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***Kogyaru* and *Otaku*: Youth Subcultures Lifestyles in Postmodern Japan**

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Abstract

The article studies social-group peculiarities and lifestyles of *kogyaru* and *otaku* as significant groups in contemporary Japanese youth subcultures. They are typical for postmodern society, with its characteristic consumption, communication, and lifestyle. *Kogyaru* and *otaku* are investigated as examples of postmodern changes in the dissemination and perception of fashion trends, hobby activities, and innovative products. The causes of their emergence and growth are related to the general problems facing postmodern Japan: its economy, educational institutions, family, and value system. Their influence is considered to be an important source of growth for a large and profitable market.

Keywords: lifestyle, youth subcultures, *kogyaru*, *otaku*.

Izvešček

Članek proučuje posebnosti socialnih skupin in življenjskih slogov skupin *kogyaru* in *otaku*, kot pomembnih skupin v sodobni japonski mladinski subkulturi. Sta tipični za postmoderno družbo, s svojimi značilnostmi potrošnje, komunikacije in življenjskega sloga. Članek preučuje skupini kot primera postmodernih sprememb v širjenju in sprejemanju modnih trendov, hobijev in inovativnih produktov. Vzroke za njun nastanek in rast najdemo v povezavi s splošnimi problemi v postmoderini dobi: to so gospodarstvo, izobraževanje, družina in sistem vrednot. Njihov vpliv se smatra kot pomemben vir rasti za velik in profitni trg.

Ključne besede: življenjski slog, mladinske subkulture, *kogyaru*, *otaku*.

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1 The Sociological Concept of “Lifestyle”

The text aims to study the changes and diversification in postmodern Japanese lifestyle through an examination of the specific features of the lifestyle of two influential youth subcultures: *kogyaru* and *otaku*.

Since the 1960s, when societies began to enter a postmodern stage of development, the concept of “lifestyle” has been increasingly used, and not only by sociologists: it has taken a prominent place in the public space, in the vocabulary of the media, and in everyday conversation. Featherstone (1991, 83) rightly asserts it has become a fashionable term. Yet its wide use has not helped make it clearer and more specific; far from this, in the early 1980s a point was reached where it “included everything and meant nothing” (Sobel 1981, 1). Although Weber (1978, 180–196) and Veblen (1994, 40) differed on their view of the notion of lifestyle, the concept was a system-forming one for both of these classical authors. According to them, lifestyle defines a person’s affiliation to a specific status group; it also significantly distinguishes social-group formations from one another.

Lifestyle is directly connected with identity, and it characterizes the class, the status group, or the subculture (Zablocki and Kanter 1976, 271). Group or community identities are formed through practices related to lifestyle, and lifestyle in this sense has “identification value” (Warde 1992, 25–26), because it connects people in specific ways to their “significant others” and maintains social ties between people. The lifestyle shared by a given community enhances ties between members, emphasizes the importance of belonging to the community, and plays the role of a factor uniting and even “welding together” the community identity. This important role it plays is one of the reasons why “lifestyle” is not only a frequently mentioned term but also an important theoretical tool for the study of social-group status in contemporary theories of social stratification. Though at first glance a specific lifestyle seems to be a matter of individual choice, it actually transcends personal distinctiveness¹; through individuals may express themselves and their preferences but it is essentially a social-group phenomenon and a form of collective identity (Chaney 1996, 11, 31; Maffesoli 1996).

In our view, some of the phenomena pertaining to lifestyle are: the whole range of typical and distinctive particularities and characteristics of activities other

¹ Otherwise, it simply “remains in the obscurity of idiosyncrasy and eccentricity” (Chaney 1996, 11).

than paid labor—activities that may be freely chosen, or else pursued out of necessity, in ways specific to the individual or group—as well as all the subjective assessments, attitudes and feelings of satisfaction related to these activities. Lifestyle, although it is a product of individual choice at first glance, goes beyond the individual's distinctiveness; while individuals do express themselves and their preferences through it, it nonetheless pertains to the social-group and is a form of collective identity (Keliyan 2008, 51–57). Lifestyle creates social bonds between people and significantly delimits, distinguishes social-formations from one another. Lifestyle is structure-defining for social subjects and is among the key indicators of social-group status in postmodern society (Keliyan 2010, 24–26).

2 Lifestyle of Youth Subcultures in Postmodern Societies

Youth subcultures are acquiring an increasingly important place in the sphere of consumption and lifestyle in contemporary societies. By analogy with Bourdieu's term "cultural capital" (1984), some authors even distinguish "subcultural capital", whereby members of various youth subcultures strive to set themselves apart from the predominant culture. Subcultural capital is seen as an alternative to cultural and economic capital. It is born out of the strong desire of some young people to find their distinctive social-group characteristics outside the categories of class, gender, ethnicity, or race, and to do so, they seek them in certain tastes they share with others (Thornton 1995). But their desire to demarcate themselves often leads to the opposite of what they intended. The consumption and lifestyle patterns of youths in sub-groups become so alike as to serve as "uniforms" signaling a person's choice of fashion. This phenomenon has been referred to as the beginning of the "age of tribes" in consumption (Maffesoli 1996). In striving to be in tune with the latest fashion trend, subculture members are guided not by personal tastes and preferences, but tend to blend into what is typical for their circle, their "tribe" of "fashion followers", their shared lifestyles. This de-individualization and "segmentation by tribes" of lifestyles was typical for the late 1980s and the 1990s. And the trend has grown even stronger since the beginning of the 21st century. Present-day societies encompass "tribal societies" with respect to consumption, each "tribe" having its own specific lifestyle. The "tribal identity" of the members is linked with certain commodities they prefer, with certain social roles they chose and display, and with the social fantasies they identify with. The tribes may even decide to change their identity and choose a different lifestyle depending on the

latest fads. Youth subcultures at the turn of the 20th and the beginning of 21st century had a chameleon-like and conformist quality, choosing the lifestyle that happened to be “correct” and fashionable at the time. In this they differed from the youth subcultures and countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, which were characterized by the desire for individuality and independence, and involved protest against, and opposition to, the status quo. That is why we now refer to youth “post-subculture,” which is active and creative only in the choice of a lifestyle most suitable for a given social and life situation (Maffesoli 1996).

In present-day Japanese society, there are numerous, varied, and dynamically changing youth subculture groups. We will restrict our discussion to two of them, which to a great degree present a typical image of the youth subculture lifestyles of the late 20th and early 21st century. Our choice of cases has been determined by the following considerations:

- First, they have a significant presence in Japanese consumer society and lifestyle. They are an important part of contemporary Japanese youth culture.
- Second, their consumption of commodities has brought about the appearance of new market niches but also stimulated the development of certain sectors of the economy and of the market in general.
- Third, their impact has long ago crossed the boundaries of the country and is influencing the consumption and lifestyle patterns of young people at the global level. In a sense *kogyaru* and *otaku* are among the biggest and most influential “products” of Japanese “cultural export” in recent times.
- Fourth, they are an appropriate illustration of the role of youth subcultures in postmodern societies’ lifestyle changes.

Although both sexes are part of these two subcultures, *kogyaru* is preferred by young women, and *otaku* by young men. These groups are concentrated in Tokyo, Osaka and other large urban centers, but in recent years their popularity has been growing in smaller cities as well.

3 *Kogyaru*

Kogyaru includes different groups derived from the so-called *gyaru*. The name comes from the English word *gal*, a familiar expression for “girl.” It first appeared

in the 1970s, taking its designation from the eponymous brand of jeans. These jeans were preferred by young women interested in fashion, asserting their sexual freedom, and preferring to remain single long enough to enjoy many sexual contacts and be able to follow the changing fads. They created for themselves the image of girls who had “preserved their childish ways” well into adulthood, and tried to demonstrate this in all possible ways. In traditional society, the ideal of femininity was connected with the child-woman, and the contemporary Japanese woman is influenced by this tradition to a great degree. She has to be *kawaii*, i.e. not only good-looking, but lovable, “cute” in a childish way, and this quality must be displayed in all aspects of her outer appearance and behavior. Young women are the chief promoters of the “culture of cuteness,” and their lifestyle and way of thinking is *kawaii* (Kinsella 1995, 795).

In the late 1980s, the designation *gyaru* began to seem outdated and was substituted by *kogyaru* when referring especially to junior-high- and high-school girls of this subculture. *Kogyaru* emerged and became established as a subculture creating and spreading the street fashion of the mid 1990s. They wear makeup and short skirts, unlike their classmates, and assume the image of social outsiders belonging to the fringe of society. Later the negative perception of them gradually began to change, and they are now associated in the minds of people with the latest waves in street fashion. They are children trying to escape from reality into an imaginary world of fashion, and their striving for refinement and style gives them the self-confidence they otherwise lack (Keliyan 2008, 193). This social group is clearly distinguishable by indicators such as gender, place of residence, age, consumption patterns and lifestyle (Suzuki and Best 2003). *Kogyaru* are not a single subculture group; they are stratified into different subgroups comprising girls of different tastes but likewise of different financial status. It would be hard to systematize and characterize all the different trends within the general category of *kogyaru*. They are so diverse that, overall, this subculture seems rather eclectic with respect to style. What is common to them is: the wish to impress people and to always be in tune with the latest and most extravagant trends; fashion is the single great passion in their lives (Kawamura 2006).

This youth subculture is exceptionally dynamic: in it fashion trends follow one after the other, sometimes changing in a matter of days. These youths are “extreme” adherents of the idea of renewal, which is generally very important for Japanese culture and consumption. While some subgroups of *kogyaru* typically darken their faces with makeup (typical for the late 20th and early 21st century),

others make great efforts to whiten it as much as possible (popular trend among some of them in recent years). The *kogyaru* fashion trends that were most striking just a few years ago are now considered to be outmoded.

Especially prominent among the *kogyaru* are:

- *Ganguro*, who first appeared in the mid 1990s and were particularly popular in the first years of the 21st century. Their various subcategories strive to resemble in their outer appearance the “California girls” of Hollywood movies. Their faces are systematically bronzed at the solarium, or tanned with dark makeup. The makeup around the eyes is bright, and the hair is dyed blond. Falling in this category are various subgroups that differ in their style of dressing, makeup and accessories. *Manba* have strongly darkened, almost black faces, with contrasting white makeup around the eyes, and with flowers or stars drawn around the eyes, with very pale lipstick, and hair dyed very light blond. They dress in clothes with metal or neon designs and fabrics.
- *Lomanba* are a Lolita-type variety² of *manba*, but invariably sporting expensive designer clothes and LizLisa accessories. *Kokolulu* (so-called after their favorite brand name) also dress expensively. The youths in these several groups belong to middle strata families and have relatively good financial means, enabling them to buy the products typical for this fashion trend.
- *Himegyaru* are a subculture of girls who, in their desire to be *kawaii*, aim to look like fairy tale princesses. Their hair is long, painted in different colors ranging from blond to chestnut, and with romantic curls. They are dressed in expensive brand name garments and follow “refined” and elegant models of dress and outer appearance.
- *Gosurori*—The Japanese abbreviation for “Gothic Lolitas,” are among the most eye-catching of *kogyaru*. According to their style preferences, they may be “classical” *Lolitas*, “cute” *Lolitas*, “black,” “rose” or “white” *Lolitas* (dressed respectively in black, rose, or white colors), etc. This group emerged in the late 1990s; they have formed their own Internet community, and are connected with the *kosupure*³ movement. Their clothes are styled after the

² In Japan this is a very popular designation for teenager, taken from the name of the heroine of Vladimir Nabokov’s eponymous novel.

³ The name is derived from the English expression *costume play*: they wear the costumes and accessories of their favorite comic-book or cartoon heroes.

dolls typical for the Victorian Age and are generally more modest⁴ than those of vanguard *kogyaru* but include elements of current Gothic fashion⁵. Particularly fashionable at present is the “Alice in Wonderland” style of clothing, influenced by the illustrations of the book and by the film⁶. The lifestyle center of *gosurori* is the bridge near Harajuku Station in Tokyo, where they meet with others of their group and display their clothes and accessories⁷.

On the borderline between *kogyaru* and *bōsōzoku*⁸ (the deviant youth motorcycle bands, which, since the 1950s, have supplied young recruits for the *yakuza*) are the so-called *baikā* (from the English word biker). They are dressed in black leather clothes and accessories and drive powerful motorcycles. Their outer appearance includes stylized elements of the work clothes worn by car mechanics, drivers, and related professions. They belong to the lower social strata—the low middle and working class.

Some *kogyaru* members are past teen age: these are called *onegyaru* (elder sister *gyaru*) who try to continuously live out their high school dreams. The plans of these young women are to remain in this group for several years and, once they have had their fill of freedom and independence, to return to the normal everyday life of their coevals: then they will complete their education, start work, and create a family. Usually they come from middle strata families who can afford to support them and provide them the commodities they desire⁹. The brand commodities they prefer serve as a distinctive uniform for them: Burberry scarves, Louis Vuitton handbags, etc.

The few young men and boys in this subculture are: *sentaa gai*, who dye their hair in different colors, wear white makeup around the eyes, draw various little figures around the eyes, etc.; there are also the *young aristocrats*—the gallants accompanying Lolitas, etc.

⁴ Their skirts are approximately knee-length or slightly longer, some add crinolines to the skirts, others wear high boots.

⁵ Such as black clothes, leather accessories, etc.

⁶ Of course, this is not an accidental choice: like the heroine of the book, they are afraid to grow up and want to remain children forever.

⁷ All *kogyaru*, and especially the different kinds of Lolitas, are happy to have their pictures taken by passers-by and much appreciate such attention.

⁸ The literal meaning of the phrase is “raving tribe.”

⁹ Of course, members also include some young women of lower social strata, who are even prepared to prostitute themselves in order to achieve the necessary standard required by the group.

Each of these groups is devoted to, and centered around, a certain fashion magazine¹⁰, which, starting from the age of 12–13, becomes the favorite reading of these girls. When looking for fashion models to display their garments, the magazines turn to ordinary girls from the *kogyaru* community instead of to professionals, but they also hire celebrities who follow the styles created by teenage girls. The magazines present the latest in clothes, makeup, hairdo, and accessories, articles that are the hit for a certain period or in a single issue.

Since 2005 *kogyaru* have formed an Internet cyber-community (Kawamura 2006). Thanks to this, they can quickly and regularly exchange information, which is an important resource for maintaining their leading position in the field of street fashion. *Kogyaru* are very important consumers for the producers and dealers of fashion goods.

Since the 1990s, in addition to the fashion trends introduced by local and world fashion houses, street fashion has also become increasingly influential in Japan. While the Japanese who aim at “refinement” and “elegance” generally imitate Western trends, the teenagers in question are creatively combining odd, eclectic combinations of different, often incompatible, styles, thus “creating a product” that, in turn, is copied by the leading Western and East Asiatic fashion designers (Polhemus 1996, 12). This leads to the strange phenomenon of “commercialization of street fashion” (Kawamura 2006, 785), typical for postmodern societies.

In the postmodern world the borderline between “production and consumption of fashion” is dissolving (Crane 2000). *Kogyaru* have been called “*trendsetters*,” people who create fashion outside the leading designer studios (Suzuki and Best 2003). This subculture has become a leader of youth street fashion, and their “innovations” in this field often pass from the street into the world of pop culture and even of high fashion.

Kogyaru are law-makers in matters of taste for teenagers and young women around the age of 20, and they even have a strong influence on people who are not fervent followers. Their specific impact stems from the importance attached to modern pop culture by young people in postmodern Japanese society. They have managed to establish their position due to the specific resources they have at their disposal: leisure time, money to spend, communication contacts, facilitation

¹⁰ Some well-known and authoritative street fashion magazines are: *SOS*, *Tokyo Style News*, *Cawaii*, *Fine*, *Egg*.

through the Internet. Some objective factors of their importance include: the general values of Japanese culture that prove favorable to their role, such as the ideal of a lovable appearance—*kawaii*; the frequent economic crises, which create a situation where even less expensive goods become desirable; the attention shown to them by the media (Kinsella 2000). *Kogyaru* have become modern “fashion icons” also thanks to the importance and social value attached to fashion in Japan. The country has a market always on the lookout for innovations and which knows how to profit by them, including innovations in street fashion. Japan’s leading position in the world economy provides good opportunities for *kogyaru*: once they have established their status as legislators of fashion at the local level, they are able to become such abroad as well.

4 *Otaku*

Otaku is the second large subculture we will discuss here: its members are introverts who strive to escape from society into a world of collections, hobbies, technology, the Internet, and other such, as a way of “cultural resistance” against the foundations and values of society (Kinsella 2000). They first appeared in the early 1980s; they are mostly males aged 13 to 40, usually single, and living in the large cities. The typical *otaku* dresses in a casual sports style, and his outer appearance is far from the modish trends, which do not interest him in the least. *Otaku* illustrate some typical global trends in modern youth subcultures: such groups later appeared in the US and Western Europe as well, mainly under the influence of Japanese pop culture (Eng 2006). The literal meaning of the designation is “your home,” which is a very polite appellation for the second person singular. According to some scholars, the name of the group demonstrates the alienation of its members from other groups, their desire to politely keep their distance both from the dominant culture and from the people in their own group (Grassmuck 1990). They have been described as “pathological techno-fetishists suffering from social dysfunctions” and from communication problems (Grassmuck 1990).

Otaku are addicted to some hobby or other, and this has become the meaning of their life. They devote all their time, means, emotions, and efforts to hobbies, and have therefore been described as enthused, passionate, even maniacal, consumers (Kitabayashi 2004). *Otaku* are loyal customers who buy certain goods

persistently and with utter devotion; they collect all sorts of objects, including information related to their hobby. They are extreme adherents of the Japanese idea of “meaningful leisure”: for them leisure is such only when it is devoted to a hobby. Japan is a country with a developed hobby culture and this creates a favorable environment for the spread of this trend. But in a country where 86% of the population has a hobby, it is at times difficult to tell at what point the line of the “generally accepted” norms is being crossed (Keliyan 2008, 200). *Otaku* are also a typical phenomenon for a consumer society, for a society where people want to possess more and more products, which are getting outdated in a matter of hours, not days.

Otaku have a high level of IT literacy, and they form cyber-communities that unite them as consumers of certain products. Their best-known Internet forum is the IT icon, 2channel. These people are creatures of the Net culture, living in the unreal world of their hobby, and substituting the Internet forum in place of live contacts.

Otaku is essentially a phenomenon of postmodern society, with its characteristic consumption, communication, and lifestyle patterns. The developed digital culture and cult of innovations in Japan are congenial to such consumption. It is typical for them that they are creative consumers, for “they create by themselves, or take part in the creation of their adored objects” (Kitabayashi 2004). They take part in the writing of *manga* and even of films devoted to their own way of life. In 2004 the film *Densha otoko* (*The Man from the Train*) was created, which tells about the love between an *otaku* and a beautiful young woman. This movie changed public opinion about the group—until then society at large tended to look upon them as strange or even dangerous, as suspicious. This negative image was provoked by a criminal case dating from 1989, when a sadistic psychopathic killer was described in the media as an alleged *otaku*. But the film *Densha otoko* shows that these young people are not only no worse than other people, but are even capable of greater compassion and show willingness to help out strangers in trouble. The film was based on a true story that took part in the *otaku* Internet forum, the above-mentioned 2channel.

Their creative potential is displayed above all in perfecting various IT appliances and in the creation of new products. For instance, in order to be able to record their favorite TV programs on their computer and then edit them, they have invented a TV tuner for PC. Their innovations are influencing the policy of

producers and traders, and are determining trends of development of digital appliances. In this way they are stimulating industrial innovations and, as a consumer community, are forming a market for the innovations invented by them. *Otaku* are the first and most enthusiastic consumers of new products, even when these are still expensive. Their consumption is more than a craze for collecting; it is also a creative transformation of the products, involving their adaptation to the buyer's views and needs. Producers are studying the innovations made by *otaku* and re-orienting their production accordingly, looking for new solutions that will make the product preferred by mass consumers. The lifestyle of *otaku* is designated by the 3 C's:—collection, creativity, community (Kitabayashi 2004).

Otaku can be of very different kinds, the most widespread of which are: *manga otaku* (people sharing a craze for Japanese comics); *anime otaku* (passionate admirer of Japanese animated cartoons); *kosupure otaku* (people who dress like their favorite heroes from *manga* and *anime*); *pasokon otaku* (addicted to computers and to assembling computers from separate parts); *tokusatsu otaku* (collecting different figurines of superheroes from their favorite *manga* and *anime*), etc. Recently young female *otaku* have appeared, who are mostly enthusiasts of *manga* and *anime*, and follow the “romantic boys’ love” style¹¹.

The total number of *otaku* is calculated as being approximately 1,720,000. Some authors believe they are as many as 6,460,000 (Kitabayashi 2004). The market share of the commodities they buy each year amounts to 411 million yen, while according to Kitabayashi it is much larger, 1,408 million yen. These data clearly indicate the important market created around *otaku* and the significant economic role they play for the maintenance, growth and flourishing of this market. The shift of their consumer enthusiasm from one sphere to another is connected with their participation in other fan communities as well. This leads to a “dispersion and dissolving of their *otaku* identity” (Kitabayashi 2004) and to the appearance of new trends in their subculture.

5 Similarities and Differences in the Lifestyles of *kogyaru* and *otaku*

What unites *otaku* with *kogyaru* is their passionate devotion to their favorite occupation, and their creativity. Both these large youth subcultures display

¹¹ They are called *bīeru otaku*, coming from BL, the initials for “boy love”.

creativity in the fields to which they are devoted. Both are opposed to the status quo, to commonly accepted values, norms, and rules of Japanese society. *Otaku*, unlike *kogyaru*, are individualists who communicate with others of their kind mostly virtually. They are not tempted by fashion, and generally find it difficult to communicate with the opposite sex¹².

These two youth subcultures are examples of postmodern changes in the dissemination and perception of fashion trends and of innovative products. According to G. Simmel (1971), the first to assimilate the new fashion trends are consumers belonging to the higher strata, after which the fashion trickles down the social ladder, the lower levels imitating the upper ones. In postmodern societies the situation has changed, for the creators and spreaders of fashionable and innovative trends may be “diffused” across various stratification positions – hence, the theory describing this phenomenon is called “diffusion theory” (Rogers 1995, 263–280). It is no longer necessarily true that the first adherents of vanguard trends and innovations are of a high status: the more important factor is that there be an existing social network to inform them. Also important for them is to have enough resources; they have a strong desire to experiment and are willing to break with conventions (Crane 2000, 194; Suzuki and Best 2003).

Both *kogyaru* and *otaku* demonstrate the particularities of postmodern power relationships between the dominant culture and the subcultures. The dominant one turns into “nominally dominant” and the subcultures strongly influence and even modify it. This reversal is another example of the effaced borderline between high and low culture in postmodern societies (Lash 1990). The consumption patterns and lifestyles of youth subculture groups have an increasingly strong influence on Japanese consumer society. They are visibly modeling the lifestyle centers in the large megapolises like Tokyo and Osaka.

Adherents of various subgroups of *kogyaru* shop from specific stores specialized in the respective fashion styles and offering brand name commodities from their favorite designer houses. These stores are concentrated in the neighborhoods preferred by these youth groups, such as Harajuku and Shibuya. The back streets of Harajuku—Ura Hara, are full of small boutiques selling expensive commodities in limited numbers. This urban center of “high street

¹² In recent years, as mentioned, these too have been changing; there are now women *otaku*, married *otaku*, and family couples in which both spouses are *otaku*.

fashion” has a purposely-contrived marginal style and underground atmosphere. It is specialized in presenting the difference and uniqueness of youth subcultures.

Shibuya is emblematic for a more mass category of consumption associated with *kogyaru*. Its symbols and markers are *depaato* Shibuya 109 and Shibuya 109–2 (Kawamura 2006, 786). The dream of every *kogyaru* is to work in one of these stores. The wages of shop attendants are relatively low and their work does not require special skills, but it is prestigious because they are “experts” in the field of “street fashion”. They are among the leading creators and disseminators of fashion trends and attract crowds of clients. They are the “face” and inspiration of the *kogyaru* lifestyle centers, the floors and shops of which resound with the elated cries “*kawaii*” of enthused young female clients. The store attendant girls in such stores often appear as models on the pages of the street fashion magazines.

The specialization and regional distribution of consumer and lifestyle centers of *kogyaru* have made them a site of subcultural tourism for young women living in smaller cities and remote prefectures. On non-working days they travel to see their idols and, with their assistance, they devote the day to shopping tour of the cult stores. They wear similar clothes and makeup, and “show themselves” around the urban spaces that are emblematic for the subgroup. Then come photo sessions documenting their one-day of a “new life,” and on the following day they are back in their hometowns and resume their usual social roles.

The best-known consumer and lifestyle center for *otaku* is Akihabara in Tokyo: in its streets they can find everything they need to pursue their “maniacal hobby” in tune with fast-changing trends. There also are the so-called *meido cafe*¹³, a favorite place for every *otaku*. These examples of the “dream world” first opened in Akihabara in 2000¹⁴ and were later followed by a version for women *otaku*, the so-called *shitsuji kissa* (butler café).

The popularity of these places is connected with the *amae* culture. The term *amae* is difficult to translate but approximately means “emotional dependence,” “emotional comfort,” “need for a passive love.” Doi Takeo (1981) characterizes *amae* as one of the basic principles that explain Japanese culture. Dependence on

¹³ Transliteration of the English word *maid*. The waitresses are dressed in chambermaid uniforms from the Victorian Age, in black garments, white aprons and bonnets, but with short skirts and low necklines; they often resemble characters from *manga* and *anime*. *Meido* is a word that also refers to female characters from *manga* and *anime*.

¹⁴ Under Japanese influence, such cafes have opened in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Mexico, and Canada.

the attitude, affection, and consideration of others, the emotional need to be comforted and “loved” by them, is only one reason for the growth of business of these cafes and their rising popularity among *otaku*, whose *amae* is evidently linked to a need for the atmosphere and service these cafes offer. Perhaps *otaku* would not seek them in this artificial world if they could find them in the real one. Since the atmosphere and service in *shitsuji kissa* and *meido cafe* resemble the fantasy world of *manga* and *anime*, and the staff behave and dress like characters in these fantasies, these places are sorts of “thematic restaurants” of the *kosupure* culture (Keliyan 2008, 213).

6 Subculture Lifestyles and the Problems Facing Postmodern Japan

The causes for the existence and growth of these two influential subcultures—*kogyaru* and *otaku*—are related to the problems facing postmodern Japanese society as a whole. These are the social and economic difficulties befalling the economic system, the educational institutions, and the family. The changes that have taken place in the value system are enhancing the feeling of loneliness and alienation. The strict social hierarchy, the increasingly difficult balance between working time and leisure, tension at work, the necessity for the young generations to work as hard as their predecessors in order to deal with economic problems, the high demands imposed on them by the Japanese morality of duty—all this drives *kogyaru* and *otaku* into the realm of fantasy, where the rules are completely different. The education system rears people in the duty of tireless labor, subjection to rules, obedience to the requirements of the group and society. The upcoming generations are also reared to follow the principles of harmony: to be radiant and courteous, not to express their negative feelings and emotions, to fit smoothly and without conflict into their social environment and into society, to pursue group goals even when these are damaging to their personal goals. These demands at times prove too severe and unbearable for young people. In their desire to escape from the rules and pressure of the groups to which they belong institutionally, they create new rules and informal groups of their own, which are meant to be the rules and groups of their “other self.” What is paradoxical about subcultures is that in their striving to be different, and even to oppose the commonly accepted rules, members of these groups ultimately follow rules as well, and in extreme forms at that.

Adherents of these two subcultures are like children who do not want to grow up and to leave the world of dreams and fantasies. Though fleeing from social requirements, rules, and obligations, and following their inner urges, young people at some point find they are past teen age, have entered the age of maturity, but have lost the desire and even the capacity to grow up, to create a family and to assume social responsibility.

The consumer and lifestyle centers of modern Japanese youth subcultures (Akihabara, Shibuya, Harajuku, etc.) resemble thematic parks, Disneyland, or a parade of Walt Disney characters. The streets of Shibuya and Harajuku, with the *kogyaru* and Lolitas parading around in them, recall a festive carnival, except that the holiday here is daily. These people are themselves an attraction for tourists visiting such places in order to see “live” the exotic young people, and to attend their “street spectacle.” This spectacle is part of the postmodern everyday life, of the postmodern street, in which the tirelessly working *sarariiman* (“salaryman,” white-collar worker) and the idle young people with a “strange” appearance mingle. All this illustrates the increasing Disneyfication of contemporary Japanese society, in which the imagined and real worlds exchange places. It turns out that dreams and fantasies can not only be a haven for young people but a source of growth for a large and profitable market.

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