Harajuku nowadays: characteristics, meaning and changes

This paper is a summary of the research conducted as a part of Japan Foundation language program. It concerned modern Harajuku subcultures — their characteristics, meaning and changes that occur within them. Analysis was made on pairs of opposing concepts that create the whole picture of the phenomenon: fashion and music, the West and Japan, tradition and modernity, men and women, fantasy and reality, players and creators, consumption and art, alternative and mainstream culture and subcultures of Harajuku and other areas of Tokyo. Harajuku is characterised by creativity, self-expression and freedom, what leads to the process of blurring boundaries in order to multiply the range of inspirations (toy box strategy). The aim is to satisfy the feeling of akogare (longing) for the fantasy world. Despite linking and exchanging various external elements, in the end the feeling of belonging to Harajuku preserves what is connected with the fact that nowadays Harajuku is not only a physical space in Tokyo, but also a kind of a symbol and a mental concept. What is more, in contemporary Harajuku two streams meet each other: the subcultural community and the mainstream wave of companies who use pop culture to promote Japan.

The topic of this article is concentrated on the district of Harajuku, its characteristics, meanings and the changes that are taking place in its cultural phenomena. All findings are results of research conducted during Japan Foundation’s Japanese Language Program for Specialists in Cultural and Academic Fields in which I took part for half a year between September 2014 and March 2015.

As a part of the research I carried out an analysis of sources (books, magazines, leaflets, posters), observed participants of subcultures in public spaces and during events, as well as conducted interviews with subcultures’ players and creators. All statements included in the paper come from my own interviews if not marked otherwise.

At the beginning it is worth clearly indicating what exactly Harajuku is — the area that stands in the centre of this paper. Harajuku — the dis-
trict in the special ward\(^1\) of Shibuya in Tokyo — extends around the station called Harajuku on Yamanote line which circles the centre of Tokyo. It is characterised by a subcultural atmosphere, as alternative groups tend to gather here since Tokyo Summer Olympics in 1964. Harajuku has also strong connection to fashion what can be noticed in the fact that commonly known brands used to start their career nowhere else but on Harajuku itself. The reason seems to lie in the international atmosphere of the place, which since the American occupation was strongly connected to foreign countries\(^2\) and served as a place of transcultural flows and fascination\(^3\).

In order to clearly characterise the kind of fashion that is connected to Harajuku it is best to use the term *aomoji kei* (*ao*- blue, *moji*- letter, character, *kei*- system, group), the style that was created in opposition to the popular and commonly worn *akamoji kei* fashion. The essence of *aomoji kei* lies in wearing whatever you like regardless of fashion trends and the so-called *sekaikan* — the worldview that has strong meaning in Japanese group society. As a result, fashion is based on the idea of creativity, self-expression and freedom. The aim is simply egoistic — satisfying own needs and visions. We can indicate many different styles in Harajuku, but it seems that the general idea of *aomoji kei* appeals to all of them\(^4\).

The main problem of this paper can be enclosed in the answer to the question about traits and meanings of Harajuku nowadays. It is also worth researching what kind of direction changes in Harajuku tend do take. To answer these questions I compared pairs of opposing terms, which allow to fully characterise Harajuku and its ambivalent and transcending nature.

These terms are as follows:

— Fashion and music
— The West and Japan
— Tradition and modernity (postmodernity)
— Woman and man
— Fantasy and reality
— Creators and players
— Consumption and art
— Mainstream culture and alternative culture / subculture
— The subcultures of Harajuku and the subcultures of different areas of Tokyo

\(^{1}\) The area of Tokyo is divided between 23 special wards which have their own laws and financial independence.

\(^{2}\) Houses and institutions of American occupiers (the so-called Washington Heights) were located in this.


To characterise Harajuku not only do I define these terms and indicate examples of their occurrence in Harajuku, but also try to find borders between them. The thesis of this paper is the statement that those borders tend to be blurred, vague and easy to overcome and penetrate each other. Values of Harajuku mentioned above: creativity, self-expression and freedom — lead to the process of transcending the borders in order to satisfy own needs and other-worldly longing (in Japanese akogare).

To fully present the transcending nature of borders in Harajuku I will describe all mentioned terms in sequence.

**Fashion and music**

When describing the characteristics of Harajuku it is essential to mention these two elements: fashion and music. Their connection is present nowadays, but also played an important role at the beginning of the district’s history. The first named zoku (tribe) among Harajuku subcultures known as Takenoko zoku (a bamboo shoot tribe) was characterised by the baggy Heian era- inspired clothes (connected to the shop Takenoko, still existing on Takeshita street in Harajuku; although its stylistics has changed) matched with a plastic jewellery and name tags. The musical element was also present as their favourite activity depended on dancing to the Western music (mostly candy pop and disco) in the streets.5

The joining of fashion and music is not surprising at all as this pair is also strongly visible in Western subcultures. Matsumura Naoki, the chef editor of the magazine Kera (dealing on the fashion and music from Harajuku), said that nothing but music and fashion are the best and the easiest ways for young people to express themselves.

The vocalist of the band Die Milch who plays electric goth pop wearing Lolita Fashion clothes (an explanation below) said that thanks to joining these two elements she can fully express her own outlook and world’s vision. It implies that the goal is aiming at self-expression, which stands as an important value in Harajuku.

Joining fashion with music is also significant for different Harajuku-based events. As an example I can mention Harajuku fashionism, which consists of a fashion show, as well as different concerts and a talk show with fashion and music stars. Events organised by the magazine Kera are similar in character. Musicians also often appear as fashion models on catwalk.

Music and fashion that is often merged during these events is visual kei and Lolita Fashion, which relation is a good example of this union. Visu-

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*al kei* is the style in Japanese contemporary music that is characterised by strong visual effects. The genre may vary, but visuality is the key trait that all bands and vocalists have in common. Visual effects are reflected in musicians’ image, promotional videos, during concerts or even on the covers of CDs. The essential feature is also the fact that almost all musicians are men; they also cross-dress to create the image of women on stage.

*Lolita Fashion* is a style inspired by European historical fashion (e.g. Victorian or from rococo era) mixed with Western subcultures like goth or punk; the Japanese aesthetics of *kawaii* (in Japanese meaning cute) is also on the list of influences. In the beginning (1980s and 1990s) *Lolita Fashion* was strongly connected to *visual kei* — girls wanted to look like their favourite bands by creating a similarly sophisticated look. Designers of Lolita clothes were also working for *visual kei* bands. Having initially developed in Osaka the styles were then transferred to Harajuku and their popularity significantly grew. Even though nowadays *Lolita Fashion* and *visual kei* have expanded and developed their independent spaces, there are still many examples of their continuous collaboration and similarities. The most visible one is a musician Mana who constantly from the 90s remains the icon of both phenomena. For creating *visual kei* music and designing Lolita clothes — he is worshiped by his faithful followers.

During interviews with subcultural players about their fashion inspirations the role of music was indicated very often. For example Tomo — a *visual kei* fan — agreed that the music has a strong influence on the fashion he wears. When attending concerts he tends to prepare special outfits to match the atmosphere of the performance. Even though music and fashion happen to meet, they do not need to always follow each other. Lolita Yumiko said that she is not interested in *visual kei* and does not go to this kind of concerts. On the other hand, she admitted liking European classical music and European culture in general. Here we can continue with explaining the next pair of concepts.

### The West and Japan

Both Japanese and Western motifs are heavily present in Harajuku’s culture. When it comes to the beginning of Harajuku and Washington Heights we can summarise that the international and foreigner-friendly atmosphere of these areas played an important role in the process of their evolution. European motifs are visible everywhere: as prints on dresses, shops interiors, music and video clips. It is although worth mentioning that the explored image of Europe is very romantic and does not strive

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for faithful imitation. The goal is to rather show the idealised image that is going to appeal to the audience. Visually attractive elements are sought, changed and adapted to Japanese culture. It does not only constitute the characteristics of Harajuku culture, but Japanese pop culture in general, with manga *The Rose of Versailles* being a clear example. The story about Marie Antoinette and XVIII-century French court turns into a romantic tale, which does not aspire to be a reliable history lesson; the goal is to speak to the eyes and hearts by a visually appealing melodrama. Similar mechanisms are used in Harajuku. For example the band Die Milch in the video *Rosaria* uses various appealing elements of European cultures: a church, stained glasses, ballet. An original, romantic and gothic world emerges thanks to the use of these motifs. The vocalist does not hide that she is strongly inspired by European culture. The ability of Japanese to adapt foreign elements and turn them into a unique, Japanese phenomenon seems to be an important feature of Japanese culture in general.

**Tradition and modernity**

Outwardly, Harajuku seems to lie far from Japanese traditional culture, but in fact traditional motifs are also deeply explored. What is more, there are a lot of parallels between them. Traditional motifs inspire fashion designers (for example Takuya Angel), they appear in music videos or constitute players image. *Visual kei* is all *kabuki*7 inspired. One of my respondents, Jasmine, said that the relation between *kabuki* and *visual kei* can be compared to father and son. Such close this relation seems to be. Strong meaning of visuality, the play based on *kata* — strongly stylised stage forms and all-male character are just a few of many similarities we could indicate. There are also a lot of *visual kei* bands that treat tradition as a main motif of their work, with Orochi being an example. Inspirations can be found on their clothes and in their lyrics or music, too.

The tradition is combined together with Western motifs. All is merged in a very postmodernist way, which transcends the limits of time and place. Simultaneously, it is worth a mention that the ability of joining different elements is a trait very Japanese in its character. As Wolfgang Welsch said, Japanese culture seems to be transcultural in its very early roots8. In Japan tradition and postmodernity suits each other surprisingly well.

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7 Japanese classical theatre started in 17th century.
A Woman and a man

The blurring of this border is not only characteristic for Harajuku, but for all Japanese culture. I have already mentioned kabuki — the all-male theatre where women’s roles are played by the so-called onnagata — actors specialising in female roles. Another example is Takarazuka revue, which consists of women only. Visual kei can be regarded as a fluid continuation. What is more, male clothes in magazines like Kera are often modelled by women, who gain popularity for their cool male image (Akira being a good example). The aim is not to transmit any feminist context, but to create a special, fantasy world. Women do not try to imitate men, but to turn themselves into ideal creatures freed from strong gender hierarchy.

Fantasy and reality

In search of creativity, self-expression and freedom the border between fantasy and reality is overcome. Fashion, music, the West, Japan, tradition, modernity, women, men — the use of all available motifs is acceptable, because the range of possible inspirations is multiplied. As my respondent Jasmine said, the driving force of all activities is the so-called akogare — the feeling of longing for another world that leads individuals to come to Harajuku searching for ways to satisfy it. Ian Buruma used the term akogare to describe the feelings of Takarazuka revue fans in accordance to its actresses; akogare is supposed to be the longing directed towards „people, places and ideals that seem impossibly far away“⁹. In my interviews this term had been coming back over and over, repeating itself like a mantra. Seems like it can be used to interpret not only Japanese theatre, but also Japanese pop culture including Harajuku. Akogare drives subculture players to engage themselves into different activities. Reality is not enough, they look for the world of fantasy and, what is more, they want to meet people that share the same goals and aesthetics. Harajuku is an area that allows realising the needs exceeding reality — needs impossibly far away.

Creators and players

Above I presented different motifs that — when combined — allow players to express their own outlook. Now I will continue with the pairs that can be examples of blurring borders in order to find one’s own vision freed

from hierarchy and public opinion. An important pair consists of creators and subculture players. The constitutive trait of Harajuku lies in the vagueness of this border. People who start as normal subcultural players go beyond and as a result gain the status of creators. The mechanism of bottom-up formation is very characteristic for Harajuku and the way its culture develops itself\textsuperscript{10}.

An example that speaks in favour of this theory is the popularity of do it yourself kind of events. In manga world Comiket — a convention where\textit{doujinshi}\textsuperscript{11} manga are sold — is the most famous one. A more fashion-concerned event is Design Festa were handmade accessories artists can promote themselves. Various additional performances contribute to diversifying its program. Smaller events of similar character can be found in Harajuku very often. Thanks to them players step on the road to become creators. It is not uncommon for players to start their own brands or promote their creative work through the Internet, which has become the most useful tool of distribution.

Let’s take a look at a few more examples from my research. Already mentioned Jasmine has started as a\textit{visual kei} fan to become more famous as a cosplayer of Yoshiki — a leader from the cult band X Japan. Then he started his own company to promote\textit{visual kei} abroad. Apart from that, he is a PhD student who is researching\textit{visual kei}. His participation in the culture exists on all available levels.

Another example is Ai Akizuki who established the fashion club called\textit{Gothic\&Lolita\&Punk no kai} at Waseda University. The aim of her project was to promote the fashion to people outside of subcultures as well as allowing players to get in contact with each other. Nowadays Ai works as a model simultaneously continuing her activist job through lectures, interviews and journeys abroad.

Another essential term for Harajuku, which is associated with the district even by people unfamiliar with it, is\textit{dokusha moderu} (\textit{doku}-sha — reader,\textit{moderu} — model).\textit{Dokusha moderu} are usually the readers of subcultural magazines, who take part in open castings organised by magazines or are simply scouted in the streets\textsuperscript{12}. As a result, they become models often gaining big popularity or cult status among other players. Many famous stars have started their career this way. For example the famous\textit{Kera} model Midori Fukasawa started as a\textit{dokusha model}; she even published her own\textit{stylebook}, as she had become the fashion icon for other

\textsuperscript{11} Self-published comics usually based on already existing ones.
\textsuperscript{12} It is not surprising that Matsumura from\textit{Kera} appreciates players’ creations, because he used to belong to punk subculture during his youth.
Harajuku kids. Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, who is almost a keyword for Harajuku promoting Japan abroad through pop culture, shares the same amateur beginning. 

Summarising, on the contrary to other fashion magazines Harajuku-based ones rarely use professional models. Self-expression is made possible only by people who prefer this kind of fashion themselves and tend to wear it outside of fashion studios or catwalks. Anyone can become an inspiration or gain cult status. Creators and players are one.

Consumption and art

The blurred boundary between creators and players is linked with the next pair of concepts: consumption and art. Even though Harajuku is characterised by a very consumerist image, art is also of great importance. It is not surprising when we consider the tight connection between culture and business in Japan.

Players do not only buy clothes or accessories, but also design, draw, paint, etc — Harajuku aesthetics inspiration is very strong across various fields. Artists also often design clothes, with Higuchi Yuko being an example. She designed prints for Emily Temple the Cute brand and had an exhibition in Isetan department store this year. The tendency to organise exhibitions in shopping malls seems to be common in Japan. Worth a mention are also exhibitions of artists who create illustrations for Harajuku magazines or brands (e.g. Yoh Monochrome or Kira Imai).

Blurring the boundaries is also visible in museum-looking shop interiors — the ornamentations are so refined. The goal is not only simply to sell clothes, but also to showcase the world, which that particular brand represents; a world, which one might feel *akogare* to. Everything is coherent in its conception. For instance Lolita brand Innocent World shop resembles a small palace adorned in golden decorations, with opera music playing inside. h.Naoto brand shop is even called *Gallery*, as the space hosts artistic events and collaborations. A visit in the shop is more than a pure act of consumption; it transforms into a full experience of the world created by the designer Hirooka Naoto and his co-workers.

This kind of activism is connected with the change in understanding consumption in the world nowadays. The simple use of elements is enriched by the additional meaning that becomes the essence of the final product. Thanks to it people can create or express who they are and where they belong. The chef editor of *Kera* said that the aim of organising events by his magazine is to create opportunities for players to wear the outfits. On the other hand, players treat consumption as a way to realise their own goals. They perceive it as a method rather than a goal itself.
Mainstream culture and alternative culture

Yoshio Sugimoto divided popular culture into mass culture, folk culture and alternative culture. The folk culture is connected with tradition and customs and does not lie in the range of my interest here. The mass culture or how I prefer to call it, the mainstream culture, is the main stream of culture, which is participated by the majority of people in the society. It is not characterised by its quality, but by the amount of people involved. The alternative culture, on the other hand, constitutes of the phenomena that lie aside from the main stream. Subcultures can be defined as singular groups of alternative culture built in contrast to the mainstream one.

My point of this part of the article is to show that boundaries between mainstream and alternative culture are blurred and joining both sites seems very natural. What is more, the mechanism of using subcultural elements by big corporations in their own campaigns is a common strategy on the Japanese market.

A vivid example is surely Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, who has started as do-kusha model to later turn into a mainstream icon of the Cool Japan concept. Now she can be seen in major ad campaigns as she has become Japan’s pop culture export product. On the other hand, her characteristic style, which is rather explored than changed by the mainstream, allows her to still be perceived as a subcultural star (as Asobisystem CEO said: „Everything about her is Harajuku”). Sebastian Masuda, who cooperates with Kyary, is also the owner of a subcultural brand 6%DOKIDOKI. He remains an important persona in developing the Harajuku culture, but at the same time he is not afraid to freely collaborate with the mainstream. He is known for his cooperation with Asobisystem Company, which leads a project Moshi Moshi Nippon. „Our mission at MOSHI MOSHI NIPPON is to spread Japanese pop culture to the world — that includes fashion, music, anime, food and a whole lot more. We want to reach out to present and future J-fans in the hopes that you will make the trip over to Japan.” Being a subcultural creator does not stop him from cooperation with the financially-oriented agency. Both sites aim at spreading Japanese culture. In December 2014 Moshi Moshi Box tourist centre was established in Harajuku. The centre was enriched by the new symbol of Harajuku — clocks designed by Masuda. The one indicating Japanese time is surrounded by smaller ones indicating time in different parts of

Clocks are filled with colourful toys and cute goods symbolising kawaii culture travelling around the globe.

Such activities are a part of mainstream culture connected with the wider idea of Cool Japan — the Japanese soft power. On the other hand, phenomena associated with Kyary or Masuda prove to have an alternative site, they are not rejected by Harajuku kids. Both dimensions of culture — subcultural and mainstream — are impossible to divide.

The subcultures of Harajuku and the subcultures of different areas of Tokyo

The last blurred boundary lies between spaces, which are the physical stage of Japanese subcultures. I indicate Tokyo, because still the development of subcultures is strongly Tokyo — based. It does not mean that subcultures do not occur in other parts of Japan. We can talk about the so-called Harajuku kei, with kei meaning a system, which can be understood as a style typical for Harajuku, but not reserved to it. For example the equivalent of Harajuku in Osaka is Amerikamura, of Akihabara — Nipponbashi.

The relation between subcultures and areas of their appearance seems to be an important trait of alternative culture. In Tokyo the so-called sumiwake could be clearly perceived. Sumiwake is a biological term, which means habitat isolation. Some animals live only in a given area and do not come into contact with animals of other species. Japanese subcultures could be described by the similar feature: kawaii, visual kei, goth, punk in Harajuku; manga, anime, idol groups and video games in Akihabara; gyaru in Shibuya etc.

The connection with a specific area used to be important. I used past time as it is said that this relation has lost its meaning and the boundaries between subcultures are not so clear anymore. For example: Lolita shops used to be mainly in Harajuku — now they can be found everywhere. Especially Shinjuku, with its Marui Annex department store, plays a significant role. What is more, clothes associated with Harajuku are often worn by idol groups that belong to Akihabara culture. The meeting of Akihabara and Harajuku can be easily perceived; it often occurs under the banner of Cool Japan that uses them both to promote the country. During events (e.g. Kawaii! Nippon Expo 2014) they are joined as two manifestations of kawaii and as a result the boundary becomes more vague. Harajuku-based people do not feel any resistance to appear on Akihabara-oriented festivals, like the mentioned before Comiket. The Internet, Cool Japan, the expansion of kawaii, and the fluidity of postmodern culture — it all leads to the disappearance of borders.

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I do not intend to undermine the fact that boundaries have become more questionable: subcultures can be seen in the same place next to each other, what leads to contact and mutual exchange; the blurring advances. But did really boundaries lose their meaning or even completely disappear? Trying to answer the question I will look at given examples one more time.

During Kawaii!! Nippon expo the meeting between Harajuku and Akihabara was held, indeed Even Kyary Pamyu Pamyu said that the event brought Harajuku closer to Akihabara. At the same time, they were divided into three different stages: Harajuku kei on Kawaii Stage and Akihabara kei on Expo and HMV stage. They met, but were not completely and permanently mixed. In Osaka I have also encountered an idol group wearing Lolita Fashion clothes. They were interested in Akihabara culture and dreamed to become idols, but at the same time were strongly involved in Harajuku culture and participated in events connected with it (I met one of them before the dokusha model contest organised by Kera in Osaka). What is more, they were working in a bar/cafe called Royal Rose where Lolitas tend to gather. As seen, in spite of being an idol group they were not excluded from the community; on the contrary — as in their cafe Lolitas met, they were in the centre of subcultural life.

When asking subcultural players about the meaning of using different spaces besides Harajuku (like Comiket or Shinjuku’s department stores) for their activities, I heard opinions about their comfort, easiness to use for meetings or the lack of resistance to encounter different groups. Taking inspirations is also commonly accepted as it can widen the range of available motifs. The meeting with mainstream or other subcultures is treated as a way to enlarge the amount of themes used to create one’s own fantasy world.

Japanese subcultures and all pop culture in general are strongly visual, which means that they are not engaged in worldview conflicts. Free approach to the fantasy world allows groups to mix different motifs and be inspired by other ideas. Changing between styles can be compared to taking toys from a box, as Hirooka Naoto described the freedom of Japanese fashion. Toy box strategy allows creating own’s fantasy world, which functions as an answer for an individual akogare. At the same time, the identity of Harajuku is not threatened. In spite of all the changes Harajuku still remains the same. The essence of Harajuku as of aomori kei lies

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in wearing whatever you like independently of public view. If a desired toy
lies in Akihabara box, why not take it to our own playground?

I will clearly repeat it: the identity of Harajuku is not at danger. The main
reason seems to lie in the fact that the word Harajuku does not only apply
to the physical space in Tokyo, but can be also understood as a symbol or
a term. Even though we cannot see so many dressed-up people in Harajuku
streets and the famous Harajuku bridge has emptied, subcultural players do
not hesitate to admit that the centre of this culture still lies in Harajuku, no-
where else. The feeling of belonging to Harajuku as to the symbol of crea-
tivity, freedom, akogare’s self-expression is strong and unchangeable. Now-
adays sumiwake could be interpreted in the same way. Physically, habitat
isolation is not as strict as it used to be, but mentally players still feel where
they belong and which community is their own group.

The role of community is crucial in understanding Harajuku. Thanks to
the Internet it is easier to meet people sharing the same interests; the Hara-
juku bridge is not needed in order to find new friends, as it was in the past.
But the emptiness of the bridge does not undermine the role of community
itself. I have talked to different players, whom I encountered independent-
ly, but then it turned out that they knew each other. The community is still
strong and stays as a parallel current to the mainstream associated with
Asobisystem and the Cool Japan wave. Their aims and motivations can be
different, but that does not mean they exclude each other — just the op-
posite: they run in parallel as their activities are not contradictory; what is
more, cooperation and mutual support also exist.

Summarising, we can encounter two streams in Harajuku nowadays:
the subcultural community and the mainstream current of companies
that use it to promote Japan abroad. It is not an only boundary that be-
comes blurred: creators and players, consumption and art, subcultures of
different Tokyo’s areas. What is more, different motifs are in use: music
and fashion, the West and Japan, tradition and modernity, man and wom-
an, finally: fantasy and reality. The essence of it all lies in the fantasy; in the
feeling of akogare — the longing for the world without boundaries, impos-
sibly far away which stays as the object of search in Harajuku. It is based on
the rules of creativity, self-expression and visuality. It is easy as taking toys
from different boxes. Harajuku is not only a physical place — it exceeded
it. It has become a symbol.

Bibliography