

# A GAL'S WORLD







an undergraduate thesis  
written & designed  
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*created in the spring of 2024*



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# subculture culture

Even with the vast amount of subcultures around the world, each with their own sets of identity, language, and customs, our understanding of the concept is often overwhelmingly Euro-American. Goths, punks, and hippies are perhaps the most famous examples of subcultures, all of which formed and thrived in the West. Our understanding of how these movements have affected society on a more global scale is limited due to

researchers having a preference towards studying Western, English-speaking subcultures. Additionally, sociologists and other related researchers tend to have a gender bias, in which studies are mainly conducted amongst male-dominant subcultures.

When compared to the rest of the world, women appear to play a major role in Japanese subcultures moreso than men,

with fashion and self-expression being the primary modes of communication. Historically, defiant young women of Japan have been treated as outcasts, thus they seek strength in numbers (such as the sukeban/delinquent girl movement of the 70s-80s). Sociologist Yuniya Kawamura, the writer of *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*, writes, "Instead of finding a place within the male-dominant subcultures, these Japanese girls

have created and maintained their autonomy and independence despite their expressions of femininity."

This book serves as a compendium for one of those subcultures, gyaru, aiming contribute a more comprehensive understanding of a movement that revolutionized generations of Japanese youth.





# sukeban

japan's first girl gangs

Sukeban, or “delinquent girl,” is a term coined by Japanese police in the 1960s to define and categorize the emergence of street gangs composed of teenage girls, whom they also described in official reports as “omens of downfall.” These young women sought to remove themselves from Japan’s oppressive, male-dominated society. Their rebellion took various forms, ranging from smoking cigarettes in school bathrooms to engaging in street violence and shoplifting.

One of the most iconic features associated with sukeban is their modified school uniforms. Common alterations included cutting the uniform tops to expose their midriffs, opting for Converse sneakers instead of loafers, and embroidering anarchic kanji and other gang symbols onto the uniforms. These alterations often served a dual purpose, not only expressing their defiance but also enabling them to conceal weapons such as knives, razor blades, and even swords or staffs.

These gangs aimed to assert that women can and will challenge the traditional norms of femininity in Japan. Through their appearances and behaviors, they communicated their own set of beliefs during Japan’s early era of societal liberation, marking the first significant departure from the submissive roles assigned to women in Japanese society.









## the origins

Gyaru (ギャル) is the transliteration of the American slang word "gal" and originally referred to young women in their teens and twenties. Over time, it has evolved into an umbrella term for a diverse Japanese subculture that gained popularity from the early 90s to the early 2000s. Despite its literal meaning, it is now used to refer to individuals of any age or gender.

Like many subcultures, gyaru emerged in response to sociopolitical change. Scholars suggest that Japan's "Bubble Period" in the late 80s, characterized by a stock market

boom, may have influenced the creation of gyaru, although its true origins remain unknown.

Japan's monocultural nature, which was more pronounced a few decades ago, told women that they should conform to a stereotype of submissive housewives with black hair and fair skin. However, nonconformist youth challenged this notion by flaunting artificial tans, bleached hair, makeup, and baggy white socks – styles they encountered in fashion magazines as well as in Western (more specifically American) media and culture.



# a gal's mindset

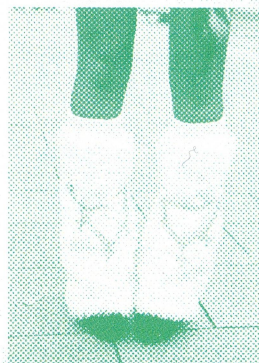
If you were to ask a gyaru what being one means to them, they would tell you that it is far more than a fashion subculture. The way they speak, dress, and behave are how they communicate their beliefs and morals to the rest of the world, but that's only scratching the surface.

Being a gyaru is about asserting one's own identity and autonomy, while also finding community in others who also seek to reject Japan's monocultural norms for what a young person should be, or who they should strive to be.

Being a gyaru is about asserting one's own identity and autonomy.

Delinquency is encouraged and in some ways required for a gyaru because abnormal and deviant behaviors are bound to attract social attention. This is held as a virtue in many groups aside from gyaru for the same reason. For example, a gyaru who is still in high school may choose to wear her school uniform improperly by bleaching her hair and opting for a miniskirt which signals to her peers that she refuses to adhere to the strict rules put in place in the Japanese education system.

Additionally, gyaru find liberation in their own social agency and confidence. They express this by partying, drinking, staying out late at night, expressing their sexuality, and joining gangs in certain cases.







“our goal is  
conquering the  
world, but first,  
**make everyone  
gyaru.**”

— kuromipo  
[center]







# sub styles



**Kogyaru** refers to gyaru who are still students who modify and/or incorporate their school uniform into their fashion. Baggy white socks and miniskirts are a must.



**Onee Gyaruru** is a style seen amongst women in their late 20s through their 30s. Considered the “graduated” version of a gyaru, often sporting luxury fashion brands.

**Ganguro** is considered the predecessor to gyaru, though the two overlap frequently. Features the staple heavy eye makeup, stark white/silver hair, and artificially tanned skin.





**Gyaru-o** is the masculine counterpart to gyaru, also characterized by tanned skin and bleached hair. Gyaru-o tends to lean more towards punk fashion influences. The '-o' suffix in Japanese denotes masculinity.

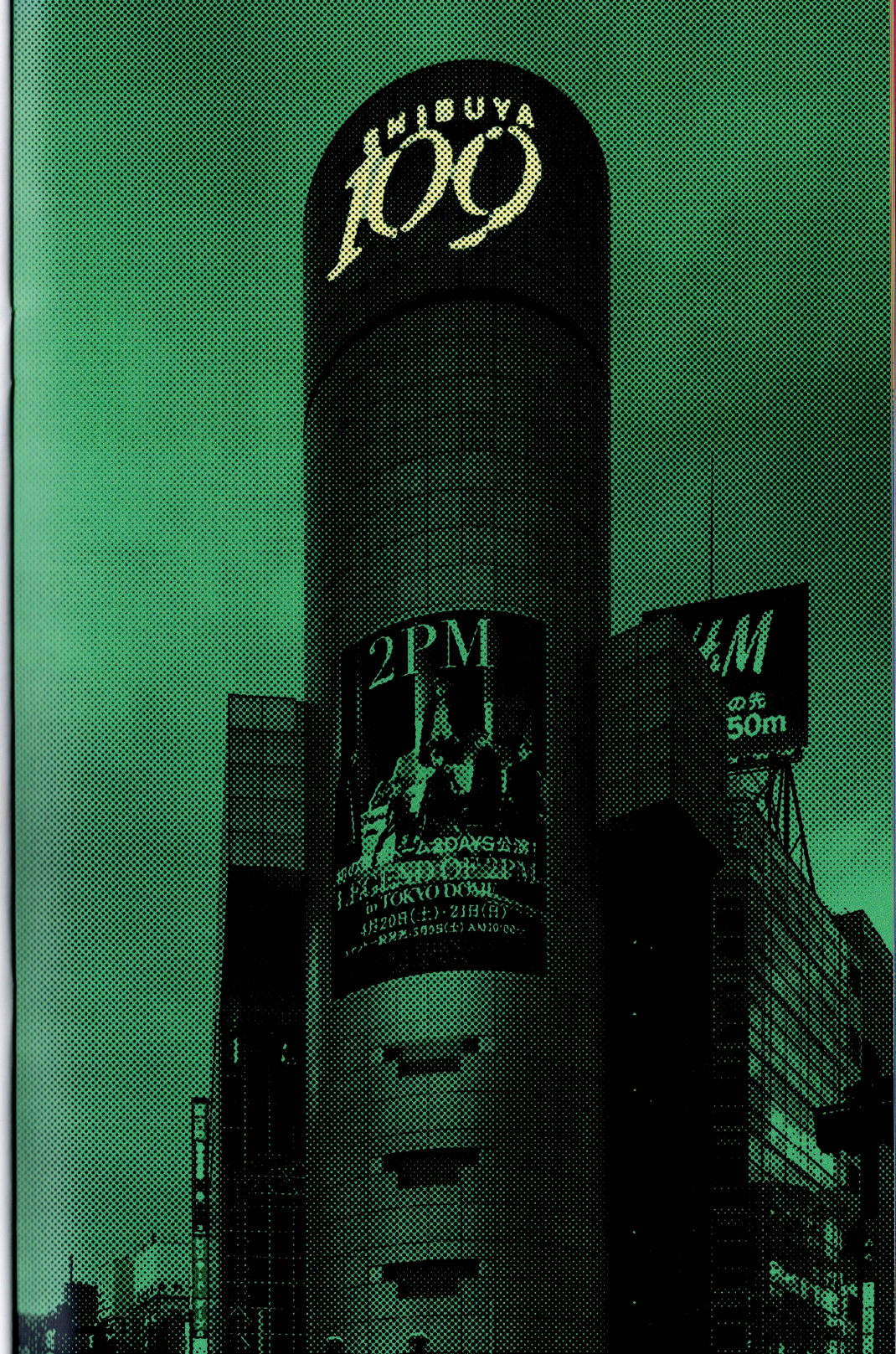
**Hime gyaru** is characterized by its use of the color pink and large hair accessories, such as bows. 'Hime' means 'princess' in Japanese, hence the feminine and elegant aesthetic.

**Kuro gyaru** is perhaps the most iconic representation of modern gyaru culture, and is an evolved version of ganguro. Staples include deep tans, animal prints, and big hairstyles.



Shibuya 109 (渋谷109) is a large Japanese department store located directly across from Shibuya Station. While originally containing stores marketed towards women in their 30s, it soon became more popular with young women and teenage girls and by extension, with gyaru as well.

To this day it continues to hold staple gyaru apparel and makeup brands, and is still a popular hangout spot for gyaru circles (a phrase which simply refers to a group of gyaru).





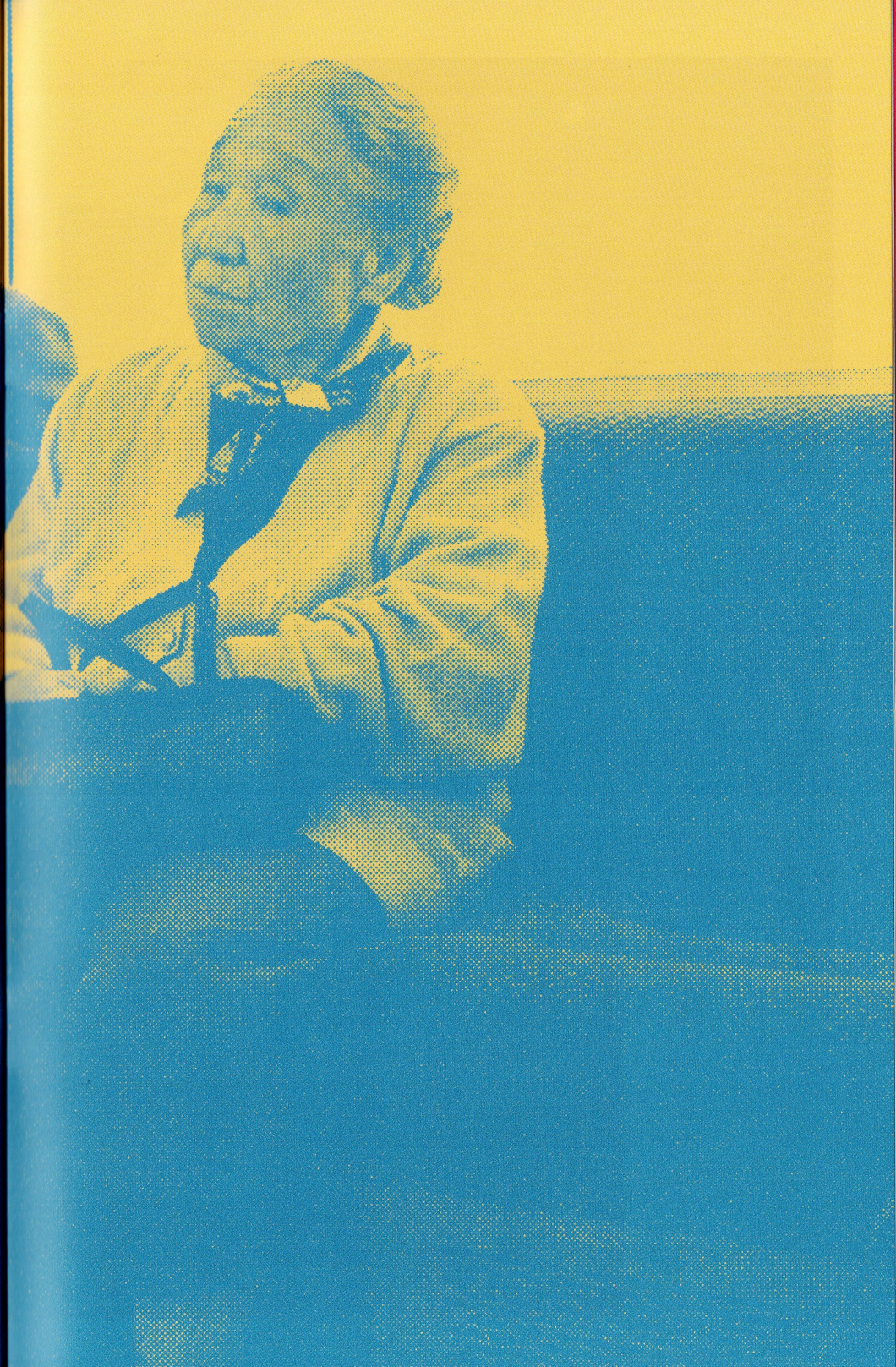


*egg Magazine* is the most popular gyaru-centered fashion publication which ran from 1995 and ended in 2014 due to the decline in gyaru fashion. A sudden resurgence of gyaru culture in 2017 led to the magazine being rereleased as an online publication as well as an established social media presence which is updated daily.

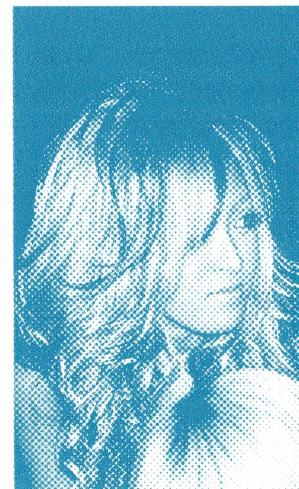
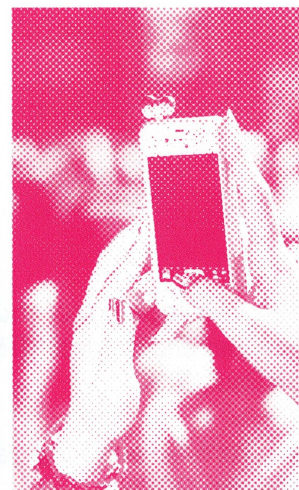
The magazine featured all the typical components of a fashion magazine, such as trending hairstyles, model features, and makeup tips.

Their slogan is "*Be wild & be sexy.*"











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## **Tokyo Street Snaps**

Cover photo, pgs. 8–9, 14, 16–17, 18–19 (all), 20 (all)

## **KIRA**

pgs. 10, 13 (all), 21

## **Michael Steinbach**

Inner pages (front and back), 28–29 (all)

## **soramimi (Getty Images)**

pg. 23

## **Claude Estebe**

pgs. 2–3, 26–27



to my mentors and  
friends who in the  
past few years, saw  
something in me that  
i didn't see before. i  
wouldn't be where i  
am now without you.

to all gyaru of the world.

to you, the reader,  
because a book is  
never fully a book if  
no one ever reads it.

