

A Comparison of Clothing Styles and Values of Korean and Japanese Youth Subcultures

UNE COMPARAISON DE STYLES D'HABILLEMENT ET DE VALEURS DE SOUS-CULTURES DES JEUNES CORÉENS ET JAPONAIS

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Abstract: Korea and Japan are two countries in Asia with a long shared history and what seem from afar to be similar values, such as modesty, filial piety and diligence. However, a more in-depth look into the two countries shows that Korean and Japanese people in fact have different minds and values. Both countries have five to six established youth subcultures in the 2000s that reflect Korean and Japanese society, and the pressures, values and lifestyles of youths. The aim of this study was to compare the youth subcultures of Korea and Japan, focusing on their clothing styles, and interpret why the differences in styles exist, using aspects of their respective social circumstances, status of youths, and traditional values as indexes, and to ultimately help deepen understanding of the relationship between clothes and culture, youths today, and the issues and trends that most affect youths in Korea and Japan.

Key words: Korea; Japan; Youth; Subculture; Style; 2000s

Resumé La Corée et le Japon sont deux pays en Asie, avec une longue histoire commune et qui semblent avoir des valeurs similaires, telles que la modestie, la piété filiale et la diligence. Cependant, un regard plus en profondeur sur les deux pays montre que les Coréens et les Japonais ont en fait des esprits et des valeurs différents. Les deux pays ont de cinq à six sous-cultures établies des jeunes dans les années 2000 qui reflètent la société, les pressions, les valeurs et les modes de vie des jeunes coréens et japonais. Le but de cette étude était de comparer les sous-cultures des jeunes en Corée et au Japon, en se concentrant sur leurs styles vestimentaires, et interpréter pourquoi il existe des différences dans les styles, du point de vue de leurs conditions sociales respectives, du statut des jeunes, et des valeurs traditionnelles, afin d'approfondir la compréhension de la relation entre les vêtements et la culture, les jeunes d'aujourd'hui, les enjeux et les tendances qui affectent le plus les jeunes en Corée et au Japon.

Mots-clés: Corée; Japon; Jeunes; Sous-Culture; Style; 2000s

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Korea and Japan are two neighboring Asian countries that share a long history, and deeply interact and exchange with, and influence one another. However, the values and clothing styles of Korean and Japanese youths that may appear similar to countries in Europe and the United States at first glance, are different and each unique in their own way. The comparative

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analysis of current Korean and Japanese youth subculture clothing styles and reasons behind changes in youth subculture styles presented in this article reveals the values of Korean and Japanese youths today and their unique styles.

The Korean and Japanese youth subculture style photographs extracted in recent studies on Korean youth subculture style (Ha & Park, 2010) and Japanese youth subculture style (Park, 2010) were used as subjects of analysis.

YOUTH SUBCULTURES OF KOREA AND JAPAN

The term ‘youth subculture’ refers to a culture created by youths who have values and pursue a lifestyle different from mainstream popular culture and of which youths are active members. Youth subcultures are an important window into the minds and resistance of youths and the behavior and appearance of youth subculture members undoubtedly influence popular culture.

Recent studies revealed that contemporary Korean youth subcultures can be divided into *riders*, *clubbers*, *nightclubbers*, *hip hoppers* and *skateboarders* (Ha & Park, 2010), and Japanese youth subcultures are defined as *bikies*, *gyarus*, *gosuroris*, *emos*, *surfers* and *cosupure* (Park, 2010).

There are both similarities and differences between Korean and Japanese youth subcultures. The two groups of youth subcultures can be compared in terms of type of youth subculture, values, statements and characteristics.

First, Japanese bikies and Korean riders are both subcultures of youths who ride motorcycles or scooters. They both aim to interrupt the culture of the social middle class with their loud riding and actions (Sugimoto, 1997; Seok, 1999). The main reason they ride is to be seen, and they enjoy the attention they get, whether it is good or bad. Therefore, style is an important factor. One obvious difference between the two youth subcultures is that almost all Korean riders are young men, but there are many women bikies in Japan who like to make the most of their youth and enjoy the attention from riding pretty made up motorcycles or scooters (Keet, 2007). In addition, Korean riders have a rebellious side and want to stand out just like Japanese bikies, but they are more mature and experienced. They pursue fast yet safe riding and are different from bikies because they place more importance on safety and purchasing a high quality ride (Batume, 2009). Korean riders and Japanese bikies have similar characteristics in that they both ride mainly at night and add elaborate lights to their motorcycles to stand out and grab attention (Keet, 2007). However, Korean riders focus more on upgrading their motorcycles and making them look good rather than standing out as much as possible with colorful decorations and bright blinking lights. The differences between the two youth subcultures are that Japanese bikies ride in groups and wear the same clothes to show that they are a group, but Korean riders do not. Korean youths want to fit in and be like other peers, too, so they wear similar styles such as jeans and a leather jacket, but they do not intentionally wear matching clothes because expressing individuality is considered more important (Ha & Park, 2010).

Korean clubbers and nightclubbers belong to subcultures with a strong nightlife element, but they are two very different cultures in terms of preferred music, lifestyle pursued, and what they hope to gain from the subculture of their choice. Japanese gyarus are not linked to a specific form of nightlife, but they are similar to clubbers and nightclubbers from the perspective that they seek fun and to live as young and free as possible, and Japanese gosuroris are also similar because they too aim to express their youth and edginess through clothing style.

Korean clubbers and nightclubbers both want to relieve stress and at least temporarily break away from the rules and regulations of daily life through their subculture life. The differentiated values of clubbers are that dance is an important form of self-expression, socialization and fun, and they express homogeneity and identity through the activity of ‘clubbing’ at clubs (Choi & Kim, 2008). Unlike clubs, which are similar to European or American clubs, ‘nightclubs’ are a unique kind of club in Korea. Most women sit at tables and men sit in rooms, which cost much more and where you have to order expensive whiskey, beer and side dish sets and may not order just beer. There is a ‘booking’ system where waiters take women guests by the hand and lead them in to rooms, where the men are sitting. The men and women talk to each other, drink, exchange phone numbers if desired and even sing songs on the karaoke machines that are installed in the room. The woman may get up and leave if she does not want to stay any longer, or the man may ask her to go as politely as possible. When the woman comes out of the room, she can go back to her table or another waiter may take her hand and take her for a ‘booking’ to another room. There is, of course, a dance floor and DJ booth where couples who meet through booking can dance. Since nightclubs are places where artificial introductions are made and any guest will most likely meet many people of the opposite sex in one night, it is a culture where most seek to show off themselves as much as possible, stand out, break taboos of daily life and resist against orders or virtues of life in Korean society such as patience, shyness and some forms of etiquette (Kim, 1997). There are no nightclubs like Korean nightclubs in Japan, and although there are clubs, they are so prevalent in Japan that clubbers are not considered to be a subculture group in Japan. Therefore, the subculture that has the strongest characteristic of enjoying youth and fun is gyarus.

However, gyarus do not break away from stress or daily life temporarily in a certain place like Korean clubbers or nightclubbers. Gyarus is derived from the Japanese pronunciation of the English word ‘girl’ and refers to a subculture that wears very exaggerated and decorative styles that are feminine, yet very bold and eccentric. Once a gyaru, they live like

gyarus all year long. They dress in the particularly exaggerated gyaru style, wear heavy makeup and spend their time shopping and hanging out in gyaru spots like Shibuya. The difference between the nightlife subcultures of Korea and gyarus is that gyarus place most importance on style, image and how they appear to others. It is through their appearance that they feel a sense of liberation and differentiation from others. There are different types of gyarus according to the specific style they pursue, such as *ganguros*, who tan their skin to look extremely dark, and *yamambas*, who wear dark eye makeup and dye their hair in multiple colors, but they are all considered gyarus as long as they want fun and a gyaru kind of style in their life. Gyarus hold regular meetings and hang out together in groups. They know they have extraordinary styles that are considered socially unacceptable by some, but prioritize self-expression over social customs and public opinion. Style is even important to all gyarus, also known as 'senta guys,' after where they hang out (Keet, 2007). Gosuroris are a new subculture that has emerged from the older 'gothic' and 'Lolita' styles. They are also strongly focused on appearance and style and aim to look different and emphasize their youth. Gosuroris are influenced by Goths. However, they do not pursue the dark Goth mind, music or culture of American Goth culture, but only borrow their stylistic characteristics (Keet: 2007).

Korean clubbers and nightclubbers, and Japanese gyarus and gosuroris have similar values of fun, uniqueness and youth. Korean clubbers and nightclubbers do not hold regular meetings outside of clubs or nightclubs and only act in their characteristic way inside clubs or nightclubs. Women try to appear as sexy and feminine as possible, and men aim to look comfortable like they did not try hard, but make sure they appear wealthy. They do not insist on wearing styles similar to other clubbers or nightclubbers and focus on expression of individuality and catching the attention of the opposite sex. Other elements of their culture include socializing with peers, socializing with the opposite sex, music, dance and alcohol consumption (Kim, 1997). Gyarus and gosuroris enjoy nightlife, too, but it is not the most important point of their lifestyle. Expression of values through style is. They wear layers upon layers of accessories to complete their unique style. Gyarus have dark, tanned skin even in the winter, wear heavy makeup, elaborate clothes and many accessories, while gosuroris dress up in an exaggerated way to appear like dolls with an edge. The particular looks are different for each person, but the overall image is the same and anyone can tell which subculture they are a part of.

Hip hoppers currently create a culture more international and artistic than clubbers or nightclubbers, and pursue expression of freedom, music, youth and art. Korean hip hop culture is a very liberal one and is spreading widely to many areas of lives of youth including hip hop clubs, hip hop events and hip hop music. There is not one certain place where hip hoppers can be seen (Kim & Kim, 2002). Emo is short for 'emotional' and started as a genre derived from punk music. The term is now used to refer to a total lifestyle, including how someone dresses, appears, acts or speaks. Japanese emos also express emotions through music, but the genre of music and kinds of emotions expressed and statements are different from hip hoppers. Hip hoppers were not detected as recent and influential subcultures in Japan because hip hop is not as established in Japan. Korean hip hoppers sing and rap of freedom and youth and choose to wear comfortable clothes that can express their individual taste, while Japanese emos sing of isolation and sadness and wear skinny jeans and tight, dark-colored t-shirts (Young Guitar, 2009).

Skateboarders have established a subculture in Korea and meet in many different 'spots' to skate and participate in competitions. It is not a large youth subculture in Japan, where surfers have rather established themselves. In Seoul, the capital city of Korea, skateboarders skate in areas with skateboarding facilities such as Dongdaemun and Boramae Park. A wide range of youths from middle school students to young adults can be seen skateboarding all year round in these places. Korean skateboarders and Japanese surfers both enjoy the thrill from speed and mastering dangerous techniques, and pursue a free and 'cool' image and lifestyle. Korean youths are particularly forced to spend most of their time studying in a society where there are great pressures to speak English, enter a good university and succeed in life (Hyun & Lee & Lee, 2003), and thus feel greatly attracted to skateboarding, which allows them to make new friends and feel a special sense of belonging. They meet at skateboarding parks, and also share information and socialize actively through the internet, in a country where internet speed, internet communities and online shopping are highly developed. Japanese surfers have a freer lifestyle compared to Korean skateboarders, and express this aspect externally with tanned skin and Bermuda shorts that would suit someone on a beach.

The cosupure subculture, which is a big subculture in Japan in terms of scale and impact, exists in Korea, but it is not as established. Korean youths wear costumes on special days like Halloween and for parties, but there is no established culture where they regularly wear and express their unique individuality through costumes. The Japanese cosupure culture is a subculture unique to Japan, and one that turns clothing into a kind of game and new form of entertainment. Japanese society requires citizens to always be polite and well-mannered, and through cosupure, Japanese youths can become someone entirely different for a while. They live in a society full of images and stimulation, including cartoons, billboards and pachinkos (Kinsella, 2000), and by wearing visually stimulating costumes to look like cartoon or game characters they can become the character for the day and also meet and build friendships with other youths who have similar interests. The cosupure subculture gathers at certain spots every Sunday. There are no restrictions regarding what costumes may or may not be worn, making it a truly free subculture of youths that allows them to express their inner creativity, desires and unique self (Chung, 2000).

A COMPARISON OF KOREAN AND JAPANESE YOUTH SUBCULTURE STYLES

Photographs of Korean and Japanese youth subculture styles (Ha & Park, 2010; Park, 2010) were compared with overall image, items, colors, materials, accessories and silhouette as indexes of comparison. Subcultures with similarities, as explained above, were compared, and differences between the styles of clothing were interpreted using information on and examination of the socio-cultural background of each country and subculture. The results are as follows.

Korean youth subculture styles generally have a simple, clean or casual image, with skateboarders or riders also pursuing an active image and women aiming to add a sexy image. Meanwhile, the overall image of Japanese subculture styles is an exaggerated image or cartoon-like or doll-like image. Unlike Korean youth subcultures, no ordinary or casual images could be found. For example, Japanese bikies, who belong to the most ordinary subculture out of the Japanese subcultures in the study, wore clothes that were more comfortable than other Japanese subcultures but were found to have a much stronger and stylish image than Korean rider styles. Korean clubbers, nightclubbers and hip hoppers tended to choose a comfortable and sexy or clean image, but Japanese gyarus expressed a much bolder style with layers of accessories and colors. Japanese youths wear much stronger images than Korean youths and express themselves in a more visually stimulating way because they have a strong desire to express individuality while living in a society where all youths try to stand out, and Japan has a very visual culture of which image plays an important role (Kinsella 2000). Koreans seem to have a stronger need to fit in than the Japanese (Kim, 2000), and although youths today feel it is important to express individuality, they consciously make efforts to do it within a range of simple, clean styles that are not too different.

The biggest difference between Korean and Japanese youth subculture styles is in silhouette. Young Korean men were found to wear natural, slim and baggy silhouettes, and women mainly wore slim or tight silhouettes. However, a wide range silhouettes were found from observing Japanese youth subculture styles. Cosupure style women's silhouettes included a round silhouette, and long H-line silhouette extended with platform shoes, and men's silhouettes included a unique silhouette of a tight top and spread out bottom, created by a man wearing a skirt. An A-line silhouette exaggerated with a petticoat was found among gosurori styles. The slim and tight silhouette that is the trend in European and American style is currently popular in Korea, too, and youths were found to have a strong preference for styles similar to the main trend even though they belonged to a subculture. In this respect, it can be said that Korea is more sensitive to international trends and Japanese youths follow the trend within their own subculture, but attempt styles that are different from popular styles.

Both Korean and Japanese youth subcultures wore black and white colors the most, and many used primary colors like blue, red and yellow in their looks, but Japanese youth subculture styles generally used color in a much more visual and elaborate way. Most Korean cases wore neutral colors such as black or white as a main color and used different pops of color partially, or wore around two to three colors in one look. However, Japanese youths were found to wear many different colors together. Gyarus wore around six different colors in one look and preferred very colorful appearances with no one particular main color. Korean culture is less visual and stimulating than the popular culture of Japan, and Korean youths therefore have a tendency to choose visually comfortable colors.

The materials Japanese and Korean youth subculture members observed wore the most were cotton, denim and knits. However, Japan wore lace, velour and fake fur a lot, too. Korean youths wore solid materials the most, and any prints they wore were small prints such as letters or logo prints, whereas Japanese youths wore a variety of different prints including stripes, floral prints, traditional Japanese prints and crown prints. Photographs of Japanese youths showed that they did not just wear one type of print but wore many different prints together in one look. Korea is particularly influenced by European and American culture, style and popular media (Kim, 2000). Instead of creating their own unique looks and purely experimenting with style, they tend to style themselves within a safe range. However, Japanese youths are so creative in the way they style themselves that Japanese street style is famous in Europe and the United States, too. Japanese youths have created a strong place in society for themselves and show off their opinions and lifestyle without hesitation. Therefore, they tend to express more unique and bolder styles.

The contrasting images of Korean and Japanese youth subcultures were examined focusing on items, next, and the results were that Korean youths mostly wear basic items such as t-shirts, jeans and sneakers regardless of the type of subculture they are a part of, and Japanese youths wear more items for one look and wear items that stand out such as petticoats and unique hats. For example, many Korean women clubbers were observed, and they were found to wear basic items such as dresses or jeans and a sleeveless top or knit, whereas Japanese gosuroris wore corsets, petticoats and knee socks. Interview results showed that Korean youths consider style and appearance to be very important, but also place importance on comfort at the same time, which is why they end up choosing comfortable items they are used to even if they style the items differently for a night out.

Many Korean youths did not wear accessories at all – 29.4 percent of hip hoppers and 42.9 percent of riders. However, only nine out of one hundred and thirty-three Japanese cases observed did not wear accessories. Korean youths have a desire to show off, but instead of wearing many accessories they wore one or two expensive accessories. Japanese youths tended to wear two to three necklaces or two belts and many big-sized accessories. Korean youths focused more on styles that could show off their face or wealth rather than style as style itself. Japanese people have a stronger desire to show off and consider being childlike and pure a virtue (Richie, 2003), which is perhaps why Japanese youths choose to wear a lot of childish accessories in bold colors and shapes.

A comparison of Korean and Japanese youth subculture styles is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: A Comparison of Korean and Japanese Youth Subculture Styles

Category	Korea		Japan	
	Characteristics	Socio-cultural background	Characteristics	Socio-cultural background
Overall image/atmosphere	•Simple image •Casual image •Active image •Sexy image 	•Fitting in is socially important •Individual expressions are made within simple and acceptable bounds	•Elaborate and exaggerated image •Strong and stylish image •Doll image 	•A visual culture where image is important
Silhouette	•Natural silhouette •Slim silhouette •Tight silhouette, etc. 	•Sensitive to trends •People prefer styles similar to styles trendy in the mainstream	•Unique silhouettes such as round silhouette, and tight top and A-line bottom 	•Follow trends within a group rather than popular styles of the mainstream
Color	•Mainly achromatic colors •Points of basic colors such as blue, red, etc. 	•Koreans prefer visually comfortable colors because of the comparatively conservative and calm culture	•Many bold colors incorporated in one item of the clothing •Colorful clothes 	•Visual and stimulating culture
Material	•Cotton, denim, knit, etc. •Solid color materials, small letters or logo prints, etc. 	•Largely influenced by western style and culture •Koreans prefer simple styles	•Elaborate materials such as lace, velour and fake fur •Diverse prints such as floral, crowns and letter prints 	•Japanese youths have strong social positions, individual tendencies and lifestyles •Culture of bold expressions
Items	•T-shirt •Jeans and other basic items 	•Place importance on comfort	•Unique items such as petticoat, corseted top, platform shoes, etc. 	•Place more importance on style than comfort
Accessories	•No accessories at times •Simple accessories •Expensive accessories 	•Focus more on their body and face than style	•Wears many accessories at once •Prefers large and childish accessories 	•Place importance on childlike naivety •Need to show off
Major style codes	•Baseball cap, rider jacket, etc.	•The symbolic significance of fashion items is important	•Platform shoes, petticoat skirt, etc.	•Express oneself clearly and strongly

CONCLUSION: DIFFERENT VALUES EXPRESSED THROUGH DIFFERENT CLOTHING STYLES

The results of this comparative study reveal the unique characteristics of Korean and Japanese youth subculture styles based on a comparison of Korean and Japanese youth subcultures in the context of the respective societies and cultural backgrounds of each of the countries. Contemporary youth subcultures do not have a political mind of resistance like other well-known youth cultures of the past, but they still resist against society and strongly pursue individual freedom, and reflect current socio-cultural characteristic, too. Youth subculture styles therefore, are a tool that provides insight, not just into the subcultures themselves, but also into contemporary society, culture and styles.

All youth subcultures examined had major style codes, or icons, which are symbolic items with significance. When youth subcultures first started to appear in Korean society the style codes were similar to those of European and American youth subcultures such as gold accessories and famous designer brands, but today, the style codes have evolved to items with newly established symbolism that better reflects the emotions and values of Korean youths in a subtle way, such as baseball caps and tight dresses. Meanwhile, the style codes of Japanese youths are much more visually blatant in comparison, such as petticoat dresses and platform shoes several inches high that show off their strong desire to stand out and be different. Korean youths have established new subcultures like clubbing because they have new values that place importance on individualism, materialism and sexual equality, in a society that traditionally values groupism, humility and male-dominance, and new items that show off wealth and sexuality are style codes. Major Japanese youth subcultures place importance on a young, free life and pursuing individuality while not being affected by others, and their style codes show off how different and unique the subculture members are, no matter how outrageous they may look to the public.

The traditional conservative values of Korean society and the new values of youths who pursue global, Western things and styles and individuality all influence youth subculture styles, and thus contemporary youth subculture styles are simple, modern, young and sexy, yet quite modest. Korean youths dressed in more glamorous and bold styles in the past, when the country first opened its doors to Western clothes, but they have a stronger sense of identity now and this is reflected in their clothing choices. Japan, on the other hand, opened its doors to the world earlier than Korea, yet maintains its strong identity. They have a strong sense of identity and values and maintain them while just adopting global looks.

Korean youths do not want to be the same as others and claimed being different was important during interviews (Ha & Park, 2010), but deep down they want to be similar to their peers and do not want to stand out too much. The values of Korean youths are apparent through their subcultures, which have groupist characteristics, and their comfortable and comparatively low-key clothing styles. The reason why Korean subculture styles especially seem uniform compared to Japanese subculture styles is because Korean youths are more aware of and care about how they appear to others, and have a strong need to fit in and act together as a group. Japan is a country with groupist aspects, too, but generally it also respects individual space and character and allows people to escape into their own world by wearing unique subculture styles. Meanwhile, Korean youths look for a route of escape in activities such as drinking, dancing or other areas of culture rather than style because they do not visually want to appear too different.

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