

The Rising Japanese Idol Scene in Sydney, Australia



étude's performance picture taken at SMASH! 2022, étude, 2022

By Zoe Li | April 11th, 2023

Back in 2019, I had the opportunity to go on this rather arbitrary study trip to Japan as a part of my high school language studies. My Japanese teacher strongly emphasised that it was going to be an “unforgettable cultural experience” and recommended all students to attend.

And an unforgettable cultural experience it was! It was a trip full of immersive language practice, educational history lessons, and... cute Japanese idols?

Now, as someone who has always been fascinated by the world of pop culture, I couldn't help but take notice of the giant posters of Japanese idols plastered all over Tokyo. No matter where

I went, within a 5 metre radius, there was always a pretty girl decked in sparkly outfits staring right back at me. They were on electronic billboards, on magazine covers, and even on my bottle of water!

Since my study trip, I've observed the J-idol scene taking off globally, with Australia as no exception. The concept of Japanese idols has really been gaining increasing traction in Sydney, Australia in recent years. With its distinctive genre of pop music mixed with high-energy dance routines, it has become a popular subculture among young Australians who are attracted to its unique brand of entertainment.

But instead of just being fans of pre-existing Japanese idols, those interested in the subculture are becoming idols themselves, forming new Sydney-based groups. In the past, the genre was primarily confined to Japan, but now it has inspired those all the way here. I can confidently say that what's happening in Sydney is nothing short of a phenomenon.

A long-time fan of the scene, Thummim Choi, helped me define what an idol was; "unlike Western artists, they don't just dance or sing a song, idols have to form connections with the audience and play the role of both a friend and a superstar!" The very essence of an idol is someone who performs in Japanese, however, it's their fan base and relationship with them that makes them so special. They often have devoted fans - much like Choi - who support them through thick and thin, attending live performances, purchasing merchandise, and participating in online forums and social media platforms.

This phenomenon finds its unlikely origins from the beloved cheesecake brand, Uncle Tetsu's; a brand that me and my stomach are very familiar with. In 2016, Uncle Tetsu's Japanese-style cheesecakes were met with great fanfare. Soon after, the brand introduced the Angel Garden; a

downstairs area that provides their customers with a Japanese style cafe experience, complete with weekly idol performances. Every Saturday, the brand's exclusive idol group, AGS102, would perform. Choi was also a supporter of AGS102; "they were like real Japanese idols, but rather than having to pay for plane tickets, I could see them in the CBD!" Unfortunately, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Angel Garden cafe was forced to shut down, with AGS102 disbanding alongside its closure.

AGS102 was an inspiration to many, paving the way for new independent groups to form in Sydney. Though they didn't have the funding of a foreign cheesecake company, these new J-idol groups were determined to make a name for themselves, especially after AGS102's success.

Another reason why the idol scene has been able to take root in Sydney is because of the city's thriving *anime* and *manga* community. These fandoms are closely related to the idol scene, as many of these Japanese series have their own dedicated idol characters. With multiple conventions such as SMASH! (Sydney Manga and Anime Show) and Supanova becoming increasingly popular, it was only a matter of time before J-idols rose to the limelight. Such conventions also provided aspiring idols and their groups an opportunity to perform on a stage in front of thousands of people; it's truly like a dream come true for any kind of performer.

Thus, a domino effect of cute puffy dresses and bright lively performances ensued.

It was very intriguing to see the reasons why people become Japanese idols in Sydney, though one common reason they began was for fun. Tiffany 'Eule' Li, a current active member of Sydney J-idol group *étude* remarks on this sensation. "I already loved dancing in high school, and I just kinda thought, why not?" Eule has been a J-idol since 2018, performing as a part of

étude at not only their regular stages but multiple large conventions such as the aforementioned SMASH! and CrunchyCon. “I think I started with *anime*, like most people, and I haven’t looked back since!”

Amanda ‘Yukari’ Yu had a very similar perspective. She had taken singing lessons since a young age, and once she graduated high school, she was afraid that singing would just become “just a cool trick at group karaoke sessions”, so she decided to join an idol group. Despite only joining *NEONism* earlier this year, Yukari has really treasured her experiences so far; “I could be very busy with uni, and have an assignment due the next day and stressed, but the crowd always hypes me up, so it’s always so much fun!”.

I was invited to an *étude* show after my interview with Eule. *étude*’s infectious music and dance routines had the crowd singing, chanting, and dancing along. Not only so, their charming personalities really shone through in their lovable interactions with the audience. It was truly such an exhilarating and accepting community.

But beyond the catchy tunes and flashy performances, there is something deeper at play here. For many fans, Japanese idols represent an escape from the pressures of daily life. They offer a glimpse into a world of innocence and fun, where everything is pure and shiny and full of wonder. Regardless of what draws fans to the idol scene, one thing is clear: it’s not going anywhere. With more and more groups emerging and gaining popularity, it’s clear that the genre has a bright future in Sydney and beyond.

Maybe one day we’ll see a homegrown Sydney Japanese idol group take the world by storm.