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“The Social Conscience of Cuteness:
Exploring Japanese Street Fashion Through an Activist Lens”

Before discussing Japanese street-fashion movements and their larger effect on contemporary Japanese culture and society, one must first understand the set of terms that will be used in this discussion.” Four important terms to know are as follows. First is Kawaii. Kawaii is the Japanese translation of the English word “cute.” Kawaii culture and Kawaii fashion refer to the aesthetics generated by this Japanese culture of cuteness. However, it should be noted that Kawaii is more nuanced in its use than the English word “cute.” Kawaii can be a positive emotion or state of being along with its use as a description for something cute. Kawaii Fashion—the word fashion is typically capitalized—is also referred to as Harajuku Fashion. Harajuku is the second term on our list. It can be explained easily: it was named in reference to a place—the Harajuku district in Tokyo, a popular shopping area where many fashion trends gain popularity. There are even magazines dedicated to documenting the different street styles of Harajuku, leading to their widespread popularity in Japan.

We have two more terms to explain. Both developed from some specific subcultures, such as Menhera, which is the third term on our list. It’s also known as Yami-Kawaii. Menhera translates from Japanese to literally mean, in English, “Mental Healthier.” With its reference to psychological states, we have to ask: how does Menhera fit into our picture of the “cute” aesthetic in street fashion? And where did the term Menhera come from? In terms of fashion, Menhera is a Japanese fashion and subculture that combines soft and colorful elements of Kawaii fashion and combines them with allusions to sickness, pain, and mental illness. We should

emphasize that Yami-Kawaii is used interchangeably with Menhera, and directly translates to the English-language term “sick-cute.”

We’ve arrived at the last term on our list: the street fashion known as Lolita Fashion, which is inspired by ideas of Rococo and Victorian styles, femininity, and modesty. The key signifiers of the fashion are first, a dress with a bell-shaped skirt that usually stops at the knee (referred to as jumperskirts if they have straps, or one pieces if they have sleeves), second, puff-sleeved blouses, third, printed tights, and lastly, extravagant accessories piled high. According to the scholar Masafumi Monden, Lolita Fashion was born out of a growing desire among Japanese women to distance themselves from what has been called the male gaze.¹ It is important to emphasize that practitioners of the style say that Lolita-Fashion has no relation to *Lolita*, the controversial 1955 novel by American-Russian author Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), whose main character, the male-identified Hubert Humphrey, is sexually obsessed by a 12-year-old girl. Followers of this fashion say that it is named Lolita-Fashion purely because of the elegant sound of the word. This is a very significant factor that we must underline: many Japanese brands utilize a decorative sense of European languages. For example: the Japanese brand, Angelic Pretty, produced a dress named “Chateau d’Écume” which directly translates to “scum castle.”

With our list of terms complete, we can now turn to Japanese street-fashion movements considered in a larger context. It is likely that many of us have preconceived notions of the stylistic features of 21st-century Japanese fashion. These preconceived notions include bright colors, a plethora of plastic accessories, and unconventional silhouettes. Indeed, Japanese fashion is known for being dramatic, different, and foremost, as we’ve already seen, very cute. However,

¹Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan. Japanese Fashion Cultures*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.

the history behind certain Japanese street style movements is far more radical than their demure aesthetics would lead us to believe. We will now see how the uniqueness of Japanese fashion comes from the unique workings of Japanese society and cultural norms, and the way in which many styles coming out of Harajuku are in reaction to a contemporary moment or a challenge to older societal structures. The Japanese subcultures Menhera and Lolita both challenge systems of oppression, which are ableism and sexism, respectively. They do this through dress, and, much like an artistic movement, they do this also through the theory *behind* the dress. With this in mind, one can analyze the ways in which the specifications of these two styles relate directly back to a call for social change.

Let us return to Menhera or Yami Kawaii style. We have seen how it is characterized aesthetically by a mixture of anime motifs, pastel color schemes, and medical supplies as accessories. One of the more popular outfits worn in Menhera is an oversized shirt (often worn as a dress), a short skirt or shorts, and patterned or colorful tall socks or tights. Nurse or maid outfits are also popular garment choices that are incorporated into the style. Outfits are accessorized with *faux* injuries and bandages. Examples are many. One is an eyepatch with fake blood. Another is the inclusion of fake weapons that have been customized to look more cute. Popular examples of this accessory, that is, fake weapons, would be a bubblegum pink silicone gun decorated with charms and stickers. Another item is from the world of clinical medicine, but also addiction: the syringe. In Menhera or Yami Kawaii style, syringes are often full of colored resin or glitter so that they can be worn as jewelry or just held as a prop.

We encounter here an example of the division between our preconceptions of Japanese fashion (that it's very cute) and the full range of factors that generated a particular style, in this case, Menhera. While the aesthetics of Menhera Fashion may seem shocking or controversial,

what sets this style apart is its commitment to putting accessibility at its forefront. Menhera Fashion was created to be a fashion community by and for disabled people and that is reflected in its garments.² Centering garments around the needs of people with disabilities requires the voices of those with disabilities to be at the forefront. Pieces like big t-shirts, sneakers, and soft fabrics are chosen deliberately for their accessibility, and rules against things like elaborate makeup or high heels are made to keep the clothing style as inclusive as possible.³

The issues of first, an individual's psychological well-being—in other words, the issue of “Mental Health”—and second, the right of every citizen, including people with disabilities to enjoy access to all tiers in a society, are notoriously taboo in Japan. It takes a scientific approach to understand why these social imperatives so often go unaddressed. In a survey conducted between 2002-2006 about mental healthcare in Japan, barriers to these services for Japanese people were examined in order to understand why a large percentage of people in the country did not seek help when they experienced psychological distress. The study found that the majority of reasons for dropping out of care or not seeking care were social or personal. These reasons included: hoping the problem would go away by itself; the inconvenience of getting such a process underway, and lastly, not being sure where to start when seeking help. Financial and institutional issues were not at the top of the list: access and affordability were factors that ranked in a low position on the hierarchy of obstacles.⁴

So where does Menhera come in? And how can dressing a certain way be considered advocacy for disability rights? Experts on the subculture believe that Menhera Fashion must

² Puvithel. “Coping through Art Yamikawaii/Menhera Fashion.” *Sea of Serenity Convention*. Panel presented at the Sea of Serenity Convention, 2020.

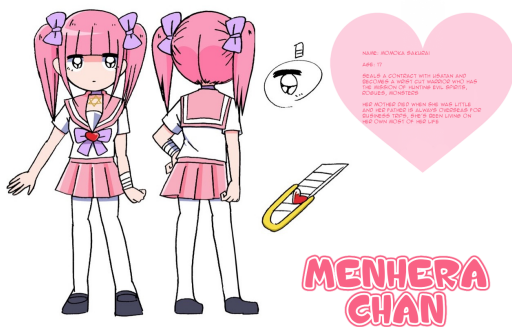
³ Puvithel. “Coping through Art Yamikawaii/Menhera Fashion.” *Sea of Serenity Convention*. Panel presented at the Sea of Serenity Convention, 2020

⁴ Kanehara, Umeda. “Barriers to Mental Health Care in Japan: Results from the World Mental Health Japan Survey: Barriers to Mental Health Care in Japan.” *Psychiatry and clinical neurosciences* (March 2015).

have a social conscience or else it can be reduced to an aestheticization of illness.⁵ As a result, I believe that the act of dressing Menhera in itself has implications that challenge the public perception of people living with disabilities. Wearing Menhera Fashion in public is an acknowledgement of a need for social change. That is because the wearer becomes a visual reminder of often-ignored “invisible disabilities” associated with mental illness. The anatomy of a Menhera outfit is designed specifically to raise public awareness of mental health and a citizen's right to emotional stability by utilizing inviting aspects like pastels and glitter to draw the viewer in, then asking that viewer to examine the less palatable subject-matter depicted.

Some of the visuals used in Menhera can be upsetting, such as the aforementioned glitter-filled syringes or references to symptoms of mental illness like intrusive thoughts. It is important to make a distinction that Menhera fashion is not meant to be triggering to individuals that may be sensitive to the topics at hand. To create art that may cause harm to those who are mentally ill would seem antithetical to the core of Menhera activism. However, cases in which an artist creates insensitive or triggering work do occur. Despite the primary message of Menhera being one of positivity and awareness, the style has received backlash for glamorizing mental

illness.⁶ One such example of this backlash is the work of comic artist Ezaki Bisuko. Bisuko created the Menhera-Chan character and manga series in 2014. The storyline of which is a point of contention within the Menhera community.⁷ The character of Menhera-Chan



⁵ Anonymous, “A Look on Menhera as Fashion,” accessed December 1, 2020, <https://fymenhera.tumblr.com/discourse>.

⁶ Puvithel. “Coping through Art Yamikawaii/Menhera Fashion.” *Sea of Serenity Convention*. Panel presented at the Sea of Serenity Convention, 2020.

⁷ Puvithel. “Coping through Art Yamikawaii/Menhera Fashion.” *Sea of Serenity Convention*. Panel presented at the Sea of Serenity Convention, 2020.

Pictured: an illustration of Menhera-Chan by Ezaki Bisuko (<https://menhera-chan.tumblr.com/chara>)

wears a pink sailor uniform, a 6-pointed star necklace in reference to the Kagome crest (which is a symbol in the Shinto religion) and bandages on her wrist. These bandages symbolize that Menhera-Chan struggles with self-harm. The plot of the Manga revolves around Menhera-Chan discovering she has magical powers that can only be unleashed by inflicting pain on herself. Additionally, the comedy of Menhera-Chan comes at the expense of her mental illness. Bisuko suggests that the manga is self-referential satire, and these comics are therapeutic for him to write.⁸ The artist may find solace in his work, but the message of Menhera is to prevent the kinds of behaviors he depicts through advocacy. Therefore, encouraging self-harm by glorifying it may be taking Menhera backwards as a movement in the eyes of it's activists.

To further examine the reasons why Menhera-Chan is deemed offensive, we can compare it to the work of another Menhera artist: Puvithel and her work in collaboration with artist Jiiri entitled "I Did Not Hurt Myself". The digital drawing is a monochrome red image on a black background, and features a female figure with tears in her eyes, bandage-wrapped arms crossed to form an X and a stoic gaze. Above the figure is an arch emblazoned with the phrase "I did not hurt myself". The figure appears strong despite her apparent suffering. Puvithel describes the work as "A reminder to everyone that those who suffer from PTSD did not cause their own PTSD - someone or something hurt them."⁹ The main figure appears strong but still acknowledges her suffering. The text above suggests



⁸ Refinery 29. *The Dark Side Of Harajuku Style You Haven't Seen Yet | Style Out There | Refinery29*. Youtube, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wsk3Oa_3F8.

⁹ Rajan, Puvithel. "A Message From the Menhera Community." Puvithel. Puvithel, September 26, 2019. <https://www.puvithel.com/blog/menheraquotes>.

Pictured: I Did Not Hurt Myself by Puvithel Rajan and Jiiri (<https://www.puvithel.com/shop/anxiety-angel-ribbon-cutsew>)

acknowledgement of pain without giving into it as well. Compared to Menhera-Chan, Puvithel's figure displays significantly more grace. The "I did not Hurt Myself" design represents mental health in a far different light. Puvithel's design is meant to empower the wearer to find strength in their trauma, opposed to making light of it.

In the concluding section of our discussion, we will return to Lolita Fashion, a style requires our particular attention given its name. Once again, however, closer examination reveals a Japanese subculture that implements social activism in its clothing style. Lolita, as we've seen, is a Japanese street fashion with a very specific look. A Lolita outfit, or a "coordinate," as they are sometimes called, consists of a very specific shape. An accurate Lolita coordinate will have a rounded skirt with a petticoat underneath that ends between one's knee and ankle; covered shoulders; socks or stockings; dress shoes such as pumps or mary-janes (a particular kind of traditional shoe for girls with a strap that fastens with a buckle) and complementary accessories such as wrist cuffs, hats, and jewelry. Although the silhouette of Lolita borrows from womenswear of the Victorian and Rococo periods, I want to emphasize that contemporary interpretations of the fashion branch far enough out from their source material to distinguish themselves from any kind of historical costuming. Lolita fashion is one of the first distinct styles to come out of Harajuku in the late twentieth century. Fashion journals of the 1990's and 2000's, like the very popular *FRUiTS* magazine, were the ones to name and classify Lolita as a subculture.

To some, the idea of Lolita fashion may appear restrictive by limiting the wearer's body movement and comfort. The fact that Lolita is a modest fashion that requires the body to be covered also may appear oppressive. However, many Lolitas consider the fashion to be liberating. One can theorize that part of this feeling of liberation is the physical space that a

Lolita dress takes up. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to take up minimal space and little attention, but it is nearly impossible not to have a strong physical presence while wearing such extravagant garb. Lolita is hyper-feminine, yet nothing about dressing like a Rococo-era noblewoman while existing in modern times is demure.

To perceive Lolita fashion as infantilizing or childish is understandable at first glance, especially given the name. While Lolita has nothing to do with any sort of ageplay, it does utilize ideals we often associate with childhood. The concept of Lolita, extravagant dress that resembles European royalty, relates to the idea of whimsy and fantasy by allowing the wearer to take on the role of a princess or prince through dressing similarly to one. Dressing in Lolita, much like dressing in Menhera, is a bold statement of outward expression. Becoming a contemporary princess is a common sentiment amongst Lolitas, including Katie Zomer: the owner of a Lolita clothing shop in the Netherlands. Zomer was quoted saying “It's not like I'm a little girl and still want to be a princess, but I just really love dressing up like this... ..My outfits are a piece of art.”¹⁰ As someone who has worn Lolita fashion myself, I can attest to feeling empowerment through clothing that makes such a bold visual statement.

Another aspect of women finding empowerment through Lolita is the asexuality of the fashion. Despite the unfortunate coincidence of the name of the fashion being shared with Nabokov's infamous novel, practitioners of Lolita culture are firm in their stance that Lolita Fashion should never be sexualized or fetishized. In the book *Japanese Fashion Cultures*, scholar Masafumi Monden places a link between the modesty of Lolita fashion and the Japanese cultural concept of *shōjo*. Shōjo is defined by Monden as an adolescent girl who signifies innocence, purity and femininity. Monden goes into further detail, asserting that the shōjo

¹⁰ Refinery29 TV, “Lolitas Of Amsterdam | Style Out There | Refinery29,” YouTube (YouTube, December 4, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV3OtzUwcPg>.

archetype exists outside of the social identities often given to women by patriarchal society: such as motherhood, hypersexuality, or marriage.¹¹ To relate this back to Lolita fashion, the idea of the shōjo breaks from the constructs of womanhood while still appearing feminine.

To protect its members from being subject to sexualization there are safeguards in place in the Lolita community, which are especially important given that most Lolita spaces are all ages. To prevent online harassment, most Lolita forums on websites such as Facebook are private and protected by questionnaires and review teams. Take the Facebook group “Big Sisters of Lolita Fashion” for example. The forum contains over seven thousand members, and functions for people interested in Lolita fashion to consult each other on questions regarding anything from styling to self confidence in the fashion. “Big Sisters of Lolita Fashion” has an application to be completed about one’s knowledge of Lolita fashion before being allowed access to the group and a second application to consider oneself a “Big Sister” or giver of advice. The group is heavily moderated and has a strict ban on sexually explicit content.¹² Fighting sexual harassment online and providing safe spaces for women is yet another way in which Lolita fashion challenges patriarchal constructs.

By examining Menhera and Lolita fashion, we have thus demonstrated the importance of these movements and their larger effect on contemporary Japanese culture and society. Both of these fashions utilize aesthetics to draw attention to a need for social change. Menhera accomplishes this by challenging the public perception of physical and mental disability through its use of attention grabbing visual tactics in garments and focus on accessibility. Additionally, Lolita fashion challenges patriarchal beauty standards by creating a clothing style that allows for

¹¹ Monden, Masafumi. *Japanese Fashion Cultures: Dress and Gender in Contemporary Japan. Japanese Fashion Cultures*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015.

¹² “Facebook Groups.” Facebook. Facebook Groups. Accessed December 9, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1527936637425516/about>.

people of all genders to express their femininity without being subject to objectification.

Together these two fashions demonstrate the utilization of Kawaii culture and aesthetics to make social statements in Japan.

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