The meeting point of the youth in Tokyo - development and establishment of Harajuku fashion

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Acknowledgments

Dear Katie,

I wrote a thesis on fashion for both of us. I think you would have liked the topic. I miss you.

Love, Matilda

I would also like to thank my parents and sisters, who all have showed immense support for me throughout this year and the writing of this thesis. Kiitos ja rakastan teitä. I would also like to thank my best friends, Reeta, Kristiina, Julia, and Irene, who always picked up the phone to talk when I needed it. And everyone else, who has supported me during this process. Thank you, so much.

Abstract

Key words: Fashion, Harajuku, Sub-cultures, Globalization

This paper explores Harajuku as a central site of Japanese youth subcultures, fashion expression, and community, and attempt to place its research on wider subcultural and fashion studies. . Drawing on classical subcultural theory from CCCS alongside post-subcultural, feminist, and postmodern critiques, the study discusses some of the theoretical challenges of defining subcultures and highlights the shift toward individualization, gender awareness, and symbolic consumption. Building on this framework, the paper traces the historical development of Harajuku as a fashion district shaped by Westernization, post-war conditions, and specific geographical features, which influence youth centered development. Using a mixed qualitative approach combining visual analysis of FRUiTS magazine and discourse analysis of contemporary video interviews, the paper examines how Harajuku functioned as a pre-social-media platform for creative expression and "silent rebellion." Three case studies, Decora, Lolita, and Yami Kawaii, demonstrate how fashion operates to build community, define identity, and to resist societal norms among Japanese youth. as a tool for identity construction, resistance to social norms, and community building among Japanese youth, addressing issues such as conformity, gender, mental health taboos, and consumer culture. Finally, the paper further discusses the commodification and globalization of Harajuku, analyzing how media, tourism, fast fashion, and social media have contributed to the brandification of Harajuku.

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1. Introduction

"*Today, I went to Harajuku. Finally! After all these years, I was able to walk through Takeshita-dori and see the neon lights, and cafés, and shops. There were so many people there, who seemed just as eager to be there (and some who seemed to not want to be there at all). The area was nothing and everything I had hoped for. I did not see the people from the magazines but mostly I saw tourists, just like myself. Yet, seeing couple people dressed up in the frilly dresses, the kitsch jewelry, I feel happy. The fashion of Japan never stops to amaze me. Everyone is so fashionable and I feel like I have to reinvent myself everytime I see someone new wearing fashionable clothes. Maybe one day*," (From the author's diary, 29th of December 2022).

There are multiple definitions of culture and it is likely to be one of the most challenging singular concepts to define. Merriam-Webster defines culture as, "the beliefs, customs, arts, etc. of a particular social group, place, or time," (Merriam-Webster, *Culture*, accessed on 31st of December in 2025). In the beginning of any study on cultures, the audience is asked to define what culture means. Some of the common examples include the traditions and practices of a particular group of people or that culture includes the customs and arts or even a language of a specific group. Culture can be something practiced by a larger group, such as a nation, or culture can be something shared between a smaller group of people. Culture can be lived, culture exists, culture can be material or it can be something meta-physical. Something as large as a culture also becomes a debate of cultural practices of the mass, which in academia translates to popular culture, or the deviation of popular culture, sub-culture. However, this reserch aims to step away from the traditional sub-cultural studies, defined by Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Following more post sub-cultural focus, the research focus becomes unique. Sub-cultures are the main interest of this

thesis, through a more specific focus on fashion and the development of different styles. Thus, the research emphasis is defined by a study on sub-cultures in a physical location. Through works of Yuniya Kawamura and other authors, this paper is positioned to represent a sub-cultural study in which the class is not the defining feature but the importance of identity expression through fashion is highlighted. There are different sub-cultures found everywhere in the world, but the interest of this thesis is the Harajuku (in Japanese 原宿 *Harajuku*) neighbourhood of Tokyo. Harajuku is a relatively small plot of land, situated in between Shinjuku and Shibuya, and it is close to some of the most important landmarks of Tokyo, such as Meiji-jingu. Tokyo, which is the capital of Japan, has a population of 33 million (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2025, accessed on 31st of December 2025). The city is known to be one of the largest cities in the world making it a significant meeting point for different cultures and sub-cultures. Originally, after the Second World War, when Japan became occupied by the US, Harajuku became a centre of multicultural interaction as the there were US army members living in the area. After, Japan became free from the occupation the area attracted creatives due to cheap rent, which allowed independent boutiques to establish their stores in the area. Despite being only a small place, Harajuku has gained attention from fashion critiques all over the world. Godoy and Varianiain (2007) discuss the increasing importance of Harajuku to the global fashion scene in their book *Style Deficit: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo*. They say:

> "While the Harajuku district has long been a spot for a domestic audience to come into contact with foreign culture and style, today the influence has reversed: foreign fashion leaders are taking notice and being influenced by what's happening on Harajuku's streets," (Godoy, Varianian 2007, 10).

Japanese fashion has emerged to the global scene as one of the biggest contributors to the world of fashion. Designers such as Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, and Rei Kawakubo, are all examples of influential Japanese designer, who all in their own works, have establsihed a significant place among previously, Western designers. Fashion is extremely Westcentric and the works from outside of the West have had a more difficult place in establishing a name. However, as seen through the popularity of Maison Margiela's (Belgian desinger) Tabi-boots, which are a direct appropriation of the traditional Japanese shoe, Japanese influence does not remain unimportant. Or Rei Kawakubo's work with Converse through Commes Des Garçons, which often is discredited to be a collaboration between a large Western and Japanese brands. Or the appropriation of the word "kimono" to mean a dressing gown. There are multiple ways in which Japanese fashion has been detached from the country of origin. Harajuku has been referenced in the works of multiple different artists. Vivienne Westwood, a British fashion designer was well-known for her connection to Japan and Harajuku. Westwood's use of punk and mixed traditional elements of British fashion became a feature of Goth-Lolita style (Hirayama 2007, 202). This mixture of styles is going to be dicussed later in this research, but overall the purposing of different element in Harajuku sub-cultures is often common. Many of the Harajuku sub-cultures utilize different symbols from different contexts, not differently from punks, who were studied by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Harajuku has not only become an influential in fashion but music too. Gwen Stefani published a song called *Harajuku Girls* in 2004, which was received with mixed feelings. The song was called racist, culturally approrative, and offensive, but as early as the beginning of the new millenium before the age of smart phones and social media, Harajuku had become a center of *kawaii* culture known by a wide global audience. The English translation of the word *kawaii,* is cute, however its use is not limited only to the English use of the word. This meaning is going to be explored further later but essentially the

word becomes something that is used about appearance or behaviour. Cute is not only limited to something endearing but it offers significance to a larger set of things. *Kawaii* becomes a meaning and a product. Fashion is *kawaii* but it also becomes a form of resistance as seen later through the case studies. There has been extensive research on the word and the different ways it can be utilized on discourse about Harajuku fashion.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the mergence of sub-cultures in Harajuku and the development of Harajuku as a neighborhood. There is not much literature on Harajuku specifically as a research topic. Previous research often focuses on specific sub-cultures but often the previous research fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of the neighborhood itself. The main research question is how has Harajuku developed into a multi-meaningul fashion centre? The corresponding sub-questions are:

1. How was the identity of Harajuku created – Creating Harajuku (Chapter 3)
2. How is community built in Harajuku – Sense of belonging (Chapter 4)
3. What is Harajuku becoming – Branding (Chapter 5)

The multi-meaningful comes from the research findings of this thesis, which places Harajuku at a unique place. Harajuku is not only a neighbourhood, but it is also a more complicated definition of style, much as kawaii and its multiple meanings. Before the three main chapters for each sub-question of this thesis, there are two chapter before. First, is this introduction, which places this work into the research so far. Second, the literature reviewed for this paper is introduced. In the third chapter ***Creating Harajuku*** the first sub-question is discussed. In this chapter the historical and geographical conditions for the formation of Harajuku are analyzed. The chapter uses the FRUiTS-magazines (stylized this way originally and to

perserve the original aesthetic of the name, this form will also be used to discuss the magazine in this paper) as a tool to explain, how the magazine series created community for different sub-cultures in Harajuku, which ultimately led to the popularity of the area. The chapter uses visual and discourse analysis to explain the meaning of the magazines for the sub-cultures and identity of the Harajuku fashion. In this chapter the visual and stylistic representation of the different groups is represented. The fourth chapter ***Sense of Belonging*** discusses three sub-cultures analyzed through discourse analysis. In this chapter the purpose is to establish the implication of sub-cultural belonging within the context of Harajuku. For the analysis of this chapter, three YouTube videos on Decora, Lolita, and Yami Kawaii sub-cultures are utilized. These function to explain the community through the interviews conducted in the videos. In the fifth chapter ***Commodification and globalization of Harajuku as a brand***, the development and modern setting for Harajuku sub-cultures are discussed. This chapter focuses on discussion of the findings in the previous two chapters and analyzes secondary literature. Additionally, this chapter also discusses the development of Harajuku and other factors such as brandification, globalization and glocalization, and the commodification of sub-cultures. Followed by the three main chapters, this work is concluded and some future research suggestions are given.

2. Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this paper is divided under two sub-chapters. The first one discusses sub-cultures as a larger study and the second one discusses fashion and Harajuku. First, it is important to discuss sub-cultures as a larger study. First contributions to sub-cultural studies were published in 1970s and from then onwards there has been multiple developments towards different directions, which are going to be explored in the first part of this literature review. Second, literature on the development of Harajuku and its importance as a meeting-point for different subcultures is discussed, and the influential authors for the study are named.

2.1. Sub-cultures

In the beginning, some of most influential authors of cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart, hailed from the UK. Together, with other scholars form the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), they would conduct pioneering work on subcultures. Tony Jefferson and Stuart Hall's *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (RTR) was one of the pioneering works written on sub-cultures. Another influential author is Dick Hebdige, whose most acknowledged work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), discusses especially punk. However, CCCS's framework did not go without criticism. MacDonald (2025) notes that the RTR was lacking the voice of the youth itself, instead focused too heavily on the post-youth and their ambitions after (2). Another criticism for the CCCS is its focus on class, and it has been argued that the CCCS's focus was too heavy on working class white males. One of the main dilemmas for sub-cultural studies is the lack of common paradigm. The classic sub-cultural school, CCCS's framework often clashes with the post-subcultural studies and within the latter, they often lack a common

ground in the studies. Indeed, even in this literature the collection of different literature is challenging. Youth-cultures and sub-cultures are both used to describe same thing and often anything related to youth can be studied under sub-cultural studies.

In the defence of Hall and Jefferson's Resistance through Rituals, the authors added an introductory chapter to the book's second edition, claiming that the work on sub-cultures has become too individualized and that the work conducted on sub-cultures lacks a place in a wider context (Sweetman 2013, 227-228). In the introduction they have multiple defences toward their work, for instance towards class, race, and gender.

Sweetman (2013) notes,

> "Moving away from an exclusively semiotic focus allows us to acknowledge and explore such issues. It allows and encourages us to acknowledge the sheer alive-ness of subcultural practice, and reminds us that there is more going on than simply that which meets the eye," (232).

Sub-cultural analysis is not merely about the perceived practices but rather, they live on their own and develop through time, which emphasises the importance of ethnographic research, which is one of the most criticized parts of *RTR.* Noted by Calluori (1985) larger issue in the sub-cultural studies was the male bias in both the studied groups and the male researchers' dominance in the field (47). The introduction to RTR second edition (2006) also acknowledges the lack of female representation in their work (Hall, Jefferson, xvi). Angela McRobbie has written extensively on feminism and sub-cultures and the visible male bias in the early research of sub-cultures. In *Feminism and Youth Culture* (2000), McRobbie

discusses how youth culture and popular media impact young women's identities. Her work critiques the male-centred focus of early subcultural theory and highlights fashion, style, and everyday cultural practices as significant sites of female agency.

The next development in subcultural studies is the post-subcultural studies. Kawamura (2012) argues that in postmodern society the fashion becomes less about the social class and instead, fashion becomes a marker of one personal identity (68-69). Sarah Thronton (1996) proposed a new addition to the discourse on sub-culture, cultural capital in her work *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*.

Another side to the concept of youth ties with the definition of youth. Youth is an ambiguous term and its meaning changes with context. To take it further, the concept of *teenage* is a relatively new phenomenon. Jon Savage (2007) writes that the concept of being teenager rose post-World War II as the manufacturers wanted a new group to target to purchace goods (xiii).

2.2. Harajuku and Fashion

Research on fashion often highlights the consumption, environmentalism, and the problem of work exploitation, which are relevant topics as noted by Patchett and Williams (2021, 198-199). Globalization has a big impact on fashion. This has been discussed by multiple authors, such as Kawamura; Patchett and Williams (2021). Patchett and Williams (2021) in their research apply five impulses, which study the intersectionality of fashion and geography (207). These intersectionalities include fashion and queer theories, decolonization, ecology, and curation of fashion. They suggest that all these factors are significant, which if applied to Japan are valuable. Japan post-war in the mid-20th century became occupied by the US.

The research on clothes and fashion in early-modernization period in Japan often focuses on the Westernization of Japanese clothing (Osakabe 2018; Cambridge 2011). Osakabe (2018) discusses how Meiji Restoration, which marks the turning point in history for Japan's transformation from an isolated island nation in Asia to a global power, also demonstrates, how the modernization process also included fashion and clothing, Historically there are two types of clothing in Japan – wafuku, the traditional Japanese clothing, and yōfuku, the Western style fashion (Osakabe 2018, 23). The shift was not rapid and did not include everyone, especially women continued to wear mainly Japanese traditional garments, because they were more comfortable (Ibid, 39-40). Yet often the pictures of the Emperors during the Meiji Restoration wore yōfuku, which illustrates the modernization and Westernization of Japanese clothing. Cambridge (2011) discusses the employment of Western attire as a process implemented by Japanese government to promote modernization through Westernization. Marx (2015) discusses how Japan post-war had to adapt to the presence of the US soldiers as a mean of survival (15).

In Japanese the term for sub-cultures is *zoku*, which can be translated to tribe, *sabukaru* is also used (Narumi 2010, 417). Tribe is not a Narumi (2010) discusses sub-cultures in Tokyo. He notes that *Harajuku-zoku* first appeared in 1960s. Similarly, in the work of Tiffany Godoy's *Style Deficit Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo* (2007), also agree that by 1960s Harajuku had established its initial role as the Fashion neighborhood of Tokyo (Godoy, Varianian 2007, 11). Harajuku fashion, according to Wang (2024), can be characterized by two ways. First, Harajuku fashion can be characterized by "broad dimension", which essentially places Harajuku in the history of Japanese fashion (114). Second, by "narrow dimension" Harajuku becomes an ecology in which different styles are people have created the unique atmosphere defining Harajuku (Ibid, 114).

At glance, it is easy to deduct Harajuku fashion simply to a uniform aesthetic in which young girls gather to the city to wear extravagant outfits on the weekends. However, it is important to discuss the different elements, which form Harajuku fashion, Fukai (2005) briefly mentions the impact of manga and its association with Japanese fashion and the kawaii culture (27). However, noted by Kawamura (2012), Tokyo's sub-cultures are extremely personal (43). Thus despite, the common argument about the conformity of Japanese society, Japanese sub-cultures are what Schiele and Venkatesh (2016) call forms of "soft-individualism" (434). Unlike, some of the previously studied sub-cultures, Harajuku sub-cultures become forms "silent rebellion (Kawamura 2012).

By far the two biggest Harajuku specific sources, which are often cited in literature are Kawamura's *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures* (2012) and Tiffany Godoy's *Style Deficit Disorder: Harajuku Street Fashion Tokyo* (2007). Kawamura's work focuses on female youth cultures in Tokyo, especially in Harajuku (home for example for Lolitas) and Shibuya (Gyarus). However, her work has also been reviewed. In Sharon Harvey's literature review on Fashioning Japanese Sub-cultures she criticizes Kawamura's work, "Kawamura's theoretical and methodological framing of her research does not thread through the book, and it lacks some coherency because of this," (Harvey 2014, 132). However, as the sub-cultural studies are a difficult study, the criticism is harsh. Kawamura discusses multiple aspects about Harajuku sub-culture within one book, which is more than most authors have done. If the sub-cultures were indeed studied thoroughly, especially in the case of Harajuku, the book would either be extremely long or divided in many volumes, or it would be vague. On the other hand, Godoy's *Style Deficit Disorder* is valuable in research but the chapters in the book are often short (1 to 4 pages). The book illustrates the previous statement about the

literature on Tokyo youth cultures. Kawamura discusses two neighbourhoods whereas Godoy one, yet Kawamura can go into more detail than Godoy. More literature is needed on the topic as Harajuku also has developed as a region and social media platforms, such as TikTok, have become more popular.

In *RTR* Hall and Jefferson (2006 edition) acknowledge the transition of the 1980s to a more consumer-based economy, which ultimately led to heterogenization of sub-cultures (xxiv). This is important for the case of Harajuku as the wider accessibility to fashion enabled people to express themselves through material culture more than before. Fast-fashion, which is discussed in Chapter five of this thesis, has developed and trend-cycles are shorter than before.

MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) propose a useful framework of "leisure careers. Their research was on Britain, but it demonstrates how youth during difficult economic times, resort in spending time outside and instead of frequenting places. In the case of Harajuku, a useful framework as the youth turn to their sub-cultural identities, when economic situation is not ideal. However, MacDonald and Shildrick's research also demonstrated that youth also become criminals, which is not the case for youth cultures in Japan. This was also a critique of Harvey's in the review about Kawamura's text as Kawamura connected the youth cultures in Hebdige's work (punks) directly to Japanese sub-cultures, when in reality punks also had high crime rates whereas Japanese sub-cultures were peaceful in nature.

Kawaii culture in Japan has been discussed by multiple authors, such as (Rose 2020; Rose, Kurabayashi, and Saionji 2022; Hardy-Bernal 2016). The most direct translation of "kawaii" is cute, but it can have multiple different meanings, such as beautiful, fun, and interesting, for

example. The term is often intertwined with fashion and sub-cultural studies on Japan. Many of the Harajuku sub-cultures are kawaii, meaning they often share multiple cute elements, such as pink, ruffles, or characters from cartoons and mangas. Kawaii and Japanese societal issues have raised an important argument for the Harajuku fashion and youth cultures. The cuteness of the fashion becomes a feminist issue as discussed by (Kawamura 2012; Gagné 2008; Ngai 2023). Gagné (2008) discusses the language and re-appropriation of *joseigo*, which can be translated to "women's language" (131). In Gagné's research, he discovers that Lolitas have appropriated the *joseigo* and they use the form of language to establish a more defined feminine identity. Moreover, The Fashion Institute of Technology Museum even claims in their exhibition introduction that rebellion becomes kawaii (FIT Museum, https://sites.fitnyc.edu/depts/museum/Japan_Fashion_Now/harajuku.html), accessed on 31st of December 2025).

Two frameworks, which are also worth mentioning, are Benedict Andersson's Imagined Communities (1983) and Edward Said's Orientalism (1978). The communities in Harajuku form *Imagined Communities* through a common interest in fashion. Within Harajuku even, the communities form their own smaller groups. Said's Orientalism also creates a perspective through which the development of Japanese fashion can be inspected. With the emergence of Japanese designers, who also gained popularity in the West, Japanese became an alternative style (Kondo 1997, 57), the "other".

A large part of the fashion studies literature is not academic. Fashion, as established already, is a very understudied subject in academia. Discussions have the tendency to be focused on either economics, sustainability and consumerism, or sub-cultures. However, academia cannot document the development of style or specific sub-cultures at the speed they require,

which is a criticism towards everyone working in the field. Fashion studies would benefit more from auto-ethnographic research in which the author is involved in the sub-culture themselves. Thus, secondary sources, which are non-academic also become pivotal for the research. Shoichi Aoki and his influence on the Harajuku fashion is discussed in multiple sources. He is frequently interviewed for comments about the creation of FRUiTS and the development of Harajuku. Despite his work being on a fashion magazine, his constant presence in the area throughout its development in the late 20th and early 21st century, makes him a highly influential and important source. Godoy (2007) comments Aoki, "To be photographed by Aoki meant that you got into FRUiTS by your own creative inspiration, the kids pushed themselves off Olympian heights of fashion excess," (111). Moreover, for any aspect of fashion, there are multiple publications, such as Vogue, Vice, or NYLON, which can all be used to study fashion. *Fandom.com* is a website in which people can create their own *wikis* about different things. On the page of Japanese Fashion Wiki there are 132 featured styles (Japanese Fashion Wiki, https://j-fashion.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Fashion, accessed 31st of December 2025). The vast number of different styles subsequently means that it is impossible to study all of them extensively, which means that there is no literature on all the existing styles and sub-cultures in Japan. Looking at the Lolita Fashion Wiki, there are 23 Lolita styles alone (Lolita Fashion Wiki, https://lolitafashion.fandom.com/wiki/Category:Lolita_Styles, accessed on 31st of December 2025). All these sub-categories of Lolita cannot be individually studied, thus fan made databases become a tool to study them individually.

3. Creating Harajuku

There are multiple reasons through which Harajuku became a central location for Japanese sub-cultures. This chapter discusses first the historical conditions of Japan and then geographical conditions are explored and the scene in which the imaginations of Harajuku fashion were created, which what the title of this chapter refers to. The sub-question of this chapter is how the identity of Harajuku was created. To answer the question a combination of visual and discourse analysis is conducted through the FRUiTS magazines and secondary literature. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the importance of a platform for creating a relevant scene in which the people were able to present their creativity before the era of social media.

First, through Meiji Restoration and then the Second World War, Japan became a part of the larger global order in which its presence was notable. Meiji Restoration opened Japan's borders to the West and proceeded Japan to adapt many aspects of Western culture. The Western-styled clothing, yōfuku, had become more widely used by Japanese aristocrats during the Meiji Restoration (Osakabe 2018, 23). Tokyo youth also followed the Westernization of clothing, and terms *mobo* and *moga* were applied to refer to modern boys and girls (Marx 2015, 4). However, the government saw the modernization in youth rebellious and reversed some of the policies in 1930s (Ibid, 5). As an aftermath of the War, Japan became occupied by the US, which lasted for seven years. Post-war period was challenging for the Japanese. The occupying US soldiers were an example of what the Japanese were not, because they were living a luxurious life and eating well (Ibid, 11). Marx writes about the Westernization, "Prewar interest in Western culture was an aesthetic choice and status symbol – now it was also a means of self-preservation," (Marx 2015, 13).

This refers to the condition of Japanese society. The people were living in poverty and the people, who relied on the Americans, such as prostitutes, got paid and access to the Western goods (Marx 2015, 12).

Harajuku lies between two busy neighbourhoods, Shibuya and Shinjuku, and the train station of the same name is located in the area as well. The main street of the area, Omote Sandō is a boulevard, which reminds one of the streets of Paris (Watanabe 1992, 239). Moreover, some other important landmarks are the Yoyogi Park and the Meiji-shrine, which was built in 1920 in celebration of the Meiji Emperor. The area of Harajuku was ideal for youth cultures, because the presence of Meiji-shrine prevented adults to frequent the area (Watanabe 1992, 249). Thus, the lack of adults allowed youth to explore their identities in an area without the need to conform to the expectation of the elders. Harajuku was a home for many US military personnel and thus, it attracted many Western shops in the area (Kurokawa 2013, 66). The identity of Japanese fashion was and continues to be created by the teenagers, the youth, who play a major part in creating Japanese fashion (Kawamura 2006, 784-785). The original sub-culture of Harajuku, *Harajuku-zoku*, shared similarities to the British Mods, creating nuisance by driving race cars at nights within the city (Narumi 2010, 421). The community of Harajuku-zoku began to establish a unique sense of style, which ultimately attracted like-minded people in the area (Hirakawa 2007, 23), However, the original sub-culture is hardly known now, and Harajuku is characterized through the girls and other youth, who have contributed to the formation of the scene.

The Westernization of Japan is an important factor for Harajuku. Many of the Harajuku sub-cultures take influence from American culture, for example Lolita-subculture takes influence from the Victorian and Rococo styles (Kawamura 2012, 65). Lolita is recognizable and

features voluminous multi-layered skirts, ruffles, and often resembles something a doll would wear. Often the sub-cultures that the CCCS studied had strong messages that they conveyed through their style. The most common example of the sub-cultures at the time is punk, which often demonstrated visible and loud messages and the rebellious spirit of the sub-culture was easily traceable. The fashion of punk involved everyday items, such as safety pins and razors, which were worn to rebel against the norm (Hebdige 1979, 107). However, the Lolitas did not have a loud message, Kawamura (2012) notes, but the message was hidden, and instead silent. The message came from being photographed and it became silent resistance,

Photography can be a powerful tool in building narratives. As the people started to gather in Harajuku towards the late 20th century, it also attracted viewers to document what they saw on the streets of Harajuku. One of the most influential people to Harajuku, was a photographer called Shoichi Aoki. Aoki was interested in the colourful fashion scene, which inspired him to establish a magazine, called *FRUiTS*. The magazine was published from 1997-2017. In the span of twenty years, Aoki and his team documented the development of Harajuku fashion. In the end, Aoki reasoned his decision to seize the production of the magazine by stating "no more fashionable kids to photograph," (Heron-Langton 2020).

Aoki's decision underscores an important development in fashion industry. The trend-cycles are speeding up, and they become less defined stylistically. This change is further discussed in chapter five. *FRUiTS* demonstrate the power of media. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige discusses *fanzines*, which are amateur journals created by people interested in the topic, such as a specific band or singer (111). To an extent, despite the meaning for Hebdige having been about punk, FRUiTS can be seen as a fanzine of a sort in its original form. The pictures of the youth were taken by Aoki, later they came to be taken

by a team of photographers. Originally the magazine was a playful collection of outfits, Aoki deemed interesting enough to photograph. The magazine sometimes includes interviews and features the clothing details of where everything was bought. Another interesting factor about the featured people is the feature of outfit points or favourite music for instance (Godoy 2007, 111). The interviews in FRUiTS become an archive of personal stories, which the youth in Harajuku experienced, the nostalgia felt towards Harajuku is discussed later.

Figures1 and 2 show two girls dressed in decora style. Figure 1 is from the 13th edition of the magazine published in 1998.

Figure 1 –FRUiTS vol. 13, 1998

The fashion worn by the girls is loud and excessive. Pink is seen throughout the outfit, in accessories, clothing, and the other girl even has a pink hair. The two pictures published 13 years apart demonstrate how the decora style has evolved. The girls in figure 2 are wearing more accessories than the girls in 1998, which is one of the key features of decora style. In the 2011 sample, the girls are wearing multiple bags and multi-layered outfits. The girls from 1998 on the other hand, have multiple bracelets. This could be since previously the youth dressed up in Harajuku rather than got ready beforehand. Thus, the fashion also becomes something *for* Harajuku. For instance, Lolitas often dress up only during weekends and their free time (Kawamura 2012, 70). The identity of these people is expressed within a specific time frame. However, most of the features remain between the two photos. The outfits are mismatched, colourful, and play with different materials, textures, and prints. They are excessive, loud, and maximalist rather than plain and simple. Clothes are an extremely powerful tool in expressing one's identity, Louise Crewe (2020) writes:

> "Clothes act as "identity-markers" and are one means by which contemporary consumers can affirm their sense of individuality. Our are among the most personal and most global object we possess – they are inherently scalar object", (Crewe 2020, 4).

Indeed, clothes become a symbol of one's personality and the way they are worn can have multiple meanings. The multi-coloured outfits hardly conform to the street view making the fashion of the Decoras easily visible. The clothes worn by Decoras show that fashion does not have to boring or scary to be impactful. The bright colors, different prints and textures, and mis-matched accessories become a way to express oneself.

Figure 2 – FRUiTS vol. 47, 2011

From here, it is possible to apply the Kawamura's (2012) argument about "silent rebellion" with the concept of "leisure career" from the research by MacDonald and Shildrick (2007). MacDonald and Shildrick note that the youth in 1970s and 80s spent much of their free time just wandering outside of home as a way to pass time (MacDonald, Shildrick 2007, 342). The case studies were of UK youth, yet it is possible to observe similar change in the case of Japanese youth. Until early 1990s Japan had enjoyed steady economic growth, but then the economic bubble burst. The burst had significant consequences to the economy of Japan, where people had been used to working full-time with life-long contracts, and when the

country faced recession, this imagination of economic wealth and security shattered (Kawamura 2012, 36). The causal-relation of the economic distraught becomes the setting of Harajuku – a space to spend time and participate the silent rebellion. Youth in Japan uses fashion to rebel against the parents, who are seen to represent the conservative values in Japanese culture (Park 2011, 18). In an economic crisis and change of lifestyle, the youth find comfort in dressing up. It becomes almost a mask, which can hide the difficult factors of one's life. Instead, fashion offers an alternative to focus on. Additionally, it brings community to people.

The change in male-dominated places was not only seen through the rise of female-dominated sub-cultures in Harajuku. The change was also seen through other magazines, for instance *Cutie*, which was targeted towards women specifically. The aim of the magazine was to empower young women and to encourage independent stylistic choices outside of the mainstream culture (Kurokawa 2013, 65). Thus, it becomes evident that the magazines played an important role for women in establishing fashion scenes outside of the norm. The female only magazine shows an alternative to the youth. It empowers to see other young women and girls to express themselves. Something similar can be observed with the rise of social media, which allows more people to express themselves. The rise of social media is discussed further in Chapter five of this paper.

Another important place in Harajuku was *Milk*, which is a store specializing in various *cute* items, which has been popular especially among Lolitas. However, the store is also an attraction for others, and they are still in business. Shops, such as Milk, are called select-shops (in Japanese セレクトショップ *serekuto-shoppu*), which are essentially stores which sell a collection of clothes based on aesthetic rather than a brand. Among others, these types

of specialized stores became more common in Harajuku from the 1960s, when rental prices were low and it attracted designers to open business in the area (Hirakawa 2007, 24). Among these designers were also Yohji Yamamoto and his namesake brand, and Rei Kawakubo's *Commes Des Garçons*, which are now considered to be in top three most famous Japanese brands, among *Issey Miyake*. Besides *Milk* and stores targeted towards Lolita fashion, this can also be seen in the Visual Kei, sub-culture (McLeod 2013, 316). FRUiTS magazines it is also possible to find the *Milk*'s significance, see figures 3, 4, and 5, which all feature the shop in the outfit details. In figures 3, in the outfit details of the girl, and in 4, the shop is featured in accessories they are wearing (in Jap. アクセサリー, *akusesarii*). In figure 5 the girl is wearing a skirt and a shirt from Milk (in Jap. シャツ, *shatsu,* and スカート, *sukaato*).

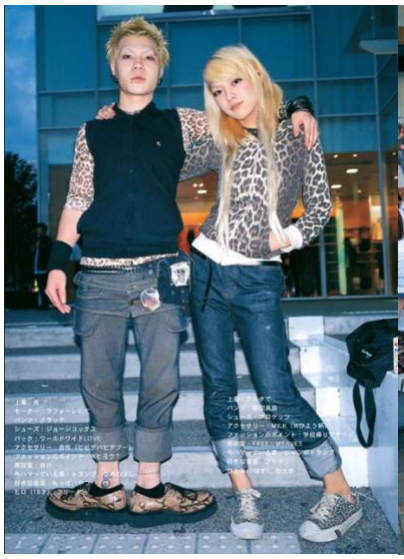

Figure 3 – FRUiTS vol. 41, 2000

Figure 4 – FRUiTS vol. 29, 1999

Figure 5 – FRUiTS vol. 37, 2000

On a larger scheme, the outfits worn by the people demonstrate brand and geographical loyalty. *Milk* was located at the heart of Harajuku, and the entire content of the FRUiTS-magazines was based on Harajuku fashion. Harajuku becomes a meaningful location, where the people are proud to exhibit their own interpretations of style but also demonstrate loyalty toward brands of the area. Additionally, the people, who are photographed in the figures 3, 4,

and 5, are not representing Lolita sub-culture, which reveals homogeneity between sub-cultures and style in Harajuku as *Milk* initially catered clothes especially toward Lolitas. The people are not necessarily dressing up solely based on a sub-cultural belonging rather the style between people is intertwined, which illustrates that Harajuku is not a neighbourhood of a specific sub-culture but a meeting point of multiple. Another example of this can be seen through Vivienne Westwood, who was a British fashion designer. Her brand, namesake to her, Vivenne Westwood, is famous for its punk design and loud political messages. However, despite originally creating fashion items exclusively for a limited audience, Westwood decided to expand her designs for wider audience (Hirayama 2007, 202). Westwood's clothes are extremely popular in Japan, and they are not limited to people associating with punk. Instead, people in Harajuku took the Westwood's designs and mixed the pieces with their own style, which is something significant and different for Harajuku (Ibid). Figure 6 demonstrates a person wearing Vivienne Westwood bag (in Jap. バッグ *baggu*). The overall style of the girl is not necessarily a representation of the usual punk attire, which Westwood represents, but the combination worn by the girl in Figure 6 becomes something unique representing Harajuku style. The combination of different styles becomes important, when looking into the sub-cultural expression. Harajuku fashion appropriates elements from other sub-cultures and recreates something unique with it. Fashion Studies have neglected to understand the shift in fashion cultures, which is becoming more diverse and freer from usual cultural or social norms (Kawamura 2017, 184). Thus, Harajuku becomes a contemporary example of fashion expression, where different sub-cultures unite and create something different.

Figure 6 – FRUiTS vol. 40 2000

Another important factor for setting the scene in Harajuku is the popularity of manga targeted towards girls and young women, which became increasingly famous towards the late 20th century (Kurokawa 2013, 63). For instance, *The Rose of Versailles* (1972-1973) and *Sailor Moon* (1991-1997), were both popular Shoujo-mangas. Shoujo in its original form was difficult, as it included stories for both pre-married and married women, but using a definition used by Ogi (2003), the manga becomes stories written for pre-married women, usually the youth (792-793). For instance, in *Sailor Moon* the main character is a normal middle-schooler, who gains powers and becomes a superhero. Sailor Moon features elements of friendship, female empowerment, love, and other coming-of-age themes, which are all important for youth. Through, the popularization of manga towards young women, they got themselves heroes, who they could admire and gain inspiration from (Kurokawa 2013, 64). We can see in all the figures 1-6 that the feature texts also include the age of the people

photographed, which ranges from 10-20-year-olds. The people photographed are not adults by any mean, but they are young, teenagers, which highlights the statement that the Harajuku sub-cultures were experienced by the youth and experienced within a specific time frame. Moreover, especially for younger people, who still attend school the only time they can dress up freely is the time spent outside of school.

Gagné (2007) dicusses how magazines can be a tool in setting the scene for sub-cultures and he connects notion to Benedict Andersson's *Imagined Communities,* which was published in 1983 (137). *Imagined Communities* referred to the idea that nations create groups based on an imaginary belonging, which was created through cultural artifacts. This can be applied to Harajuku, where people, who do not have an initial mutual connection besides the shared background (Japan), but they create belonging through shared interest (fashion), and they are featured in same magazine (FRUiTS), and this causes creation of a space in which they can freely express themselves. Thus, Harajuku becomes a significant geographical location in which the sub-cultures were able to present themselves to their peers.

4. Sense of Belonging

The previously established geographical connections towards Harajuku have now been explored in this paper. This chapter dwells in more towards the sense of belonging. Community building has been an important factor for Harajuku sub-cultures. The different sub-cultures in the area also feel at home there, which is another interesting factor about the creation of Harajuku. The studied sub-cultures in this paper are Decora, Lolita, and Yami Kawaii. They are studied through different videos published on YouTube. The videos on Decora and Yami Kawaii are published by *Refinery29* as part of a series called *Style Out There*. The video on Lolitas is by *ICON Network*. All the videos are subtitled by the publisher, and these subtitles are used to analyse the content of the videos. The videos all follow a format in which a foreign interviewer follows people from the sub-cultures within Harajuku and interviews the participants about the sub-cultures they represent and Harajuku overall as a place. Through a discourse analysis the Sense of Belonging is studied through a sub-research question, how is the community built in Harajuku. Additionally, this paper will use simplified versions of Decora and Lolita sub-cultures meaning that for the purpose of this paper the sub-cultures are not studied through their sub-cultures.

4.1. Decora fashion and sub-culture

Decora is a sub-culture, which can be seen earlier in the figures 1 and 2 of this paper. The word Decora comes from “decoration”, which is seen through the multiple accessories, colourful and layered clothes, and the corporation of toys in the outfit (Rose et al. 2022). The fashion becomes a maximalist compilation, which is very recognizable. Additionally, the fashion is extremely personal as the wearer of the culture creates their own outfits based on their own preferences and they draw inspiration, for example, from their favourite characters

(Rose 2020, 84). Therefore, if one were to take inspiration from Hello Kitty, they would add elements from the character to their outfit, such as the iconic bow, or even wear plushies and other logos, which feature the character.

One of the interesting sights to Decora fashion is the notion of extending childhood (Rose et al. 2022). Fashion becomes a way to play and recreate elements, which are conventionally considered child-like. However, conjoining *kawaii* with childness is Orientalist (Rose et al. 2022). Japanese, especially women, are often described being docile. Instead, *kawaii* can be a way to socialize and lower stress levels through the items and clothes. Therefore, Decora fashion becomes a way to be with other people, which creates a sense of belonging.

In *Refinery29*'s series *Style Out There* they feature an episode called "What Harajuku Girls Really Look Like," on Decora fashion published on 5th of November in 2011. The video follows the interviewer around Harajuku, while she discusses the overall information and conducts interviews on the Decora style. The title of the video implies that "Harajuku Girls" are Decoras, which is not the only sub-culture present in Harajuku. The video has incorporated English subtitles by the channel, which will be used for this paper. A Decora girl called Kat, discusses what Decora is in her opinion:

> "Decora fashion is fun fashion. It's very against the mainstream of things. It's not in the magazine. It's not elegant. It's very much boom in your face. It can scare people a little bit. Some people just go uh that might be a weird person there (Refinery29 2011, 1:13-1:25).

Kat is not a native Japanese Decora, which indicates the foreign interest in the sub-culture as well.

Moreover, there are celebrity Decoras too. *Refinery29*'s video features Haruka Kurebayashi, a Decora celebrity, who has 192,000 Instagram followers (in December 2025) and Junnyan, a Decora boy, who also had a large following of 24,800 followers on Instagram (in December 2025). The interviewer asks Kurebayashi, why people come to Harajuku to get ready to which she responds, "If they come to Harajuku, they know that there are other kids like them. By sharing it, we can enjoy this space together (Refinery29 2011, 2:13-2:25). Shoichi Aoki, the founder of FRUiTS is also interviewed in the video. He comments the excessive Decora fashion, "Their fashion becomes extreme because it stays within their group. Fashion outside of their group doesn't matter to them," (Refinery29 2011, 4:09). More Decoras comment on their feelings about their fashion in the video as empowering and feeling good, when dressing up in Decora fashion (Refinery29 2011, 6:49-6:55). The findings indicate that Decora fashion becomes a way for the community to enjoy time together. The sub-culture is not purely aesthetic, but it also becomes a tool to connect with others.

Harajuku becomes a place in which Decoras can freely express themselves through their clothing. It becomes a location for community and friendship. The sub-cultural belonging is important as seen in the videos. Part of the appeal of Decora Fashion is that it has less rules than, for example, Lolita subcultures (Schiele, Venkatesh 2016, 439). The comments in the video indicate that Decora is a sub-culture, where the fun and community are important, which is facilitated by the factor of easiness as well. Additionally, if Decora fashion only requires accessories and colourful clothes to recreate, it becomes much more accessible than the other two case study examples, Lolita and Yami Kawaii in this paper.

4.2. Lolita fashion and sub-culture

Lolita is another sub-culture, which is based in Harajuku. Unlike the Decora fashion, which is quite thrifty and spontaneous, Lolita fashion is more deliberate. Lolita fashion takes inspiration from Victorian and Rococo in Europe (Ngai 2023, 546). Often the sub-culture Lolita is believed to be tied to Vladimir Nabokov's book carrying the same name, however it has very little to do with it (Kawamura 2012, 66). In short, Nabokov's book is a story of an old man, who becomes sexually interested in a minor girl. In Japan, there is a term *Loli-con*, which refers to old men, who become sexually interested in minors, but Loli-con and Lolita sub-cultures are two different things (Ibid, 66). There are multiple different sub-cultures derived from the original Lolita fashion, but the original version is best characterized by the frilly dresses, Mary-Jane shoes, and knee-high socks (Monden 2020, 166).

In a YouTube video titled "Harajuku & Lolita Fashion ∞ CULTURE CHIC w/ Sonya Esman" by *ICON Network* published on 16th of December 2015, Sonya Esman follows a woman called RinRin around Harajuku and together they discuss the meaning of Lolita fashion to RinRin. RinRin is a Lolita influencer, who like the Decora influencers, have a large following, on Instagram her account *rinrindoll* has 198,000 followers (In December 2025). The popularity of her account demonstrates how significant individual people can be towards the sub-culture.

In the video RinRin comments the overall environment of Harajuku:

> "There is a sense of creativity that you don't really find anywhere else in the world. I think it's the weird of mixed sense of really high fashion also mixed in the same area as really, really cheap and fast fashion as well. It's very accessible," (ICON Network

2015, 2:31-2:47).

In the case of Lolitas, they even share a way of speaking, which can be an identity marker. (Gagné 2008, 131). This is also seen in an interview by Kawamura (2012), who reports of a Lolita girl, who discusses the shift in the way she speaks, when dressed in Lolita (69). Lolita identity thus expands beyond fashion and clothes. The location becomes a creative hub, in which the people can express themselves freely. However, despite Rinrin discussing the accessibility of Harajuku fashion, it is important to note, that Lolita fashion is quite expensive, and the clothes are nearly $500 on average (Ngai 2023, 546). Therefore, it could be that Rinrin means that the overall participation in a wider Harajuku fashion is accessible, but she may not exclusively mean Lolita fashion. Another point of view on Lolita fashion is the reappropriation of female and friendship spaces over the dressing up for the male gaze, which is also discussed by Rinrin. The male gaze concept was coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975 as a feminist theory according to which Hollywood movies implement a narrative in movies which enforces the male hero narrative and gender roles (Goldin 2022, 602). This has also been implemented in fashion in which girls attempt to dress for female gaze, as seen through Lolitas, instead of the men. Moreover, similar to the Decora fashion, Lolita fashion is worn in a community setting rather than individually and some people even coordinate their outfits (Shuai 2020, 68).

4.3. Yami Kawaii

The last case study for this paper is a newer sub-culture called *Yami Kawaii*. *Yami Kawaii* is a style, which plays with elements from cute elements with more serious, sickly or even grotesque. The style differs from its original form *Yume Kawaii*, which is a more dreamy and pastel style, and it becomes darker. In a video titled “The Dark Side of Harajuku Style You

Haven't Seen Yet" published on 24th of February 2018 by Refinery29 (the videos is part of the same series as the video on Decoras, *Style Out There*), Yami Kawaii is discussed through a similar format as the previous two.

Yami kawaii first appears similar to other kawaii fashion styles of Japan and Harajuku. However, it also includes gruesome elements, such as syringes and nooses or texts, which refer to the person's desire to die. The video features Bisuko, who is an artist known for their character *Menhera-chan. Menhera-chan* is a cartoon character, young girl, who has a pink hair and, on the surface, cute outfit. However, after closer look, the cartoon character has cuts on her arms and she often carries a blade. *Menhera* is a derived from the English words "mental health." Bisuko's girl character becomes a heroine for the Yami Kawaii sub-culture, who appropriates the often-taboo self-harming and uses it to transform into a magical superhero (Seko, Kikuichi 2022, 9). Bisuko participated the LA Anime Expo in 2018, where they were interviewed by *Asia Pacific Arts*. They were asked whether they believed that Yami Kawaii glamorizes mental health issues to which they responded:

> "I don't worry about that. I think that it takes a very deep pain and a lot of courage to commit a suicide and I don't think my work inspires that. My fans usually pay attention to the dark, underground culture of yami kawaii, so they understand my concept and take good parts of it," (Nguyen 2018).

Often the *menhera* characters are young girls, who suffer from different mental health issues (Seko, Kikuchi 2022, 4). Coincidentally, there is a manga series by Kotoha Toko, which also features a main character girl named *Menhera-chan*. The manga discusses bullying and social

issues, which in the end are resolved by the main character entering adulthood, thus overcoming the difficult youth years (Ibid, 4).

The sub-culture of *Yami Kawaii* is yet to be researched extensively. Lieber-Milo (2022) discusses it briefly, while referring to the video by Refinery29, and they argue that Yami Kawaii becomes a way of consuming cute things, while also addressing darker themes such as suicidal thoughts (757). Japan has relatively high suicide-rates. According to data by World Population Review in 2023, Japan had an overall suicide-rate of 21.5 suicides per 100,000 people placing Japan 8th in the entire world, 30.1 male suicides per 100,000 people, and 13.3 female suicides per 100,000 people (World Population Review 2025, accessed 31st of December 2025). There are also cultural factors, which cause the mental health to be a taboo (Imataka, Shiraishi 2024, 8). Therefore, it is difficult to express struggles regarding mental health issues, which Yami Kawaii attempts to do. Bisuko expresses, the need for these darker elements and justifies their use of the grotesque themes in the art (Refinery 2018, 5:06-5:21). One of the girls, who was interviewed for the video says that she had multiple suicide attempts in the past and she wishes to spread her story to her fans in order to consider suicidal thoughts again (Refinery29 2018, 8:53-9:08). Therefore, Yami Kawaii becomes a tool to extend the fashion beyond an aesthetic purpose into a channel to discuss otherwise difficult subjects, such as suicide.

4.4. Harajuku as a place for community

All the case studies highlight an important factor. Sub-cultures of Harajuku are communal and they each in their own way rebel against social issues. Taking this back to Kawamura's argument about silent rebellion, the sub-cultures participated by people in Harajuku partake in different societal issues in their own ways. All three groups do not dress in the fashion of

some of the most popular fashion brands in Japan, such as Uniqlo, Beams, and Muji, which often feature more monochrome and simpler designs. Instead, Harajuku fashion is loud and colourful.

Japanese female idols on tv are often expected to appear young and beautiful towards the male gaze (Omori, Ota 2023, 7). However, as seen in the case of Lolitas, the sub-culture attempts to diverge from the male gaze towards cute aesthetic shared and enjoyed by friends. However, Monden (2020) argues against the feminist perspective as the inspiration for Lolita comes from the European dresses of the 19th century, which were seen as a mode of oppression due to their restrictive nature (167). Yet, for the people in the Refinery29's video about Lolitas, the fashion does not appear restrictive, but rather something empowering. Indeed, Lolita fashion is a useful example of why an area study focus is important. Kawaii and Lolita both feature elements, which often in Western settings are deemed childish or even, encouraging paedophilia and over-sexualization of women (Monden 2020, 174). Therefore, the analysis in Japanese context is important rather than focusing on the Western interpretations of Lolita sub-culture. Yet, there are considerations, which can be explored in analysing Lolita fashion. First, the sub-culture attempts to extend the childhood towards adulthood and diminish the line between the transition (Hardy Bernal 2012, 121). Lolita fashion is influenced by adoration towards Western princess from fairy tales already from earlier in the life (Zhao 2025, 6). Lolita fashion gains a nostalgic element, where the person can develop their style later in life with the influence of the pictures from the childhood. Second,

Japan has developed in a similar direction to the Western countries, yet there are multiple instances in which it differs. All though often argued, Japan is conformist and there are social

norms, which the population are expected to follow (Schiele, Venkatesh 2016, 428). Decoras, Lolitas, and people, who dress in Yami Kawaii each rebel in their own way against the social norm, which causes social segregation from the mainstream culture (Schiele, Venkatesh 2016, 432). By the time participants in the sub-culture are ready to leave, they join the mainstream culture, which is usually, when they get a bit older (Schiele, Venkatesh 2016, 433). This is one of the reasons, why sub-cultures are also important to be regarded as youth cultures. The case of Harajuku demonstrates, how the youth gain a temporary community, which expresses and rebels, albeit "silently", against the societal norms posed by the mainstream culture. Kawamura's (2012) research Fashioning Japanese Subcultures is concluded by her agreeing the similarities of all youth cultures, such as rebellion and apposition with mainstream cultures, but the uniqueness of Japanese sub-cultures is derived from the "silent rebellion" through fashion, which sets the youth apart distinctively (136-137). In a way, the youth procure a temporary location from Harajuku, where they can participate the rebellion, for instance, against conformity, against male gaze, or even, against taboos of discussion on mental health issues.

5. Commodification and globalization of Harajuku as a brand

The two previous chapters have utilized a combination of visual and discourse analysis to explain the creation of Harajuku as a physical space and utilized case studies to explain, how Harajuku also becomes a setting for lived experience. These two chapters have explained, how Harajuku is not only a neighbourhood in Tokyo but rather a dynamic site for cultural production. First, the development of the area can be connected to the influence of Western culture and media, which have positioned Harajuku for creative expression and stylistic experimentation. The blend of Japanese and Western influences has allowed Harajuku to become a scene for vibrant sub-cultures, who express themselves through fashion. Second, the analyses have revealed that Harajuku subcultures have a strong sense of community and belonging. However, there are multiple societal factors, which may have an impact on the development of both, the sub-cultures in Harajuku but also on a larger scale worldwide.

Harajuku has become a major centre for fashion expression. To bring back the example of *Harajuku Girls* by Gwen Stefani there is a notable attraction and curiosity towards Harajuku and Japan on a global level. The song caused mainstreaming of Harajuku, which caused the song to be an example of Japan/Harajuku to Western audience (Schiele, Venkatesh 2016, 442). The song includes Japanese phrases such as いっらしゃいませ *irrashaimase* and ありがとう arigatō, meaning ”welcome” and ”thank you”, which were performed by Japanese back singers. The song is Orientalist deducting the Japanese back singers in the background, while Stefani sings about Harajuku to the Western audience in English (Laemmerhirt 2012, 12). Japan and Harajuku become exoticized, while leaving the imaginations of them for Stefani to open. Additionally, detaching culture from its original background also poses multiple risks. Lolita fashion has also been broadcasted in foreign newspapers and often it is

connected to Loli-con, thus creating a false image abroad about sexualized and fetishized Lolita girls, as the two are completely different (Gagné 2007, 139). As globalization progresses, sub-cultures become more exposed to other cultures as well, which allows different interpretations to be made. It is not unusual that the sub-culture spreads internationally. Punk became a global phenomenon and throughout the world people interpreted it differently.

The song by Stefani does contribute towards the introduction of the area towards wider, global population. Chances are that not everyone, or even most know what Harajuku fashion is, but the same application goes for Fashion Weeks of Paris, Milan, or New York. Not everyone knows, and to take it further, not everyone *needs* to know. What the example of Harajuku demonstrates is the development of a neighbourhood, from the appearance of different sub-cultures to development of sub-cultures of those main ones to a colourful compilation of multi-expressive cultural centre. The richness and diversity of the neighbourhood have functioned as a catalyst to the commodification of Harajuku. Hebdige (1979) discusses how all sub-cultures consume something and its these stylistic things, which function as a secret language almost for the sub-cultures (103). Globalization has made this secret language less defined as symbols can also be shared online.

However, the Harajuku boutiques' purpose is not necessarily profit on the products they sell (Kawamura, 792). The boutiques in Harajuku are there to sell to the respective sub-cultures, but the marketing is not created to attract wider audiences. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the store, Milk, has been around for multiple decades. Milk's Instagram account has 26,600 followers (December 2025), which is relatively little. In comparison H&M's Instagram has 38,500,000 followers (December 2025). Note, the two are very different, both in distribution,

H&M group is an international multibillion company with stores in over 79 countries (HM GROUP 2025). This raises a question of how do these shops survive on their own?

The survival of the original Harajuku brands relies on the sub-cultures in the area.

> " "Harajuku" is not just a physical location, it is a symbolic environment for those who want to do (or be) something new," (Godoy 2007, 220).

As seen in the videos and through the analysis in the previous chapter, Harajuku is a location for different youth cultures, where people gather to spend time together and to express themselves. However, Harajuku has not gone without reformations. From the mergence of the original sub-cultures in the 1960s to the beginning of FRUiTS to the present, the location, platforms, and even the people have changed. Now Harajuku can be broadcasted online and people can see, what happens on the streets through YouTube and TikTok. In an interview by CNN, Shoichi Aoki comments that fashionable people are disappearing from Harajuku due to the rise of fast fashion (CNN 2017, 4:11). Seen through the closure of FRUiTS in 2017, Aoki's decision highlights the change in the area by a decision of one of the most influential people in Harajuku.

In the early 21st century fast-fashion has become the most dominant alternative for consumers, and the change is also seen in Japan (Nakao 2016, 16). Fast fashion becomes an active issue, when discussing fashion studies. During the time of pre-industrialization, trend cycles were much slower. Cost of a garment was much more than it is today, which meant that people could not buy clothes as often. Even during post-industrialization era, high fashion brands showcased new collections around twice a year, but fast fashion has changed

the pace to even faster (Joy et. al 2012, 275). The pace in which clothes are consumed is fastening and the traditional examples of fast fashion are brands such as Zara and H&M. Yet, there has been a development towards even faster form of development, ultra-fast fashion. *SHEIN*. *SHEIN* is a Chinese brand which attracts customers with inexpensive garments and other goods, and their contribution is mainly based online (Zimand-Sheiner, Lissitsa 2024, 2). Without ethnographic research, it is impossible to say whether *SHEIN* has had an impact on select-shops, such as *Milk*. However, given the price of Lolita fashion, for example, it is possible to hypothesize that ultra-fast fahion has taken customers from the smaller businesses. Despite, this development, it all contributes to the brandification of Harajuku. The use of different parts from Harajuku style, even in fast fashion, contributes to the globally established image of Harajuku even if the original brands are not involved in the process to the same extent as before.

However, the main contributor to the continuing support of Harajuku fashion, is the search for nostalgia in youth. The official Instagram of the FRUiTS still publishes street snaps and the account, *fruitsmag*, has 197,000 followers on Instagram (In December 2025). Additionally, an archive of the FRUiTS magazine, *fruits_magazine_archives*, which publishes frequently outfits from the old magazines, also has an impressive 147,000 followers on Instagram (In December 2025). The following goes to demonstrate the continuing interest in FRUiTS and Aoki's worlds, which after nearly 30 years of the first publication in 1997 continues to be relevant today. In 2020 FRUiTS was revived as Aoki reportedly found new interest in the works of Virgil Abloh and Demna Gvasalia and he saw potential in the influence of the work of the two designers for the fashion of Harajuku (Heron-Langton 2020). Unfortunately, Abloh passed away in 2021, but his legacy, especially with his own bran *Off-White* continues to be relevant today. Gvasalia has worked as the creative director of

Balenciaga and as a co-founder of *Vetements*, and from 2025 he became the creative director of Gucci. FRUiTS has expanded to the internet and there are influencers for sub-cultures as seen through the case-studies, which demonstrates that the previously physical spaces have also gained another dimension online.

The influence of social media cannot be undermined in the development of fashion world. In 1970s and 1980s, when sub-cultural studies became increasingly relevant, there were no online platforms to utilize in fashion expression. Influencers are what Khamis et Al. (2017) describe as "micro-celebrities" (194). They are people, who use their platforms, such as Instagram to build a personal fan-base. There is little to none research on Harajuku based influencers, but in essence following the definition by Khamis et. Al (2017), these popular representatives of the Harajuku sub-cultures are influencers in their own respective communities. Additionally, interest and influence on Lolita fashion can also be found through internet communities (Rahman et. al, 2011). Therefore, the location does not restrict a person anymore from participating in the sub-culture as information and community can also be found online. Similarly, one does not need to be in a certain location to practice a religion if they are familiar with it from elsewhere, such as Instagram. Influence through new means has become more prevalent. Japan implemented a "soft power" strategy in their internationalization process, which is known as *Cool Japan. Cool Japan* is a campaign in which Japan utilizes means of soft power to improve its international relations. Products such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon are examples of how this is done. Instead of being associated with traditional hard power, Japan utilizes the cute characters to build an amicable image of the state to foreign countries. Additionally, through the Cool Japan, different conventions, such as Japan Expo, are funded (Koma 2021, 137). The products of "Cool Japan" are glocalized to attract the local markets of the recipient countries better (Borggreen 2013, 42).

For instance, the Pokémon is dubbed into different languages, which distances the anime from Japanese culture. Children around the world know Pokémon in their own language and they can enjoy the products without attaching meaning to Japan per se.

Lolita sub-culture is also a globalized phenomenon, although somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, Lolita fashion demonstrates, how Asian countries can reimagine Western elements, such as the Lolita dresses inspired by Victorian and Rococo eras (Zhao 2025, 4). Therefore, the dress gains unique elements influenced by the Asian cultures. One the other hand, the appropriation of the Lolita dress can be appropriated again by Western Lolitas. In a study by Koma (2021), she discusses the French Lolita and she notes, that most of the Lolita wearers consider the fashion to be a mix of European and Japanese influences or completely European (136). Thus, there is a mix of understanding the origin of the culture with also claims that the dress is not Japanese at all, despite frequenting Lolita events celebrating the Japanese sub-culture abroad. Lolita fashion can be defined by both elements, which illustrates the globalization of the sub-culture. People different parts of the world can detach Lolita sub-culture from Harajuku and reappropriate its significance. Yet, the original appropriation remains from European to Japanese.

Globalization also contributes to the increase in travel into further destinations. *Go Tokyo – The Official Tokyo Travel Guide* features Harajuku in their website and the page dedicated to the area also discusses the fashion and sub-cultures of the area (*Go Tokyo – The Official Tokyo Travel Guide, https://www.gotokyo.org/en/destinations/western-tokyo/harajuku/index.html,* accessed on 31st of December 2025). Interestingly, the webpage also includes a reference to the Stefani's song. Therefore, despite being controversial, even the official website of Tokyo Travel Guide acknowledges that the song might be the only

place, where a tourist might know Harajuku from. Especially post-Covid-19, Japan has seen a rise in mass tourism and continues to reach record high numbers of incoming visitors (Wortley 2023, accessed on 31st of December 2025). People are interested in visiting Japan more than before, which means that local brands also enjoy the spending of tourists in the area. Fashion can be used to attract tourists to purchace local culture (Montazer, Zare Bidoki 2017, 1). Thus, the rise of tourism contributes toward the popularization of Japanese fashion through the increase of tourists visiting Japan.

Development of Harajuku also has contributed towards a disappearance of the lines within Tokyo. The area is no longer a meeting point of only the so-called original sub-cultures, such as Lolitas and Decoras but nowadays products from multiple different sub-cultures can also be purchased from there (Adamowicz, 16). Harajuku, despite the resistance of some, has transformed from an area to a meaning (Adamowicz, 18). No longer is useful to inspect Harajuku only through the perspective of sub-cultures present alone. Rather Harajuku becomes a brand of multicultural expression, which people can enjoy from multiple locations. Another perspective is that the authenticity of sub-cultures has disappeared. Instead, anything and everything can become an aesthetic, and these diluted versions of culture can often be marked with the -wave and -core suffixes (Koc 2025, 137-138). An article titled "HARAJUKU, THE MAXIMALIST JAPANESE AESTHETIC, IS BACK FOR MORE," published on 20th of February in 2024 by India Roby on *NYLON* is an excellent demonstration of the use of Harajuku as an umbrella term. The article constantly mixes the different sub-cultures of Harajuku, which detaches the original culture behind and combines different elements reducing the significance of Harajuku. Instead, Harajuku becomes a core, which replaces the individual meaning of a sub-culture. The meanings of such as the community building between people within sub-culture, social struggles, and the silent

rebellion, all become bleak and reduced to a simple aesthetic category. However, it is not necessarily important for the sub-cultures themselves, which also is something that requires more empirical analysis. The question their lies in a question of authenticity and whether the reimagination of Harajuku sub-cultures as cores or waves harm the original communities. The question is whether "brandification" has negative implications. Does it influence the factors, such as fetishisation of the sub-cultures, which would indicate the harmfulness of the brandification. More research on the topic is needed. Overall, brandification of neighbourhoods, such as Harajuku, is a useful tool to study the influence of globalization. Moreover, despite not having been discussed earlier in this paper, another question, which can be posed for the future research in the area is whether gentrification of the area, of Tokyo overall, has had an influence on the area.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Harajuku has developed into a multicultural fashion centre through the development of sub-cultures, the creation of community, and the processes of commodification and globalization. By adopting a post-subcultural framework and focusing on Harajuku as a *place* rather than as a singular stylistic phenomenon, this research has demonstrated that Harajuku functions as a dynamic scene for cultural production where identities are often reimagined and circulated.

The first analytical chapter, *Creating Harajuku*, addressed the question of how Harajuku's identity was created. The chapter illustrated the emergence of Harajuku as a fashion centre created through unique combinations of Western influence, urban restructuring, and availability of affordable places, which created possibilities for youth, creatives, and independent stores to open their doors there. These factors enabled youth cultures to flourish there. Additionally, media outlets, such as FRUiTS had a major role in transforming the local fashion into a notable visual culture. Through visual and discourse analysis, this chapter demonstrated how FRUiTS did not only document the fashion but also contributed to the development of Harajuku styles by creating a space in which the sub-cultures could be visualized, voiced, and experienced.

The second chapter, *Sense of Belonging*, focused on how community and belonging are constructed within Harajuku sub-cultures. Through the case studies of Decora, Lolita, and Yami Kawaii, this thesis illustrated how fashion operates as a form of identity creation and social connection. While these sub-cultures have their differences, they all share an emphasis on self-expression and community, which allow the participant to challenge rules related to gender, conformity, and emotional expression without using "loud means", rather the "silent

rebellion", described by Kawamura. Additionally, this chapter demonstrated that the identity is not fixed and people eventually "grow out" from the sub-cultures.

The third chapter, *Commodification and Globalization of Harajuku as a brand*, examined the commodification and globalization of Harajuku as a brand. In this chapter it was argued that Harajuku has increasingly shifted from being understood as a specific neighbourhood to functioning as a symbolic and commercial space instead. Media exposure, tourism, fast fashion, and social media platforms have contributed to the circulation of Harajuku aesthetics far beyond Tokyo. While this process has increased accessibility and visibility, it has also led to the dilution and aestheticization of sub-cultures, where complex cultural practices are reduced to interchangeable "styles," "waves," or "cores." Harajuku becomes a core, which can be recreated and reimagined on social media through influence of authentic social media personas. At the same time, the analysis showed that commodification does not result in a complete loss of meaning. Nostalgia, online archives, influencer communities, and the revival of *FRUiTS* demonstrate that interest in Harajuku fashion persists, even as its forms and platforms evolve.

Overall, the findings of this thesis demonstrate that Harajuku cannot be understood by sub-cultural models only. Rather, Harajuku sub-cultures are better understood as different social groups which co-exist within the same space. Harajuku becomes a multi-meaningful location, a lived experience, and a global trend as well. Harajuku can also be experienced through globaliztion, as seen through the globalization of Lolita fashion, while also being a physical location Tokyo.

This thesis also has had multiple limitations. The lack of qualitative, ethnographic data, makes it difficult to truly study sub-cultures. In person interviews, observation, and acutal locality would make the claims of this thesis stronger. Additionally, there are factors such as

gentrification and further research on brandification, which are all themes, which could be studied with more detail in the future research. There are already studies on gentrification and its implication on rental prices, for instance, but it would be interesting to see, how it affects the people in the area. However, this thesis attempts to open the door for future research in which Harajuku can be studied as a large multi-cultural space.

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