Child's Play? Exploring the Significance of Kawaii for Decora and Fairy-Kei Fashion Practitioners in Harajuku through a Case-Focused Analysis

NEW VOICES IN JAPANESE STUDIES

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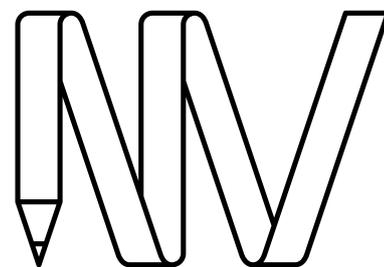
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ABSTRACT

Literature that explores alternative *kawaii* ('cute'; 'adorable') fashion associated with Harajuku, Japan, argues that it is an infantile practice in which practitioners seek to reject adult thoughts, feelings and responsibility through childish mannerisms and dress. These understandings of *kawaii* fashion, however, are formed without input from practitioners themselves. Drawing upon a case-focused analysis of alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioners in Harajuku derived from semi-structured interviews, this article seeks to contribute to this discussion from a sociological perspective. The article focusses on *decora* and fairy *kei*, two alternative *kawaii* fashion styles in Harajuku that typically incorporate toys and clothing intended for children, and in doing so blur the boundaries between acceptable attire for children and adults. The article provides an overview of literature on the relationship between *kawaii* fashion and 'the little girl' (*shōjo*) and identifies new possibilities for expanding on current understandings of *kawaii*. It also seeks to complicate views that equate alternative *kawaii* fashion practice with childishness by placing the voices of two practitioners in dialogue with scholarly research in this area to date. In doing so, the article advocates for the voices of practitioners to be considered in future scholarship on alternative *kawaii* fashion with ties to Harajuku.

KEYWORDS

affect; alternative communities; contemporary; fashion; gender; girl culture; girls; Harajuku; kawaii; shōjo; subculture; women; youth; youth culture

INTRODUCTION

Harajuku (原宿), a shopping district in Tokyo, has been associated with spectacular fashion since the 1970s.[1] One form of fashion that has emerged in this area since the 1980s is alternative *kawaii* fashion. The term '*kawaii*', which is rendered variously in Japanese script as 'かわいい', 'カワイイ' and '可愛い', has been defined by scholars as 'adorable' or 'cute' and is primarily recognised as a gendered mode of expression for women and girls.[2] '*Kawaii* fashion' is a broad term which refers to fashion informed by the concept and aesthetic of *kawaii*. Over recent decades, numerous subgenres of *kawaii* fashion have spawned across Japan, each with their own specific conventions, aesthetics, purposes and intents. One grouping of these subgenres can be described as 'alternative *kawaii* fashion', as its practitioners aim to create new modes of dress and expression, and do not adhere to more mainstream *kawaii* fashion conventions. This grouping of alternative *kawaii* fashion is informed by the locale of practice and the ways in which practitioners resist mainstream fashion conventions. In this article, I use the term 'alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with Harajuku' in acknowledgement that I research just one instance amongst a large field of *kawaii* fashion practices in the Japanese context. Anglophone scholarship on *kawaii* fashion has largely focused on Lolita fashion (ロリータファッション), which is one specific subgenre of this practice associated with Harajuku (for example, Winge 2008; Younker 2011; Nguyen 2016). In contrast, this article is dedicated to two lesser-documented subgenres known as '*decora*' (デコラー) and 'fairy *kei*' (フェアリー系), as they were practiced from 2013 to 2015. The purpose of this article is to complicate the understanding of the extent to which women who participate in these two subgenres may view their mode of dress as a child-like, infantile and playful practice. I aim to situate *decora* and fairy *kei* within a broader discussion of the significance and implications of young people in Japan using alternative *kawaii* fashion to navigate pathways to adulthood.

Scholarship has acknowledged that '*kawaii*' as it is used in today in Japan has flexible and diverse meanings and is used by different groups in different ways (Koga 2009; McVeigh 2000, 135; Miller 2011). In this article, I use the term '*kawaii* culture' to refer to a variety of practices including fashion, aesthetics, performance, appearance and disposition that are centred around the concept of 'the adorable'. *Kawaii* culture involves both an appreciation of things that are thought to be adorable, as well as an interest in becoming adorable for other people. In the context of alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with Harajuku, practitioners are interested in exploring what is adorable for them and in being affirmed as adorable by their peers.

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1 The Harajuku area has historically served as the main point of access to Meiji Shrine. Following World War II, trendy boutiques selling Western fashion began to be established in the area. Since then, the site has played host to many generations of youth subcultures and communities. Today, Harajuku's main streets are densely lined with shops and shopping centres that sell an array of fashion-related goods and confectionery. These stretch to the very back streets of the area, known as *Ura-Harajuku* (裏原宿; 'back of Harajuku'), and continue until the neighbouring suburb of Omotesando, which is home to a combination of residential properties and luxury shopping boutiques.

2 *Kawaii* is a multifarious concept, with each script having its own connotations. In Harajuku, practitioners favour the more casual renderings of the term; namely, 'カワイイ' or 'かわいい'. A comprehensive discussion of *kawaii* is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information, see Monden (2015), Yano (2015), McVeigh (2000), Nittono (2013, 2016), Ihara and Nittono (2011), Kanai and Nittono (2015), Nishimura (2019), Abe (2015), Yomota (2006) and Aoyagi (2015).

This article responds to Amelia Groom's (2011, 205) argument that practitioners in Harajuku employ *kawaii* fashion as a "tactic of empowerment" through the "avoidance" of adulthood by participating in child-like play (205). In making this claim, Groom's article is one of many to respond to Sharon Kinsella's (1995) conceptualisation of *kawaii* fashion more broadly as a means of exploring alternative pathways to adulthood. Kinsella's (1995) chapter "Cuties in Japan" is regularly cited as an authoritative source in English-language scholarship on *kawaii* culture. However, as 25 years have passed since Kinsella made her original observations, our understandings of the nuances of *kawaii* fashion need to be recast in terms of contemporary practice. Furthermore, if we are to continue to view alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area as a resistant and subversive practice, as Steele et al. (2010), Godoy (2007) and Kawamura (2012) propose, then the relationship between it and adulthood requires careful conceptualisation. This is because scholars also argue that while the use of *kawaii* by women is multifaceted, it can also reinforce gender inequality in the Japanese context (see for instance Akita 2005; Yano 2015, 56; Koga 2009, 206–20). This argument creates an additional layer of complexity. While participants might attempt to resist mainstream adult expectations by 'acting like children', they also inadvertently reproduce heteronormative gender norms present in the experience of womanhood in Japan.

In this article, I draw upon English-language literature on *kawaii* fashion, and specifically on alternative *kawaii* fashion affiliated with Harajuku, along with a case-focused analysis based on qualitative interviews conducted in Harajuku between 2013 and 2015. My informants reflected on whether *decora* and fairy-*kei* practitioners view their mode of dress as infantile or whether there is more to the practice than outsiders have proposed. As a sociologist trained in the interpretivist tradition, positioned as an Australian-born alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioner with ties to the Harajuku area since 2009, I call for further research that incorporates the voices of practitioners when conceptualising the relationship between alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with Harajuku and broader discussions of women and *kawaii* culture. I argue that alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area enables practitioners to bring colour and creativity to their everyday adult lives, and that it is not intended to be a form of regression or resistance to 'growing up'. Contrary to Kinsella's argument, my informants related that *kawaii* fashion provides practitioners with a wealth of experience as it involves responses to objects that are emotive, imaginative and energising. A secondary aim of this article is to provide an account of *decora* and fairy-*kei* practices, which are documented in journalistic texts but have yet to be explored in Anglophone academic literature.

The article begins by introducing *decora* and fairy *kei* as two particular styles of alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area. It then provides an overview of the literature on *kawaii* fashion and of the study's methodology, followed by two case studies. The first case study focusses on a practitioner who reflects on dressing in fairy-*kei* fashion and her interest in colourful clothing, which she feels goes against social norms in Japan. The second follows a *decora* practitioner who reflects on what she sees as

the playful and spontaneous nature of her fashion. The article concludes by discussing the implications of both case studies with reference to the literature and makes recommendations for further research.

AN OVERVIEW OF DECORA AND FAIRY-*KEI* FASHION

Decora and fairy *kei* became prevalent in the Harajuku area in the late 2000s, worn publicly by individuals while shopping or meeting with friends. It has been documented primarily in the form of street photography and on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. It is difficult to determine the number of participants in these subgenres, as they do not organise themselves into formal groups or clubs and little information on these modes of dress is available in either popular media or scholarship.[3] Regardless, these subgenres are worthy of note due to their visual salience in representing the Harajuku area, as seen in Japanese street fashion publications such as the print magazine *KERA* (1998–2017; *decora* and fairy *kei* are evident in issues from 2012 onwards) or the *KERA* photo book *Harajuku Wonderland* (2019), along with other books such *Decora.Book* (2016) by Shōichi Aoki [青木 正一]. *KERA* is a print magazine which was published by Kodansha and ran from 1998 to 2017. It featured content such as clothing editorials using products from fashion labels affiliated with Harajuku, as well as clothing and make-up tutorials and street photography. Shōichi Aoki, meanwhile, was the editor of the influential *FRUiTS* magazine, which captured street fashion in the Harajuku area from 1997 to 2017. English titles that capture *decora* and fairy-*kei* fashion include Card's (2014) *Tokyo Adorned* and Okazaki and Johnson's (2013) *Kawaii! Japan's Culture of Cute*. These modes of dress are also documented online via street photography websites such as *Tokyo Fashion* (2019).[4] Although *decora* fashion is still worn and documented in street photography and social media, fairy *kei* appears to be in decline at the time of writing. However, as these subgenres can be quite unpredictable, it is possible that fairy *kei* or a variation thereof may re-emerge.

Whilst the *decora* and fairy-*kei* styles have their own specific traits, both are characterised by full skirts made from gauze and tulle, colourful clothing, and the layering of accessories including bracelets, hair clips, necklaces and rings (Groom 2011, 193; Yagi 2018, 17). Based on these sources, popular items among *decora* and fairy-*kei* fashion practitioners include oversized vintage t-shirts and sweaters, bright American sports jackets and knitwear from the 1980s, striped socks and platform shoes. One specific practice shared by these two styles is upcycling, whereby objects are transformed into accessories which participants use to adorn their bodies. While fairy *kei* uses softer colour palettes and has a greater focus on thrifting 1980s American childhood paraphernalia, *decora* fashion uses brighter colours and has less

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3 Some of the few examples of print media documenting *decora* fashion include KERA (2012, 44; 2014, 22), Okada (2012, 40–44), Keet (2016) and Aoki (2016). It is interesting to note that in the *KERA* magazine editorials such as the ones cited here, 'colourful' (カラフル) is used as a descriptor for these fashion cultures, rather than the more specific terms '*decora*' or 'fairy *kei*'. Further research into why these media did not adequately document this phenomenon is needed, however one hypothesis could be that these subgenres are not strongly affiliated with a particular designer label and are thus difficult to market to. For rare examples of English-language scholarship discussing these genres, see Groom (2011) and Yagi (2018).

4 *Tokyo Fashion* is an online blog dedicated to documenting street fashion worn in the Tokyo area, and has a section dedicated to documenting clothing worn specifically in the Harajuku area. The website can be accessed via www.tokyofashion.com.

predictable themes, as practitioners create their own based on things they like, such as particular animals, favourite characters or monsters. Another difference between these subgenres is the volume of accessories worn and their placement. While fairy-*kei* practitioners may wear a few statement pieces, such as a necklace with a large toy pendant, *decora* is characterised by excess: clips are layered in the fringe and behind the ears, and multiple bracelets and rings are worn. Practitioners are primarily young women; however, a few men are also involved.

Both fairy-*kei* and *decora* fashion practitioners source clothing from second-hand clothing stores, such as Kinji or Sankyu Mart in Harajuku, but also shop at specialist boutiques. Some *decora* fashion practitioners take inspiration from Sebastian Masuda's Harajuku boutique 6% DOKI DOKI, founded in 1995, and ACDC Rag, another Harajuku boutique founded in 1980. Fairy *kei*'s look was primarily solidified through the formation in 2004 of Sayuri Tabuchi's thrift and hand-made goods store Spank!, which sells vintage clothing sourced from America.[5] Fairy *kei* has been further shaped by Japanese clothing boutiques such as Nile Perch, which sells new clothing including baby doll dresses, oversized knitwear, oversized t-shirts and hand-made accessories, all in pastel tones. A key part of both *decora* and fairy *kei* is creativity and customisation, which is expressed through the assemblage and upcycling of items into new outfits. This is in contrast with other styles associated with the area, such as Lolita fashion, which relies on specially manufactured clothing tailored to the style. *Decora* and fairy-*kei* practitioners often upcycle objects originally intended for children (sourced from both Japan and overseas), including toys, accessories, clothing and craft materials. For this reason, the *decora* and fairy-*kei* subgenres could be considered as blurring the boundaries between acceptable attire for children and adults. Because of this practice, in addition to practitioners' interest in *kawaii* as a concept and aesthetic, *decora* and fairy *kei* provide interesting examples of the use of *kawaii* by young people, and its relationship to pathways to adulthood.

Figure 1: Two *decora* practitioners and friend at a Harajuku Fashion Walk, 2013.
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5 It is important to note that not all stores associated with the alternative *kawaii* fashion that has emerged from Harajuku have a presence in the Harajuku area. At the time of writing this article, Spank! is located in Tokyo's Nakano area. Further research is needed on the significance of place and the movement of stores for alternative fashion associated with the Harajuku area.

Figure 2: Fairy-*kei* practitioner, 2011. Image: © Kjeld Duits/
JapaneseStreets.com; reproduced with permission.

Figure 2: *Decora* fashion practitioner, 2016. Image: © Haruka
Kurebayashi; reproduced with permission.

AN "ACT OF AVOIDANCE"? ALTERNATIVE *KAWAII* FASHION ASSOCIATED WITH THE HARAJUKU AREA, AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD, EXPERIENCE AND AFFECT

The study of *kawaii* fashion as it is understood and practiced by youth in Japan can be traced to Sharon Kinsella's (1995) influential chapter "Cuties in Japan". While Kinsella's research was limited to the 1990s *kawaii* fashion phenomenon, it was one of the first studies to recognise *kawaii* culture as a valid site of scholarly research and her argument has since been considered in studies of *kawaii* more broadly by both Japanese and English-language scholars (see for instance Nittono 2013; Ihara and Nittono, 2011; Yano 2015). Her work has also influenced more recent studies of alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area (see for instance Winge 2008; Lunning 2011; Monden 2015; Kawamura 2012; Steele et al. 2010) which reflect on the use of *kawaii* as a mode of resistance.

Kinsella's canvassing of 1990s *kawaii* fashion was supported by an analysis of youth print media and a mixed-method survey of the Japanese public. It highlights the potential that *kawaii* offers young people as a means of exploring alternative pathways to adulthood, and as an outlet for creative expression. Kinsella argues that *kawaii* culture offers participants a means of "delaying" adulthood and its associated burdens (1995, 235). Kinsella's study frames *kawaii* as a creative outlet for the individual, but one which also has disadvantages as it involves "acts of self-mutilation…acting stupid, and essentially denying the existence of a wealth of insights, feelings, and humour that maturity brings with it" (1995, 235). Her account places *kawaii* and maturity in opposition with each other, proposing that one cannot enjoy *kawaii* culture and at the same time act, feel and understand the world as an adult. In this conceptualisation, the use of *kawaii* culture by young people is a pause along a linear life journey, before one inevitably fulfils the social roles that demarcate adulthood.

Amelia Groom (2011) seeks to complicate Kinsella's argument from a fashion studies perspective, drawing upon observational fieldwork of street fashion cultures in Harajuku conducted from 2006 to 2007 and Roland Barthes' concepts of *dress* and *dressing* (see Barthes 2006). She argues that practitioners use alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area to create a temporary escape from adult responsibility and that they exercise agency through appropriating objects as fashion items, thereby assigning them new meanings. In response to Kinsella's claim, Groom writes that *kawaii* offers individuals an "everyday tactic of empowerment" in that it

> offers a respite from the perceived banality of the adult world, and [sees] young women anxious about future subservience, obscurity and drudgery in married life fashion themselves like little girls as a tactic of avoidance. (2011, 205)

Here, Groom implies that practitioners intend viewers to read their mode of dress as "child-like" or as a performance of "the little girl", and that in doing so they are making a stand against mainstream adulthood. In this

account, the act of dressing in *kawaii* fashion is not one of "self-mutilation" as Kinsella suggests (1995, 235), but instead an expression of agency and resistance by refusing to partake symbolically in mainstream adult dress. However, if we pause and consider Groom's conceptualisation of alternative *kawaii* fashion as a temporary escape, her use of "avoidance" also implies maladaptation or evasion of an issue which ought to be confronted. This echoes Kinsella's conceptualisation of young people's participation in *kawaii* culture as a "delay" that temporarily stops the inevitable rather than creating new potential futures where one has a choice not to get married or partake in a marriage that does not involve subservience or drudgery. As such, while this account presents alternative *kawaii* fashion as a form of resistance to social expectations, it stops short of suggesting that active subversion is taking place in the form of creating an alternative way of being an adult.

Another way of understanding the practices of fairy *kei* and *decora* lies in studies of Lolita fashion, which argue that alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area presents a different way of living as an adult. Participants in these studies have been keen to discourage the view that they wish to appear like children or regress to an infantile state. An Nguyen (2016), in her qualitative study of Lolita fashion practitioners in Japan and Northern America, interprets alternative *kawaii* fashion not as an attempt

> to change the institutions that constrain women but rather [as] an outright refusal of them. It is an endeavour to find meaning that lies outside the confines of work and marriage.
> (26)

Rather than necessarily avoiding work and marriage, Nguyen argues that practitioners attempt to create additional experiences and insights that can occur alongside them. Theresa Younker (2011), in her study of Lolita fashion in Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe in 2010, similarly highlights the fierce independence which shapes the lives of *kawaii* fashion practitioners. Younker notes that while her participants may be "wrapped up in their own self-centred worlds", they are also aware of the sacrifices they make to pursue their interest in fashion, in particular managing finances to support their hobby and choosing to work in creative industries that support their mode of dress (2011, 102). Here the use of *kawaii* is not conceptualised as avoidance of adulthood, but as part of a full and rich adult life. While these studies pertain specifically to Lolita fashion, this article aims to consider if this conceptualisation might also apply to the *decora* and fairy-*kei* subgenres.

One final way of conceptualising the relationship between alternative *kawaii* fashion and adulthood is the view that it is a process of segregation or removal. For instance, Masafumi Monden (2015), in his textual analysis of Lolita fashion, argues that *kawaii* enables wearers to "appear girlish and cute while being segregated from obvious sexualisation" (78). He characterises participation in alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area as an attempt to disrupt the framing of women's bodies as sexual objects, creating an alternative space in which to live one's adult life. It is worth noting that Monden argues this point in the context of a broader discussion of

shōjo (少女; lit. 'little woman' or 'little girl') culture. *Shōjo* culture scholarship provides an interesting locus for interpreting alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area. Thinkers such as Eiri Takahara (1999) and Masuko Honda (1982) argue that *shōjo* culture enables the individual to turn inward and indulge in the creative, the imaginary and the fantastic, as a refusal of social obligations. Takahara (1999) further characterises this self-indulgence as the freedom to pursue one's own interests and as a response to gendered expectations. While Honda conceptualises *shōjo* culture as liminal and lived in the transition from girlhood to womanhood, Takahara argues that anyone can live or perform a *shōjo* disposition to the world. In this sense, the use of *kawaii* in *decora* and fairy *kei* could be conceptualised as an attempt to remove oneself from being categorised as a mainstream adult, through the construction of an entirely new category of being.

Literature also considers the appeal of alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area to its practitioners, and the different experiences it may offer them compared with those available as a part of mainstream adulthood. Both Groom (2011) and Nguyen (2016) highlight the joy and wealth of experience that alternative *kawaii* culture associated with the Harajuku area offers practitioners. While characterising alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area as child-like, Groom proposes that it offers participants a pleasurable activity. She emphasises the practices of shoppers in *Ura-Harajuku*, where "like children, [the practitioners] are spontaneous and un-inhibited in their dress up games" (2011, 206). As an example, Groom describes the activities of *decora* practitioners, "where masses of multifarious colourful plastic toys and objects dangle from bodies and clothes" (206). Overall, Groom's analysis suggests that alternative *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku is a playful and creative exercise which creates a liminal space where the predictability of social scripts for adults can be temporarily re-written. She argues that this is central to the resistant nature of this community as an alternative culture centred on "uniqueness, eccentricity, spontaneity, vibrancy and playfulness" (205). As such, there appears to be potential for a rich and complex understanding of *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku as both expressive and personal, where feelings are not denied but rather explored and interpreted through play. In this article, I consider whether *decora* and fairy-*kei* practitioners might agree with Groom's account, and if they view this behaviour as inherently childish or intended to imitate child-like play.

Nguyen (2016), in her exploration of Lolita fashion, circumvents character-ising the pleasure in participating in alternative *kawaii* culture associated with the Harajuku area as childish through her use of sociologist Sarah Ahmed's (2010) theory of 'happy objects'. In theorising how emotion and affect influence the way we (as adults, youths and children alike) craft our lives, Ahmed argues that "Objects that give us pleasure take up residence within our bodily horizon" whereas objects we do not prefer are positioned "away" from us (2010, 24). Drawing on this, Nguyen argues that *kawaii* "is best understood as an affect that expresses an aesthetic, describing things one wants to be surrounded with or bring within reach" (2016, 23). According to this model, *kawaii* fashion practitioners select objects to wear based on the feelings they

experience towards them, including excitement, joy, pleasure and curiosity. However, the logic Ahmed and Nguyen present does not exclude the idea of delay or avoidance discussed above. This invites us to question: if alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area involves gathering and wearing objects that bring joy, what objects do not bring joy, and are therefore "positioned away" from practitioners' "bodily horizons" as Ahmed might suggest? Could they be the clothing worn by mainstream adults and the responsibilities they might represent? If so, does this present a form of resistance or denial of adulthood, or can this process be conceptualised as subversive? This article explores the experiential dimension of alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area, and also consider the logic Nguyen puts forward in the context of *decora* and fairy *kei*.

In considering these questions, I seek to contribute to emerging scholarship that considers how *kawaii* can be experienced by adults in the Japanese context.[6] Hiroshi Nittono (2013; 2016) and his collaborators (see Ihara and Nittono 2011; Kanai and Nittono 2015) have produced an extensive body of work in the behavioural sciences that explore how young adults respond to *kawaii* objects and subjects. They acknowledge that *kawaii* can evoke caregiving behaviours, which may link to the above discussions of *kawaii* as childish. However, they also find that *kawaii* objects motivate individuals to "get closer to the cute object and know it further" and "improve interpersonal relationships" (Nittono 2016, 90). Marie Aizawa and Minoru Ohno (2010) and Mika Nishimura (2019) have also suggested that *kawaii* culture in general has much to offer adults by encouraging them to be playful and creative as a form of self-care. Carolyn Stevens (2014), who reflects on the use of the *kawaii* character Rilakkuma by adults, also suggests that such figures offer "emotional equilibrium in the face of instability" (n.p.). Christine Yano (2015), in her exploration of Hello Kitty as a *kawaii* character and cultural phenomenon, suggests that women who enjoy *kawaii* culture appreciate the opportunity it offers to be both "cared for and the caregiver" (57). Together, this scholarship evokes a rich tapestry of experience for adults who enjoy *kawaii* culture with its interwoven themes of care, soothing, curiosity and play. As such, this article aims to consider how those who participate in *decora* and fairy-*kei* fashion might experience their use of *kawaii* objects.

GIVING VOICES TO "GIRLS WITH A SENSE OF AGENCY": A CASE-FOCUSSED ANALYSIS APPROACH

Groom's (2011) observational and textual analysis of street fashion in Harajuku reflects on the meaning of objects worn by those observed using a semiotics approach established by Roland Barthes. Barthes' approach situates the researcher as an expert on the signs and signifiers of the culture

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6 This research in the Japanese context also reflects similar work by overseas scholars exploring cute culture and the way we experience cute objects. Gary Sherman and Johnathan Haidt (2011) and Sianne Ngai (2012) explore the playful and creative aspects of cuteness, and their research has been incorporated into the work of Joshua Paul Dale et al. (2017), who explore the multifaceted nature of cuteness and its relationship to power and powerlessness. These texts highlight the role that Konrad Lorenz's (1943; 1971) *Kinderschema* concept, which argues that "cute" physical traits present in infants are designed to evoke caregiving behaviours, plays in informing the assumption that both *kawaii* culture and cuteness only involve caregiving relationships. Sherman and Haidt (2011) and Ngai (2012) propose that there are other ways of experiencing cute objects, in particular through play.

they study, and as interpreter for the reader in detecting how these signifiers manifest in the phenomena studied. The limitation of this approach is that it cannot explore what practitioners themselves think, or what the subjective experience of dressing in *kawaii* clothing is like. Groom's analysis is imaginative and creative, informed by a long history of textual analysis in fashion studies and by Dick Hebdige's (1979) work on subcultures. However, the analytical strategy relies on the researcher-as-outsider's observations and interpretations rather than drawing on what practitioners report about themselves. Stanley Cohen offers a provocative question in his critique of this methodological approach: "this is, to be sure, an imaginative way of reading style; but how can we be sure that it is not also imaginary?" (1980, xv). More broadly, in treating women who enjoy *kawaii* culture as a 'text' to be studied, without seeking also to obtain their views, there is a risk that we as researchers infantilise the group we are concerned with. The etymology of the word 'infantile' can be traced back to the Latin '*infans*', which means 'unable to speak' (Hoad 2003). In not seeking the input of practitioners, we lose a valuable opportunity to allow them to speak for themselves. Monden (2015) argues that in studies of *kawaii* "the voices of girls with senses of agency and positive attitudes are frequently disregarded" (114). It is important to consider how we can avoid reproducing this structural inequality in our research.

One way of testing Groom's (2011) argument is by involving practitioners as participants in research. As previously discussed, Nguyen's (2016) use of qualitative interviews with Lolita fashion practitioners and Younker's (2011) ethnographic study of Lolita communities demonstrate the potential of this approach. Taking on Nguyen and Younker's use of semi-structured interviews, as well as their case-focused approach to analysis, provides an interesting opportunity to see whether Groom's semiotic analysis aligns with what practitioners report about their experiences. A case-focused approach involves selecting and analysing in depth the responses of specific participants to build a case study, rather than aiming to provide an overview of the common themes across all interviews conducted. This is recognised in qualitative social research as an effective way for authors and readers to explore the complexity of experience (Weiss 1994; Flvbjerg 2011). Case studies capture the richness and detail of lived experience in a way that thematic analysis, which provides an overview of common ideas across all interviews, cannot.

The case studies presented in this article are of two participants from a larger qualitative research project, conducted as part of my PhD research, that recruited n=17 alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioners associated with the Harajuku area to participate in semi-structured interviews between 2013 and 2015.[7] I present a case study of a fairy-*kei* practitioner, referred to by her

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7 The participants recruited for this study frequented Harajuku, and wore styles including Lolita fashion, *decora* fashion, fairy *kei* and *hime deco* [姫デコ]. *Hime deco* is a mode of dress characterised by pink lace, rhinestones, glitter and tiaras and has ties to both the *gyaru* and Harajuku fashion scenes. While some individuals still practice *hime deco*, including those interviewed for this research, this particular style has been in decline since 2014. The majority of participants were educated at a tertiary level, and were engaged in various modes of employment. One participant was a full-time student, a quarter of the sample worked casually for corporate employers unrelated to their fashion interests, and the remainder were self-employed models, designers and content producers working in the Harajuku scene. In one instance, a participant had successfully managed their own *kawaii* fashion business with multiple store fronts for 20 years. As the socio-economic status of the sample

preferred moniker Kumamiki, followed by a case study of a *decora* practitioner, who asked to be referred to as 48809. While Kumamiki's case study provides one example of how fairy-*kei* practitioners view the relationship between their practice and adulthood, 48809's case study explores the playful, creative and imaginative aspects of *decora* fashion.

The intention of these case studies is not to provide generalisable data to show definitively whether or not alternative *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku is intended to be child-like, infantile and playful practice. Rather, I take a phenomenological approach to exploring the everyday experiences of two specific individuals, with the intention of deepening our understanding of how *decora* and fairy-*kei* practitioners might view the relationship between their practice and adulthood. This is part of my broader ethical commitment as a researcher to elevate the voices of alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioners in Harajuku and treat them as "experts, at least in their own lives" (Frank 2010, 99). This position is in response to my observation that they are often spoken for and about by scholars, cultural critics, journalists and bloggers, but are rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves. This approach is also embedded in interpretivist sociology, which was pioneered by Max Weber (1978 [1922]) and Georg Simmel (2009 [1908]) and involves examining the individual's experiences of the social, giving meaning to social action and acknowledging that these meanings are specific to the individual. Interpretivism relies on inductive analysis, whereby meaning and patterns are derived from the data collected, with an emphasis on the experiences of the research participants.

48809 and Kumamiki were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy as part of the wider research project, which means they were selected to participate in the research against set selection criteria, rather than chosen at random. Purposive sampling is beneficial in this type of qualitative research, as it ensures the recruitment of participants who are best positioned to answer the research questions set (Marshall 1996, 523; Emmel 2013, 64; Corbetta 2003, 211–12).[8] Suitability was measured through selection criteria which sought participants who had been involved in alternative *kawaii* fashion for long enough to have experienced what it was like to gather and wear *kawaii* objects, and who had a commitment to deepening outsiders' understandings of their community.[9] Semi-structured interviews with these practitioners ran for approximately 90 minutes and covered topics including the inspiration for their mode of dress, how their outfits were put together, the importance of *kawaii* fashion and what it means to them as practitioners. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants in order capture their views with a high degree of fluency. As both 48809 and Kumamiki's

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is varied, this research cannot comment on linkages between class and *kawaii* fashion practitioners. Participants presented as cisgendered, however the sexuality of the participants was not discussed as it fell outside of the research scope. Further research would be needed to discuss both class and sexuality in the alternative *kawaii* fashion context.

8 Snowball sampling was also critical in locating suitable participants for screening against the selection criteria. This meant that I followed participants' recommendations to invite others to participate in the study. The study was advertised by linking to a recruitment webpage across social media platforms including Twitter, YouTube and the Japanese blogging website Ameblo.

9 The selection criteria stipulated that participants must frequent the Harajuku area, and also must have been: 1) involved in the *kawaii* fashion community for at least three years; 2) wearing or making *kawaii* fashion on a regular basis; and 3) actively contributing to the community through activities such as making, designing, modelling or organising events.

native language was Japanese, and I have only a limited command of the Japanese language, the interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. The interpreter was involved in alternative *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku and was thus familiar with the slang and manner of speech common to this community, which enabled the interviewees to speak without modifying their language. Further, this interpreter with a connection to the community was chosen with the additional aim of creating a collaborative space where alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioners associated with the Harajuku area might be more likely to trust me with their stories. A limitation of this approach overall, however, was that the language difference created a degree of distance between us. The interviews were transcribed in Japanese for analysis, but the selections presented in this paper have been translated into English.[10]

"I WANT PEOPLE TO WEAR WHAT THEY WANT TO WEAR": KUMAMIKI, A FAIRY-*KEI* PRACTITIONER

Kumamiki was an influencer in Harajuku at the time of her interview in 2013 and had worn fairy *kei* for three years. Her mode of dress was frequently photographed and featured in street photography media such as *KERA* magazine. Kumamiki was studying at Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo, a school that attracts many designers interested in Harajuku fashion. Through her studies she developed a design practice centred around *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku. Today, Kumamiki is still an active influencer in the *kawaii* fashion community through self-produced social media. In her interview, Kumamiki provided rich detail regarding how she values hand-made accessories and clothing and sought to share this interest with others by posting instructional tutorials to social media. She discussed how she used relaxing thoughts and memories to inspire her designs, including breakfast foods. In general, the majority of Kumamiki's accessories were created through the upcycling and customisation of plastic toys with decorations such as beads and lace which were then attached to jewellery findings such as ring bases and earring posts. In addition to sewing her own clothes, Kumamiki also sourced clothing from second-hand shops, such as babydoll dresses and tutu skirts, which she wore over blouses or t-shirts.

The philosophy behind Kumamiki's mode of dress was that it enabled her to enjoy colourful and playful clothing as an adult, a practice she felt was not supported by 'society'. Kumamiki (2013) explains as follows:

> There's a kind of social trend where adults must not wear childish or colourful things like this, but I want to ignore that kind of rule. I think even when you become an adult, you can wear anything you want…[11]

Here Kumamiki describes dress as guided by social constructs. Her use of the phrase "social trend" implies that the perceived tendency of adults to not wear colourful clothes is part of what Kumamiki believes to be a social

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10 The translations were provided courtesy of Dr. Anne Lee of The Japan Foundation, Sydney.
11 「大人になるとこういうカラフルなものとか子供っぽいものとか、つけちゃいけないみたいな、そういう社会の流れみたいなのがあるんだけど、私は、そういうのを無視して、大人になっても好きなものをつけていいじゃないかっていう気持ちを持っている…」

norm, which individuals follow out of a desire to belong. When pressed on the matter, Kumamiki concedes that adults do indeed have access to colourful clothes, but in her view they are for limited purposes—"underwear or pyjamas"—or are associated with a liminal period of time—"in spring, there is a boom of pastel colours". Further, Kumamiki dismisses these clothing items as "largely austere".[12] They lack the playfulness she finds in *kawaii* fashion. Kumamiki perceives adult clothing to be banal, a view which reflects Groom's (2011) hypothesis of why *kawaii* fashion might be attractive to practitioners in Harajuku. She describes her decision to wear what she wants in terms of ignoring pressure to conform and following an alternative path. In this sense, her clothing gives her some perceived freedom from societal pressures.

The colourful clothing then becomes an expression of freedom, but does it also express a desire to be a child? Kumamiki provides the following clarification:

> It's not that I want to stay a child. I've become an adult, but when I was a child, I thought adults were boring. When I saw stuff like boring-looking salarymen on trains, I thought that I didn't want to be that kind of adult. I didn't want to grow up, and wanted to stay a child, but in the process of growing up I've met many interesting adults. They are kind of like children at heart, where they can freely express what they like and think is interesting. Even after becoming adults, they like what they like. So, even though I'm an adult, I've come to think that when I make things or wear this kind of fashion, I want people to be able to clearly say what they like and wear what they want to wear. I'm expressing that it's okay to have that kind of freedom in my daily life.[13]
> (2013)

In this excerpt Kumamiki decisively states that she does not want to remain a child, emphasising her discomfort with this view of her dress. In her description of her childhood memory of salarymen on the train, we are given the impression that she views her past anxiety about becoming a "boring" (つまらない) adult as childlike or simplistic. As a child, the world around her was shaped by what she knew, which at that time was passengers on her commute. Becoming an adult enabled her to gain a more nuanced view of adulthood. It is also interesting to note that Kumamiki describes the passengers as "boring" but then does not provide more detail other than that they are male company employees. How does she know they are boring? Is she perhaps projecting her own disapproval as a child onto them? Furthermore, there is a lack of other adult figures in this anecdote, such as university students, women (employed or otherwise) and the elderly What generalisation about adults do these salarymen represent? If we examine the latter half of

12 「…大人用のパステルカラーのものってアンダーウェアとかパジャマばっかり。なんかブームとかで、時々、春になったらパステルとか出ることはあるけれど、パステルカラーでもラインが大人っぽいかっこいい感じが多いと思います。売ってるものでパステルカラーのものって、大人のものはもっと渋い物が多い。」

13 「子供でいたいんじゃなくて、私は大人になったけど、大人ってつまらないものだと思っていて、電車に乗ってるサラリーマンとかすごいつまらない感じで電車に乗ってたりとか、そういう大人にはなりたくないって思っていて。だから昔は子供でいたい、大人になりたくないって思っていたんだけど、だけど自分が実際に大人になる過程の中で、やっぱり面白い大人の人に出会うことが多くて、そういう人たちって子供の心っていうか面白いものは素直に面白いとか好きなものは好きなんだっていうのを表現していて、大人になっても好きなものは好きでいいじゃんっていうのがあって。だから私が自分が物を作ったりこういうファッションをしたりして表現したいのは、私は大人だけど、好きなものは堂々と好きだって言うし、身に着けたいものは身に着けるっていう、そういう自由があってもいいじゃないっていうのを私の生活の中で表現しています。」

Salaryman (サラリーマン) is a Japanese term for male company employees.

her answer, we can see that she views adults who can "express what they like" (好きなんだっていうのを表現していて) as still possessing the freedom that salarymen have apparently lost. In this sense, Kumamiki's anecdote of the salarymen on the train reflects Groom's (2011, 205) remark about *kawaii* being a form of resistance to the "subservience, obscurity and drudgery" of adult life. Salarymen are depicted as depressed by the servitude of employment which is not necessarily aligned with their own personal interests. It is interesting to note that Groom specifically puts forward an argument premised on gender, claiming that *kawaii* fashion practitioners are resisting the negative features of womanhood (motherhood and marriage), whereas Kumamiki's account is framed around conformity and employment, placing herself in opposition to masculine archetypes as opposed to their feminine counterparts. This perhaps suggests that for some *kawaii* fashion practitioners, normative markers of adulthood move beyond the gendered kinship roles Groom describes and instead provide opportunities to create alternative adult pathways that transcend gender norms.

Kumamiki does not view her clothing as an outright rejection of adulthood. Rather, she views her *kawaii* outfits as part of a way of living as an adult outside the mainstream. She identifies as an adult who speaks and dresses freely, and arguably uses this as a way of expressing her maturity. Kumamiki views the typical salaryman as an adult who denies himself the ability to express his interests or feelings, which is an inversion of Kinsella's account. Rather than seeing mainstream adulthood as offering a range of insights and experiences, Kumamiki views it as a way of living that denies the fullness of life. In short, in practicing her chosen form of alternative *kawaii* fashion, Kumamiki seeks to distinguish herself from normative models of adulthood, rather than seeking to become a child. In social psychology, this phenomenon is captured through Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, which holds that individuals seek to balance feelings of belonging and individual expression (Brewer 2003; Leonardelli et al. 2010). They seek a 'middle ground' between states of assimilation and distinctiveness, opting to identify with groupings that allow for an optimal combination of individuality and acceptance. Kumamiki identifies with the grouping of 'adults' but wants to distinguish herself inside that category as an 'alternative adult'. In this regard, she is not trying to avoid or delay adulthood, but rather to find ways to participate in adult life that differ from the mainstream.

Kumamiki's case does indicate a kind of personal resistance, as Groom (2011) suggests, but rather than seeking to appear as a 'little girl' to avoid adulthood, Kumamiki explores what alternative expressions of adulthood in the Japanese context could look like. Kumamiki holds the view that children, unlike adults, are afforded the freedom to like, think and feel with abandon. Of course, this is a matter of perspective. Kumamiki cannot possibly have access to the interior experiences of these other individuals, just her own perception of them. This case partially confirms Groom's observation that *kawaii* constitutes a form of resistance to the banality of adult life. However, Kumamiki makes an important distinction: although she wishes to escape the perceived banality of adulthood, she does not want to extend her childhood. Instead, she wants freedom to be afforded by society to both children *and* adults alike.

"I STARTED ADDING THINGS, LIKE A BRACELET HERE, AND IT WENT ON...": 48809, A *DECORA* FASHION PRACTITIONER

48809 has participated in alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with Harajuku since age 16. She is a *dokusha moderu* (読者モデル; lit., 'reader model') for *KERA* magazine and is widely recognised in the *decora* fashion scene.[14] As a *dokusha moderu*, 48809 frequently offered makeup and fashion tutorials for *KERA* during its time in publication (1998–2017). She now runs a highly popular social media channel. She is frequently hired as a professional model for designer labels affiliated with Harajuku, has made a series of television appearances in Japan and overseas, and is invited to attend pop culture conventions internationally.[15] At the time of interview in 2013, 48809 was in her early twenties and was employed part-time as a graphic designer alongside her contract-based modelling work, which she used to support herself while living independently in Tokyo. 48809 discussed in detail her interest in *kawaii* culture and the way in which her fashion enables her to express a sense of originality.

48809 identifies a range of fantasies that inform her process of dressing, the primary one being centred around the 1980s. Having been born after this period, 48809 actively imagines what this time was like with curiosity and incorporates American vintage clothing and toys from the time into her outfits. 48809 relates her interest in the 1980s in the following:

> Author: Do you like 1980s fashion?
> 48809: I like it a lot. I like it so much that I often look up old stuff on the internet.
> Author: Why do you like it?
> 48809: In the 1980s, things such as the internet and mobile phones did not exist. But looking at that period, it's very eccentric and odd compared to today, including the shapes and colours of things. It all has a very strange feeling.
> Author: Why American? Why not Japanese?
> 48809: I like Japanese, too. But in Japan in the 1980s things that boys like such as robots were popular, which wasn't to my taste.[16]
>
> (2013)

Here 48809's fantasy relates to a particular time and place, but it is a fictional one, imagined by a young woman in Japan who was not born in that era. Her fantasy world could exist in Japan or the West, and it exists in a timeline where the internet never came to fruition and where 1980s aesthetics never fell out of fashion. This time period, where analogue technology such as VHS and cassette tapes flourished, jars with her everyday experience of digital

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14 A *dokusha moderu* is an amateur fashion model who is scouted to appear in print or website publications from a pool of readers and is intended to represent the everyday reader and consumer.
15 The specific social media channels, television shows and conventions 48809 has appeared in have been redacted to maintain her anonymity.
16 Author: 80年代のファッションは好きですか？
48809: すごく好き。昔のものは結構自分でパソコンとかで調べて見るくらい好き。
Author: 好きな理由は？
48809: 今よりも、例えばインターネットがなかった、携帯がなかったっていう、そういう時代なのに、その時代から見るとだいぶ奇抜で、変わった形をしてる。フォルムもそうだし色もそうだし、なんだか不思議な感じがします。
Author: なぜアメリカなんですか？日本の80年代は好みではない？
48809: 日本も好きだけど、日本はどちらかというと80年代はロボットとか男の子が好きそうな物が流行ってたから私の好みではなかった。

technology in Tokyo, and present mysteries from a recent history almost forgotten. The fantasy does not just present a new way of life for 48809, but a "strange" (不思議な) one full of "eccentric" forms (変わった形). 48809 can never visit and experience the 1980s as it was, but she can unearth old clothing and objects like archaeological artefacts and give them new life as part of her fashion practice. It is also interesting to note 48809's specific interests. She prefers 'American' technology, rather than that which is synonymous with the boom in robot-related franchises in 1980s Japan. She aspires to be closer to the time and place that she admires through the process of appropriating objects into her clothing. What she perceives as the spectacular nature of the 1980s presents itself as an escape from the mundane, and an opportunity to carve out an exciting and creative life and identity for herself.

48809's process of dressing does not just reflect this thought process, it also involves the playfulness that Groom describes. Through the creative arrangement of shapes and textures, contrasting colours and unusual toys turned into hair clips or bags, 48809 finds pleasure in putting outfits together. She offers insight into her creative process:

> Author: Why did you decide to wear *decora* fashion?
> 48809: There was not a specific moment when I decided to wear *decora*. I always wore things I liked, but I slowly began to think, "oh, I look a bit plain today". So, I started adding things, like a bracelet here, and it went on and on until I arrived at this point.[17]
> (2013)

In this account, 48809 enjoys layering things that she likes. Once she becomes accustomed to what she wears, additional objects are added to rejuvenate the feeling of creativity and 'newness' and allow her to re-experience fascination and curiosity.

While 48809's story is just one of many, this case study suggests an understanding of *kawaii* fashion as a reflective and playful process. We can see that 48809 plays with *kawaii* fashion as part of a reflection on her identity. It is an activity filled with insight, feelings and humour in terms of the imaginings associated with it and the playful nature of dressing. Further, we can see that the personal meaning of the objects worn is more important than their communicative value. This suggests a slightly different process of assigning meaning to objects from that which Groom proposes. The worn objects have personal meanings specific to the wearer which she alone is privy to, and which elude the viewer. This indicates that studies of alternative *kawaii* fashion which view and analyse practitioners' appearances solely from an observer's perspective may not consider these personal meanings, and therefore may arrive at incomplete understandings of the significance of the practice for the practitioners themselves.

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17 Author: デコラファッションを着てみようと思った理由は何ですか？
48809: いつからしようっていうのはなくて、いつも好きで着てた物がだんだん、あっ、ちょっと今日地味かも？って思い出して、ちょっとずつ足していった。今日はブレスレットとか、どんどん足していったらこうなりました。

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored the extent to which women who participate in *decora* and fairy-*kei* fashion may or may not view their mode of dress as a child-like, infantile and playful practice. In doing so, I situated *decora* and fairy *kei* within a broader discussion of the significance and implications of young people in Japan using alternative *kawaii* fashion associated with the Harajuku area to navigate pathways to adulthood. To contribute to this discussion, I conducted a case study analysis of Kumamiki, a fairy-*kei* practitioner, and 48809, a *decora* fashion practitioner, who were participants in a larger qualitative project exploring alternative fashion practitioners associated with Harajuku. In my analysis, I have responded to Groom's (2011) argument that alternative *kawaii* fashion in Harajuku is a playful, child-like practice which is used as an avoidance of adulthood. Both case studies highlight the wealth of experience and reflection involved in creating and wearing their fashion, and the joy and playfulness it brings to the everyday lives of the practitioners.

Drawing upon a case study of Kumamiki, a fairy-*kei* practitioner, I have argued that not all practitioners in the Harajuku context view their fashion as childish, and that at least some see it as a different way of living as an adult. Through 48809's case study, I have highlighted how *decora* can act as a springboard for imaginatively exploring new and different possibilities of living. My findings support Groom's (2011) argument, but add further nuance with regards to how participants conceptualise the relationship between alternative *kawaii* fashion and adulthood. In this specific context, the use of *kawaii* by adults is shown to have the potential to bring a sense of creativity, happiness and play to their everyday lives. Rather than denying adult thoughts and feelings as Kinsella (1995) suggests, *decora* and fairy-*kei* fashion provide these practitioners with a chance to explore them, focussing on what they do and do not want in their adult lives and on what inspires them to be creative. This aligns with Nguyen's (2016) argument and usage of Ahmed's (2010) 'happy objects' concept, which contends that practitioners bring closer to them the things that bring them joy and push away the things that do not. The idea that *kawaii* objects can inspire creativity in this context adds to emerging literature that documents the experience of *kawaii* more broadly as a playful and creative outlet for adults (Nittono 2016; Aiwaza and Ohno 2010; Nishimura 2019; Stevens 2014; Yano 2015). These two case studies do not suggest that *kawaii* is about being cared for or giving care, but rather highlight the role of *kawaii* as a source of play and enjoyment for alternative *kawaii* fashion practitioners affiliated with the Harajuku area.

The case studies offer insights into how *decora* and fairy-*kei* practitioners view their own practice, as examples of the many subgenres associated with alternative *kawaii* fashion in the Harajuku area. Further research that documents and captures *kawaii* fashion practitioners' own views and experiences would serve well to ground some of the more abstract theoretical debates about *kawaii* resistance, agency and creativity. We need more research that incorporates the voices of women who enjoy *kawaii* culture, in order to complement studies that rely on observation and visual analysis

alone. Further research into the relationship between alternative *kawaii* fashion and gender—specifically, womanhood—would also add further nuance to this debate, especially as much of the literature I have focused on explores the binary of child/adult rather than girl/woman. Overall, a commitment to elevating the voices of these young women in research is key to considering how alternative *kawaii* culture enables practitioners to reimagine their futures and bring play and joy to their adult lives.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

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