

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH:

# The formation and commodification of *Harajuku*'s image in Japan

Atsumi NAKAO<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Harajuku* is known as a youth fashion street in Tokyo since 1990s and is now considered as one of the unique representatives of Japanese contemporary culture. This paper explores the construction of the image of *Harajuku* by looking at two dimensions; one is the historical formation of its image and the other is an institutional function through street snaps in media, especially popular magazines. The analysis is based on a number of concepts formerly developed by social researchers including the concept of “circuits of cultural capital” and “commodification of a place” by Zukin and Bell, respectively, as well as the semiotic architecture of capital and corporate imaginary by Goldman and Papson. This paper also provides a detailed illustration of the historical construction of *Harajuku* and the analysis of how street snaps on popular magazines and SNS influence on the young people's image of *Harajuku*.

**Keywords:** Fashion magazines, *Harajuku*, *Harajuku* fashion, Japan, Japanese culture, Street snaps.

### Introduction

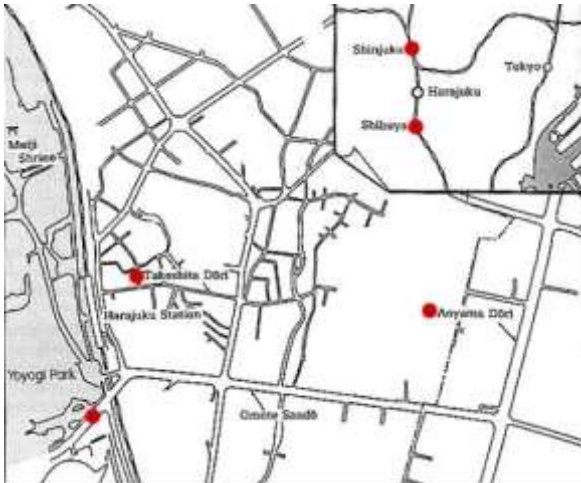
When I was a high school student, I religiously read the fashion magazine KERA. I would look at fashionable people photographed in Harajuku street snaps and long for a feeling of being in Harajuku. At the start of my college life, I went to Harajuku with money saved from doing part-time jobs. I do remember the disappointment I felt the first time I went to Harajuku. It was just a busy street; I could not find the fashionable people I saw in the magazine. At that moment, I realized how a fashion fantasy was constructed and that I was intrigued by an invented imagery of Harajuku. This experience encouraged me to explore how the Harajuku image was constructed and this paper reflects on my attempts to understand it.

Harajuku is a district located in Shibuya, Tokyo. However, in this paper, Harajuku is considered as a place where young people gather to create their unique culture and street fashion, especially in Takeshita Street (Figure 1). The object of this paper is to find out how the Harajuku landscape has been conceptualized to carry an image of a youth fashion street by applying two main theories: “circuits of cultural capital” by Zukin (1993) and “commodification of a place” by Bell (1997). In order to explore the strategies and processes in creation of Harajuku's image, this paper looks at the historical and semiotic perspective of its construction as a youth fashion street.

The paper first provides a brief explanation of Harajuku as a district. This is followed by the methodology including a review of the concepts developed by Goldman and Papson in their “Landscapes of Capital”, where they have explained how a representation of a certain landscape affects our ideas and the way we see the world. The methodology also uses the concepts of “circuits of cultural capital” and “commodification of a place,” which are applied to the analysis. This paper therefore analyzes the historical formation as well as a semiotic conceptualization of Harajuku. Finally, the paper will synthesize all the aforementioned elements to figure out how Harajuku's image was conceptualized in contemporary Japan.

---

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Asia Pacific studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Beppu City, Oita, Japan  
email: atsumi.o.1106@gmail.com



**Figure 1.** Harajuku as a district (Source: World Wide Web)

## Methodology

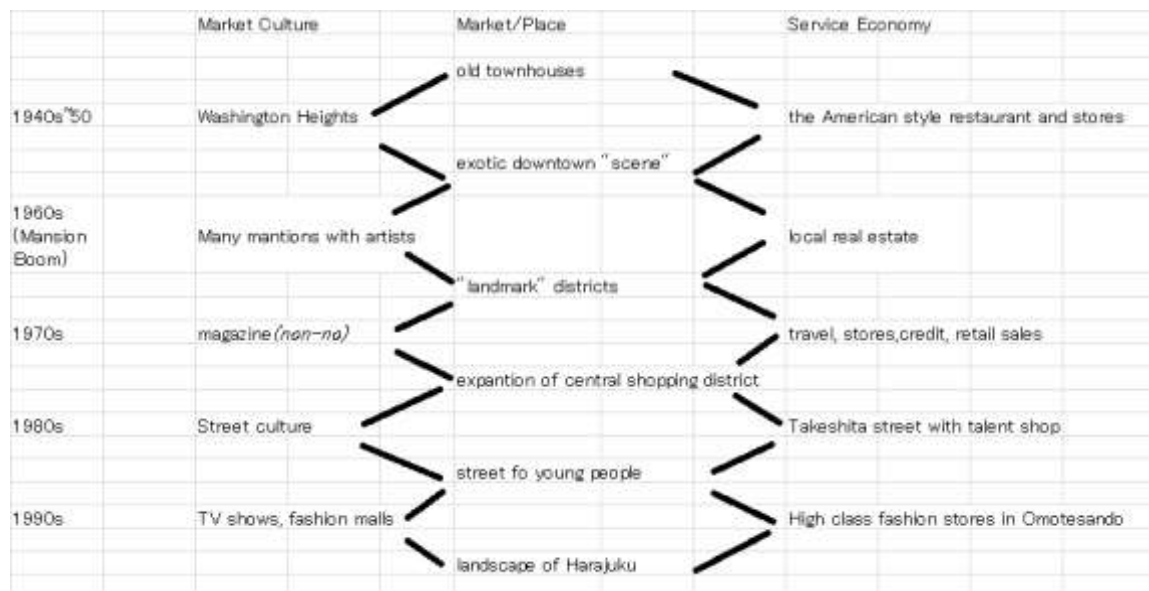
Goldman and Papson explain their research concepts in a famous book published as “Landscapes of Capital”. Goldman and Papson (2011) collected 2,400 television advertisements (TV ads) from 1995 to 2010 to explore how those ads represented the world at the time. The theoretical basis behind “Landscapes of Capital” is that discourses within advertisements construct our understanding of contemporary economy and society. Goldman and Papson pointed that in TV ads, landscapes are not tied to historical events, geography or an actual nation, but that TV ads are signifiers that may float and flexibly change shape based on the encoder’s intention. One example is an advertisement with the streamline of a light beam, which may signify the image of speed, or information flows depending on what image the advertiser may find more appealing (p.124). Goldman and Papson offered how this floating or flexible landscape of capital leads to a certain image. This paper will apply this concept into the semiotic analysis part.

**The theory of circuits of cultural capital:** As for the concept of circuits of cultural capital, Zukin (1993) explains how a certain place goes through the process of gentrification. During urban development, continuously produced commodities keep moving around between ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ circuits. In this process, one may witness the accumulation of “*economic value of investment capital*” (p.260). Zukin tries to explain “*the structural linkage between cultural and economic values today*” (p.260) by bringing two examples; the gentrification of nouvelle cuisine and Disney World (pp.260-275). This structure will be used later in order to organize the historical formation of Harajuku.

**Commodification of a place:** Bell (1997) conceptualizes the commodification of a place by exemplifying how tourist destinations are constructed. To explain the concept, he referred to three castles that were constructed with old antique and made to look real as if they had not changed since the 1800s. Hence, the commodification of a place is the process of giving value to the place and making it attractive for people to come to the place. This is done through brochure, displays, guides, etc. in trying to “*commodify*” the place (pp.828-832). This notion of commodification will be applied in the semiotic analysis in this paper.

## Findings and Discussion

**The formation of an imaginary landscape:** For many decades, Harajuku has been spinning between market culture and service economy, and through this process has accumulated its capital value. Following Zukin's (1993) idea of "circuit of place", the following diagram shows the historical formation of the Harajuku landscape (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The historical formation of the Harajuku landscape from 1940s to 1990s.

The history of Harajuku is analyzed based on the preceding structure. It started with Harajuku post World War II since it was the period when Harajuku became a slightly unique district from other Japanese places. The United States (US) occupying army had a residence called "Washington Heights" built in a section of Yoyogi Park in Harajuku. Residents were noncommissioned officers and families categorized as middle class, thus contributing to the Harajuku's atmosphere of glam and refinement (Harajuku Omotesando Hiiragikai 2004: 77). This architectural market culture led to the establishment of American style restaurants and stores. Within Washington Heights there were residential areas, schools, churches, theaters, bars, and stores with employees required to speak English (Masubuchi 2012). A bookstore named Kiddy Land was built in Omotesando for American military officers and also Oriental Bather was established as a souvenir shop (Akurosu 1995: 94). The downtown scene started to form around that area. In 1958, central apartments were built next to Kiddy Land. Photographers, copywriters, and designers also moved to Harajuku since they were attracted to its refined and exotic atmosphere (Masubushi 2012). They were often seen gathering together at the cafe located on the first floor of the building and arguing about their work and political issues (Masubushi 2012).

In 1963, Harajuku witnessed its largest transformation when Washington Heights was returned to Japan and reformed to become an Olympic athlete village. In Yoyogi Park, Kunitashi stadium was built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympic (Akurosu 1995: 94). Mabuchi (1989) emphasizes that this stadium was the most beautiful stadium in Tokyo. As a result, Harajuku became broadly known for its exotic and international character. Then more designers, models, talents and apparel-related people migrated to Harajuku, and it was called "Japanese Champs Elysees", thus, an exotic downtown scene was formed.

In the 1960s, a “mansion boom” in Japan led to the building of expensive residential building complexes with the most famous ones in Harajuku because its atmosphere was preferred by many higher class people (Sakane, and <http://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/26400/>). Such beautiful buildings became the landmarks of Harajuku. In 1966, Harajuku-zoku (the Harajuku tribe) appeared in the Harajuku district, most of whom were middle class college students wearing ivy, continental and mods fashion. They drove to Harajuku in sports cars (Acrosu 1995: 94). This was parallel to the context of Japan's rapid economic growth, especially in 1966, a year named “*mai car nengou*” (i.e. the year of ‘my car’). The Izanagi Economics, “*Izanagi Keiki*”, had just started when Harajuku tribes came around 1966 to 1967. The tribes would dance in loud music and do sports car racing in Omotesando streets which resulted in their being widely known and sometimes reported for such behavior to the police. In other words, the sophisticated atmosphere of Harajuku appealed to many young people.

Eventually, Harajuku tribes evacuated and left in the summer of 1967 (Mabuchi 1989: 139-144). After the Harajuku tribes went away, there was a time when Harajuku became quiet again for about six to seven years. Then in the early 1970s, the baby boomer generation started to get jobs. These baby boomers experienced several student movements when they were college students. There was a tendency among these baby boomers to not want to get employed by large companies. As a result, launching new business was the trend at that time (Mabuchi 1989: 243-244). Many young designers and buyers rented small rooms in apartments in Harajuku and opened clothing stores called “Mansion Maker”. They sold clothes, which attracted people from the same generation (Narumi 2007: 195). They also opened small boutiques in their mansions or in Takeshita Street. In 1971, the monthly fashion magazine “*non-no*” started its circulation. Followed by the launch of “*an-an*” a year later. These magazines featured Harajuku and its clothing stores. Girls reading *non-no* and *an-an*, called “*annon zoku*” (*an-non* tribe), got interested in Harajuku, which led to them shopping at Harajuku clothing stores. Consequently, Harajuku and Takeshita Street became famous for fashion and youth culture throughout Japan (Shibuya trend researcher 2006: 60).

In 1977, “*hokosha tengoku* (Pedestrian Paradise) started in Harajuku. Kawamura (2012) emphasizes that the Pedestrian Paradise was the primary reason youth culture flourished in the Harajuku district: “*Between 1977 and 1998, a section of main road in Harajuku was closed to traffic on Sundays making a public sphere and young people dressed in their (often handmade) creative fashion gathered there*” (p.29). In October of 1978, a fashion apparel building, Laforet Harajuku, was established. It had six floors with the first floor filled with famous branded apparel shops. However, sales did not go well and rumors went around that “Laforet Harajuku was a big failure” (Harajuku Omptesando Hiragikai 2004: 82). In February of 1980, Laforet Harajuku renewed its stores with Mansion Makers. Consequently, it became a big success and created bases for the DC brand boom from 1982 (Ibid, p.83).

Moreover, during 1978, *Takenoko-zoku* (the “Baby Bamboo Tribe”, Figure 3) appeared in Harajuku on weekends. It was the first time teenagers created a reputation for their own culture in Harajuku streets. Most of the members were junior high school students. They changed their clothes in Yoyogi Park and danced to the beat of disco music around “*hokosha tengoku*” (Pedestrian Paradise). Wearing harem pants, Kang-fu shoes and clothes inspired by the Arabian nights formed the major wardrobe of the *Takenoko-zoku*. They were just about 30 boys in 1979, but girl fans started to get together with them and media broadcasted their dancing. As a result, they grew to over 2,000 members in 1980; if tourists and fans were included, the number would rise to more than 100,000 people. Some of the popular boys among *Takenoko-zoku* became talents and actors, such as Okita Jouji. The *Takenoko-zoku* phenomenon ended in 1981 with the entry of a

new tribe called “*Fifties*”, who had a regent style with twist dances. Hence, the *Takenoko-zoku* trend only lasted for about three to four years (Shibuya Trend research 2006: 16).

**Figure 3.** *Takenoko Zoku* (Baby Bamboo Tribe)  
*Takenoko Zoku* emerged in the early 1980s. In those days, “the main street in Harajuk, Omotesandō, was declared hook-ten (‘pedestrian haven’) and cars were banned every Sunday.” *Takenoko Zoku* would “perform choreographed dance moves for hours on end at Yoyogi Park. They invented a vibrant sphere of inclusion where their constructed self-image made them intensely visible, but also kept them distanced from their surroundings and from the audiences they drew. Quickly becoming a popular tourist attraction, they translated the state of being under perpetual scrutiny into the pleasure of being seen” (Groom 2011:191)



Because of *Takenoko-zoku*, the center of Harajuku moved from Omotesando to Takeshita Streets. In the late 1980s, talent shops were established on Takeshita Streets. However, these talent shops only invited the lower age bracket of customers and were just considered as a popular tourist spot. Therefore, the talent shops were recognized as “Children’s place” and “Tourist site” with an uncool image (Shibuya Trend Research 2006: 60).

In the end of 1980s, when rapid economic growth in Japan seemed to last forever, office ladies and female college students went out to nightclubs and danced all night. They were called *Gyaru* or *Bodi-Kon Gyaru* because they were wearing body conscious clothes that tightly fit their bodylines and emphasized their sexual attractiveness (Kinsella 2013: 60-61). This *Bodi-Kon* boom cultivated the upcoming *Kogyaru* (high school gal) subculture in Shibuya. *Kogyaru* subculture got popular during the mid-1990s.

*Kogyaru* is the term for high school or junior high school girls who were dressed like a delinquent girl (Figure 4). This delinquent image was attributed to high school girls when media sensationalized and reported *Kogyaru*’s engagement in *Enjokousai* (compensated dating) with Japanese salary-men (white collar workers). The menu of compensated dating varied from selling their own panties, pretending to be on an actual date, going together to Karaoke, etc. to having sex just like prostitutes. The common notion for compensated dating was that girls involved in it sold their sexuality for the sake of money (Miyadai 1994). From around this period, a discourse was symbolized around high school girls as being sexually attractive. Likewise, the pornographic industry flourished with high school girls on adult videos, pictures or cartoons (Matsutani 2012: 71-76).





**Figure 4.** *Kogyaru* (literally: little girl) is characterized as wearing a school uniform in a stylish way with loose socks, a mini-skirt implying sexual deviance (Kinsella 2013:60).

Source: Left picture: Nippon of the day. Retrieved Nov 21, 2014 from <http://www.pinterest.com/sozaiyakoaki/nippon-of-the-day/> Right picture: My opinion on *Kogyaru* Fashion (*Kogyaru Kei Fasshion nituiteno Watashi no Iken.* Retrieved Nov21, 2014 from <http://akb48entertainmenews.blog.so-net.ne.jp/archive/c2304875360-1>

Then Shinohara Tomoe, a solo singer and talent, debuted in 1996. It was the time when the words *Enjokosai*, *Ruzu sokkusu* (loose socks) and *Amura* (short form of Amuro Namie) were awarded as the most popular words (*ryukou-go taisho*). These events indicated the high time for *Kogyaru*, with Shinohara popularity propelling it to a social phenomenon. Shinohara Tomoe was characterized with her flamboyant fashion, high-pitched voice and unique movement resembling the act of dancing (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Shinohara Tomoe (left) and Shinora (right)

Source: Right Picture: GRE news. Retrieved July 22 from <http://guri01.com/shinoharatomoe-yuumin-259>  
Left Picture: minp! Retrieved November 21 from <http://www.minp-matome.jp/pub/>

At that time, Shinohara was 16 years old. However, she was not promoted with the advantageous image of a high school girl, but probably appeared as a reaction to the *Kogyaru* boom. The followers of Shinohara Tomoe soon emerged, called *Shinora* (short form of Shinohara Tomoe), and these teenage fan girls started to copy and follow her fashion, hairstyle and behaviors (Matsutani 2012: 88-92). Her fans would get together in Harajuku and go to the Laforet Harajuku to enjoy expressing themselves through clothes. As Godoy (2007), an editor of a fashion magazine has remarked, various kinds of fashion style emerged in Harajuku since mid-1990s including Punk, Cyber, Lolita, Shironuri, Feary, Decola and so forth; styles in Harajuku were never static or fixed. The boundaries of the varying styles often blurred and integrated with each other to the point where sometimes a new branch of style was created from a mainstream category. At the same time, many high class fashion stores were built in Omotesando, with brands imported from abroad. Thus, we can say that the landscape of Harajuku completed its formation around the 1990s.

However, upon the turn of the new millennium, the situation in Harajuku street fashion changed. Yonezawa (2008) and Masuda (2014) point to Harajuku's quantitative decline during the earlier part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the entrance of 'fast fashion', which appealed to the price-conscious market (Masuda 2014). With the clothes boom (Yonezawa 2008: 80) UNIQLO played a significant role in the fast fashion paradigm shift. UNIQLO is a fashion brand established in 1984 in Hiroshima prefecture. It became such a widely popular clothing brand in Japan that every locale has at least one of its clothes stores. With a sales message as "simple, functional and comfortable", it can be regarded as the opposite of the Harajuku extreme street style (p.95).

Masuda Sebasuchan (2014) also mentioned that the decline of Harajuku street fashion is due to the disappearance of *Hoko-Ten* (Pedestrian Paradise). Youth culture lost their space for growth in their fashion and Harajuku witnessed the wave of *Ura-hara*, the backside of Harajuku style. *Ura-hara* is characterized as a simple boyish style. Masuda (pp. 23-25) suggests that a colorful decorative fashion can be at odds with adult norms, and believes that the forces of capitalism are pushing to regenerate *Hoko-Ten* (Pedestrian Parades) in the Harajuku district.

It can be said that Harajuku fashion is now internationally recognized as one of the most unique forms of Japanese culture. However, some artists who have been in Harajuku complain or refer to it as very cynical. As photographer Yonehara said in Masuda's (2013) book: "*Six years ago, Gyaruru was the center of the appeal trend when Sebasuchan (Masuda) was looking at Harajuku. Nobody accepted it as culture at that time. Then they suddenly changed their behavior to Harajuku when foreigners acknowledged its uniqueness*" (p. 24). Then, Aoki Shoich, editor of magazine "FRUiTS" also commented in Masuda's (2013) book that "*People abroad believe that Japan consists of colorful and vigorous people, but actually inside of Japan has become a very simple place now. I cannot find anyone to ask for one's street snap in Harajuku.*" (p.25)

Harajuku has a long solid history, which proves its growth from post war Japan towards its current status today. It was not an overnight story. Harajuku's unique culture is driven and cultivated by the youth's street power. However, some argue that Harajuku's street fashion is affected by the crisis of global capitalism and is losing its street power. Thus, we may be able to add Zukin's (1993) argument that after the urban landscape is mature enough, we can expect the deterioration or decline of the place.

**Representation of Harajuku image and its consumption:** One may observe how the landscape of Harajuku is commoditized in the fashion magazine KERA, and more specifically in the street snap of KERA. Many fashionable people have been photographed in the Harajuku street snap. Their fashionable uniqueness

motivates young readers to go to Harajuku and purchase the clothes they wore in the magazine. The concept of commodification of a place is applied here. Some examples of how readers react to those street snaps are provided in this section.

KERA was established in 1998 and has been featuring the Harajuku street snap in the magazine. Since 2012, the proponents of this paper have surveyed the people who consume Harajuku fashion. Through queries with them, it was observed that they commonly described the Harajuku street snap section of KERA as the best compared to other fashion magazines. They would first check the Harajuku street snap and find out who is on it for the latest month. This way they could get to know the featured person through social networking services (SNS) such as twitter. There is a small information box in each featured person's page where they put their twitter account in it. Therefore, fans or ordinary people can communicate with each other by following them. The small box also provides information concerning the location of the stores selling the clothes worn by the featured person, and most of the clothes can be found in Harajuku. So the featured street snap persons are not only showing their personal expression, but are also advertising fashion brands by unintentionally becoming their models.

The process of representation occurs within the Harajuku district. If one knows Harajuku well, they can tell where each photo is taken. Harajuku has only been a place but with fashionable people gathering within it, Harajuku has become more than a mere place for young readers. Magazine photos make readers believe that there are many people wearing such fashionable clothes in Harajuku, which leads to the desire to be one of them (Figure 6). Through this process of adding value, Harajuku is commodified.



**Figure 6.** The role of street snap and twitter in Harajuku image construction.

After being photographed in the Harajuku street snap, that person may spread that information on twitter. The left picture is showing how a person reacts towards a post. She put her photograph on magazine on twitter then many people pushed the 'like' button on it. By getting 'like's, that tweet can spread to those in real time and a number of people can see the one who is on the magazine. Because of this, appearing on the magazine makes one famous among the Harajuku fashion consumers in twitter. The girl who appeared on the magazine, gained hundreds of followers and now she has 1,368 followers even though she is just an ordinal part-timer and is not any kind of a celebrity or model. Now she can obtain a lot of twitter or SNS followers, which translates to having more power and influence over followers.



As a result, people go to Harajuku with unique clothes in order to appear on a magazine. In other words, such representation of Harajuku motivates people to consume Harajuku fashion. Although Harajuku fashion is not a vehicle that encourages any fashion to flourish, it accelerates particular streams of fashion style in this district such as Decora, Lolita, Cyber and so on. Such styles merge with the newest trends after being reproduced by individuals. For instance, Lolita has formed into *Hime-Loli* (Princess-like Lolita) and *Kura-Loli* (Classic Lolita).

Harajuku is only a background of the photo in KERA's street snap. However, it contains a power larger than the models featured in the street snap because Harajuku has the ability to attract people in its fashionable environment. As Goldman and Papson mentioned, the landscape can change its image by being represented in a certain way. Harajuku is represented as the most fashionable place in Japan through KERA's street snap. This commodification of the place reproduces the Harajuku culture because it presents a circulation of desires that continues to inflate.

## Conclusion

This paper explored how the landscape of Harajuku has conceptualized its image of being the youth fashion street. This paper came up with two answers. One is that Harajuku has successfully formed its urban structure with a unique market culture, such as the youth street subculture. Hence, such an urban structure kept its appeal for the young people to keep on coming and consuming Harajuku influenced culture. Magazines (*non-no*) and TV celebrities (Shinohara Tomoe) also contributed to Harajuku's image formation of a young fashion street. We analyzed the formation process by applying the theory of "circuit of cultural capital". This paper noted that after reaching maturity, a place's culture may deteriorate. We observed that Harajuku went quiet and simple after reaching a certain level of popularity. Another one is that Harajuku has been represented as a place to show your fashionable clothes in fashion magazines. KERA's Harajuku street snap photographs actual pedestrians in Harajuku instead of professional models and thus, provides an equal chance of publicity exposure to everyone. This representation of Harajuku has motivated young people to go and consume Harajuku products. The aforementioned turn of events were examined by the concept of "commodification of the place".

## References

- Akurosu Editorial. 1995. *Akurosu Henshusha* (in Japanese). Street Fashion 1945-1995. PARCO Shuppan.
- Bell, M. M. 1997. The Ghosts of Place. *Theory and Society* 26(6): 813-836.
- Goldman, R., Papson, S. 2011. *Landscapes of Capital*. Malden, USA: Polity Press.
- Groom, A. 2011. Power Play and Performance in Harajuku. *New Voice* 4(1): 188-210.
- Harajuku Omoteseando*. 2004. *Hiiragikai Omotesando* (in Japanese). Ei Publisher.
- Izumi, Y. 2008. Cosmetic Era: Contemporary Cultural Theory of "Playing myself" (*Kosumeno Jidai: "Watashi Asobi" no Gendaibunkaron*). Keishousha.
- Kawamura, Y. 2012. *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kinsella, S. 2013. *Schoolgirls, Money and Rebellion in Japan*. Routledge.

- Masubuchi, T. 2013. Backstreet Creates Cultures! (*Rojiura ga Bunka wo Umu!*) Seikyusha.
- Miyadai, S. 1994. Choices of School Girls with Uniform (*Seihuku Shoujo no Sentaku*). Koudansha.
- Narumi, H. 2007. The Cultural History of the 20th Century Fashion (*20 Seiki Fashion no Bunkashi*). Kawaide Shoubou Shinsha.
- NOHA. (n.d.). The History of Harajuku (*Harajuku no Rekishi*). Retrieved from <http://www.tour-harajuku.com/history.html>.
- Sebasuchan Masuda. 2013. Dokidoki Perfect Book. *Takarajima Sha*.
- Shibuya Trend Research (Shibuya Torendo Kenkyukai). 2006. Girls' Culture Creates the History (*Jidai wo Tsukuru Garuzu Karucha-*). Goma Books.
- Sakane, Y. (n.d.). The roots of High Class Luxury Apartment is Akasaka. Retrieved from <http://allabout.co.jp/gm/gc/26400/>
- Zukin, S. 1993. Landscapes of power: from Detroit to Disney World. University of California Press.