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Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion

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abstract: This study is a macro-sociological analysis of the social organization of Japanese street fashion and a micro-interactionist analysis of teen consumers who form various subcultures. These subcultures directly and indirectly dictate fashion trends. The present study shows the interdependence in the production process of fashion between institutions within the industries and the Japanese teens. Street fashion in the fashionable districts of Tokyo, such as Harajuku and Shibuya, is independent of any mainstream fashion system and goes beyond the conventional model of fashion business with different marketing strategies and occupational categories. This article shows that fashion is no longer controlled or guided by professionally trained designers but by the teens who have become the producers of fashion.

keywords: fashion ♦ Japanese ♦ street ♦ subculture

Introduction

Japanese fashion has inspired many fashion professionals in the West, starting with Kenzo Takada's appearance in Paris in 1970 followed by Issey Miyake in 1973, Hanae Mori in 1977, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons in 1981. Japan is gradually becoming a country that is a genuine force in the field of fashion. Today's Japanese fashion contributes both to the aesthetics of fashion as well as to how business is made in this industry. The traditional western view of Japanese style, such as boringly suited salesmen and their demurely dressed wives, is turned upside down when we see the range of styles worn by the young people on the street of Tokyo (Polhemus, 1996: 12).

Japanese street fashion does not come from the famous professional Japanese designers, but is led by high school girls who have become extremely influential in controlling fashion trends. These fashion-conscious, or fashion-obsessed, youngsters indirectly and directly dictate this type of Japanese fashion. It is not an exaggeration to say that they are

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the agents of fashion, who take part in the production and dissemination of fashion. Japanese street fashion emerges out of the social networks among different institutions of fashion as well as various street subcultures, each of which is identified with a unique and original look. These teens rely on a distinctive appearance to proclaim their symbolic, subcultural identity. This identity is not political or ideological; it is simply innovative fashion that determines their group affiliation.

While many fashionable Japanese consumers simply imitate western styles, the teens have led the way in a creative mixing and matching of contrasting eclectic styles that has been extensively copied in the West (Polhemus, 1996: 12). Similarly, many apparel manufacturers and retailers from neighboring Asian countries, such as Korea and Taiwan, visit Tokyo in search of new ideas, and that is why knockoffs are found throughout Asia. A buyer from Hong Kong explained: 'Telling a teen customer that an item is popular in Japan is a big selling point in Hong Kong. That's why it's important for us to know what is going on in Tokyo. I'm here every three months to catch up with the latest trends.'

The most recent fashion phenomenon in Japan goes beyond the conventional model of fashion business. Over the past 10 years, a separate system of fashion with a new business model has been created in Japan in order to commercialize street fashion and boost the market. In this new model, occupational categories within various institutions of fashion are blurry, and the model also supports the trickle-up/bubble-up or trickle-across theory of fashion that Herbert Blumer proposed in 1969.

I use Diana Crane's theoretical as well as analytical framework of the postmodern culture of fashion, in which the emphasis is placed on consumer fashion rather than class fashion postulated by the classic writers such as Georg Simmel (1957), Herbert Spencer (1966), and Thorstein Veblen (1957). According to Crane (2000), the consumption of cultural goods, such as fashionable clothing, performs an increasingly important role in the construction of personal identity, and the variety of lifestyles available today liberates the individuals, especially the youngsters, from tradition and enables them to make choices that create a meaningful self-identity. Like Crane, Fred Davis (1992) also points out the ambivalent nature of identity and fashion.

This article attempts to show the interdependence in the production of fashion between various institutions of fashion within the industries and the Japanese teens. I first discuss the social and economic background of Japan that explains the emergence of the *Kogal* phenomenon and the *CosPlay* movement. Then I investigate the teens' role as the producers of fashion in two major districts in Tokyo, Shibuya and Harajuku, that led to the formation of a new business model and a system that is independent of the mainstream fashion system with specific marketing and diffusion strategies.

Methodology

This study is a macro-sociological analysis of the social organization of fashion, street fashion in particular, and a micro-interactionist analysis of teens who form and belong to various subcultures. The relationship between the social structure of street fashion and the individuals involved can be observed.

Subcultures can best be studied by an ethnographic method, as a researcher can get close to the empirical social world and dig deep into it through face-to-face communication and interaction with the research subjects. I combined direct observation, both participant and non-participant, with structured and semi-structured interviews to become familiar with this world.

I take a symbolic interactionist approach to understand the communication process between the teenagers as it is an inductive approach to the understanding of human behavior, in which explanations are induced from data. As Herbert Blumer (1969) explained, the scientific approach of symbolic interactionism starts with a problem regarding the empirical world, and it seeks to clarify the problem by examining that empirical world. It does not begin with a set of hypotheses but looks at the processes by which individuals define the world from the inside and at the same time identify their world of objects.

My research data come primarily from an ethnographic study in Shibuya and Harajuku, two of the most fashionable districts in Tokyo, where street culture or subculture is found and from where the latest street fashion originates. Shibuya 109 Department Store is the symbol of Shibuya where the latest street fashion items are found, while Harajuku is famous for its back streets, known as Ura-Hara, with small boutiques selling exclusive items in limited quantities. During January 2005, I visited these two places every Sunday to get to know mainly teenage girls, and between June and August 2005, interviewed them formally and informally. I carried out 21 interviews with manufacturers, retailers, designers and salesgirls, who are involved in commercializing, marketing and distributing Japanese street fashion.

Social and Economic Backdrops of Japanese Street Culture

Before I begin to discuss street fashion and subcultures in Tokyo, I explain the social and economic situations behind this phenomenon as fashion is always connected to and is never independent of its social, cultural and economic surroundings.

After the tremendous economic prosperity of the 1980s, Japan's economic

bubble burst, and the country has since experienced their worst and longest economic recession. Japanese society is famously cohesive and conformist, but as John Nathan (2004) argues, this may be cracking under the strain of economic stagnation. Fathers are being laid off for the first time; mothers who used to be full-time homemakers, now have to look for part-time jobs to supplement their household income; children find no hope in the Japan of the future, and violence in schools has risen dramatically. Since 1998, teens aged between 14 and 19 have been involved in 50 percent of all arrest for felonies, including murder (Nathan, 2004). There is a widespread feeling of disillusionment, alienation, uncertainty or anger that has spread throughout the society, among both adults and children. The traditional family, social and economic systems have gradually become weaker.

The Japanese value system, especially that of the teens, is changing. The previous generation's traditional Japanese beliefs, such as selfless devotion to their employers, respect for seniors and perseverance, are losing their force (Ijiri, 1990). An intentional shift away from old ideology and ways of life is evident in today's Japan. Fashion expresses the prevailing ideology of society, and these teens see the assertion of individual identity as more important and meaningful than that of group identity, which used to be the key concept in Japanese culture. Such attitudes are reflected in their norm-breaking and outrageous, yet commercially successful, attention-grabbing styles. Dick Hebdige (1988: 35) accurately pointed out that subcultures are formed in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance; they translate the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched.

Therefore, it may seem ironic, but it is under these social and economic conditions that Japanese street fashion became increasingly creative and innovative, as if the teens wanted to challenge and redefine the existing notion of what is fashionable and aesthetic. They went against the grain of the normative standard of fashion. The teens are in search of their identity and a community where they feel that they are accepted.

Female-Dominated Japanese Subcultures

While Hebdige (1988: 27) explained that girls have been relegated to a position of secondary interest within both sociological accounts of subculture and photographic studies of urban youth, and though they still show masculine bias, it is the girls who play a major role in Japanese subcultures.

Japanese girls are always shopping, and they spend a great deal of their capital on clothes and makeup. Fashion is of the utmost importance for them because they want to stand out and be noticed. Some also wish to rebel against the formal and traditional ways. They tend to hang out in

large groups around train stations chatting. These teens are sometimes treated as deviants by the rest of Japanese society. By hanging out with peers who dress in the same style they can bond with each other.

The Kogal Phenomenon since 1995

Japan's distinctive street fashion began to creep up in the mid-1990s in urban Japan by young teenage girls known as *Kogal*.¹ They are known for wearing short plaid skirts that look like their own school uniforms and knee-high white socks, and they occasionally use a lot of makeup and artificial suntans. Their effects and influence extended far beyond a particular subculture. This group consequently redefined sartorial and sexual norms and was generally associated with a minority of social dropouts.

For the majority of the teens, their life centres round the Shibuya train station. This group unintentionally created a subculture. The first street subculture that appeared in the 1990s and that helped fuel the industry is known as *Ganguro* (literally means 'black face'). A common sight on the streets of Tokyo at the time was groups of young girls between the ages of 15 and 18 with long dyed-brown or bleached-blond hair, tanned skin, heavy makeup, brightly coloured miniskirts or short pants that flare out at the bottom, and high platform boots. A designer who used to be *Ganguro* said: 'I was a hardcore *Ganguro* when I was in high school. I had to be. Otherwise, I wouldn't be accepted by other kids. I would be totally out of place if I looked normal. We all want to fit in when we are teenagers.'

Ganguro led to *Amazoness*, which was more extreme than *Ganguro*, but according to some industry professionals, it was probably too extreme to last long. Instead, in the late 1990s, *Yamamba* (the term comes from Japanese mythology and refers to a mountain witch) as another fashion trend and a subculture emerged to replace the *Ganguro* look. More recently, *Yamamba* evolved into *Mamba*, which is already beginning to fade. There are multiple interactions occurring simultaneously on the streets of Tokyo, and the subcultures and their specific appearances have branched out in so many different sub-subcultures that it is almost impossible to track down all the existing groups.

Street Fashion as Symbolic Group Identity

The distinctive looks function as a visible group identity for the teens and become shared symbols of membership affiliation. A symbol is the vehicle by which humans communicate their ideas, intentions, purposes and thoughts, i.e. their mental lives, to one another. The teens are almost uniformly aware of all of their communication, which utilizes symbols that vary in the degree to which meanings are shared and intended. Therefore, these styles are functional and meaningful only within the specific territory of Harajuku and Shibuya among particular groups of people.



Figure 1

I approached one of the girls in Shibuya and asked her: 'Are you a *Mamba*?' She replied to me: 'No, I'm a *Celemba*.' I asked the difference between a *Mamba* and a *Celemba*. *Celemba* is a combination of a celebrity look and a *Mamba*. The *Celembas* tend to wear expensive brands while the *Mambas* do not. The *Mambas* use white eyeshadow around the eyes but the *Celembas* use silver instead. As for fashion, the *Celembas* look more mature and sophisticated and always have a scarf or a shawl around their neck. There is another group called *Lomamba*, that is a *Mamba* with a *Lolita* touch, and the label they wear must be *LizLisa*. Furthermore, *Cocomba* is someone who covers herself with the brand *Cocolulu* sold in Shibuya (Figure 1). One girl said: 'There are so many girls who are only partially *Mamba*, and they are not authentic *Mambas*.' Authenticity appears to be important, and only the insiders can tell the difference between what is real and what is not.

Teens' Role as Producers of Fashion in Shibuya and Harajuku

When a fashion trend hits Japan, it spreads very fast and becomes universal, and almost everyone will be wearing it. This is a phenomenon

that is unique to the homogeneous Japanese society and rarely found in other societies.

One of the first trends that the teens started was probably the loose white socks that became the rage among the high school girls in 1993. These are long, white pairs of loose, baggy knee socks deliberately pushed down to the shin like leg warmers. Many teens have their own style of wearing the loose socks. They know how high the top part of the socks should be to achieve the right amount of wrinkle on the legs. Some like the socks to be as long as a yard. By 1996, there were as many as 35 different types of loose socks sold in stores. A girl who just graduated from high school said: 'These loose socks look stylish. They make your legs look longer. If you didn't have them, it was really embarrassing.'

Therefore, the loose socks have been a necessary item for junior and high school girls. The trend is not as strong as it once was in Tokyo, but it is still popular in the suburbs and smaller towns. The product was not marketed by fashion professionals but the teens themselves. This is when the fashion industry began to realize the marketing potential of the teens, and the trends that they promote to their friends are independent of and go against the grain of the mainstream fashion.

Salesgirls as Designers and Merchandisers in Shibuya 109

Shibuya 109 (pronounced as Shibuya Ichi-Maru-Kyu or Shibuya Maru-Kyu) Department Store is the symbol of Shibuya district and Japanese girls' culture and is known as the mecca of street fashion. There is a collection of stores that cater to Japanese teens, and more than a hundred stores are located on 10 different floors. They sell new, hip and inexpensive clothes, accessories and jewelry. This is where the most fashionable salesgirls work.

To work as a salesperson in a boutique is not a high-paid job, and many are also hired as part-time workers. Its position in the occupational ranking is rather low as it requires neither license nor special qualifications. A salesperson is someone at the cash register who puts merchandise in a shopping bag. She is usually not that well educated and does not come from a wealthy family. However, this notion is completely reversed, especially among the teens, in some spheres of today's Japan. One of the girls who was shopping in Shibuya explains how difficult it is to get one of these positions: 'It's really difficult to work in the Shibuya 109 building as a salesgirl, you know. It's competitive to get that position. You should go to the store every Saturday and Sunday and become friends with the salesgirls. Then when there is a position available, they might call you if you have the right look. But the waiting list is really long.'

In many of the stores in the 109 Department Store, the salesgirls are so influential in setting the new trends that the teens would buy the exact

same outfit that the salesgirl is wearing. They are no longer merely selling clothes but contribute to the buying of merchandise and designing for the store labels. They have first-hand knowledge of the kind of tastes the teens have and what garments and accessories they are looking for. They have acquired this knowledge because of their direct day-to-day contact with the teen consumers. The salesgirls themselves become icons, known as *karisuma tenin*, literally translated as charismatic salesgirls. They have created their own website and give advice to their followers about how to coordinate the latest items. A salesgirl who once worked in the 109 store said: 'In our store, there was a monthly theme, and we salesgirls would dress according to the theme. Many customers would purchase the items that I used to wear. They believed that I was the fashion leader so as long as they dressed like me, they would be considered fashionable. That made me feel really good.'

In the November 1999 issue of *Popteen*, one of the major Japanese street fashion magazines, a survey was conducted with 500 teens in Shibuya, and they were asked who their role models for fashion were. No celebrities ranked in the top five. The list included amateur high school models who appeared in street fashion magazines and salesgirls in the 109 Department Store, who became famous in their own right. There is a consensus among the teens that to find out what the current trend is, they need to go to Shibuya. The 109 Department Store itself has become a brand. On weekends, the store is packed with the teens dressed in a Shibuya look.

Teen Consumers as Designers

Those who come to shop also play a crucial role in the production of fashion trends. One of the salesgirls explained why becoming friends with her teen customers is important: 'I can get a lot of information through chit-chat with these girls. I learn what kind of color combination they like or they don't like. They tell me if the skirt is too short or too long. The pant legs are too wide or too narrow. If they say something is *kawaii*, that usually sells.' The teens' opinions and voices are reflected directly in their merchandise selection.

Many young designers who have started their own teen-targeted labels used to be the followers of street fashion themselves. They represent the young teenagers and attract cult-like followers. For instance, Takao Yamashita, a designer for the label Beauty Beast, who was not trained in fashion but is one of the most popular street designers, said: 'Making clothes is not enough. You need to imagine who will be wearing your clothes and how they will be worn. We, designers, need to create a lifestyle that comes with the label. We make clothes to communicate with our consumers.'

In the late 1990s many teens came to believe that anyone can be a designer, without training, and many without any formal fashion degrees became commercially successful. The definition of a designer as an occupation has changed.

Artists-Turned-Designers in Harajuku and Ura-Harajuku (Ura-Hara)

It was in the 1980s that Harajuku became famous because of street performers and entertainers that appeared near the station on Sundays, and Takeshita Street near the station became lined with fashionable stores for teens. The most recent hot spot is Ura-Hara (short for Ura-Harajuku, which literally means the back streets of Harajuku). There are small boutiques and stores run by young artists, and this area is known as the gateway to the mainstream Japanese fashion industry. The culture of Ura-Hara is still very marginal and has an underground atmosphere, separate from the mainstream scene. In this underground world, information about new products is spread through word of mouth. Unlike the mainstream fashion districts in Tokyo, such as Ginza or Omotesando, there were no particular strategies to invest in and develop the small area of Harajuku.

The fashion business of Ura-Hara consists of so-called select shops² that sell minor brands designed by semi-professional designers, who may have just graduated from fashion schools, and artists, such as graphic and textile designers. There are also a number of collaborative projects between brands, stores and artists.

According to marketing expert Kensuke Kojima (2002), some of the unique characteristics of the fashion business in Ura-Hara are: (1) there is no organizational structure to the business that they operate, such as setting seasonal/annual budgets or promotional strategies; (2) they consider manufacturing or the actual making process extremely important, and much time is invested in planning and merchandising, and these items are sold in small quantities; and (3) they are not worried about the mainstream trends and are content as long as their own unique styles are accepted within their own community and are sensitive to the trends within their own subculture. They are involved in creative aesthetic work that demands innovation and adaptation to current fashion trends (Aspers, this issue, pp. 745–63); making profit is not their ultimate goal.

Ura-Hara street fashion grew out of friends' social network, and they managed to commercialize products that they truly like and that they think are cool and cute. Many of the creators and store owners are not designers but, for example, former DJs, singers, stylists, editors and bikers. Hiroshi Fujiwara, a former DJ, produces street-wear labels, and the teens worship him. Fujiwara explains that a designer is not someone who knows the technical terms of garment construction: 'Ten years ago,

nobody thought about making their own clothes . . . But you don't need a fashion background to make T-shirts. I would work with designers and say: "I want a zipper here", and they would say, "You can't have a zipper here", and we would have big fights' (Mead, 2002: 56). What they create is not completely new, but they put additional elements to create something of their own. This is the basic philosophy found in Ura-Hara fashion.

Gothic Lolitas on Bridge near Harajuku Station

Another trend or movement that has fueled Japanese street fashion is the *CosPlay* movement, short for 'Costume Play', in which people dress as characters from the Japanese *manga* comics, or the Japanese animated films known as *anime*. The purpose of this trend is merely to have fun and entertain oneself and others by dressing up as one's favorite character. Besides dressing up for public events such as *anime* conventions, they walk around town wearing costumes. *CosPlay* of rock bands is also very popular and whole events devoted to it take place before concerts, and they hang around on the bridge near Harajuku Station with the *Gothic Lolitas*, another subcultural group.

The *Gothic Lolita* is one of the most popular costumes found in the Harajuku area since the later 1990s (Figure 2), and it is part of the Lolita subculture. This style can be seen as a counter-reaction to the *Ganguro* style and others that evolved out of it. It is a fashion style popular among those who think *Mamba*, *Yamamba* or *Ganguro* is too outrageous. It is usually worn by girls, and the image is that of a Victorian doll. *Gothic Lolita* appears to be an exaggerated form of femininity, with pale skin, neat hair, knee- or mid-thigh-length Victorian dresses, pinafores, bloomers, stockings and shoes or boots.

Its substyles include *Elegant Gothic Lolita* with a monochromatic palette, *Classical* or *Country Gothic Lolita* with pastel colors and *Punk Gothic Lolita* with punk fashion elements such as leather, zippers and chains. Other *Lolitas* include, *Ama-Loli* with a basic *Lolita* look using mostly white. If pink is used, it is called *Pink-Loli*. When two girls wear exactly the same *Lolita* style, it is called *Futago-Loli*, which means *Twin Lolitas*.

The *Lolita* followers have created a website community (Holson, 2005). There are rules as to what kind of topics can be posted on the Internet so that they can maintain their subcultural identity of the site. There are discussions on *Gothic Lolita* brands, on *Gothic Lolita* handmade items, and people ask for advice on how to put together a *Gothic Lolita* look. They also share images from different *Gothic Lolita* brands, and auction, sell and buy *Gothic Lolita* items. The enthusiasts create and use their own language and abbreviations that outsiders cannot comprehend, such as *LoliBra*, which means a *Lolita* brand, or a *Cardi*, which means a cardigan.



Figure 2

An industry observer explained: 'This is a style that has been developing out of the *CosPlay* movement in the streets of Japan for the last 10 years or so. The look has evolved and is slowly beginning to take root in other countries around the world. *Gothic Lolita* is a combination of the applied version of styles from the Victorian era and modern Gothic looks.'

A New Business Model: De-Professionalization of Occupational Categories

Wearing the latest style was the privilege of the rich until the mid-19th century in Europe, and it was they who initiated fashion. Applying Irving Goffman's (1959) idea of the social setting being divided into front and back stages, it can be said that there was a clear distinction between the front stage where fashion was exposed and the back stage where the clothes were being manufactured for the rich. Once the clothes appeared on the front stage, they were converted into 'fashion'. Thus, the producers of fashion and the producers of clothing were separate. There was a clear division of labor, and the occupational categories were tightly controlled. Even after fashion became an institutionalized system³ in Paris in 1868 (Kawamura, 2004a), the division of labor was fixed. Fashion was then produced by designers and couturiers. The power relationship between the designer and the consumer was reversed when the designer began to

initiate the latest style. The professionalization of occupational categories in fashion had been intact in the mainstream fashion world. However, in the new model of fashion that is represented by the actors I study, such categories are insignificant.

Japanese street fashion provides the industries with a new model of fashion that blurs and defies occupational classifications in fashion. This fashion is no longer produced by well-trained designers who know how to drape, make patterns and instruct sewing procedures. Anyone with great ideas is in the position to produce and disseminate fashion. This new model allows the teens to be designers, merchandisers, salespeople, stylists and models among many others. They are the gate-keepers, as well as the agents, of street fashion.

Marketing and Diffusion Strategies

Kawaii as a Marketing Tool

According to Sharon Kinsella (1995), young women were the main generators of the cute culture in Japan. From the consumption of cute goods and services and the wearing of cute clothes, to the faking of childish behavior and innocent looks, young women were far more actively involved in cute culture than men. Cute culture permeates Japanese teen society, and it started as a youth culture among teenagers, especially young women. It was not founded by business (Kinsella, 1995), but the industries took advantage of and made good use of girls' fondness for cute products as a marketing strategy.

As I roam around the Shibuya 109 Department Store packed with teens, on every floor, I hear them screaming '*kawaii*' at the top of their lungs. This term *kawaii* is often translated as 'cute' in English. However, this is more than just an adjective. If retailers and manufacturers can materialize *kawaii* into fashion items, their brand will be successful. The street fashion business in Japan boils down to this one word, *kawaii*. It is the word they repeat like a mantra. One of the girls shopping with her friends in Shibuya explained: '*Kawaii* is a state of mind and a lifestyle. My whole life is about being *kawaii*. I'm always thinking about how I can make myself even more *kawaii*.'⁴

Japan's teen fashion industry revolves entirely around what the girls in Tokyo say is *kawaii*, which also implies what is hot and cool and must be at the basis of any fashionable products. What is *kawaii* or not can only be determined by the teens themselves. A middle-aged guy who owns and runs a clothing company or a store has no idea what is *kawaii* and what will be commercially successful. What is defined as *kawaii* is a mystery to many. One of the store owners said: 'Even the teens probably cannot define what *kawaii* is. It's a feeling. When they see something that

is *kawaii*, there is an immediate reaction. They intuitively know that it's *kawaii*. That's why we need to have their input as a designer or as a salesperson.'

Since fashionable clothing, especially in women's wear and even more so in street fashion, depends upon rapid changes in style, calculations as to what to buy are fraught with risk (Entwistle, this issue, pp. 704–24). Companies cannot afford to lose any profit in this extremely competitive market. Thus, hiring teens as salesgirls, stylists, designers and marketers is one of the surest ways to boost profits. For instance, they know the exact shade of pink that the teens like, the exact length of a T-shirt that is in fashion or how low they like to wear their jeans.

Teen-targeted labels also recruit designers from a pool of famous and popular salesgirls working in the Shibuya 109. A former salesgirl said: 'I used to work there and once the magazine people took my picture, and I appeared in the magazine, and then I was approached by a fashion company to work as a designer for them.' According to her, the company sales increased by 180 percent after she was hired as a designer. Like the former DJ, Fujiwara in Ura-Hara, most of them are not formally trained in fashion design (Mead, 2002), but they know what *kawaii* is and, hence, what will sell. Being young and knowing what is *kawaii* gives them an edge over others. The salesgirl explained: 'I sometimes go to thrift shops in New York or Los Angeles and buy things that are *kawaii* as samples and bring them back. I might change the color, size or minor details so that they would meet the taste of the Japanese teens.'

Traditionally, company designers sketch, make presentation boards, choose fabrics, make samples and instruct the production process. But this procedure may no longer be effective. The companies need the teens' ideas for their businesses to survive. A manager at the most popular shoe store explained: 'I listen to what my salesgirls and customers say and take their advice seriously. I would change the designs or even the merchandise display according to their taste. Whatever they say usually works.'

Scarcity, Originality and Speed

One of the girls in Ura-Hara said: 'Sometimes my friends have something really cute. I might ask them where they bought it, but I would never buy the same thing. I want to look for cute things myself. I would never imitate.'

In one of the most popular stores in the Harajuku district, major Japanese designer labels such as Yohji Yamamoto and Comme des Garçons have little popularity. The Japanese teens consider the internationally famous Japanese designers as too widely known. They get pleasure out of discovering marginal underground designers and worship their labels as their own. Scarcity and originality are what make the street

labels appealing to them. These brands are not sold in the US or Europe and they focus only on the domestic market. They want to wear clothes that hardly anyone else wears, but at the same time that everyone will recognize as exclusive. Thus, many street designers and stores often sell only a limited number of garments.

However, Japanese street fashion is slowly spreading outside Japan and is becoming a global business. Young Japanese street designers, such as Jun Takahashi of Undercover, Keita Maruyama and Shinichiro Arakawa, who represent the voices of street culture, and who have teen worshippers, now participate in the biannual Paris fashion collections, since that is where the annual cycle of fashion is anchored (Skov, 1996, 2005). It is also the fashion shows of the different seasons that international fashion magazines devote their pages to (Moeran, this issue, pp. 725–44). One of Jun Takahashi's followers said: 'I liked him better when not many people knew him. Now he's too popular so I don't want to wear his clothes. Now I'm looking for a new exciting designer.'

Alex Wagner, a former managing editor of *Tokion*, a Tokyo-based fashion and art magazine, says 'Japanese culture is very ritualistic. They get hung up on one thing and then it becomes this feverish race to get as many of those things as possible' (quoted in Ogunnaiké, 2004). For some, following a particular brand has a religious implication.

Speed is also another important characteristic of Japanese street fashion, especially in the 109 store where merchandise changes very fast. Unlike the mainstream fashion industry, they provide the teens with new products every two to three weeks so that they find something new every time they shop. This is why the clothes are set at a reasonable price. Each item is roughly within the price range of US\$30–50, inexpensive enough for the girls to buy with their own pocket money that they earn by working part-time jobs. 'Newness' has always been the essence of fashion, and shopping is the major form of entertainment among the teens.

Diffusion

Diffusion theories of fashion seek to explain how fashion is spread through interpersonal communication and institutional networks, and it can be assumed that fashion is not ambiguous or unpredictable. In the aristocratic society of 17th- and 18th-century Europe, the fashion leaders were members of royalty, while in democratic societies, politicians' wives, such as Jackie Kennedy, or celebrities, like Madonna or Britney Spears, have become the leaders of fashion.

As Crane (2000: 13) explains, most of today's fashion is consumer driven, and market trends originate in many types of social groups, including adolescent urban subcultures, and consequently, fashion

emanates from many sources and diffuses in various ways to different publics. Fashion has become diverse and thus very much fragmented.

Moreover, the teens' tastes are very fickle. No one can accurately predict how long the trends will last. Tokyo girls are soon copied by those in the countryside, and then they start looking for newer and a more *kawaii* look. A store owner explained: 'Some brands in 109 retain high sales even after their popularity declines in Tokyo. This is because girls from outside Tokyo come to Shibuya and buy up all the brands that have already lost popularity among Tokyo girls.'

With technology and the Internet, it is not difficult to diffuse fashion worldwide. The teens create websites promoting, chatting and exchanging information about their favorite fashion. It is not surprising that some of the Japanese street styles have migrated to the streets of New York City. In addition to *manga* animation, sushi and other cultural objects, Japan is now an exporter of the latest street fashion and is setting new fashion tastes.

Teen Readers as Magazine Models

Any fashion, once it is created, has to be spread. The salesgirls can easily spot the latest trends on the streets of Tokyo, but they cannot reach the countryside or spread throughout Japan or overseas without fashion magazines, which are the dissemination media. These magazines influence not only the Japanese teens but also how the rest of girls in Asia dress.

Before the street fashion phenomenon that started in the mid-1990s, the fashion trends were mostly dictated by the major fashion magazines, but they no longer have complete dominance over the consumers. With street fashion came a new type of fashion magazine. A number of Japanese street fashion magazines, such as *SOS*, *Tokyo Style News*, *Cawaii*, *Fine and Egg*, were almost simultaneously launched in 1995. Instead of having professional fashion models pose in famous designer brand clothes, the street fashion magazines feature high school students and teens on the streets.

The professional labor that used to require some formal training is being replaced by untrained but fashionable amateurs. They are the ones who create street fashion. As Crane (2000) pointed out, in postmodern cultures, there is a shift from class fashion to consumer fashion. The consumers or the readers are now playing the role of the producers and disseminators of fashion and thus, the boundary between production and consumption of fashion is breaking down.

The mass media contribute in collapsing the boundary between the social organization of fashion professionals who are the insiders and non-professionals who are the outsiders, by allowing the non-professional viewers to take a look at and participate in the professional world of fashion.

A teen described how she appeared in a magazine: 'I visited the editorial office at *Egg*. Then they called me later and asked me if I wanted to model in the magazine. Then *Cawaii* called me. It's a thrill to see your picture in the magazines. I think everyone wants to be in it. That's why street fashion is getting more and more exaggerated so that they would stand out and get their pictures taken.'

As indicated earlier, some teen models have become well-known because of the frequency of their appearances in the magazines, and they are hired by the popular retail stores as salesgirls. One of the store managers in the 109 Department Store said: 'We now aggressively hire teenage models who appear in the street fashion magazines as our sales-girls. It's one way to attract the teens because they visit our store to talk to them and get to know them.'

Conclusion

Sociological discussions of fashion look at the macro-structural analysis of the social organization of fashion and also the micro-interactionist analysis of the individuals, such as designers, publicists, journalists and editors, involved in the production of fashion. This is different from the production of clothing, dress or costume (Kawamura, 2004b). Sociologists also investigate the interaction and interdependence between the organization and the individuals in the world of fashion (Crane, 1997a, 1997b, 2000). Therefore, sociologists of fashion pay less attention to a semiotic analysis of the details of clothing that costume historians might engage in. Instead, sociology focuses on the social, cultural or subcultural context in which a particular fashion phenomenon is produced, diffused, maintained and gradually fades away.

By using Japanese street subculture as a case study, we can understand the group affiliation of the teens who walk around the streets of Tokyo. Fashion in postmodern times emerges out of youth culture and is then commercialized by the industry to reach a wider audience to spread it as 'fashion'. There is a strong social connection and a sense of belonging among those youngsters who dress themselves in unique and original outfits, some of which may be outrageous, radical and extraordinary. As Howard Becker (1982) remarked, art is a collective activity, and so is fashion. Fashion is also a collective activity that arises out of particular social relationships among the members of a subculture. Within every subculture, there are common values, attitudes and norms that bind them together, and they are frequently expressed visually through their distinctive clothes, makeup, accessories and jewelry, which are used as their symbolic identity. Fashion today cannot solely be dictated by professional designers. The junior and high school students who represent Japanese

street culture and fashion have the power to influence other teens. They not only produce and diffuse fashion but also market and guide the industry professionals about coming trends. This finding may also apply to other creative industries. Particular styles imply which and what level of social groups they are involved in. The teen consumers I have studied, who are at the same time the producers, have a substantial impact on the production and dissemination of fashion. This means that there is a complementary relationship between the consumption and production of fashion.

Notes

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1. The term *Kogal* is often associated with the term *Enjo-Kosai*, which translates literally as 'assisted dating'. Teen girls meet with older men for sex in exchange for expensive designer label gifts or money to finance their shopping spree.
2. Select shops are small boutiques where shop owners' tastes in selecting, mixing and remixing merchandise are highly valued by customers.
3. In the modern system of fashion, there are networks of institutions, companies, journalists, designers and many other fashion professionals. See Kawamura (2004b).
4. According to a random selection survey of 110 people, of which 89 answers were returned, conducted by Kinsella in 1992, 71 percent of the young people between 18 and 30 years of age either liked or loved *kawaii*-looking people, and almost 56 percent either liked or loved *kawaii* attitudes and behavior (Kinsella, 1995).

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