



Kyary Pamyu Pamyu: More than a

“Japanese Lady Gaga”

**A Profile of Harajuku’s Official “Kawaii Ambassador”**

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My first exposure to Kyary Pamyu Pamyu began with her wacky music videos released on YouTube. I came upon an internet gif of the petite Japanese girl vomiting animated black birds from her mouth and was instantly intrigued. After a short investigation I was treated to a conglomeration of adorable weirdness. Her music videos became an instant hit among my artsy East Tennessee State University college friends as well, and I soon developed an obsession with the young, disgustingly cute, J-pop artist. I even went as far as to construct a costume of her “Fashion Monster” outfit to wear at one of our local anime conventions.

In the late spring of 2013 Kyary began her KPP World Tour, with the closest showing to my hometown of East Tennessee being the Best Buy Theater at Times Square, New York. My friends and I did some financial calculations, and made the brash decision to purchase our tickets and attend that very New York concert. At Times Square, on a chilly Sunday Evening in May, we stood in line for the concert, admiring the cute pastel outfits and extravagant costumes of the fellow concert-attendees. One girl proudly wore her skirt constructed from snack bags, another displayed a hat shaped liked Japanese pudding on her head. It was like a contest of eccentricity. To our left, a group of fans performed a flash mob to her hit “Tsukema Tsukeru,” each dancer elaborately dressed and superbly choreographed. The hype for this small Japanese girl was outrageous.

Once we were allowed entrance into the Best Buy Theater, we took our place at the raised platform in the back half of the concert, a good spot to be in. A small tinkling music box sound played over the speakers as the concert hall filled with eager standing patrons. We waited for what felt like an eternity and just when began to feel that the repetitious lullaby would drive me insane the music ceased and the house lights further dimmed. The crowd roared as the stage lights went up and Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, in the flesh radiating “kawaii” (or cuteness), skipped to

center stage. “Konbanwa, Minasan!” she waved to the crowd wildly and began the concert with a performance of her most recent single, “Furisodation.” Even without a single lesson on Japanese language, the entire crowd of over 2,000 fans began to sing along and dance to this 20 year-old Japanese Popstar.

How did such a young girl become such internet pop-culture sensation? The answer might be simpler than you think. Kyary Pamyu Pamyu began as the rambunctious Japanese High School student, Kiriko Takemura, during the week. But on most Sundays, she was a fashionista who frequented the Harajuku district of Tokyo, Japan in her wild and colorful homemade outfits. Here, at the young age of 16, she was approached by a photographer for the popular J-fashion Magazine KERA’s regular “Street Style” segment. Her debut in the fall 2009 KERA initially began her modeling career. She chose the name Kyary for the magazine after she was once called “Kiyari” (a transliteration of “Carrie”) by her friend who noted the western influence of her dyed blonde hair. She felt that the name should be cuter and later extended it on her J-fashion blog to Kyarorain Charonpuroppu (Caroline Charonplop) Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. She was soon found in more fashion magazines such as Zipper, and fashion runway events such as the September 2010 Harajuku Style Collection.

It was at this runway event that she initially met producer Yasutaka Nakata, a producer famous for the, highly successful, J-pop idol trio, Perfume. She saw him again, two months later, at the TAKENOKO club event for minors, where she had agreed to volunteer as a DJ. He had been placed in charge of producing the club event, and spoke to Kyary a number of times throughout that night regarding her potential musical career. In no time at all, he had agreed to sign her to *Contemode*, his Japanese record label. Her popularity as a model as well as her steady followers on her online fashion blog helped propel her into stardom.



Above, still from Kyary Pamyu Pamyu's "PonPonPon" Promotional Video released on July 2011.

In July 2011, she released her first promotional single, "PonPonPon." (Pictured Above) The Music Video for the song was released to YouTube, its psychedelic decora aesthetic making it an instant viral hit. The music video became an internet phenomenon and was reported on by American News site, *The Huffington Post*, and music video channel, MTV, who dubbed it as "one of the craziest videos ever" in the second episode of their pop music show, *Bigger Than the Buzz*. The video was frequently compared to an acid trip, with Kyary unicycling amongst CGI eyeballs and a faceless woman in a pink morph suit/tutu dancing in the background window.

After a flurry of promotional singles, she finally released her first full album, *Pamyu Pamyu Revolution*, in May 2012. A multitude of "cute" instruments can be heard in the songs of her debut album. Anything from 8-bit electronics and synthesizers to bagpipes and electric guitars are found here. (And let's not forget the ever-popular toy piano!) This mish-mash of instruments is not only surprisingly pleasing to the ears, but gives the album a child-like quality akin to the small Asian vocals of Kyary herself. Though most of the lyrics are in Japanese, even the average English speaker would have some impression to the simple meanings in her songs. Songs like "Candy Candy" and "Tsukema Tsukeru" express the simple joys in life, like finding candy in your pocket or applying false eyelashes for maximum "kawaii" aesthetic. The Album

was a hit in Japan, reaching number 1 in the Oricon Music Charts and even became a success in the United States, hitting the number 1 spot on the iTunes' Electronic Album Chart with its November 5, 2012 release.

Japanese Culture and Anime-enthusiasts everywhere had fallen for the Kyary's Kawaii charm; however, the average American Youtuber continued to scratch their head over the best use of viral marketing to swim overseas. While some may not have been a fan of the child-like sounds of her music, it was still difficult to ignore the girl's creative and strange representation of the "Kawaii Culture." In promotional music videos such as "Fashion Monster" and "Mottai-Nightland", any number of crazy costumed characters can appear: A rabbit-man playing guitar, an old Japanese samurai with an elongated head, and bikini clad backup dancers with spooky ghost masks all inhabit Kyary's world whilst the straight-faced Japanese girl sings about wearing what she likes and ignoring bad dreams in search of good ones. It's hard not to fall in love with her creepy-cute imagination.

The videos aren't the only wacky feature to this girl. She is most often found sporting avant-garde and unconventional fashions in both her videos and her photo-shoots. She can be seen with any number of strange accessories including but not limited to: sharks on her head, eyeballs in her hair, pandas on her feet, ruffles, bows, sparkles, and skirts, all in disproportionately large sizes. Most of the costumes are drafted herself Straight from her kawaii-inspired imagination, whilst also in collaboration with 6%DokiDoki designer, Sebastian Masuda. Since her musical debut, she has had the resources to fully realize her creativity and become an icon for Japanese fashion in itself. Even the fashion tabloids of the west recognized her unique fashion and helped pen her as the "Queen of Harajuku." This title was fully realized in September of 2012, only a little over a year since her debut, when she was recognized by

Shibuya, Tokyo mayor Toshitake Kuwahara and awarded a certification of her official designation as Harajuku's "Kawaii Ambassador." Kyary (pictured below) even marked the occasion with full knee-length polka-dot dress adorned by oversized congratulatory ribbons with Japanese toys placed in the center.



Above, Kyary accepting the Harajuku "Kawaii Ambassador" Award in September 2012.

Yet, amongst all this weirdness, there is still sense to be found in her aesthetic. In an April 2013 interview with FADER, an American music magazine, she explains her strangeness. When asked about why her music videos often made scary things seen cute, she explained that she "love[s] grotesque things. My concept is scary things that become traumatic with their cuteness. There are so many "just cute" things in the world, so I add grotesque, scary and even shocking materials like eyeballs and brains to balance out the cuteness." She's often cited Katy Perry and Lady Gaga as inspiration for both her music and fashion style. In the same FADER interview, she explains that "Lady Gaga and Katy Perry give [her] inspiration all the time, for clothes too. Gaga is more high fashion and Katy has more cute things, like macaroons and



candies, so I feel we have kind of the same sense of fashion. I'm always inspired by her style, and I heard they love Harajuku stuff too."

Just one year after her initial debut, her second studio album, *NANDA COLLECTION* was release in June 2013. With more hit singles such as "Furisodation" and "Invader Invader," it's hard to imagine the young pop star ever slowing down. Since her world tour, she's realized the international appeal of her songs. In her FADER interview she mentions that she "want[s] to go for the global music scene for sure, but I want to bring the world what I am doing right now. I believe my music doesn't have a language barrier. People can sing my songs even though they aren't Japanese, and the dances are easy to learn. If my songs were in English, they would be totally different! But in the future, I want to do collaborations with my favorite American artists."

On November 1<sup>st</sup> 2013, Kyary most recently met her idol Katy Perry at Japanese radio station, Music Station, Tokyo, where they were both interviewed together. Katy Perry expressed that she was very much a fan of Kyary's music and fashion. Is a future collaboration possibly in store? Who knows for sure? In any case, Kyary Pamyu Pamyu has left an adorable tiny footprint on the world and has gained universal fame in the music industry. As Harajuku's Kawaii Ambassador, she was charged with the task of "transmit[ing] Harajuku culture to the entire world," a task that she most certainly has not and will not take lightly. It's a surefire guess that in whatever she touches, there will remain the lingering essence of "Kawaii."



Above, Kyary with her idol, Katy Perry, at Music Station, Tokyo.