

Kawaii Fashion Subcultures in Tokyo & the USA

Lesson Plan: *Kawaii* Fashion Subcultures in Tokyo & the USA

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Keywords: *Kawaii*, Subculture, Fashion, Cuteness, Gender



Target Audience:

High-school students, Undergraduate students

Duration:

2 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson In:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses

- Media Studies courses

Background:

In this lesson, we explore the material practice of "Harajuku kids" who frequent a neighborhood called Harajuku in Tokyo, as well as an international community local to Georgia in the United States of America. Students analyze and work with interview materials from videos led and directed by members of the community to reflect on flexible femininities, "happy objects," and queer world-making. For the video interviews, we have created short, 12-13 minute versions as well as 25-35 minute versions, so that educators may incorporate them into different length classes as appropriate.

Learning Objectives:

1. To understand fashion subcultures related to Tokyo's Harajuku district and to work toward an understanding of the different motivations, engagements, and meaning that certain fashion subcultures create for young people.
2. To explore how *kawaii* fashion subcultures work as an expression of agency and inter-group world-making and storytelling.
3. To reflect on the potentials, limits, and ambiguities of subcultures for identity, resistance, and belonging.

Core Readings:

Iseri, Makiko. "Flexible Femininities? Queering *Kawaii* in Japanese Girls' Culture." In *Twenty-First Century Feminism: Forming and Performing Femininity*, edited by Claire Nally and Angela Smith, pp. 140–163. New York: Palgrave, 2015.

Rose, Megan Catherine, Haruka Kurebayashi, and Rei Saionji. "Kawaii Affective Assemblages: Cute New Materialism in Decora Fashion, Harajuku." *M/C Journal* 25, no. 4): <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2926>

Nguyen, An. "Eternal Maidens: Kawaii Aesthetics and Otome Sensibility in Lolita Fashion." *Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 2 no. 1 (April 2016), 15–31.

Assigned Materials:

"Wearing Kawaii: Harajuku Fashion (Extended Version)," Erica Kanesaka, 2024. (Video)

"Wearing Kawaii: Harajuku Fashion (Short Version)," Erica Kanesaka, 2024. (Video)

Interviews with U.S.-based lolitas, Erica Kanesaka, 2024. (Video)

LOLIBRARY, Official Website:

<https://lolibrary.org>

Optional Assigned Materials:

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Miller, Laura. "Cute Masquerade and the Pimping of Japan." *International Journal of Japan* 20, no. 1 (2011): pp. 18–29.

Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Monden, Masafumi. "Transcultural Flow of Demure Aesthetics: Examining Cultural Globalisation through Gothic & Lolita Fashion." *New Voices* 2 (2008): pp. 21–40.

Monden, Madafumi. "Being Alice in Japan: Performing a Cute, 'Girlish' Revolt." *Japan Forum* 26, no. 2 (2014): pp. 265–285.

Nakano, Atsumi. "The Formation and Commodification of Harajuku's Image in Japan." *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 34 (2016): pp.

10–19.

Rose, Megan Catherine. "Butterflies on Pins: On Photography in the Lolita Community, with Rei Saionji, Sakuya Shiki, Hamuka and Millna." *Mechademia: Second Arc* 17, no. 1 (2024): pp. 164-186.

Yunker, Therese. "Japanese Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying." *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2012): pp. 97–110.

Al-Jamie, Anthony. "Sebastian Matsuda." *Tokyo Journal*, September 13, 2014.

<https://www.tokyojournal.com/sections/fashion-design/item/443-sebastian-masuda.html>

"What Are Harajuku Lovers in Texas Wearing? J-Fashion Coordinate/Fit Check." Posted July 23, 2022, by cybr.grl. YouTube, 10 min., 29 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIhMdrBAPo&list=PLdZ8TEEx7C5dXBpuOJODZnjZSLHV0NEC0e>

"How can I make friends with Lolita people?" Posted May 17, 2023, by WonderTeaParty. YouTube, 42 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ewst1-RLnBk&list=PL2fu2Es43KQIRUPar-SJbGQxxMEWZ4uio&pp=iAQB>

"Visited MONOLOG for much prettierus." Posted February 11, 2023, by WonderTeaParty. YouTube, 15 min., 27 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O-xsJrnfCg&list=PL2fu2Es43KQLneoVPWrnLNd3jB5yf5_b7&pp=iAQB

Misato Aoki Search, Fashion Tech News Official Website: https://fashiontechnews.zozo.com/culture/misako_aoki?page=8

Tokyo Fashion, Official Website: <https://tokyofashion.com/>

The COMM (Japanese street fashion magazine), Official Website:
<https://the-comm.online>

Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Lesson 1:

1. Organize the class into five groups, who will collectively analyze "Wearing Kawaii: Harajuku Fashion." While watching the video, the groups should take notes and answer one of the following questions, then share their answers with the class:
 1. What objects and materials can you see incorporated into the presentation and dress of each speaker?
 1. What qualities do they attribute to the objects they've chosen?
 2. Where have they found them?
 3. What kinds of colors, textures and figures, characters and motifs can we see across the outfits shown?
 2. What are the processes by which each speaker has selected and assembled their outfit and accessories?
 1. How much is handmade, and what places are other things purchased from?
 2. What does the excess and layering of the materials mean to the speakers?
 3. In what ways are these outfits expressions of the speakers' selves and participation in the Harajuku scene?
 1. What are the careers/occupations of the speakers, including their modeling and brand ambassador work?
 2. How does this practice diverge and intersect with cosplay?
 3. What other kinds of garments do they wear outside of Harajuku and elsewhere?
 4. In what way does Harajuku work as a liminal space? (i.e., a space for this fashion to be worn)?
 1. What kind of a place is Harajuku in their descriptions?

2. What qualities do they assign to Harajuku style? For what reasons do they think they are *not* wearing Harajuku style?
3. What are some of the social rules for dress outside of Japan?
5. What are the social and relational aspects between the speakers and the Harajuku scene at large?
 1. How do the speakers know each other?
 2. What are the common "rules" or guidelines for participation that the speakers point out?
 3. How did they get into Harajuku fashion? Via what media and platforms did they see the style, and who did they see?
2. In light of the class input on the above questions, in what way do the speakers "transform what cuteness means" (Iseri, p. 148; see also Rose et al.)? In what ways are alternative femininities embodied and shared in the group?
3. Given that the speakers all experiment with cute aesthetics in a country where cute femininity forms part of mainstream culture, what might some of the challenges for this group be in their attempts to appear visibly resistant? (See Iseri's discussion on p. 141.) How do they reflect Elizabeth Grosz's conceptualization of a movement toward "freedom to new ways of being" (Rose et al., paragraph 9)?
4. In what ways do you think the speakers' presentation, articulation, and ways of thinking overlap with and diverge from Iseri's discussion of Kyary Pamyu Pamyu on pp. 155–157? Students might like to reflect on the fact that this video was directed and shaped by the speakers themselves. Furthermore, the art director for Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, Sebastian Masuda, also owns the store 6% Doki Doki, which is discussed throughout the video.

Lesson 2:

1. Students work in groups with the *Lolibrary*, a website created by fan archivalists that documents and catalogs the history of lolita garment

design. In lolita fashion subcultures, motifs such as these form a significant part of world-making, visual storytelling, and inter-group communication. Using the search bar or tag filters, each group researches one of the following motifs:

1. Alice in Wonderland
2. Rabbits/bunnies
3. Coffins
4. Fruit
5. Bears
6. Astronomy and space
7. Cake

Students should explore and reflect on how these motifs are portrayed and used across the garments and objects under these categories, paying close attention to the narratives and storytelling conveyed.

2. After taking notes, the group reports their findings to the class. In what ways do these motifs reflect the world of "*shōjo*" (girl) aesthetics that Nguyen discusses on pp. 16–17?
3. As a class, students watch the video interviews with U.S.-based lolitas and discuss the following questions:
 1. What does lolita mean to the interviewees?
 2. What are the colors, motifs, and textures they have incorporated into their outfits?
 3. In what ways might these motifs reflect their viewpoints on what cuteness and lolita means to the interviewees?
 4. In what ways are these interviewees' responses a reflection of "a revolution of the self, fermented [by]... a conscious decision to break free from social mores and embrace the power of *kawaii*, the power of making and upholding personal choice" (Nguyen, p. 27)?
4. Discuss the ways in which the motifs and interviews analyzed by the class reflect an expression of agency and contact with *kawaii* as Nguyen

discusses on p. 23. What potentials, limits, and ambiguities emerge from this practice?

Evaluation:

Students canvas the Harajuku hashtags on Instagram and TikTok and compare them to the video, "Wearing Kawaii: Harajuku Fashion." In what ways does this digital space shape or change the way Harajuku kids present themselves and explore identity?