

Harajuku Fashionista Chi: Fashion Saved ME

By Ugne Giraityte

In the past few years, fashion trends have been rapidly changing within days as social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have been introducing something new or leaving something old behind every day. From Gen Z's ban on skinny jeans to obsession over the trending Zara dress that stole the spotlight in 2021 – the fashion world has proved how hard it can be to have your own style nowadays. But not everyone follows the latest trends and tries to fit the crowd, as have we learned from subculture Harajuku followers and fashion enthusiasts on social media. As a TWENTYSOMETHING YouTuber and J – fashionista Mikan explains:

'Harajuku is one of the most famous fashion districts in the world, standing out like a sore thumb to an otherwise conservative and conformist society. It has birthed some of the most creative fashion styles and brought the word 'Kawai' to a non-Japanese consumer.'

Harajuku can be seen as a mix of pop culture, avant-garde, and Japanese sub-cultures that have evolved in various different Japanese street styles. Harajuku is an extremely cute, gothic, and expressive style allowing people to play around with colours, patterns, and various ideas encouraging Harajuku style followers to be themselves despite their gender, sexuality, or religious beliefs. As the style was born without any rules, different people follow different Harajuku trends. While some focus on Lolita (doll-like look), others choose Peep (sporty goth style) as there are plenty of trends and zero rules.

Although the idea of Harajuku has become quite clear, we were still keen on learning more about it so we decided to meet the real expert and long-time Harajuku style enthusiast Chi who invited us to her J – fashion fantasy.

A TWENTYSOMETHING Chi from London has been obsessed with the style since her school days when she first learned about K - pop and became a fan of the K - pop boy band Big Bang and the leader of the band G – Dragon who she describes as a 'Fashion-forward God'. Since then Chi has been experimenting with different subcultures and styles which led her to realise not only her style but herself as a person.

'I always call myself a 360 Weeb (non – Japanese person who is obsessed with Japanese culture) because I feel that is the best way to describe myself as I've always been into many different styles and hobbies: I watch anime, I cosplay, and I listen to K - pop. I was very punky in school which led me to come across the punky gothic Japanese style - Visual Kei which inspired me to do further research and come across many different J-styles. That's how I understood that fashion is my way of expression. It's my art form. I love wearing pastel colours that allow me to shine brightly wherever I go. I've not belonged to anything even growing up and through fashion, I have found my true family.'

Chi began her official J – fashion journey in 2018 when she started making scrapbooks and going to Harajuku fashion events.

'I used to go to B&Q and get the free colour paint paper samples and stick them in my book and draw outfits that would look cute in that colour. The more I experimented the more I found different ways of wearing clothes. Then I have decided to become more active in the community: I have hosted meetups where J-fashion enthusiasts can meet and make new friends who are interested in J - fashion. Over the years it has grown and become large with lots of wonderful members. I guess I've become the cool Mama who has inspired younger artists to explore and experiment with their own style.'

But Chi's primary fashion inspiration comes from her idol a Japanese model and social media persona Haruka Kurebayashi.

‘My ultimate Idol is Kurebayashi, I had the privilege of meeting her when she came to London and got to go to her exclusive goodbye party before she left to go back to Japan. I've been following her since I've been into Decora and Fairy Kei. She inspired me to push the limits with accessories and many different patterns.’

And while the Harajuku journey seems exciting and inspiring, a TWENTYSOMETHING woman admits that there were times when she felt like giving up as her insecurities were taking over.

‘When I started it was very frustrating as I kept on comparing myself to others and thinking why does my style not look like that. It was hard growing up and being the only alternative fashion fan in my area, I couldn't express myself freely without someone coming up to me asking very uncomfortable questions. The worst part is that my body shape never fitted any cute clothes as I'm top heavy and it made me want to constantly compare myself to other people on Instagram.’

However, Chi's struggles didn't keep her away from her true self.

‘After I left school, I was able to push myself and gain confidence in what I wanted to do. Although it was hard, to begin with as I lost friends because they didn't like how I dressed and felt embarrassed of my colourful and unusual outfits and accessories. I was too different. But soon I started focusing more on myself rather than what other people think of me. That's when I truly started to blossom. I began to accept this is my style and how I look makes me unique. I've always thought after getting through that hurdle, why be a follower when you can be a leader. I live by this line. Whenever I see someone on Instagram who I believe looks better or is doing better I stop myself and think - I'm unique in my own way. Now, I am my bubbly self who is happy to walk out of the house in anything with no care in the world.’

When Chi realised she was finally free from the judgment of the people around her, she decided to take a step further and begin her social media journey that would help her followers ‘cupcakes’ to find inspiration and learn more about J – Fashion.

‘I'm so grateful we have platforms that exist to express myself and inspire others around the world. I use Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. I have started doing fashion videos on my YouTube, I mostly do a lot of K - pop dance covers, tutorials, and vlogs. I've had a lot of engagements with my cupcakes who always want to know more about my style and get tips and inspiration.’

Chi's Harajuku journey has given her a chance to make new friends and connections that allowed her to gain exciting experiences.

‘Expressing myself in my own style has opened doors for many great opportunities as a J - fashionista. In the recent years I have had the honour of being invited to mansion parties where I got to meet many wonderful alternative artists all in different fields. This has given me great connections and I hope to do more future collaborations.’

But the best part of Chi's adventures is the music video she was invited to be a part of a couple of years ago as well as the opportunity to model at the Hyper Japan event where she was able to be as an example of how much you can achieve when you choose to be yourself.

‘My highlight has got to be modelling at Hyper Japan and hosting my own J-fashion meetups. Watching everyone smile and be happy knowing that they are all welcome is the best feeling that a host can get. I always want anyone who joins the community to feel loved!

Besides, I have been invited to be a part of music videos and work alongside such artists as Little Dragon – a Swedish electronic music band. The director found me on Instagram, I was driven to an amazing castle in Kent where I had a runner look after me all day, providing me with food and drinks. The whole experience was so surreal!’

Chi is just one of many great examples of how fashion can be used as a tool to express oneself. And as we have already learned, Harajuku is a great way to live a life full of joy, adventures, and colours.