asia, and it will be interesting to see what the consequences will be in the future."[6]

The future has now come, and not only has the Gyaru subculture continued to exist in the Asian context, but it has now spread to countries thousands of miles away. The consequences of the future of the movement has now started to also involve people of different nationalities and backgrounds, races and religions all around the globe. Has this sort of development been something expected is hard to gauge, but the overwhelming presence of international Gyarus on social media has become a trend that cannot be ignored. It is exactly through engaging with this social media content that I developed an interest in exploring the evolution of the Gyaru movement abroad. In late 2022, there was a popular trend on TikTok where girls were lip-syncing to the song *OHAYO - GAL ft. Shake Pepper & Yvngboi P*, or rather, it was at that time that the trend reached my *For You Page*. I immediately noticed that there was an astonishing amount of non-Japanese girls participating in the trend, all belonging to different categories of the Gyaru subculture. Some people participating, of course, were not presenting themselves as Gyaru but were simply following the trend, but the other part, those who could be very clearly identified as being Gyaru, were those who caught my attention.

[5] Terms such as Kogal, Manba, Ganguro and Hime-Gyaru all refer to sub-styles of the Gyaru subculture, and even though they vary significantly in their fashion proclivities are grouped together under that term, so I will be using the term Gyaru as a generalized umbrella term, although specific substyles might be highlighted in different contexts.

[6] Miller, Laura. "Those naughty teenage girls: Japanese kogals, slang, and media assessments." *Journal of linguistic anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2004).

As the algorithm noticed my interest in the trend, I started being shown more and more videos of Gyaru from all over the world. It was not a case of a specific group that I stumbled upon and started being shown all their videos, but I was seeing girls from France, America, England and Germany all posting, and interacting with each other in their respective videos. It was obvious that this subculture had gone global, and further research led me to *Reddit* pages, *Facebook* Groups, *Discord* chats and whole websites dedicated to the international Gyaru circles[7].

Not only is there a noticeable presence of international Gyaru on online forums, there was also another interesting development in the Gyaru subculture overseas: a Gyaru-themed magazine in English called "Papillon", targeting international Gyaru communities. Although this magazine is no longer available as of writing this Thesis, it is interesting to note its existence as a signal of the globalizing nature of this subculture.

These findings raised many questions in my mind:

How did these individuals find out about this subculture? What about this subculture drew them in to the extent where they decided to actively participate in it? Are there any distinct differences in the motivations and behaviors of these subculture members? Is the treatment of internationals Gyaru by wider society resembling that of the original Gyaru in Japan?

With all this in mind, I have decided to write my Master Thesis on the topic of the international Gyaru, examining their aesthetic inclinations, motivations, behaviors and receptions of this subculture online. Especially in regards to the conversations observed in the comment sections of those individuals who decided to publicly present themselves as Gyaru, some of which mention complex topics such as bullying, cultural appropriation, sex work and so forth. My intention would be to talk to these individuals, conducting semi-structured

[7] A Gyaru circle (or Gyarusa) is a is a group of Gyaru (and sometimes Gyaruo (male Gyaru)) who spend time together, usually through meeting up on the street, shopping and going to events together, and they usually have their own online communities, Instagram pages and other social media channels.

interviews, allowing them to bring to light topics that have not yet been discussed, gaining insight into the lives and identities of international Gyaru members.

One thing to note is that when I refer to international Gyaru, I am also including Gyaru from Asian countries such as China, Korea and the Philippines. However, even though Laura Miller mentioned the Gyaru movement already gaining popularity in other parts of Asia and how that development could be interesting to follow, what fascinated me more is the popularity this subculture managed to gain outside of Asia. My focus will therefore be on specifically the Gyaru who are not from Asia, particularly focusing on those residing in North America, as their presence online is the most noticeable on my social media channels.

Theories of Subcultural Rebellion and Global Flows

The first step in defining understanding what Gyaru is, is to understand what subculture is a "sub-" of, in other words, what constitutes a *culture* of a group in the first place. One definition often encountered is that culture is "the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodies in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of object and material life."[8] But an inquire into subcultures entails not only understanding what a subculture stems from, but also in which way and by what means it distinguishes itself from the dominant culture.

The term subculture was coined in relation to the work done by the Chicago School of sociology, and has further been modified and influenced by the analysis of the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. It became popularized in the field of youth studies by A. K. Cohen's 1956 work "Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the

[8] Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain. *Routledge*, (2006):4.

Gang"[9], but many definitions have since been posited, and the interdisciplinary studies focused on this particular subject have yielded differing opinions and assumptions[10].The prevailing, loose definition of what a subculture represents is a "social groups organized around shared interests and practices".[11] Similar definitions are visible at the *Cambridge dictionary* site, which defines subculture as "the way of life, customs, and ideas of a particular group of people within a society that are different from the rest of that society".[12] The *Merriam-Webster dictionary* expands the definition by stating that a subculture is "an ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristics patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society".[13] These definitions present to us with a binary: the dominant culture and a culture that differs from it. *But how do these sub-societies coexist and interact with the wider society?*

One of the first noticeable markers of a subculture is the physical appearance and behavior of its members, who differentiate themselves from the general public through acting and looking in ways often seen as non-conforming, rebellious, unconventional and sometimes provocative. Interestingly, while subcultures emphasize non-conformity in their rejection of mainstream norms, they simultaneously exhibit conformity within their own group, through adhering to certain aesthetic and behavioral patterns, as noted by Yoder "Youngsters pressured by their peers smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, participate in gang activities and so on, (are) conforming to the way of their subculture group"[14].

Indeed, to be a member of a subculture is to *embody* it with your choice of outfits, activities, and places you orbit. Thus, a requirement for such a group is that it "must exhibit a

[9] Blackman, Shane. "Youth subcultural theory: A critical engagement with the concept, its origins and politics, from the Chicago school to postmodernism." Journal of youth studies 8, no. 1 (2005): 3.
[10] Zadie Smith, Swing Time, New York: *Penguin Press*, (2016), 315–16.
[11] Soccio, Lisa, Joanna Mitchell, and Amy Herzog. "*Interrogating Subcultures*." (1999).
[12] Definition available at:https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subculture.
[13] Definition available at:https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subculture.
[14] Yoder, Robert Stuart. "Japanese youth: inequality and deviance." In Deviance and inequality in Japan Policy Press, (2011): 53.

distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their 'parent' culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values. Certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture". So, as members of the subculture exert that distinction by centering themselves around specific things and products, such as films, musical genres and artists, fashion trends, they form communities easily distinguishable from the wider society. Some of the most distinctive and widely known examples being the *Punk*, *Hippie* and *Goth* subcultures of the previous century. Nowadays they might manifest themselves *e-girls/e-boys*, *cottage core* enthusiasts and *dark academia* followers.[15]

However, these types of inclinations do not necessarily have to be perceived as being completely opposing to the dominant cultural and political currents. For example, a *dark academia* subculture member will exhibit a "romanticisation of preppy vintage fashion, classical literature and gothic architecture"[16], hardly something that would be perceives as risky by the general public, yet it represents a sub-stratum of the parent culture. As similar or opposite as they might seem, they are regardless a direct product of the dominant culture and are therefore intertwined with it, even sometimes operating within the same constraints as the dominant culture, reinforcing the same hierarchical structures and leading to a paradox.

That paradox is the abovementioned desire of individuality of modern subcultures paired with conformity within their group. Members of these groups tend to adopt common consumption patterns and lifestyles, that themselves act a sort of symbolic "uniform", therefore signaling their alignment with specific fashion trends or even social roles. This phenomenon, termed the "age of tribes" by Maffesoli in 1996, reflects the trend of de-individualization of

[15] These examples refer to the subcultural currents originating in the 2020s, mostly gaining recognition and spreading through TikTok and Instagram .

[16] Freddy Foulston, Nostalgia and the Dark Academia aesthetic, *The Oxford Student*, November 2021, Accessed on: 11.10.2024, Available at: https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/11/06/nostalgia-and-the-dark-academia-aesthetic/.

subcultural identities, where personal preferences are subdued by the norms of the collective entity. Unlike the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, which emphasized individuality and resistance to societal norms, late 20th and early 21st-century subcultures exhibit a more fluid, chameleon-like nature, adapting to the latest trends. This shift has led to the concept of "post-subculture", characterized by its creativity in selecting lifestyles rather than fostering opposition to the status quo.[17]

But belonging to a subculture is not an inherent trait, but a deliberate choice. And when such a choice entails differing from the majority of the population, people participating in such communities open themselves to public scrutiny. Being unique is empowering, but is simultaneously making the members of the movement more vulnerable, as they could be possible targets for criticism and judgment. This sometimes leads to their sole existence being perceived as a threat of the social order or mainstream norms, causing a moral panic. *Youth Culture* as a subculture in itself is perceived as the "'the vanguard' of social change", both being produced by the changes society was experiencing at a given time, and also predicting the changes that are yet to come[18].

Those changes can be scary to those protecting the status quo, so both groups end up fostering unfavorable assumptions and opinions about one another. The reality of the situation is however, that regardless of how strong one's affiliation to the subculture is, it does not free them from societal constraints. They "may walk, talk, act, look different from their parents and from some of their peers: but they belong to the same families, go to the same schools, work at much the same jobs."[19]

[17] Keliyan, Maya. "Kogyaru and otaku: Youth subcultures lifestyles in postmodern Japan." *Asian Studies 3* (2011): 97.
[18] Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain. *Routledge*, (2006):10.
[19] Ibid: 8.

Suppression of ideas and behaviors that challenge the status quo is coming not only from the parents and families of individuals participating in subcultures, but from the dominant culture itself, as it "represents itself as the culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range." [20]The key word here would be "tries". That effort proves itself ultimately impossible, as exemplified by the hundreds of subcultures that emerged and are emerging around the world to this day. The tension between these fractions is often reflected in the way mass media portrays subcultural members. But both those who belong to the dominant culture and those who seek to defy it are, again, operating within the same restraints and the same society. Neither group is unaware of the problems facing the modern world, yet their response to tackling those challenges are different. Subcultures therefore use their fashion and lifestyle to "project a different cultural response or 'solution' to the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience".[21]

But how does this cultural response manifest itself? As Dick Hebdige's claims in his seminal work "Subculture: The Meaning of Style", subcultural practices serve as symbolic acts of resistance against dominant societal norms. He argues that subcultures utilize style, predominantly clothing, language, and behavior in order to challenge mainstream values and assert alternative identities[22]. The Gyaru subculture, as a subculture that rose to prominence around the 1990s in Japan, is a great example of this type resistance, as it rejected the dominant standards of female purity, simplicity, and cuteness[23] through bold aesthetics like tanned skin, bleached hair, and exaggerated femininity. However, as we observe this subculture travelling further and further away from its country of origins, Gyaru is slowly transforming from a local Japanese phenomenon to a global subculture. This expansion is characterized by what Homi

[20] Ibid:5.
[21] Ibid: 5.
[22] Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London ; New York :*Routledge*, (1991) :2-4.
[23] Magnúsdóttir, Laufey. "Alluring Faces: Beauty Standards in Japanese Society through the Ages." BA Thesis, (2015): 20-23.

Bhabha refers to as "cultural hybridity " in his work "The Location of Culture"[24]. Although his analysis is predicated on observing the identities of colonizers and colonized as unstable constructions, ultimately being fractured and hybrid, the notion that cultural practices are reinterpreted and blended in new contexts is very relevant to examining global subcultures.

A term of the utmost importance for this thesis would most definitely be *globalization*. Arjun Appadurai uses a framework I find relevant to exploring the globalization of the Gyaru subculture, as he names five dimensions of global cultural flows as being "(a) etbnoscapes, (b) mediascapes, (c) technoscapes, (d) financescapes, and (e) ideoscapes."[25]It would be of no surprise that some these flows, particularly the media ones, were key the creation and popularity of international Gyaru communities around the world. He calls these landscapes the foundations of so-called *imagined worlds*, building on Anderson's concept of *imagined communities*. His interpretation is that people in today's world live not just in *imagined communities* but *imagined worlds*, thus empowering them to challenge and, at times, subvert the dominant *imagined worlds*.[26]

Haenfler explains that this type of cultural diffusion occurs through the spread of cultural practices and artifacts between individuals and groups in two specific ways: *centralized* and *decentralized*. Organized diffusion done by MTV and other similar powerful corporations is done very purposefully and serves and agenda. However, decentralized diffusions occur more organically and in a significantly smaller scale, achieved mainly through the exchange of music, magazines and other artifacts among individuals. [27]

Globalization is therefore proven to lead to hybrid forms, where dominant culture elements are blended with local ones, creating a combination unique to each given space. And although social media has undoubtedly amplified the spread of subcultures, their existence and

[24] Bhabha, Homi K. The location of culture. *Routledge*, (2012).
[25] Appadurai, Arjun. "Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization." U of Minnesota P (1996): 33.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Haenfler, Ross. Subcultures: the Basics, Taylor & Francis Group, (2013):128.

diffusion have always been mediated through different channels before the Internet, such as magazines.[28]

As Appadurai mentioned *mediascapes* as one of the five global cultural currents, I believe it's important to go back to one of the core publications in relation to the power newspapers and magazines. That work is of course that of Benedict Anderson, presenting his ideas in the famous "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism"[29]. His work provides insights into role of newspapers in shaping national identities. His perspective entails that newspapers, and publications of a similar kind, exerted a pivotal influence on promoting national cohesion and solidarity, thus fostering a sense of shared identity amongst the nationals of a specific nation.

According to Anderson, so-called "imagined communities" were formed by the dissemination of newspapers, which served as an information dissemination platform. As individuals are geographically dispersed in every nation, newspapers served as a way of creating a feeling of a shared experience amongst them, further providing a sense of simultaneity. The people who were unable to envision every single one of their co-Japanese people for example, could envision themselves as a part of that larger community through consuming the same information though newspapers. So, it becomes blatantly clear that the rise of "print capitalism" was the core of developing nationalism and a sense of belonging. Not only has this medium helped to revolutionize language thought reforms and standardization efforts, it was also the catalyzer for the circulation of cultural and political ideas.

The dissemination of newspapers and magazines can therefore affect the formation of subcultures as well. Individuals belonging to a certain subculture often consume the same media, be it in the form of magazines back in the day, and social media "corners" in recent

[28] Haenfler, Ross. Subcultures: the Basics, Taylor & Francis Group, (2013): 130-131.
[29] Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism." In The new social theory reader, *Routledge*, (2020): 282-288.

years. The development of subcultural identities is accomplished through providing the needed platforms for these groups. In these spaces, they can engage in conversation, be provided with the representation necessary for specific cultural groups, especially those centered around fashion and makeup, and see the different perspectives and expressions of other members of the movement. This aspect becomes all the more important when approaching the topic of the Gyaru subculture and its global spread.

In summary, subcultures represent a response to dominant cultural norms, often exhibiting mixed characteristics of both resistance and conformity, and in that process they constantly negotiate between individual identity and collective belonging. As I move into the discussion of the particularities of the Gyaru subculture, it is of the utmost importance to consider how this Japanese subculture exemplified these dynamics and frameworks. The Gyaru, with its bold defiance of traditional feminine ideals, serves as an case study of subcultural rebellion, while the emergence of a Global Gyaru communities showcasing the hybridization and globalization that are at play today. Through exploring characteristics of both the Japanese Gyaru movement and its global variant, we can gain insight into how members of this subculture renegotiate their identities and social positioning. This exploration also reveals the interesting intersection of the digitalization, globalization of media, online community membership, and the evolution of subcultures as they adapt to localized contexts.

Gyaru as a Japanese Subculture

The terms *Lolita, Visual Kei, Decora,* and *Gyaru* are all instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with Japanese fashion subcultures and Japanese culture at large. Hundreds of online articles in English make it easy for a non-Japanese speaking person to get acquainted with the subcultures, *YouTube* videos and *vlogs* give us an insight into the daily lives of these

individuals, and many makeup tutorials and OOTD[30] videos make it easy for anyone to engage with these styles. Because it is easier than even to get exposed to, and attracted to, these various fashion subcultures, their influence has easily extended far beyond Japan. One particularly popular style was the *Kawaii* style that originated in the 1980s and was celebrating everything "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced. "[31] As these subcultures become increasingly accessible to a global audience, with guides on how to participate in these subcultures readily available, it's important to revisit how and why they even came to be. Examining their origins can help us better understand why these movements hold such strong appeal to people outside Japan, offering an insight into how they became so culturally impactful.

As already noted in the previous chapter, the development of subcultures is undoubtedly shaped by a nation's distinct social and cultural framework. It is exactly in this tension-filled interaction between Japan's long-standing traditions and rapid modernization that made a fertile ground for the development of these subcultures. Before the Gyaru subculture came to the scene, there was the Lolita style, which positioned itself as a "complex matrix of visual and behavioral resistance against the conventional, traditional, and contemporary Japanese culture"[32]. Just from this definition alone it becomes clear that female-led subcultures had in common the element of *defiance*, as this exact definition could be used to describe the Gyaru subculture that developed years later and would describe it perfectly.

In a country that is known for its collectivism and expected conformity to rules and regulation, subcultures become a space for individuality and experimentation. They are a direct

[30] Abbreviation for Outfit of the Day.
[31] Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in japan." In Women, media and consumption in Japan, pp. 230-264. Routledge, (2013): 220.
[32] Pelea, Crînguţa-Irina. "Japan's Fashion Subculture: Lolita, From Cuteness to Feminist Revolution and Escapism." In Storytelling in Luxury Fashion, Routledge, (2020): 138.

response to Japan's societal and cultural dynamics, a phenomenon described by Park[33] as one caused by the tendency of the Japanese society to place a strong emphasis on emotional and individual values that may not always align with rationality. She explains that Japanese people had to navigate dual roles, personal and official, from a very early age. This duality is reflected in concepts such as "uchi" (home) and "soto" (outside the home) as signifiers of personal and social spheres. Similarly, "omote" (front) refers to one's public persona, while "ura" (back) is associated with the private or hidden side. In this context, the ideal Japanese person is not someone who embodies strict control *per se*, but someone who can move seamlessly transition between the emotional and rational realms, understanding the balance between omote and ura.

As is the case with other subcultures formed by predominantly young individuals, the Gyaru movement has roots in the need for going against the grain, in teenage rebellion and reinvention of the predominant standards. As Kawamura points out, the Gyaru subculture "shares similar components and traits with subcultural groups in the United Kingdom and United States, such as deviance, delinquency, aggression, rebellion, and antisocial behavior." And although not all members participated in these kinds of delinquent behavior, their sole existence started being perceived as a message, and a sort of reminder of the confusing and turmoil-filled period Japan was going through. The politicization of subcultural existence is not limited to the Gyaru community, as "Camus considered life in community inherently political, the political act was one of forging human self-identity, dependent upon each human being's self-consciousness, not only of what he or she is, but of what he or she is not. "[34]

[33] Park, Judy Joo-Hee. "Japanese Youth Subculture Styles of the 2000s." International Journal of Costume and Fashion 10, no. 1 (2010): 2.

[34] LeBlanc, John Randolph. "Art and politics in Albert Camus: beauty as defiance and art as a spiritual quest." Literature and theology 13, no. 2 (1999): 127

As we transition to a deeper dive into the Gyaru subculture itself, we can see how these societal tensions and individual desires for rebellion continue to shape and redefine subcultural identities not only in Japan, but in North America as well.

The *Magazinescapes*

It was very early in my research into Gyaru that I noticed the immense influence magazine culture had in its development and spread since the 1990s. Through my exploration I stumbled upon many publications deemed as classics, such as *Egg, Happie Nuts, Popteen, Ranzuki* and *Ageha*. The audience for these particular magazines was mostly Gyaru subculture members, but the 1990s generally saw a large number of publications dedicated to capturing and spreading the diverse styles emerging from the streets of Tokyo. The most internationally renowned on is definitely *FRUITS*, a magazine founded by Shoichi Aoki in 1985. Through street-style photography, his magazines showcased the early signs of subcultural trends we now recognize worldwide. This candid style of photography included each individual's name, occupation and age, thus providing inspiration to its consumers. This magazine was credited with introducing international audiences to the plethora of Japanese trends and subcultures slowly developing

In a 2021 interview, Aoki recalled feeling a sudden "change in the air of fashion" in Japan during the mid-90s: "A new kind of fashion was emerging, yet nobody understood how big of a deal it was. I wanted to keep shooting on the down-low until everyone realized [how big of a deal it was]."[35]

His observation and dedication to accurately capture the "shifting of tides", provides us with a lot of material to study the inception of Japanese fashion subcultures in the 1990s. With

[35] Hiroaki Nagahata, The evolution of 90s Tokyo street style according to Shoichi Aoki, the founder of STREET, FRUiTS, and TUNE (part I) (2021), Available at: https://tokion.jp/en/2021/11/19/shoichi-aoki-part1/.

this in mind, it would also be important to note that a lot of people started purposefully dressing similar to the people represented in the magazine just so they can get published, therefore the "authenticity" of all people captured could be taken into question, but the impact of the photographs still remain. It is in this magazine that we see the beginnings of many trends. The members of the Lolita, Gothic Lolita and the Gyaru movements could be seen making their way around town, embodying their subculture association in their chosen outfits and makeup. Because their existence was captured in these publications, "the images would legitimize the members and affect the direction of the new culture being documented. "[36] Thus, further proving the importance of print media, especially fashion magazines in the spread, and somewhat normalization, of experimental fashion subcultures.

Another notable aspect is that, for most of these magazines and most of the fashion subcultures of Japan in the 1990s, the consumers and creators of the movements were predominantly women. Such a fact is especially attention-grabbing since the majority of the subcultures existing around the world at the time were male-led, such as the Emo, Goth, Grunge and Punk subcultures.

The streets of Tokyo were first-hand witnesses to the, sometimes extreme, gender expressions of young Japanese woman, and they came in different variations and styles: from the Shibuya Gyaru focus on sexuality and eroticism, to the Lolita's overt cuteness.[37] Such expressions stand in contrast to the currents of subcultural phenomena outside Japan, with Yuniya Kawamura observing that:

"Masculinity and manhood are stressed in male-dominant Western subcultures, while female qualities are emphasized in Japanese subcultures. While violence is an outspoken

[36] va Pesaran, Daphne Mohajer. "From Wajiro Kon to Fruits Magazine: Tokyo Street Fashion Culture's imprint on Collective Memory." In Proceedings of the 17th Annual IFFTI Conference Momenting the Memento (IFFTI 2015),*Edizioni Polistampa*, (2015): 51-56.

[37] Kawamura, Yuniya. "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures." (2013): 113.

expression of rebellion, sexuality and cuteness are nonviolent forms of rebellion. Both are ways to empower oneself by enhancing sex and gender characteristics." [38]

Along with helping form different communities, encouraging experimentation and aiding public figures rise to prominence, these magazines were also crucial in the spread and popularization of many subgenres of the Gyaru subculture. They served as a know-how for fashion and makeup, but also provided its readers with a sense of community and belonging. The lifestyle articles, interviews and reader submissions linked those who aspired to become part of the community to those already participating in the subculture. Through communicating with their role models, many girls might have gotten the courage to shed the traditional way of clothing for a more experimental style, one that could be more suitable for their liking. An alternative form of beauty was slowly becoming more popular, and more represented in the media, inspiring young girls to find their own style rather than conform to societal expectations. But this shift in self-expression and style was not limited to Japan. With the rise of transnational female urbanism and Japanese soft power, certain aspect of Japanese culture and subculture began to influence global cultural scene.

Transnational Female Urbanism

Japanese soft power has had tremendous influence on the world, especially in the period after 2002, when the Japanese government introduced a new policy focusing on the promotion of "Cool Japan" in order to aid Japanese economy and trade through culture.[39] However, this policy was focused on parts of culture the government perceived as worthy as being exported, and that resulted in the "promotion of Cool Japan which was dominated by the male-oriented ethos"[40]. Laura Miller stresses in her 2017 work that this entailed focus on so-called boy

[38] Ibid: 113.
[39] Kawamura, Yuniya. "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures." (2013): 127.
[40] Miller, Laura. "Girl Culture in East Asia." *Transnational Asia* 1, no. 2 (2017): 6.

culture, with focus being on video games and anime, whereas "girl culture" was somewhat ignored. Ultimately leading to the girls in the Asian region who did come across Japanese girl culture consuming culture that was not cherry-picked and sanitized by the government. They used the Internet to move in a transnational manner, something that has become even more wide-spread and common in modern days.

These modern-day developments are reflected in the quote: "Together with contemporary media forms, cross-border travel, immigration, and the internet, urban spaces and activities enable shared understandings among girls, creating a type of sub-stratum culture that is found throughout the region. This is a layer of culture that, at times, renders national boundaries irrelevant."[41]

I would argue that this sub-stratum can now be found not only through the region, but the throughout the whole world. This "transnational female urbanism" has now transgressed borders with the aid of modern technology, especially the Internet. This type of a girl cultural identity that is above any nationality or ethnicity nowadays can also be observed in the emergence of female-led Japanese subcultures, such as the Gyaru, in countries other than Japan, or even East Asia .

Miller's insights were, however, mostly focused on the East Asian region, although she did use Japanese Lolita as a case study in her book "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures", noticing that this subculture is starting to gain traction around the world. She mentioned the Internet and technology as important factors in the diffusion of fashion trends, and provided examples of French, American and Italian Lolitas and how they adopted the style and lifestyle through the web. I would like to build off of her work so far, observing the sheer volume of people now participating in the Gyaru subculture abroad. Her observation about scholars often neglecting

[41] Ibid:22.

girls sharing energy, aesthetics and values, particularly in the East Asia as a region[42] is something I have also noticed on a global scale. I am therefore using this thesis to contribute to the research done in this realm by examining the trend of international girls sharing aesthetics and lifestyles with the Gyaru subculture. But in order to do that, it's necessary to first explain the genesis and characteristics of the subculture that came to be adopted all around the world.

Defining a Gyaru

"Looking Gyaru": Aesthetic Characteristics and Subgenres of the Subculture

The essential practices of feminine beauty in Japan, such as the of blackening one's teeth and the desire for pale skin[43], paired with and the flowing colorful kimonos differing in sleeve length have long been district aspects of Japanese culture exemplifying different understanding of beauty, fashion and femininity. These traditions, of course, did not emerge in isolation, they signal deeper meanings, some of which have been renegotiated. It would be highly unlikely to see somebody dying their teeth black nowadays, as the business casual look would surely shock someone living in the Nara[44] period. Beauty is constantly being renegotiated and reinvented, evolving and dissolving. To truly grasp the layers of meaning embedded within these expressions of beauty, it is important to pay attention to not only what we see, but what we are silently being told through these "beauty performances", if we are willing to listen.

Living life as a Gyaru in Japan entails presenting oneself in a way noticeably different from the rest of the population. Much like other subcultures that use fashion as a deliberate tool for communicating their ideas and preferences, the Gyaru adopt the same means. Style is used

[42] Ibid: 4.
[43] Wagatsuma, Hiroshi. "The social perception of skin color in Japan." Daedalus (1967): 407-408.
[44] A period of Japanese history lasting from 710–794, when the capital was in Heijō-kyō, a city now known as Nara.

in order to help subculture members indicate their affiliations with specific Gyaru subgroups, and, simultaneously, their distance from the mainstream culture and other Gyaru groups. Choices of clothing and makeup are therefore modes of expressing personal belonging or beliefs.

The Gyaru movement originated in a time where the average Japanese woman wouldn't want to attract attention to herself with neon clothing and extravagant makeup, as this goes directly against the beauty standards present in Japan during the 1990s, as previously discussed. Donald Keene described Japanese aesthetics through noting that the traits most appreciated within the culture were "suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability" [45]. That description could be translated to physical beauty, where suggestive, not lude outfits were appreciated, simplistic styles of clothing were preferred, and youthful appearance (which is by nature very perishable) was preferred. With appearing youthful, one might bridge on looking child-like, something that can be problematized in its own right. What was abundantly clear was that these standards were invoking aesthetics that the Gyaru did not follow (although certain subgenres that emerged did sometimes invoke them).

This divergence in style highlight a broader trend in how identities are communicated through our physical appearance. Throughout history, the colors chosen, materials used and accessories added could point to one's social standing, marital status, employment sector and even religion. This is possible because our social identities are communicated through how we choose to appear, as humans have negotiated and attached meanings to specific cues, and therefore specific identities, connected to them[46]. Such is the case of the member of the Gyaru community. At first glance one might notice the bleached hair and extravagant makeup, paired with what most would describe as bold fashion choices, but when approaching clothing as more

[45] Keene, Donald. "Japanese aesthetics." Philosophy East and West 19, no. 3 (1969): 294

[46] Johnson, Kim KP, Jeong-Ju Yoo, Minjeong Kim, and Sharron J. Lennon. "Dress and human behavior: A review and critique." Clothing and Textiles Research Journal 26, no. 1 (2008): 5

than just a piece of fabric, we recognize it as a "non-verbal resource that transfers meanings about individuals in the society"[47]. And the following chapters will discuss how this choice of clothing impacted not just the Gyaru themselves, but society at large.

Even though we highlighted clothing as a possible means of liberation and freedom, it's important to stress that was also used as a means of suppression. There were many instances where people were forbidden from, or forced to, wear certain types of clothing based on their status, nationality, race and so forth. Such examples include the so-called "sumptuary laws" during the Middle Ages, which explicitly regulated how one was allowed to dress, do their hair, and included other restrictions on visual markers that are showcasing wealth. Though historians are still unsure whether these laws were intended to be strictly enforced or if they were mostly symbolic, meant to reinforce social values and class divisions, their existence tells us a lot about how those in power wanted to shape the lives and appearances of their subjects.[48] Although not explicitly stated and mandated by law in Japan, one might infer that the often-provocative fashion style of the Gyaru are not something overly appreciated in Japanese society. However unwritten, these expectations and laws exist and linger in members of any society. *But what happens when a group of people decide not to abide by the societal expectations of beauty and conduct?* In our case, the Gyaru Subculture emerges and moral panic ensues.

Shibuya 109, Amuro Namie and Mountain Witches

Streets filled with young women giggling, their phone charms dangling from their flip phones, on their way to the Shibuya 109 shopping mall. A daily sight for those orbiting the

[47] Aghaei, Maedeh, Federico Parezzan, Mariella Dimiccoli, Petia Radeva, and Marco Cristani. "Clothing and people-a social signal processing perspective." In 2017 12th IEEE International Conference on Automatic Face & Gesture Recognition (FG 2017), pp. 533. IEEE, 2017.

[48] Booker, S. Moustaches, Mantles, and Saffron Shirts: What Motivated Sumptuary Law in Medieval English Ireland. *Speculum*, *96*(3), (2021): 726-728.

area around Dogenzaka 2-29-1 during the 1990s. The approximate 120 shop of this so-called Gyaru Mecca were where this subculture began to take root.

In her extensively detailed book "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures", Yuniya Kawamura provides valuable insights into the origins and defining features of the Gyaru movement, offering one of the most thorough examinations of Japanese fashion subcultures from the 1990s available in English. Alongside Laura Miller, they are at the forefront of research on this topic, and their insights and findings will form the foundation for my examination of the Gyaru movement as I use the following few paragraphs to provide an overview of Kawamura's chapters on Gyaru from the book "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures"[49]

It is very important to understand that the Gyaru subculture is far from being stylistically uniform, making it challenging to define what truly constitutes a Gyaru. Various styles that appear visually distinct can still fall under the broader Gyaru umbrella. For example, while a *Manba* and a *Himegyaru* may share similar makeup preferences, their fashion styles are noticeably different. In this chapter, I will explore the key aesthetic characteristics that define the Gyaru movement and examine how differences in makeup and fashion choices have given rise to numerous sub-genres within the subculture

The first forms of the Gyaru subculture as we know today developed during the 1990s in Shibuya[50]. It was high school girls that were at the forefront of the newly emerged Gyaru movement, and therefore one of the first notable fashions that appeared was the *Kogyaru*. Since the movement was primarily comprised of teenagers who were high school students, the name for them includes *ko*, which is derived from the kanji for high school (*kōkō* 高校). Characteristics that this movement expresses are extravagant makeup and bleached,

[49] Kawamura, Yuniya. "Fashioning Japanese Subcultures." (2013): 51-64
[50] Ibid, pp. 50

voluminous hair, traits shared by most of the other existing subgenres. However, what truly sets it apart and makes it easily identifiable is the practice of modifying school uniforms, typically by shortening them, and pairing them with designer bags[51]. This look is further accentuated by the use of knee-high and over-the-knee socks, complemented with platform boots or heels. The popular singer Amuro Namie is said to have been the biggest role model for these girls at the time, as they adopted her signature long, light brown hair and platform shoes, often visiting tanning salons to attempt to mimic her tan complexion. While the media dubbed this look Kogyaru/Kogal, the women themselves preferred the more general term "Gyaru".

As the Kogyaru style evolved, some followers embraced even more extreme versions, leading to substyles like *Ganguro* and *Yamamba*. Ganguro is easily recognizable by the dark tans girls adopt, paired with the exaggerated makeup focusing on the usage of white eyeshadow around the eyes. This style marked a dramatic intensification of the Kogyaru aesthetic, and there were those within the subculture who pushed it to the further extreme, called Yamamba (mountain witch) by the media. While these styles emphasized contrast between deep tans and vivid makeup, they still aligned with the overall experimental fashion forwardness and the rebellious spirit of Gyaru culture.

Over time, Gyaru diversified even more, with additional substyles and then substyles of substyles. *Himegyaru*, for instance, embraced an ultra-feminine, princess-like look, with long hair, pale skin, and large false eyelashes. This style highlights a different aspect of Gyaru, focusing on hyper-cuteness and glamour rather than the bold, rebellious elements.

Another substyle, often called *Agejō* or *Kyabajō*, is associated with women working in hostess clubs and in the night scene in general. This highly sexualized and glamorous look features big hair, pale skin, and extravagant outfits, including glittering satin gowns. Though

Agejō is a far cry from Kogyaru or Ganguro, it still carries the Gyaru hallmark of pushing fashion boundaries.

Even as Gyaru evolved, some styles dialed back the extremes. *Bamba*, a toned-down version of Yamamba, featured more subdued makeup and lighter tanning. Newer Gyaru styles continue to emerge, blending elements of sincerity and irony. For example, a kimono could be reimagined with a punk hairstyles and loud makeup. Despite the differences, these styles all share the playful and unconventional ethos that defines Gyaru.

"Acting Gyaru": Sexuality, Moral Panic and Community

To be a Gyaru does not only entail looking the part. Members of the subculture also need to actively "act the part" through following common behavior patterns and norms formed within the subcultures. The characteristics of this behavior also reflect social issues of the 1990s, and are exemplified by the media outrage that the Gyaru caused. It was at this time that some of the first manga addressing the Gyaru community were released. One particular case is the manga under the fitting name, "Gals!" by Fujii Mihona, which was published in *Shueisha's Ribon* magazine from late 1999 through 2003.

The *GoodReads* sites summarizes the plot of this manga as:

"Self-styled Kogal queen Kotobuki Ran and her friends just wanna have fun, which includes shopping, hanging out, and scamming meals off gullible guys. Unfortunately, their "hood"—Shibuya—is in constant danger of being despoiled by dirty old men, street gangs, nasty Kogal rivals, and other societal evils. But with a little help from her friends and a toughness born of coming from a family full of cops, Ran takes on the bad guys (and gals) with gusto!"[52]

[52] GALS! Series, *GoodReads*, Accessed on: 10.10.2024, Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/series/60902-gals

In this description, we can quickly spot some familiar terms from the Gyaru subculture I've already covered, such as Shibuya and shopping. However, one key aspect that hasn't been addressed yet, though it was quite widespread and seen by some as quintessential to the subculture, relates to the "dirty old men" highlighted as a danger in the summary of this manga. Exploration of gender identity, sexuality and independence is often tied to this subculture, along with *Enjo kōsai*. This term is often translated as "assisted" or "compensated" dating or "subsidized companionship", and usually entails older, wealthy men sponsoring schoolgirls, or younger woman in general, in return for dates, companionship, luxury gifts and sometimes sexual favors.[53] Such conduct was not well received by the general public, causing a moral panic in Japanese society.

The fear of the societal downfall caused by inappropriate behavior is not something unique to Japan. Just as there are heated discussions currently being held about the *Only Fans* platform and the morality of sex work, the Gyaru lifestyle in the 1990s was equally debated, regardless of whether or not they actually engaged in this behavior. This kind of surveillance of women is nothing new, it echoes longstanding debates about women's roles and, as Thiel Stern writes, " These concerns are often tied to the feeling that the adolescent girls are not performing gender in a way that is consistent with the dominant understanding of girlhood in their own community, and this often fosters a cultural crisis that journalists might not necessarily start but do certainly foster and perpetuate."[54]

Having become the focus of intense public concern, with media discussions reflecting an ongoing obsession with defining and controlling their sexuality, behavior, speech and so

[53] Broma-Smenda, Karolina. "Enjo-kôsai (compensated dating) in Contemporary Japanese Society as Seen through the Lens of the Play Call Me Komachi." *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia* 27 (2014): 19-41.
[54] Thiel-Stern, Shayla. From the dance hall to Facebook: Teen girls, mass media, and moral panic in the United States, 1905-2010. *University of Massachusetts Press*, (2014): 7.

forth, the Gyaru were often described as impertinent, vulgar, self-centered, lacking manners, or devoid of common sense.[55]

Behavior such as sitting in a wide stance, smoking, going out during the night and posing in dramatic poses was hardly considered feminine in Japan. The dominant portrayal of the feminine woman was an "innocent" individual, who speaks softly and dresses modestly, and does not participate in clubbing culture constantly. Acting in opposition to these standards can be seen as explicitly rebelling against the expected societal behavior, thus stepping out of the bubble of what is considered feminine. Adopting what is usually considered "masculine" behavior from the Gyaru can be seen as form of a feminist protest when taking into consideration the immense number of rules and expectations put on Japanese women.

In her 2004 work[56], Laura Miller describes the fascinating and innovative ways in which Gyaru communicated. From developing a whole unique text message code called "Gyaru moji" to the very contents of their chats being an interesting combination of "spoofed cuteness and burlesque freakishness that defies gender normativity"[57], the Gyaru were a perfect reflection of the changing times. Their originality is also reflected in the act of creating their own vocabulary, paired with challenging the very structure of language by the intentional use of language forms deemed "masculine" and purposefully neglecting proper honorifics. However, this behavior is not them trying to adopt a masculine persona, but more so the breaking of gendered language norms and the redefinition of femininity.[58]

In the same work, behaviors such as sitting on the street pavement and on the floors of trains and making funny faces are mentioned as examples of rebellious behavior the Gyaru engaged in. Their blatant disregard of gender norms challenges the cultural stereotype of

[55] Miller, Laura. "Those naughty teenage girls: Japanese kogals, slang, and media assessments." *Journal of linguistic anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2004): 228

[56] Miller, Laura. "Those naughty teenage girls: Japanese kogals, slang, and media assessments." Journal of linguistic anthropology 14, no. 2 (2004): 225-247.

[57] Ibid

[58] Ibid

Japanese women as cute and delicate, and they were mocking such an expectation by often making silly and ugly faces when taking pictures. This behavior is referred to as "uni-ru", which translates to "make your face scrunched up like a sea urchin".[59]From these patterns of behavior, we can deduce that the Gyaru girls utilized not only fashion, but language and behavior to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture.

Whilst notions of empowerment, liberation and creativity are invoked when approaching the subculture from the perspective of a member, other concepts also arise, notably objectification. This concept is quite complex, but an important part of it is the denial of human qualities to the objectified person, who is usually a woman choosing to dress in a more provocative way. The two qualities invoked in these conversations were perceived agency and moral agency[60]. Many scholars focused their research on the interplay of provocative dress and objectivation and, unsurprisingly, women who dressed more provocatively were perceived as having less agency and less morality. They were therefore "perceived as having less of the qualities normally attributed to humans".[61] We can observe the same trend when noticing the moral panic and outrage the way that the Gyarus are dressing, but also acting, caused.

This chapter's aim was to illustrate just how influential the Gyaru subculture was, and how the young women of Japan played a pivotal role in setting both stylistic and linguistic trends in Japan, challenging the notion of femininity and female agency. Ultimately, the Gyaru girls were challenging gender roles by embodying what Japanese society feared most, and the critiques they received were a perfect reflection of the Japanese social climate of the time. Their aesthetic and cultural imagery has since gained significant popularity outside of Japan, influencing future generations of young women. This subculture has thus provided a model for reimagining girlhood and alternative expressions of female identity. And now, in 2025, we

[59] Ibid
[60] Johnson, Kim, Sharron J. Lennon, and Nancy Rudd. "Dress, body and self: Research in the social psychology of dress." *Fashion and textiles* 1 (2014): 4
[61] Ibid.

notice a significant increase of Gyaru members coming from counties outside of Japan, embracing the same key aesthetics as the original Gyaru, and defying traditional expectations of restraint. The following chapter will therefore dive into the motivation and lifestyles of international girls choosing to be part of this culture three decades after its genesis.

Gyaru as a North American Subculture

Methodology

As these previous chapters were dedicated to unraveling the roots of the Gyaru subculture, it is now time to shift the focus to its journey and evolution in the West. As this subculture evolved and spread, it managed to reach nations and individuals thousands of miles away from its hometown of Tokyo.

In order to understand the motivations, experiences, and lifestyle choices of the North American Gyaru, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with active members of the community: Mae (30, Canadian residing in America, she/her), Suo (33, America, she/her), Em (27, America, any/all) and Daniel (26, America, they/them). The interviews were organized through me reaching out to them on *Instagram*, and were carried out via *MS Teams*. These interviews were aimed at gathering data and insights into how the Gyaru lifestyle has been adopted, adapted, and further personalized by individuals in North America. Although many interesting topics were discussed, the scope of this Thesis does not allow for in-depth analysis of certain topics such as cultural appropriation, “fake” Gyaru, the mentioned “cattiness” of the community and so forth. I will be mentioning some of these topics, but further research and work would be necessary to properly showcase this data.

Along with presenting the findings of the interviews, I decided to use social media platforms and web pages of certain individuals and/or organizations in order to gauge how these types of communities interact with their followers online. This type of approach will

allow me to gain a better understanding of how the Gyaru culture is maintained and replicated, its spread in the digital age, and how it is adapted to new audiences outside of Japan.

The Digital *Magazinescape*

As we have observed in our overview of the Japanese Gyaru subculture tendencies and trends, magazines such as *Egg, Ageha, Popteen* and *Happie Nuts* played a very important role in setting fashion trends, building communities and putting certain individuals as the forefront of fame and influence. The same can be observed in the North American Gyaru community, where these exact Japanese magazines as seen as a treasure trove of inspiration and legitimacy.

Because original physical copies of these magazines were very hard to get outside of Japan, international Gyaru communities needed to find a different way to gain access to their contents. One of these ways was building digital repositories, namely the *Gal Revo*. This site was cited by my interviewee Em as being the best source of inspiration, a mark of how important the magazine aspect of Gyaru community is in the US, but also a show of the philanthropist nature of the community.

"They've spent and invested hundreds and hundreds of dollars at this point into buying magazines just so they can scan them one page at a time and upload them so that we can all read them. And I think that that is where most of us have found some of our biggest inspiration, from people basically being like philanthropists like that and just giving something so that we can all share it."

The site is truly impressive, as it has a huge catalogue of magazines available outside of the most popular aforementioned one, such as *Es Poshh!, Ego System, Misc PopSister, Blenda* and *Vanilla Girl*. As someone who is an outsider of this subculture, I didn't even come across some of these magazines in my research, until I found about *Gal Revo*. As Em previously

stated, the monetary, and time investment needed to put this project together must've been immense.

Their site states the motivation for this site as follows: "Many media resources that had helped immortalize Gyaru history in the Heisei-era were lost. Websites and blogs that were once used as important references for others had shut down. This left much of the information about Gyaru in a state of limbo up to a certain point. However, this is what will make Gal Revo special. This website's purpose is to be a hub that commemorates what Gyaru was and what Gyaru still is", concluding their History section of the site with a call to keep the subculture alive and not forget its roots: "Without a past, there isn't a future. Without a future, there is no heaven. So, let's go crazy! "[62].

A notable development in the Gyaru scene was the launch of a global Gyaru magazine, which not only showcased content from international creators but was also driven by their active submission of photos, articles and interview. It started with publication in July 2019, and it seems as though the last issue published was on March 7th 2023. This magazine is now no longer available for viewing and purchase, but I managed to gain some data before it went dark.

The global influence the Gyaru subculture has managed to gain in the last couple of decades is visible in the "Introduction to the models" segment of the magazine that I managed to read before the site became unavailable. This paragraph mentioned individuals from the following countries as participants in the project: Israel, USA, Canada, Peru, Estonia, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Iceland. An unconventional convergence of nations participating in what originated as a Japanese subculture.

The *Papillon* Instagram page is still up, and its 225 post provide interesting insight into this project and the community itself. Although the last post is from 2023, going back to earlier post we see a great number of events, such as reader participation events, one of them being

[62] The History of the Gyaru, *Gal Revo*, Accessed on: 30.12.2024, Available at: https://www.galrevo.com/history

focused on *Animal talk*. This event was aimed at getting the followers to share their embarrassing stories, the description of the post reading: “We're not always innocent and good and sometimes just *accidentally* our wild side escapes out!😉👀Share with us your funny, embarrassing or weird stories... whether they're sexy or not!😉[63]”. This type of openness with discussing potentially sexual stories is also a noticeable trait of the global Gyaru community, as discussions of this nature are not seen as a taboo, and are even encouraged. In general, interacting with the readers is something seen as important and beneficial to the magazine, and topics include not only explicit ones, but also slumber party stories, reader snaps (pictures), Galantines story event and so forth. This particular aspect is shared amongst both the Japanese Gyaru subculture and its North American counterpart, utilizing freedom of expression and language as a means of asserting open-mindedness and confidence.

Although the page, and the magazine itself, is mostly focused on giving fashion and makeup tips and tricks, the creators were not afraid to express their opinions on political matters, as the staff of this magazine openly showed their support for *Black Lives Matter* and the queer community in multiple posts, with one sharing educational resources on various issues and human rights crises happening around the globe. The description of the post calls for the readers to “Please take the time to check out these sources to learn more about current world events and human rights issues. Our members and readers are dealing with different situations all over - but we can help each other. ”[64] Such an approach highlights a sentiment I’ve noticed while conducting the interviews with the North American Gyaru, and that is that the standing united against those who pose threats to the marginalized communities is of immense importance, particularly the LGBT+ community.

[63] Animal Talk Instagram post, Magazine Papillon, Accessed on 02.01.2025, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B5mxTDYHP_D/
[64] Educational Resources Instagram post, Magazine Papillon, Accessed on: 02.01.2024, Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CF0S64bDoMf/

This approach differs significantly from the Gyaru subculture in Japan, where their existence and behavior were often seen as political, yet they refrained from engaging in active advocacy on political matters. This contrast highlights how the local North American context is hybridizing the subculture, adapting it to the region's social and political landscape.

Other posts in the *Instagram* page showcase a number of models featured in their magazines, with their *Instagram* handles being tagged on the post, making it easier to those interested in the model's style and journey being able to follow them. Such a focus on models is similar in both the North American and original Japanese Gyaru contexts, but there's a clear shift in the way this is carried out. In Japan, Gyaru girls gained attention mostly in person or through magazines. But in North America, this same dynamic exists in an adapted way, using new digital platforms and reaching global audiences.

Em mentioned in their interview that magazine culture is an important part of international Gyaru communities, but that the big difference is that they mostly consume this content digitally, which is different to its Japanese roots that focused on print copies. I would go as far as to say that the word "digital" goes beyond just magazine culture, and is influential in other facets of the community. In fact, it could be argued that this aspect has become one of the defining characteristics of the subculture.

The "Armor Effect": Gyaru as Protection from Society

While conducting the interviews, one word kept coming up: *armor*. Encountering the word armor in multiple interviews stuck me as odd, especially because the interviewees used the same term without being prompted to do so. Describing one's belonging to a subculture as armor insinuates the defensive and protective qualities it carries, shielding the individual from the wider society in one way or another. Having an armor signals having something to protect yourself against, and in the context of the interviews conducted, I would gauge that that danger

would the societal judgement and scrutiny. As Suo described, being a Gyaru "kind of became almost like an armor because I am actually a very social socially anxious person. So, I felt like when I put on gal, I was Suo, this confident person.". The same sentiment was echoed by Em whose "looking cool" was connected to feeling cool and more social. This is reflected in her statement: "I've always had like a low confidence level in myself, normally. But when I look cool, that goes up….It's the armor. ". But this internal switch in Em was also noticeable in their partner, who was happy to proclaim: "I've watched you basically go from being kind of like shy and quiet and stuff… and you approach people more now. "

Some might point out that, for people whose personalities are on the shyer side, it is a bit unexpected to choose a style such as Gyaru. It could be seen as ironic, since Gyaru as a subculture is not one that "goes unnoticed" and often entails makeup and outfit styles that are attention-grabbing, therefore it could be seen as sort of "exposure therapy" tactic these individuals that choose to participate in the subculture. Embodying a kind of beauty that is not as generally common, all whilst experiencing social anxiety is a brave decision, and in this case, the fashion and makeup aspect seize to be purely stylistic denotations, and take the role of symbolic defense mechanism against the societal pressures and internal struggles.

While anxiety and low self-esteem were mentioned in multiple interviews, I was surprised to encounter open discussions on the topic of neurodivergence within the community. Mae shared her experiences with bullying and drew a connection to neurodivergence in her statement:

"I think that in general, usually the people that land in these types of spaces are people that may be neurodivergent, people that have special interests, and maybe Japanese pop culture being one of them. I do think that there is a heavy correlation between those of us that were like, say, bullied as children or as teenagers that seek this type of thing out in our adulthood."

Such an observation that Japanese culture as a special interest is the gateway for many subcultural styles is further given credence by the fact that all of my interviews had previous experience in other subcultures, primarily those originating in Japan, such as *Fairy Kei* (Daniel), *Visual Kei* (Mae and Suo) and most of them had stated that they had issues fitting in or low confidence prior to entering the community. This "special interest" in Japanese culture amongst the international Gyaru community is evident from Suo's standpoint as well, as she stated "I think everybody had their stepping stone that had some interest in Japanese culture. Cause, how else would you find it?"

But what happens once someone finds the subculture and decides to actively engage? A lot of confusion at first. My informants shared similar stories of not having access to certain types of makeup and brands at the beginning of their Gyaru journey, and mentioned how magazines and social media helped them find inspiration, but also guidance. The said guidance usually came in the form of other Gyaru commenting on their outfits and makeup choices, which seems endearing at first, but does have a darker side. Mae's experience during the 2010s was filled with drama and bearing witness to a lot of bullying, something she finds to blame for a lot of Gyaru circles disappearing. "There used to be like there used to be a stronger sense of community online. But I felt like in the 2010, specifically in the international community, there was a lot of weird falling out and like a lot of different circles dissipated. And unfortunately, there's always been this kind of like drama tied to it, and especially with sites like live journal and like *4 Chan* and *Locale Farm* and whatnot. Gyaru, specifically like Western Gyaru is a big hot topic in those types of forums, and you see a lot of online bullying. You see people that are in competition with each other. And I think that those aspects of the Western Gyaru culture is what kind of like caused the community collapse. Because nowadays, you're seeing a lot more people going in person to meet rather going online because there isn't really much of an online community left from what I've noticed. "

This opinion stands in stark contrast with the information gathered in other interviews. Mae does state that she left the community for around 8 years before returning during COVID-19, so it's a bit difficult for her to access the current state of the community. Em however, thinks that social media is exactly what is keeping the community together: "So, I think that social media is how we keep connected, keep glued together. And I think that the hanging out in person has is kind of a little bit replaced by just hanging out in Group chats, being all online at the same time, sometimes even video calling and like hanging out on a video call together, doing our makeup.

…

But I think that if you were to look at all the gal circles that exist just in the United States, it's like 80% of them probably it's an online kinship,".

My understanding of the nature of interaction of the subculture members, insofar I have discovered through the interviews conducted and exploring online Gyaru groups, is that the Northern American Gyaru face the challenge of being very spread out throughout the territory of the continent, to the point where it's a bit difficult to have in-person contact with other Gyaru regularly. The biggest cities, such as New York and LA were mentioned as locations where Gyaru circles regularly meet. However, to those living in other locations, getting to the meet up location can not only be a time consuming, but also a financially arduous task. Therefore, staying in contact, getting inspiration and the support of the 'safety' net, is mostly done in online spaces, such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, 4chan and so forth.

But just because a lot of the communication is done online, does not take away from the depth and unconditionality of the friendships developed. A particularly endearing statement was made by Mae:

"Like I have friends from like the Netherlands for example. I have friends from Norway. I have friends halfway across the world. Have I met them before? No. But would I

trust them with my life? Of course. Like I think that it doesn't really limit how close you are. I think it's just...I have known these people for years and I consider them some of my dearest friends. And you can't really describe that feeling to anyone that doesn't really understand that, but, I think that as a whole, the Community is one community."

When talking about their circle *Kokohari*, Em also reflected on the tight-knit relationship developed between members: "We're like very close now and it's like we've shared a lot of personal stuff like, just even outside of talking about the fashion, which we do a lot."

There is a number of Gyaru-sa operating in North America, such as *Diamond Arch, Golden Puma, Kira Gals* and *BlackOut*. But such groups are not specific to just the North American Gyaru members, as shown by online page[65] which list a large amount of *Gyaru Circles*, both active and inactive, in various European countries. The countries named on the site as having an active Gyarusa are Canada, Spain, Finland, Switzerland, USA, UK, Brazil, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Uruguay, Russia, Israel, France, Norway, Ireland, Italy and Poland. The sheer spread of the subcultural influence of Gyaru is evident through it being present in such a large amount of countries, with certain countries having multiple circles operating actively.

Some other Gyaru-sa named have an interest descriptor in brackets next to their name, which states *Virtual*. I find this especially interesting, as I noticed just how digital and virtual belonging in this subculture is to certain members. As some Gyaru live hours away from where the circles are based, it is quite hard to meet up with other members on a regular basis. Therefore, the majority of the communication is carried out online. For example, Suo is a member of *BlackOut*, which is based in Chicago, but since she lives in the Midwest, it would take her 12 hours of travelling to meet her circle in person. The notes this as a big difference

[65] List of Active and Inactive Gyarusa Internationally, Gogogal, Available: https://gogogal.online/galw/lifestyle/galsa

compared to the Japanese Gyaru community: “So there definitely is a difference just because, especially in America, we're all so spread out that we don't have that togetherness, like nightlife, like the Japanese gals did. We have to be very organized. We need to meet at this time at this place.”

Haenfler notes that this kind of virtual scene is defined by the continuous interaction, evolving meanings, and collective identity that is developing within it. Some subcultures have members who never experience in face-to-face interactions, but keep their engagement primarily online. In such cases, the virtual scene is not just an extension of local scenes but can become the *primary* space for community formation and belonging.[66] The example he uses is the rise of the alternative country scene, where the internet brought together musicians and fans, but I believe the Gyaru subculture also represents this phenomenon to an extent

He further explains how the traditional view of subcultures as localized, physical localities characterized by in-person contact is becoming outdated. And while some people might be tempted to assume that virtual scenes are less “real.”, this judgement overlooks just how authentic and meaningful the interactions online could be, while also dismissing the fact that both virtual and non-virtual communities share certain common dynamics. Actually, there is often an overlap of virtual and non-virtual scenes, making yet another dynamic. This is evidence of the fact that nowadays the distinction between real and virtual is becoming more blurred, and is more of a fluid interaction than anything else.[67]

“*The Girls, the Gays*” *and the Gals*

I’ve approached the topic of the international Gyaru community through the lens of it being a female-led subculture, an assumption that was quickly rendered incorrect by two of my

[66] Haenfler, Ross. Subcultures: the basics. Routledge, (2023): 122.
[67] Ibid: 123-124.

informants identifying as either non-binary or gender non-conforming. In my interview with Daniel, the first inkling of the queer nature of the subculture in North America came about.

"I feel like the Gal community is very like in unison when it comes to many things. Ironically, I find it really interesting how we have a lot of… it's very like queer and not gonna lie, I feel like there's a lot of queer gals…"

Queerness was not something I encountered being widely discussed when it comes to the Gyaru subculture in Japan, so this is definitely an aspect deserving of attention. Regardless of how participants identify themselves identity and sexuality wise, it is quite transparent that this community attracts identities that are not those holding the capita in the current social system in Northern America. Borrowing the term from Ortner, I would say that these individuals all belong to the "pan-cultural second-class"[68], a class in which "women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them.". I would expand this definition to include non-binary, non-gender conforming and transgender individuals as well, although ironically they are often described as being "against nature", which might just be the most transcendental way of overcoming "nature". Although Ortner disagrees with the particular formulation seeing at as an oversimplification of the case, I would position that the fact that these types of identities not being associated as much with culture, or the "right culture", gives all the more strength to the communities that form as subcultures under the dominant culture's umbrella. Participant might be finding unity and power in a subcultural system within the wider system, which in term challenges the existing patriarchal hierarchy.

[68] Ortner, Sherry B. "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" *Feminist studies* 1, no. 2, In M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds), Woman, culture, and society. Stanford, CA*: Stanford University Press*, (1972): 73.

When asked about whether there is a noticeable presence of Gyaruo in the international community, my wrongful binary thinking was once again pointed out, as Em started describing how they dress in both Gyaru and Gyaruo, depending on how they feel that given day.

"And I dress in Gyaruo, sometimes outside of dressing in Gal. And I think that there's a lot of non-binary people and just people who like to sort of cross genders a little bit, that enjoy doing that where it's kind of like they're applicable pieces in both that can be worn either masculinely or femininely, and so sometimes you'll find people that it's like, yeah, they're a Gyaruo, but they're also a Gyaru."

A similar phenomenon was also noticeable within the Japanese Gyaru community as the line between men's and women's sexual identities in the subculture was also reported as often blurred. Male Gyaru, could often be spotted wearing coats from Alba Rosa, a popular women's brand that many Gyaru women wear and even share with their boyfriends.[69]

Along with diversity, sentiments of solidarity, community and understanding seem to be the core tenants of the international Gyaru community, as they stand united no matter what. Suo reflected on the overturning of Roe v Wade, expressing how the Gyaru were there for each other during these trying times:

"We're building each other up and if anything from the outside comes in, even if we have our internal conflicts, we can come together to stand for each other. Like even things outside of the subculture, like major things like, take what's happening in the US, for instance. We're all still standing with each other, despite any differences that we may have."

Trying times are also those when subcultural members receive backlash for their choice of lifestyle. The negative reactions and odd comments often received by members of this subculture are presumed to be stemming from people's discomfort with female liberty, as per

[69] Keet 2007 in Park, Judy. "An investigation of the significance of current Japanese youth subculture styles." *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education 4*, no. 1 (2011): 18.

Em's statement: "People don't like women to have as much power over themselves as gal provides. I think that it's kind of like be soft, be subtle, you know, be demure, you know? And gal is anything but, and I think that being loud and being unapologetically yourself and being bright and bold with your clothing and your makeup… I think it's one of those things that people secretly they do like seeing it, but it makes them feel weird because it doesn't look like what the magazines have."

Other than the acknowledgment that people find discomfort in female liberation, there is also a lack of care about what these people who feel uncomfortable by stylistic experimentation think, especially when it comes to men. This subculture is very noticeably de-centering men. Opinions, affirmation and attention from men is not seen as a goal, and if anything, getting praise from a senior Gyaru sister would mean a lot more than validation from a random man. This de-centralization of men is visible in Suo's claim that "female-led subcultures are a lot about making yourself an individual from the men, like it's something that we're creating for ourselves that they don't have a part in."

Choosing to dress and do your makeup in whichever style use like is one part of it, but another way is utilizing that freedom of choice to reclaim femininity. Opting for hyper feminine styles is an example that Daniel used to describe navigating around social expectations around gender, but also a way in which they asserted their non-gender conforming identity.

Daniel did however describe instances where a compliment seemed like a double-edged sword, where they felt as though they were redefining femininity but still operating under the same worldview. They dressed in Himegyaru and we're greeted with praise that felt bitter-sweet: "I feel like those comments I get though sometimes… I think what make me feel weird because they either like insult other women, if that makes sense like, they were like, oh, like finally, like, women are wearing things women wear again."

So as much as their gender identity is reaffirmed through certain Gyaru substyles, it seems as though an overarching theme of women receiving criticism for being too put together or not put together enough is haunting the minds of passerby men. For these individuals, the concept of a "real woman" is deeply tied to stylistic and makeup choices, reducing womanhood to a "look" rather than an identity.

In so far the Gyaru of Japan are famous for redefining mainstream norms of beauty and behavior, the North American Gyaru are also participating in this sort of societal change, with experimentation and redefinition of what it means to be a woman. Alongside using fashion as a tool of self-development and societal change, the tight-knit community is also a safe net for individuals which find their identities as not really fitting in. By providing friendship, advice and support, along with advocating for marginalized groups explicitly, it would be safe to say that the North American Gyaru took the rebellious spirit of their Japanese predecessors and decide to put their outspokenness to good use.

Conclusion

This thesis had the aim of exploring how the Gyaru subculture, originating in Japan, has managed to transgress national borders and be reimagined and reincorporated in the North American context. I decided to approach this topic from a lens of subcultural rebellion, digitalization and globalization, seeking to find an answer to the following questions:

What drew individuals from North America to engage with this Japanese subculture?

What is the role of magazines and digital platforms in the global spread of the Gyaru identity?

And finally, what particularities arose from the localization of a foreign subculture in a North American context?

Data gathered from the interviews suggests that my informants already had a generalized interest in Japanese culture before discovering Gyaru. Such a case makes me reflect on Appadurai's concept of *mediascapes*, because the global dissemination of Japanese media, such as anime and J-pop, has created a sort of *imagined world* that reaches individuals far beyond Japan. This initial interest served as a gateway, and the usage of digital platforms only further encouraged them to engage with the subculture and *become* Gyaru.

The role of magazines in this subculture was pivotal, although the print-copies of magazines which served as inspiration to the Japanese Gyaru were not a resource the North American Gyaru had access to at first. Through the creation of *Gal revo* and similar sites, we see the role of digitalization of media come to the forefront, providing a whole subculture with material necessary for them to stay informed and inspired by decades of documented evolution of Gyaru.

The shift from print to digital platforms has unquestionably impacted the spread of Gyaru, but platforms such as *Instagram, TikTok,* and *Facebook* are credited for amplifying the subculture's visibility, allowing members to transcend geographic boundaries, and build a community that doesn't orbit a physical location, but a virtual one.

When it comes to the question of how this subculture was reimagined, the concept of *cultural hybridity* provides an explanation of *why* the North American Gyaru community puts an emphasis on inclusivity and activism. Through the adaptation of a foreign subculture into the localized context, we see the North American Gyaru being more outspoken and determined in their support of political movements, something the Japanese Gyaru are not described as having been prone to.

Another difference in these two variants of the subculture is the reliance of members on physical spaces. Interviewees noted that the North American Gyaru subculture is so dispersed throughout the continent, that the main mode of communication *has* to be through online platforms, and so they develop friendships through group chats, video calls and joint *Facetime* make-up sessions. This stands in stark contrast with the Japanese Gyaru way of interacting, where they heavily relied on physical places such as the shopping malls and streets of Shibuya.

A particularly touching aspect is that of Gyaru becoming an *armor*. Through the interviews I had the privilege of hearing some of the personal stories my interviewees had lived through, describing their insecurities, social anxiety and past experiences of bullying. This subculture provided them with safety-net, allowing them to get the psychological support and a sense of empowerment they longed for.

This support fostered by a sense of belonging echoes ideas posited by Hall and Jefferson, who see subcultures as collective responses to feeling alienated. Gyaru provided my informants with a space in which they can comfortably be themselves and express their identity, gender and sexuality with no constraints. Suo noted that embodying Gyaru enabled her to overcome social anxiety, while Em described the subculture as tool for social empowerment

Through this examination I've noticed certain similarities that arose in spite of different cultural, geopolitical and historical backgrounds of the regions observed. A strong sense of community, girlhood, redefining femininity and liberation are some of the subcultural characteristics that stand out as the key similarities. However, the North American community seems to be more explicitly outspoken about political issues and is openly not only approving of, but constituted by, queer individuals. Another aspect of the North American Gyaru subculture is the noted neurodivergence observed by its members, who believe that this is one of the things that keep the community connected and united, as a lot of them share the same experiences.

Through conducting the interviews, it became clear to me that the intersectionality of these identities is crucial to understanding the North American Gyaru experience. Their rebellion goes beyond aesthetic choices and includes a rejection of societal expectations tied to neurodiversity and queerness. Ultimately, both communities exemplify how subcultures function as spaces of resistance, allowing individuals to express alternative identities and challenge dominant cultural norms. The inclusion of neurodivergence and queerness within the North American Gyaru group signals the evolving nature of subcultures, suggesting that as cultural exchange grows, so too will the complexity of rebellion and identity in these spaces. And although the Gyaru subculture has gone global, it is not going anywhere!

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Appendix: Visual Materials

Amuro Name Fan Space Magazine no.3 (2003)

Excerpts from Egg Magazine depicting the *uni-ru*

Cover Pages of *Papillon* Magazine

Examples of *Gyaruo* Magazines *Men's Knuckle* and *Men's Egg*

An edition of *Happie Nut*s Magazine