

A photograph of a person sitting on a striped rug, reading a large open book. The person is wearing a red patterned shirt and blue denim jeans with a tear at the knee. Their hands, with red nail polish, are holding the book. The background is a dark, textured surface.

**A história cultural (global) do distrito  
de moda Harajuku: Exotização,  
internacionalização e DIY**

*The (global) cultural history of the fashion district  
Harajuku: Exoticization, internationalization and DIY*

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**[resumo]** Na minha pesquisa acerca do significado do distrito Harajuku de Tóquio para a cena da moda, a discrepância entre as suas dimensões geográficas limitadas de apenas dois quilômetros quadrados com a sua extrema relevância simbólica nacional e internacional na cultura pop é impressionante.

Ao longo do desenvolvimento deste distrito, o papel charneira do internacional é um marco distintivo que emerge. Quer seja pelo contacto direto com o estrangeiro pela sua representação “autêntica” ou pela sua imaginação exotista, esta marca é um elemento eficaz para moldar a identidade deste bairro.

Nestes fenómenos, as práticas de bricolage desempenharam durante muito tempo um papel importante, inspiradas pelas ligações globais que o distrito mantém. Nos últimos anos, este processo cruzou-se com o desenvolvimento de culturas de moda online, tornando-o um objeto do máximo interesse para abordar *on* e *offline*.

Com base em entrevistas a atores-chave da história de Harajuku, conteúdos impressos e online, assim como observações etnográficas, este artigo explora uma breve história cultural de Harajuku a partir do período pós-guerra.

**[palavras-chave]** Harajuku, moda de rua, história urbana, Japão, culturas de moda online.

**[Abstract]** When considering the significance of the Tokyo district Harajuku for the fashion scene, the discrepancy between its limited dimensions of barely two square kilometers and its great national and international relevance in pop culture is striking.

Throughout Harajuku’s development, a special role of the international emerges, shaping the identity of this neighborhood. At the same time, DIY practices have long played an important role, inspired by the area’s global connections. In recent years, this process has intersected with the development of fashion cultures online.

My article develops a brief cultural history of Harajuku since the post-war period based on interviews with formative actors from its history, print and online media content and observations made on site.

**[Keywords]** Harajuku, street fashion, urban history, Japan, online fashion cultures.

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## Introduction: Tokyo's Harajuku fashion district

Harajuku has become a household name nationally and internationally for colorful fashion, creative youth culture and lifestyle trends. As a creative free space, it's one of the highlights in every Japan travel guide, attracting Japanese and foreign guests alike. International luxury labels such as Louis Vuitton showcase their flagship stores along Omotesandô boulevard, and the shopping sprees of stars such as Kanye West and Kim Kardashian find a wide audience. Harajuku is also significant for Japanese people: Series such as Mika Ninagawa's Netflix Original *Followers* find in the neighborhood a fitting setting for the stylish daily lives of its creative protagonists. Teenagers from all parts of the country make pilgrimages to this small part of Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, to try out the latest food trend and, of course, take the Instagram photos to prove it.

Through this wild mixture of bubble tea stores, designer boutiques, and subculture trends, runs a common thread: Harajuku is perceived as set apart by its intense contact with foreign countries, both direct and indirect. The international and the exotic are two central ways of making sense of this special connection. Another aspect that sets Harajuku apart, which is intrinsically connected to these processes, is its tendency to experiment and innovate in the spirit of DIY.

In this article, I will address the question of what effects internationalization, exoticization and DIY have had on Harajuku from the postwar period until today. At the same time, I want to shed light on what Harajuku itself contributes to these phenomena, within Japan, in the rest of the world, and on the internet.

In order to better grasp Harajuku in its pop-cultural function as a fashion and lifestyle hub from a cultural studies perspective, it makes sense to address some of the grounding assumptions of my research.

A first factor is the prevailing understanding of "foreign" itself in this particular context: In Japan, a few select countries and regions tend to serve as fixed reference points in fashion. Once they become strongly associated with a particular brand or style, the references to them are usually repetitive. Studies mention brands from Great Britain, as well as from France and Italy or the American West and East Coast as examples that have gone through this process of fusing country cliché and brand image (cf. Marx, 2015; Hata, 2004; Goodrum, 2009).

The processes of internationalization and exoticization help shape this special mode of referencing the foreign. Both principles play a role in defining the possibilities for contact and exchange with the fashionable foreign country. They are by no means mutually exclusive, but rather form endpoints of a scale on which practices of engagement with the foreign fall (for an older, related perspective on this with a focus on Western perceptions, see: Narumi 2000). Nevertheless, it is analytically beneficial to distinguish them.

I define internationalization as concrete connections and exchanges with foreign countries. Business contacts, travel, and visiting and participating in fashion weeks or trade fairs are important activities which people working in the fashion and lifestyle sector perform. Furthermore, such fashion cosmopolitans require a good knowledge of the international fashion scene, for example of labels and designers, trends and collections, pop cultural influences.

While participation in professional events is usually limited to members of the industry, all these aspects are also of great importance to people interested in fashion. Even fashion media aimed at a more general audience communicate international expertise to some degree and presuppose some prior knowledge of it.

In contrast to this concrete, well-informed internationalization, I employ the concept of exoticization, which stands for an imagined “foreign country” in fashion and lifestyle. Exoticization is characterized by abstraction and a highly selective perception: individual aspects associated with a country or region become decontextualized and distorted, then are repeated as tropes.

This is evident, for example, in the selection of countries perceived as fashionable foreign countries. In Japan, these are by no means all the countries in the world that are active on the fashion market. Rather, it is still primarily a few central Western “fashion cities” (cf. Breward, 2010; Breward and Gilbert, 2006) that stand in for their countries at large and determine their image: Paris for France, London for England, New York, and in some cases Los Angeles for the United States serve as synecdoche. Their fashion shows, fairs, stars, and street snaps keep Western Europe and North America the centers of attention (cf. Jansen, 2020). The cities serve as shorthand for fashion and taste, are used to promote both individual products and entire brands. Goodrum, for example, analyzes this behavior for the Japanese market: in her research on the success of the British brands Mulberry and Paul Smith, she found that a specifically Japanese idea of Britishness does not only inform the reception of the brands by the customer, but also the complete process from the idea of a garment to its presentation in the store (Goodrum, 2009).

Another important perspective on the Japanese fashion world shows, in turn, its perception in Europe and America. The success of the young Japanese avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s in Paris, as well as the career of the only Asian couturière, Hanae Mori, are all vital developments in the 20th century. The collections of the “Big Three,” Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo, had the postmodern claim to break through the boundaries between West and East, fashion and anti-fashion, and modernity and anti-modernity, and to overturn the existing rules of fashion and clothing (Kawamura, 2004). They succeeded in this - the monochrome, asymmetrical, architectural-looking designs, with their holes and rips, shocked the Parisian fashion world, spurring enthusiasm but also rejection. The often-cited term “Hiroshima chic” is a reference to Kondo’s (2010) observations that racism or orientalist clichés often resonated in international reviews, and characteristics of the designs were readily attributed to aspects of Japanese culture such as Zen or kimono.

Even if the revolutionaries had caused a stir in Paris, continued success was only possible by integrating themselves into the existing system of the fashion world there, for example through regular participation in the shows. The acquisition of social, economic as well as symbolic capital according to the rules of the Parisian “fashion worlds” (following Becker’s (1982) “art worlds”) secured their recognition and that of the following (Kawamura, 2004).

These complex loops of perception can be observed in Tokyo as well. As a capital city, it shows how self-perception and perception of others, exoticizing and internationalizing tendencies can influence what is on offer, and how its neighborhoods make use of it in their own ways, Harajuku among them.

The neighborhood itself is not clearly delimited, as it is officially part of the Shibuya-ku Jingûmae district. Nevertheless, there is a wide-spread informal understanding of what constitutes Harajuku: focal points such as the wooden building of the old Harajuku Station, the narrow shopping street Takeshita-dôri, Omotesandô boulevard, and department stores such as Laforet serve as symbols for the entire neighborhood. This selective perception also applies to food and restaurants: Harajuku is inseparably associated with international sweets and snacks such as crêpes.

Harajuku's focal points further serve as commonly understood waymarkers, as my analysis of maps with the keyword "Harajuku" from Japanese-language fashion, lifestyle, and travel magazines has shown. Here, I found that some landmarks and central routes exist that are equally familiar to domestic tourists and members of fashion subcultures. Based on these assumptions, Harajuku is currently located in Shibuya-ku Jingûmae 1, 3, 4-chôme, and parts of 5 and 6.

Another important aspect of Harajuku is its proximity to DIY culture. Bennet and Guerra define the concept quite generally as:

[A] form of cultural practice that is often pitched against more mainstream, mass-produced and commodified forms of cultural production. It often finds itself aligned with an anti-hegemonic ideology focused around aesthetic and lifestyle politics. (Bennet & Guerra, 2019, p.1)

They go on to note that DIY, after the 1970s has grown into a "global 'alternative culture'", developing a "level of professionalism that is aimed towards ensuring aesthetic and, where possible, economic sustainability" (Bennet and Guerra, 2019, p. 7). This trend holds in Japan as well, if in a specific way, as I will show in Harajuku's history.

I collected data on the historical development of the district through expert interviews with fashion professionals as well as archival research between April 2017 and February 2019. Following the work of Obayashi et al (2002), I focused primarily on the coverage of fashion and lifestyle magazines in this context.

To complement this, I also conducted on-site participant observation, including attending monthly trend observations and consumer interviews conducted by ACROSS (part of Parco's fashion and culture think tank), as well as substitute work at a fashion store and regular visits to the neighborhood.

## Historical development of Harajuku

### *Foundations: Harajuku until the 1950s*

Until the end of World War II, Harajuku was of interest only to its immediate residents for most of the year. Its brief time in the spotlight came with each New Year's morning when many Tokyoites visited the Meiji Jingû shrine there. It had opened in 1920 on the grounds of Yoyogi Park and was dedicated to the Meiji Emperor and Empress.

Along with the shrine came Harajuku Station, which connected the area to the Yamanote loop line. Today's Omotesandô boulevard served as the access road (Ohta, 2016).

During the American occupation, Yoyogi Park was confiscated and used to house higher-ranking U.S. Army personnel, partly because of its accessibility along National Route 246 / Oyama Road and its proximity to downtown Tokyo. With the Washington Heights base came stores and facilities to cater to Americans and other foreign personnel (Yoshimi, 2019).

After Tokyo was named the site of the 1964 Olympics, the Yoyogi Park land was returned to Japan. A new stadium was built there, and the former army base Washington Heights was used as the Olympic Village for athletes from around the world. Media attention helped the area gain widespread notoriety and made it the first point of contact with Western culture and lifestyle for many Japanese (Hirakawa, 2007).

Import stores, cafés, a drive-through burger restaurant at the corner of Meiji dôri and Omotesandô streets, and their non-Japanese signage gave visitors the impression of being transported to America or Europe. Omotesandô was consequently nicknamed "Japan's Champs-Élysées" (Mabuchi, 1989).

While buildings such as the Central Apartments, completed in 1957, already provided high-quality living space for the army and embassy personnel, the neighborhood now also became home to the most expensive apartments built for Japanese at the time (Across, 1995).

### *1960s / 1970s: Harajuku and the youth and fashion scene*

After the Olympics, Tokyo's affluent youth was drawn to Harajuku: Starting in 1965, the wide Omotesandô boulevard, at the time still without its landscaped median strip, offered Tokyo's wealthy youth perfect conditions for nighttime car races. During the day, they could show off their imported sports cars here, stroll along the avenue and meet in the cafés or go dancing. The media reported on this new youth movement, christened Harajuku-zoku, which attracted up to 4,000 participants, but complaints from local residents about noise pollution from the races and loitering youths kissing in public also increased. These protests led to a residents' movement that, in cooperation with the police, put an end to the car races in the following year (Mabuchi, 1989; Narumi, 2010).

Even in the context of this development, the influence of internationalization is still relatively clear, as places created for a primarily foreign audience were used by wealthy youth in search of lifestyle—an aspect they associated with the international, given the still

limited domestic offerings in Japan, which also weren't catering to a younger audience.

The first holders of new katakana professions, which transposed fashionable English-language job titles into Japanese - designers, models, talents - also showed interest in Harajuku and began to settle there.

These creatives, who subsequently became the core of the fashion district, knew how to skillfully mix practices of exoticization and internationalization to create a distinctive lifestyle - this was one aspect that increasingly defined Harajuku's flair. Their small group became the avant-garde: expensive trips abroad gave them the opportunity to gather international fashion knowledge and contacts. Upon their return, they cleverly used these resources to give their growing young audience in Japan a glimpse of London or Paris. Exoticization of the foreign was a factor here, whether it emanated consciously from the side of the well-traveled fashion designers or was a byproduct of the lack of knowledge.

Their central gathering point became the Central Apartments. The stylist Yacco (Yasuko Takahashi), who first came to the Central Apartments as a visitor, but returned as a resident, credits what was actually a "fairly mundane building" with having been legendary in its function as a gathering place for many young creatives. In retrospect, she also emphasizes its "foreign atmosphere" (Takahashi, 2006).

On the lower floor, in addition to cafés and restaurants, Mademoiselle Nonnon, one of Japan's first boutiques, opened in 1966. Shortly after, Hitomi Ôgawa's shop MILK followed, just a few doors down. Both stores "had a small storefront, were narrow, and only 6 or 7 meters deep" (Takahashi, 2006).

According to Hirakawa, they were thus both examples of a "distinct 'Harajuku' feel" and representatives of a particular business model that was to become more widespread.

I recall a particular manual of the time, titled something like "How to Succeed in the Fashion Business", which advised the hopeful to rent a small room in an inexpensive apartment block in the backstreets of Harajuku (now known as Ura-Hara), set up an atelier, and start working. ... Easily mistaken for overseas brands, the collections would then be sold wholesale to small shops. Another route was for designers to rent cheap commercial space in Takeshita-dôri and open their own retail shop. (Hirakawa, 2007, p. 23).

This DIY spontaneity and experimentation would prove to be formative for the area's beginning development into a youth fashion hub. The stylist Non Nakamura also emphasized the role of these small businesses, often run by families and friends, in my interview. Unlike in Shibuya or Shinjuku, she said, everything here came from a single source, and combined ateliers and retail stores were able to quickly build their own reputations (interview by author, 5 September 2017).

Another representative of this DIY approach was Hitomi Ôgawa, who founded the MILK boutique with her two siblings in 1970: She said she did so because she wanted to express her ideas. She told me that hippies, psychedelic or glam rock cultures had shown them the way and that they wanted to contribute themselves. The location was also clear from the

start: Harajuku had hardly any fashion stores at the time, but it was chic, just like its inhabitants, and radiated a “strange power.” Her creations were inspired by the streets of Paris and London; she sewed what she wanted to wear but couldn’t buy in Japan. She cites punk as an example of this: During her visit to London in 1974, she cut up a Harris Tweed jacket and pinned it back together with safety pins and made sure to get in contact with Vivienne Westwood. Back home, this experience became one of the building blocks for her designs until today (interview by author, 25 September 2017).

The relatively small, close-knit group of creatives in Harajuku inspired each other, shared their experiences abroad and international contacts, tapping into the beginnings of global DIY networks (cf. Bennet and Guerra, 2019). This resulted, for example, in a long collaboration between David Bowie and the designer Kansai Yamamoto, as well as the stylist Yasuko Takahashi and the photographer Masayoshi Sukita (Godoy, 2007).

These young creatives found a mouthpiece in new fashion magazines such as *an an* (Heibonsha, now Magazine House) and subsequently, an audience: The baby boomer generation came of age and moved to the big cities for study or work, their rising incomes allowing for an increasingly high standard of living. Tokyo became a young city that hosted numerous new youth cultures, always in search of new identities and inspirations (cf. Namba, 2007).

These new media also contain aspects of internationalization and exoticization: they take the reader on a journey, showing trends documented worldwide - but they also deliberately filter what is shown in order to make it seem attractive to a Japanese audience. This, combined with a lack of contextual knowledge on the part of readers, as well as the inherently selective nature of fashion magazines designed to stage an attractive lifestyle, undoubtedly led to a distortion of the image of foreign countries.

International fashion and pop culture trends were now more widely received, which also increased the demand for the styles they presented. While MILK, for example, offered not only its own productions from the beginning, but also select imported goods (cf. Yasuda, 2019), the late 1970s saw the emergence of stores that specialized purely in the skillful import of fashion and lifestyle goods: on the one hand, the first vintage stores such as Cream Soda appeared on Cat Street. On the other, select stores such as BEAMS made their debut in the district.

The growing imports by select and second-hand stores, as well as cheaper, locally produced copies of those garments, are interesting with regard to their role in exoticization and internationalization: The level of fashion knowledge increased. More direct contact with international products, well-informed staff, as well as newly emerging magazines contributed. At the same time, however, an increasing exoticization occurred. Some consumers came to be satisfied with approximate copies of looks and preferred fantasy worlds created by movies to direct contact with foreign countries. A look at Harajuku’s visitor numbers is helpful for understanding these opposing developments - unprecedented masses crowded into the small neighborhood. Their interests, social and economic backgrounds, and sources of information became increasingly diverse, with two results. The positions on the scale be-



tween internationalization and exoticization became increasingly complex, while Harajuku itself became known as a hybrid. The groundwork had been laid for its perception as international yet Japanese, accessible yet not mundane. This position outside of rules and regulations of everyday life led to its position as a DIY heterotopia with links to “global ‘alternative’ culture” (Bennet and Guerra, 2019, p.9).

### *1980s – Harajuku becomes a fashion city of its own*

The 1980s brought brands like Yohji Yamamoto or Comme des Garçons to the forefront for Harajuku’s fashion avantgarde. While part of their popularity within Japan was also due to the overseas success of the designers, the aforementioned magazine *an an* had also been supporting many of them for some time, and their brands were now gaining attention as so-called DC brands. (DC brand, short for “designer’s character brand” - the label is headed by a single designer known to the public). According to Across, a near-cult of designers like Kawakubo Rei formed from the “fashion freaks” among their readers. Many of them became store employees in the wake of the DC boom that followed in the second half of the 1980s, as they were a good fit for the sleek, purist store environments (Across, 1995).

While at first glance this turn to Japanese designers seems to run counter to an increasing focus on exoticized foreign lifestyles, on closer inspection it is indicative of that very trend: as mentioned at the outset with reference to Kawamura’s and Kondo’s analyses, fashion labels such as Comme des Garçons, which had long been stocked in Harajuku’s boutiques, were only noticed by many shoppers in the 1980s after a legitimizing fashion city such as Paris had started to pay attention to them. This illustrates the leading position that continued to be assigned to a narrow range of foreign-fashion countries in matters of style.

The Harajuku of this period benefited from the significant financial opportunities that even young people had at the time (or sought to attain through the use of credit cards) - being dressed head to toe in the works of an internationally known designer or wearing exclusively American imports, impossible before, was now common.

At the same time, fashion and lifestyle expertise was more in demand than ever: In order to make an increasingly extensive and complicated world of offerings accessible and understandable to the public, numerous new magazines sprouted up, reporting in ever more diverse and detailed ways, and existing ones adapted their coverage. Harajuku knew how to fill the resulting expert positions through its network, which had grown since the 1970s. Buyers, employees and stylists were now able to share their specialist knowledge with readers.

An outstanding example of such a role as a columnist and the pop culture-wide influence that could develop from it is Hiroshi Fujiwara. In a styling contest at the Tsubaki House club, Fujiwara, who had just moved to Tokyo to study fashion, won a trip to London. MILK

designer Hitomi Ôgawa was involved in this, as she used her connections with the judges to recommend her protégé as the winner. A Sex Pistols fan since middle school, he already owned a collection of Vivienne Westwood's Seditious designs and, through Ôgawa's connections in London, got to know the designer personally as well as her husband, Malcolm McLaren (Fujiwara and Kawakatsu, 2008).

When he returned to London a year later, he worked in her store World's End and also continued to make acquaintances through the club scene. McLaren recommended that he travel to New York, where he became fascinated with the hip-hop scene there. Fujiwara bought records, practiced DJing and, upon his return to Tokyo, founded Japan's first hip-hop label, Major Force. Globally well-connected as he was, the subculture magazine *Takarajima* offered him the opportunity to write a column with his friend Takagi Kan in 1987. The two shared their wide-ranging interests from skateboarding to punk rock, high fashion, art films and hip-hop with the readership. Soon the column had fans Japan-wide who, inspired to pursue similar careers, also came to Tokyo seeking contact. The young Nigo became his assistant and, along with other friends, followed his lead as a media curator in magazines such as *Popeye* (Marx, 2015).

In this way, Harajuku's internationalization also continued: The experts were well-traveled and firmly integrated into the international fashion world. Thus they gained access to information such as trends, new labels, knew the current pop-cultural influences as well as historical role models, and occupied important key positions in globally relevant fashion and media.

#### *Into the 1990s: Fashion media diversifies*

As the designer boom ended, Harajuku's attention increasingly turned to street fashion. This change is interesting in terms of internationalization: while high fashion, as already mentioned, was firmly linked to the traditional fashion system, which Japan accepted by following its fixed system of rules, street fashion was much freer in its development. Street fashion magazines, for example, allowed international and Japanese designers to be presented simultaneously on an equal footing, and fans around the world were paying more and more attention to Japanese labels. So now, more than ever, the movement ran both ways.

Following the example of New York street wear pioneer Shawn Stussy, Fujiwara also began to create his own designs under the Goodenough label. He cleverly placed these between the product recommendations in his columns. In 1993, his friends Nigo and Jonio opened their first store, Nowhere, in Harajuku, selling secondhand items, but also some of their own T-shirt designs. They did not choose a prominent location on Omotesandô or Takeshita-dôri, but deliberately picked the inconspicuous residential area of Ura-Harajuku. Despite the growing demand, the brands from Urahara only produced small quantities, which contributed to their notoriety (Godoy 2007).

In terms of DIY production, this part of the streetwear scene is uniquely positioned. It combines creatives with a diverse set of backgrounds and varying degrees of professionalism: Some were fashion school students, others graphic designers, DJs, or stylists. Out of their friendship and mutual sub- and popcultural interests, they formed their own scene, which would then grow and professionalize. The scarcity of their products, as well as the select group of pop-culturally relevant wearers provided ample subcultural capital, which was worth steep surcharges to many fans in resale (Marx 2015).

Next to the Urahara scene, *hokoten*, the street closure that took place since the 1970s every Sunday for the benefit of pedestrians had made a name for itself throughout Japan: In addition to dancers and artists, fashion enthusiasts also took the opportunity to see and be seen and to inspire and outdo each other. Their creative new ways of combining local and international designer pieces, flea market finds, as well as their own DIY creations resulted in another innovation: street snap magazines.

Covertly shot photos of such styles had already been appearing in the rather harsh style critique segments of the major magazines in the 1970s. In the mid-1990s, though, Harajuku-based photographer Shoichi Aoki discovered that Japanese youth could now keep up with the fashionistas he had previously photographed while traveling in London or Paris (Aoki in Keet, 2007).

So he founded *FRUiTS*, a magazine dedicated exclusively to the young people of Harajuku, documenting their style experiments, and also acting as a source of inspiration for further developments. To emphasize this, he engaged with them, and asked them to fill out questionnaires: Who is the wearer, where do the clothes and accessories come from, what excites them the most right now, what is the theme of their outfit? Those photographed were free to give or withhold information - but many willingly shared their favorite stores or even advertised their own designs.

In an interview, Aoki shared that he also wanted the magazine to function as a showcase for new fashion talent: No matter how stylishly they dressed, at the time they could become shop assistants at most. A coveted spot in *FRUiTS* would command people's attention and helped them to enter a variety of careers that could take them further (interview by author, 13 October 2017).

*2000 onwards: Harajuku's fashion as export hit, endangered good, and tourist magnet*

The fashionistas documented by Aoki and his team would go on to play a surprising role: In 2001, the photographer put together a coffee-table book for the English publisher Phaidon to make the phenomenon of these Harajuku street styles known worldwide. This heralded a new phase in the interaction between the fashion district and the world abroad, as international audiences embraced both the book and its follow-up volume, as well as a related photo exhibition.

During this period, Harajuku reached a new level of internationalization: it became the symbolic stand-in for Japanese fashion as a whole worldwide. While attention from fashion abroad had been rare and very scene-specific, the colorful looks of the *FRUiTS* photos

now attracted widespread attention. Japan was no longer just a skilled style importer: No Doubt frontwoman Gwen Stefani released *Love Angel Music Baby* in 2004, an album that included songs like *Harajuku Girls* and was presented live with the help of four Japanese American backup dancers also referred to as “Harajuku Girls.” Music videos for the album as well as the album’s design also cite elements of street fashion from Harajuku. Stefani’s Harajuku Lovers fashion line and perfumes brought the district further into the public eye. However, the public did not only react positively, but also criticized Stefani’s open exoticization of Japanese street fashion - “[...] she’s swallowed a subversive youth culture in Japan and barfed up another image of submissive giggling Asian women.” wrote Mihi Anh (Anh, 2005).

Further interest in the Harajuku scene came from international fashion lovers, professional and amateur alike: In 2003, Lynn Yaeger documented the diverse Harajuku scene for the US *Vogue*, declaring „This is Fashion’s future, definitely!“ (Yaeger, 2003, p. 346). At the same time, internet communities sprung up. The FRUiTS Livejournal community<sup>2</sup>, founded in 2002, was among the first and biggest, allowing people to showcase their outfits inspired by Aoki’s photo books as well as subsequent magazine issues. Feedback was exchanged, meetups organized and those in the know shared instructions on how to order from Japan or where to shop.

In the following years, the growing interest in Anime and Japanese Subcultures led to numerous conventions for fans being held around the world. Several Harajuku-based fashion labels that fit the bill took the chance to sell and showcase their designs in fashion shows there. A prominent example for Europe would be the Japan Expo, held in Paris, France since 1999, and host to over 250.000 visitors before the pandemic.

Japan noticed the attention Harajuku’s creative fashion received worldwide. In 2009, the government appointed three “kawaii ambassadors” as part of the *Cool Japan* campaign, even though Harajuku trends had moved on and the neon-colored looks of the 1990s had become niche by then. For one year, the ambassadors were to act as “Trend Communicator[s] of Japanese Pop Culture in the Field of Fashion,” advertising the fashion styles they represented abroad (MOFA, 2009). In my interview, Aoki called attention to this anachronistic disparity between the perception and reality of Harajuku street fashion (Interview by author, 13 October 2017). It is another clue to the ongoing simultaneous internationalization and exoticization of Japanese fashion abroad.

The designer Sebastian Masuda, whose 6% DOKIDOKI label emerged during the FRUiTS boom, used the newfound global popularity. The Harajuku-based production company Asobisystem booked him as art director for Kyary Pamyu Pamyu’s viral megahits *PONPONPON* (2011) and *Fashion Monster* (2012). Through these successes, as well as numerous convention visits, he realized the potential of this colorful “signature look” for the rapidly growing tourism market. Together with event restaurant operator Diamond Dining, he opened Kawaii Monster Café in 2015 on Meiji-dôri, a colorful fantasy world in which the

<sup>2</sup> <https://fruits.livejournal.com/>

“iconic Harajuku girls called Monster Girls” put on a show in their street fashion-inspired costumes (Kawaii Monster Café, Internet) - a prime example of the (self-)exoticization of Japanese fashion at this time.

The café, which closed down in January 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, offered substitutes for the crazy outfits and colorful looks that guidebooks continue to promise for foreign visitors, even though they have in reality mostly disappeared from the streets. Low-priced, multinational companies such as H&M and Zara are now present in Harajuku and tie the district directly to the fast fashion pulse with their globally identical collections. They are gradually squeezing out local competitors who can no longer afford the rising rents. At the same time, the exoticized, abbreviated distorted image of crazy Japanese fashion, with Harajuku as a synecdoche for it, persists in the minds of foreign visitors.

*From the streets to Instagram: Harajuku's future(s) on- and offline*

In recent years, there has been another interesting development concerning the national and international reception of Harajuku styles. Current street snaps can now be posted directly, sometimes even streamed live to platforms such as Instagram, where the focus on visual content minimizes language barriers.

But it's not just current developments shared in real time: Several standout looks or brands originating from the area have now returned to the spotlight through the rise of secondhand fashion, as well as recently rehashed trends of the 90s and 2000s. And this time, it's not just celebrities and their stylists scouting for extravagant pieces as seen in hard-to-reach archives. For one, magazines containing photographic evidence from those eras are plentiful, and some of it, through the early adopters on the internet, has already been digitalized. Those scans now get dug back up and added to, either by curious individuals with the necessary skills to acquire back numbers of the magazines or even the magazines themselves. Contrary to the ways of the old internet fandom for Japanese Fashion who had to build their own websites and communities for sharing purposes, social networks today offer the necessary infrastructure, as well as a huge, global audience to anyone using the right tags or keywords.

This poses the question if these developments have resulted in more in-depth knowledge and a greater connection of audiences abroad to Harajuku's street fashion. Superficial references like Stefani's are nowadays more easily recognized as exoticizing, and even in the fashion industry, ethical evaluations have begun to change. Instead of decontextualized transfer without local involvement, we see more in-depth interest and knowledge being shared.

After temporarily stopping publication, FRUiTS has turned to Instagram to share both current street snaps<sup>3</sup>, and after editor and street fashion enthusiast Chris Tordoff received Aoki's permission, their full archive<sup>4</sup> as well (Heron-Langton, 2020). Next to those official sources, there are countless people curating and sharing their favorites, scanned from

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/fruitsmag/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/fruits\\_magazine\\_archives/](https://www.instagram.com/fruits_magazine_archives/)

their own magazine collections. Internationally, standout accounts like [zerocoolarchive](https://www.instagram.com/zerocoolarchive/)<sup>5</sup> or [archivings.stacks](https://www.instagram.com/archivings.stacks/)<sup>6</sup> are run by hobby archivists, or creatives using them to collect inspirations for their own work (Satenstein, 2018).

William E. Wright, the owner of the [zerocoolarchive](https://www.instagram.com/zerocoolarchive/) account, links both his professional identity<sup>7</sup> as a creative director, as well as [zerocoolcouture](https://www.instagram.com/zerocoolcouture/)<sup>8</sup>, his secondhand online shop. The works he showcases note that he was either the creative director for promotional shoots for various artists, or point to clothes sourced from his archives. The shop page presents vintage designer pieces from Japan or other clothes that share a similar aesthetic, some for sale, some simply archived.

Such sales lead us back from the internet to real world buyers, who once again carry these clothing styles into the street, internationally. Whether they understand the provenance of the pieces they picked up via Instagram or resale platforms such as Depop or Grailed, is hard to assess. Yet, the product descriptions are full of details, historical information, emphasizing the items' connection to their Harajuku origins. They seem to marshal this link to confer the items for sale an aura, converting cultural capital into monetary value.

One seller presents a knit cardigan from 90s and 2000s Harajuku favorite Super Lovers, claiming it “will make any boring outfit look like it’s from a copy of *fruits* magazine from the 90s”. The seller goes on to note how “this is straight from Japan and is very much part of the harajuku street wear style in Tokyo !” (Depop amberketti, 2021). Other descriptions can present even more in-depth information, sharing knowledge of the brands, their designers and historical context.

Yet another layer has since emerged, in the form of fashion media reporting on some of the exceptional pieces available on the platforms. An article by Eilidh Duffy in the British fashion and culture magazine *i-D* presents a selection of pieces its title describes as “[t]he hottest Harajuku fashion on Depop right now” (Duffy, 2021b). Once again, Harajuku’s history is used as an explanatory framework to tie them together – sometimes based on information taken directly from the articles’ listings. The strategy at work here resembles Howard Becker’s concept of Art Worlds, lending a further layer of legitimization and valuation through historical context from a position of authority. By spreading the word about brands or styles to know, the magazines do not only update their readers, but also contribute to hype cycles, thus ensuring the items’ value.

What we have seen here is that a robust discourse on Harajuku street fashion and its history has developed among presumably foreign English-language publications and audiences. This is also supported by other kinds of media mentioning or exclusively focusing on Harajuku fashion, such as popular histories or guidebooks.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/zerocoolarchive/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/archivings.stacks/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/williamewright/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/zerocoolcouture/>

Meanwhile, in Japan, the interest in historical Harajuku fashion has taken a slightly different form. While it's not impossible that followers of the English language archival accounts discussed before are located in Japan themselves, we can clearly observe there has been an increase in archivists or secondhand bookstores that present their selections of local magazines in fashionable contexts in the country.

The most referenced project here is the collaboration between Hiroshi Fujiwara's 2018 The Conveni concept store and magnif, a secondhand bookstore focusing on fashion publications. The now closed location in Ginza replicated a convenience store, selling clothing and accessories packaged to resemble snacks or drinks (Stanley, 2018). True to form, it also included a magazine corner, filled anew each month with vintage issues curated from the offerings of magnif. Another example for fashionably convenient access to secondhand magazines would be Tuneless Melody, run by a Tokyo collector and frequently appearing as a pop-up guest in various lifestyle stores across the country.

Secondhand shops, online and in the city, can also be seen using archive material to present their offerings in a proper retro context. One example is Blue Room<sup>9</sup>, who pepper their Instagram feed of 90s Urahara offerings - national and international streetwear - with suitable pages and images from local magazines from back then. Their internet content finds reflection on the street, as documented by Across in a street snap and interview from July 2020: The interviewee, an 18-year-old fashion student photographed on Omotesando Boulevard, is wearing vintage Under Cover and Vivienne Westwood items bought online, as well as Under Cover shoes from Blue Room, and specifically mentions reading street fashion magazines from the 90s (Across 2021: 328).

### **Conclusion: Harajuku's cultural history and its future**

In my description of the development of fashion and lifestyle in postwar Harajuku, I have outlined the various phases of its historical constitution between self-perception and foreign perception, exoticization, and internationalization. In this, a gradual change can be seen, from a mere imitation of the lifestyle exemplified by international residents to a deeper understanding and the well-informed interpretation of these influences, to an expert, independent commentary on forms of fashion occurring worldwide. At the same time, both internationalizing and exoticizing tendencies exist in each of the stages of Harajuku's development. This enduring, dynamic duality continues to have considerable influence on the perception and character of the neighborhood today. It cannot be described simply as an international neighborhood, nor is it a purely Japanese creation.

Both the national and international matter in the context of DIY and online presences, too, which in turn play a role in redefining the area and its reception worldwide. While I have outlined shared interests both in Japan and abroad, it remains to be seen if those in the know in both places will come to more frequently exchange their views and expertise in

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/blue\\_room\\_\\_\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/blue_room___/)

the future, establishing a direct, ongoing dialogue. Especially in a post-COVID world, online influences on the streets will be interesting to watch. As one English Harajuku aficionado has recently reported, Camden, another area with a tradition of youth and street fashion, has begun to see a return of young people to the city, dressed in their secondhand finds and inspirations from Japan (Duffy, 2021a). Documenting this, she adds another layer to the feedback loop of reception of Harajuku style: She has started her own street snap series covering the area, “in honour of Street & Fruits Magazine” (Duffy, 2021a), under the Instagram handle hystericsnaps.

Harajuku’s own future after the pandemic remains to be seen: Will more small businesses reinvigorate the scene by moving into the gaps left by now closed souvenir shops?

Regardless, it is all but certain that the four aspects of its cultural development explored here, exoticization and internationalization, DIY and online fashion culture, will continue to influence its future.

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