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Lolita Fashion: a trans-global subculture

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Abstract

While there are some who would argue that the origin of Lolita fashion can be traced back to fiction (namely, the 1955 novel, *Lolita*, which was adapted to film in 1962 and again in 1997) and has relevance to sexual attractiveness with reference to the young, this popular style developed more recently into a subcultural identity in Japan as a distinctive style in its own right. This article regards Lolita as an independent street fashion and subculture and explores this particular culture that Lolitas (those who wear this distinct fashion style) have created. Although a small-scale subculture, Lolitas demonstrate an obvious way of thinking and behaving which reinforces their identity of which fashion plays a significant role. The fashion style suggests escapism through fantasy as it can be interpreted as a visual resistance against conventional culture and is therefore of interest to a range of disciplines including fashion, culture and behaviour theorists. The article explores this subculture in the UK context to provide a better understanding of British Lolitas and evaluates the marketplace to offer a retail-marketing perspective.

Keywords: Lolita, fashion, subculture, style, Japan, British

Introduction

Lolitas, their fashion style and the subculture emerged during the 1980s in Japan at a time when the country was embracing a taste for nostalgia. Lolitas are predominantly females who enjoy dressing in a manner that characterizes western Victorian dolls emphasizing a fairy tale-like romantic image through a child-like silhouette and excessive elaborate feminine elements like laces, frills and ribbons inspired by European classic dress. However, the look can vary depending on individual preferences, desires and inspirations. Lolitas are invariably perceived as quite extraordinary beings, because of their surreal appearance which forms a striking contrast to the modern day surroundings. The fascination for this particular style has captivated many people all over the world developing into a global phenomenon. In spite of the distance from its roots in Japan and the lack of Lolita related products in the UK, Lolitas are still to be found in many cities where they have developed their own subcultural communities. Aided by the speed of communication, it would appear that there are no obvious differences between Lolitas in Japan and in other countries, however it can be considered likely that due to general cultural differences there should be some points of difference evident among the similarities. This article explores the British context of Lolita fashion and its subculture through the following objectives:

- To establish the universal features of Lolita fashion and subculture
- To classify Lolita fashion
- To better understand the British Lolita subculture and provision

Research methods

Books, academic journals, newspaper articles, magazines and internet material

provide the theoretical context. A range of methods were used to obtain primary data including observation exercises to identify significant traits; visits to local stores offering Lolita or Lolita-like fashion products in a UK City Centre to evaluate the range of products readily available in a locality; questionnaire survey findings were used to determine opinions, attitudes and behaviour indications; the online Lolita community 'LoliGothUK' was extensively monitored to evaluate popular activities and opinions / attitudes establishing a consensus of the British Lolitas' philosophies and thinking with regards to their fashion style and subculture throughout the UK; and a Lolita meeting was observed to directly access Lolitas' activity and behaviour. This also provided offered an opportunity to interview Lolitas using an unstructured format to further evaluate attitudes and their reactions toward the general public. Due to accessibility and time constraints, the study was limited to one large city considered to be a fair representative sample having a well-established Lolita community.

Lolita subculture

According to Winge (2008: 47) Lolitas are young females and males who wear '*anachronistic visual representations of Victorian-era dolls*' decorated all over the body with lace, ruffles and bows. Their appearance and culture is very unique in many respects. According to Gagné (2007) they like to see, behave and speak like 'princesses' with a characteristic young girl appearance. Although the majority of Lolitas are young women, they can be identified as people who pursue the strong femininity and cuteness of a young girl regardless of their actual age and gender. They usually appear on the streets of major cities and have expanded their aesthetic and identity through media such as TV, magazines and websites (Winge, 2008).

Lolitas seek to fulfil their look and identity through overall appearance and behaviour. Fashion plays a crucial role in establishing their unique identity and conveys significant meaning. Their dress hides the mature silhouette with minimum skin exposure, emphasizing a child-like appearance through voluminous skirts and elaborate decorations (Winge, 2008). This reinforces their desire to be cute, innocent and elegant; doll-like hair styles and makeup adds to this. Kato (2010) recognizes that Lolitas do however follow their own rules of behaviour. For instance, they speak in a manner that intimates the kind of cultivated high-class femininity synonymous with the image of a princess (Gangé, 2008). Typically they exaggerate politeness as they intentionally differentiate themselves from others, constructing and communicating their identity.

The reasons for why they look and act as they do can be explained theoretically through Wicklund and Gollwitzer's theory of self-completion, when an individual feels a lack of completion, he or she participates in 'self-symbolising' and may use symbols to construct and hold absolute 'self-definition' which are special statements of self (1982: 9), which is evident through the qualities that Lolitas aspire towards; cute, etc. It can be interpreted as a desire to escape the real world. Wearing fairy-tale dresses, Lolitas appear to build an imaginary world to remove themselves from a range of social and personal pressures (Osmud, et al., 2011). This could be a confined adult life (Winge, 2008), a boring or otherwise unpleasant everyday existence (Nishimura, 2004). It can also be characterized as a form of resistance against a conservative culture and ideologies. The exaggerated cute and feminine characteristics of Lolita stand against androcracy (Kotani, 2007) and against the social norm of dressing (Winge, 2008).

Lolita fashion

It is presumed that the name 'Lolita' was adopted as its style expresses the ideology of rejecting a mature woman's sexuality and valuing child-like properties, as they aspire elegance (Zimenez, 2008) and deny any intention of sex appeal. The definition of Lolita fashion is not clear and still debated as different subgenres emerge creating new variations of the style. However, in general, Lolita styles are typified by frilled or lacy blouses, knee-length voluminous skirts, petticoats, drawers, doll-like shoes and accessories which show strong inspirations from European classic fashion, though sometimes with inexact or mixed use of references. According to Michelle Nguyen, contributing editor of Gothic & Lolita Bible, Lolita fashion was inspired by '*the romantic images of the Victorian era (1837-1901) and the Edwardian era (1901-1910), or Belle Epoque, with influences stretching as far back as the Rococo movement*' (2008: 8). Lolita fashion utilizes such diverse elements and modifies them to accord with the subcultural identity reflecting the Japanese preference for the cute aesthetic. Accordingly, it produces a more burlesque doll- and child-like look which engenders new meaning.

Classification of Lolita fashion

As Lolita fashion became more wide-spread new subgenres emerged each with its own take on the universal Lolita aesthetic resulting in some confusion through the different interpretations. In order to aid a more systematic understanding, this article categorizes the variations based on four criteria shown in figure 1; though it should be stated that there are more subgenres which cannot be so explicitly classified or could be included in more than one category.

In the first instance, Lolita fashion can be classified according to gender expression: *Ōji* style (Figure 2) and general Lolita style. *Ōji* (prince) style, known as *Kadona*, is characterized as a cute boyish look which is inspired by Victorian boy's costume (Winge, 2008). The common features of this genre are knee-length Capri-style pants, ties, bowler caps and long socks (Anon, 2008). The male Lolita standing third from the right in figure 3 also demonstrates this look. Since Lolita fashion itself is inherently female in nature, there is no specific term for girl-style therefore 'Lolita' is used as a separate classification for the purpose of this article.

Secondly, Lolita fashion can be categorized by the dominant colours of a dress. Where the ensemble is black the term *Kuro* (black) Lolita or *Kurolooli* is used. Similarly, the term *Shiro* (White) Lolita or *Shirololi* is used for white or cream ensembles which creates a more innocent image. *Shiro* Lolitas are often found with *Kuro* Lolitas, they are regarded as counterparts and are pleasantly visually contrasting. *Ama* (sweet) Lolita (Figure 4) or *Amaloli* can be included in this category as pastel colours generally make up the look of this style. Soft tones and maximum cuteness are common themes in *Ama* Lolita fashion (Winge, 2008), which emphasizes a sweet and loveable mood. However, Lolita fashion with prominent colours such as red and black with excessive cute elements are also regarded as *Ama* Lolita.

A Lolita style can also be distinguished on the basis of its mother culture. According to Park, mother culture refers to '*a large culture or a culture of the past that influenced a current culture or from which a current culture was derived*' (2011: 14-15). The most common Lolita subgenre is Gothic Lolita, portrayed typically by '*dark colours ... straight raven hair and long false eyelashes, along with dramatic makeup*

to present [a] slightly evil - yet innocent appearance' (Nguyen, 2008: 9). This style uses the same symbols as its mother culture, Goth, principally bats, coffins, skulls, crosses and blackness (Monden, 2008) and expresses the gloomy, elegant and cute image combined. The Punk inspired Lolita subculture is simply called Punk Lolita. This style features leather, zippers, chains and spikes (Kawamura, 2006) and sometimes comes with torn dress and bondage elements. Red and black outfits are a common theme in this style which appears more rebellious than other Lolita styles. *Wa* Lolita refers to a style which incorporates traditional Japanese fashion or adopts some elements of it. It typically consists of short length kimono-shaped tops, voluminous skirts and obi style belts (Anon, 2006). In addition, showy fabrics like Kimono textiles are frequently applied (Anon, 2008). *Qi* Lolita is a Chinese style which incorporates Chinese national dress, *qipao*, consisting of mandarin collars, knot-style buttons and brocade prints. Unlike the *qipao*, its silhouette is generally a slim bodice with a slightly larger skirt to accommodate a petticoat. Sometimes puffed sleeves are used for emphasis (Anon, 2006). *Hime* (princess) Lolitas are identified by a strong sense of Rococo style. According to lolitafashion.org (Anon, 2008), *Hime* Lolita fashion commonly contains *Ama* Lolita style themes with Rococo elements and small crowns or tiaras frequently worn atop grandiose hair. Although Rococo elements are generally present within the Lolita style, this article considers Rococo as a mother culture, due to its more prominent Rococo components such as a *la Francaise* dress and *fontage* hair styles.

Finally, an overall main theme is usually applied to distinguish between styles. This category is rather limitless as any personal taste can be incorporated. It also covers the subgenres of the third category above. Classic Lolita is a style with a lady-like

and elegant theme. It is slightly more mature and graceful, but nevertheless retains a child-like silhouette, commonly A-line in shape. In comparison with *Ama Lolita*, it is less cute with few frills or ribbons and the fabric is of muted colours and floral patterns (Anon, 2008; Anon, 2006.). *Ama Lolita* can also be classified into this category by considering hyper-cute as a main theme. Within the boundaries of *Ama Lolita* there is a more rustic version called Country Lolita. These styles are often near indistinguishable, however Country Lolita is generally characterized by a presence of straw, either baskets or hats.

A wide range of other main themes exist including an injured theme known as *Guro* (grotesque or gore) Lolita, Casual Lolita which emphasizes comfort and the controversial *Ero* (erotic) Lolita.

Lolitas in the UK

Lolita subculture has spread around the world possibly due to an increased interest in Japanese culture, the internet for information sharing, global online shopping opportunities and the enthusiastic efforts of foreign Lolita devotees. The UK is a good example of the subculture's global reach. This article draws on the perceptions of British Lolitas and the factors that influence their culture through an online community, the marketplace and a Lolita meeting to better understand the British Lolita subculture.

Lolita online community

The interactive communication of British Lolitas has grown through global internet forums subsequently building their own community. Amongst them, LoliGothUK is the

biggest community with more than a thousand members where the real nature of British Lolitas' is expressed effectively through their posts. The members are polite and create a favourable mood following their own guidelines and rules. The subject of their postings is relatively free and diverse and the characteristics of their writing style and activities are quite feminine. Lolitas' demonstrate the desire for dignity through the use of archaic words such as 'aw', 'thee' and 'thou' in common with the lady's speech of Japanese Lolitas. The members appear to take pleasure in communicating through this forum bringing Lolitas closer together. The members participate in a variety of activities including buying and selling Lolita products, organising meetings, sharing information, counselling, advice-giving and finding friends. Through these activities the members become more accomplished in the Lolita subculture. Their main concern is how to acquire their desired Lolita products and regularly seek up-to-date news and ways to find such desirable items, relying heavily on shared information and advice. It appears that British Lolitas like to confirm their actual or imaginary style to each other and most think Japanese brand products are more desirable. However due to the high prices and limited availability many take part in buying and selling to obtain second-hand brand goods. They also trade replicas of premium brands, Japanese/non-Japanese ready-made Lolita fashion and handmade items. Their enthusiastic participation within the community is largely due to discontent with the undeveloped Lolita fashion market in the UK with many depending on foreign Lolita cybermall or public brands selling Lolita-like fashion products.

The UK Lolita fashion marketplace

The domestic and foreign Lolita shops are a major interest to Lolitas; since Lolita style is not mainstream fashion, Lolita fashion product availability is limited in the UK with no specialist brands. While a few select shops or party costume stores do deal with Lolita or Lolita-like fashion goods in some of the large cities, many do not purchase from local sources. They generally prefer high quality Japanese designer brands obtained via overseas online shopping channels, though local Lolita or Lolita-like products are acceptable if they are value for money.

Three types of UK Lolita fashion stores have been identified through observational visits which also served to ascertain characteristics of the local marketplace. The shops were selected through a number of online community posts. Firstly there are select shops that handle Lolita fashion goods with other subcultural products. Through observations it was found that generally Gothic and Punk items are displayed together, though some brands tend to classify Gothic, Punk and Lolita fashion garments separately to a limited degree. Some stores have a specialist Lolita fashion section where skirts, dresses, blouses and petticoats can be found. However the variety of items appears limited and biased towards the Gothic and sweet Lolita styles. Although extensive selections can be found in certain types of products, Lolita fashion generally appears as an extension of Gothic and Punk items.

Secondly, there are select shops that deal in Lolita-like items. These tend to display unique and characterful products from a variety of brands. One retailer in particular sells Japanese fashion-inspired cute goods. In addition to garments and accessories, the range of products often includes fancy goods, kitchen utensils and other miscellaneous items. Well-known brands can be found among unlabelled replica

antique products. Some Lolita product can also be found in recycled vintage clothing stores, although such products are generally less identifiable as Lolita fashion such shops are still an option for British Lolitas.

Thirdly, there are specialist party wear stores that sell costumes, accessories, wigs and cosmetics, some being Lolita in style but tend to be shorter in length thus exposing more skin than Lolitas prefer and the quality of the products relatively inferior.

While British Lolitas appear to have a strong desire to acquire Lolita specific fashion products, the marketplace is undeveloped; specialist brands and stores are absent, the variety is limited and the quality is poor. In response to this, many Lolitas express a wish for good quality Lolita shops or British branches of well-known Japanese Lolita brands.

Lolita meetings

Lolita meetings are held in many locations around the UK, usually organized by regional groups which suggests that many have formed their own societies. The meetings are highly favoured as they offer a place to communicate with other members directly. Lolitas usually have tea and take photos together at the meetings and all of their activities are generally feminine and modest. For example, Lolitas enjoy *origami*, embroidery and drawing at tea-houses. They also enjoy picnics, shopping and going to interesting exhibitions or other Lolita-related events, such as Hyper Japan and MCM EXPO.

Through observations at a meeting the behaviours of the British Lolitas and their

attitudes were better understood. The primary purpose of the meeting was to collect the goods each had ordered as a group purchase from an overseas online shop. In addition the Lolitas used the opportunity to enjoy the social aspect and friendship. They wore dresses that looked exactly the same as Japanese Lolitas. While waiting for other members to join them they talked about each other's appearance and the day's schedule. When every member had assembled, they took group pictures before moving on to a local Museum to view a Spice Girls exhibition where in the event session they participated in singing and drawing activities; they had drinks and took many photographs during the meeting (Figures 5 and 6).

During the observation, several remarkable characteristics of Lolitas could be seen. Despite the cold weather they carried their coat (indoors and outside), they seemed to like exposing their dresses and took lots of pictures as mementos. They frequently checked their own and other members' clothing and tidied up the dresses, evidently maintaining a good appearance is important. They demonstrated confidence throughout regardless of the public attention they were drawing. In addition, the Lolitas retained good posture and were impeccably polite. They consciously folded their hands and kept their legs together and were highly civil to each other and to other people. Even when strangers walked up to ask them about themselves they remained polite and calm, irrespective of positive or negative reactions. Except when they laughed, they did not make loud sounds even when they sang songs. The constant concern regarding their appearance, posture and behaviour confirms a certain degree of similarity with Japanese Lolitas, presumably being due to being well acquainted with the Japanese Lolita subculture through online facilities.

To obtain a more in-depth understanding of British Lolitas' opinions on their subculture interviews were conducted where Lolitas were asked to freely describe their motivations, the meanings and influences of their subculture, their experiences of friendships and Lolita fashion in a lifestyle context. This approach yielded some very interesting findings discussed below. The questions are given in figure 7.

The motivation and meaning of Lolita fashion

British Lolitas appear to be highly motivated to engage with Lolita fashion due to their interest in Japanese culture, i.e. fashion, music and comics. For example interviewee A mentioned being “enthralled by Japanese visual rock bands and their dress” which had “influenced her decision to be a Lolita”. She said her way of dressing was also “very much influenced by one member of a band”. Lolitas tend to use adjectives such as ‘pretty’, ‘cute’, ‘unique’, ‘nice’, ‘girly’ and ‘fabulous’ quite frequently when explaining their impression of Lolita fashion. They emphasize the fact that Lolita fashion is totally different from conventional fashion which they consider to be featureless, sexualized and too changeable. Whereas Lolita fashion is consistent and makes them feel more cute and pretty. While there are similarities, there are also differences in opinion regarding what Lolita fashion is. For example Interviewee B who prefers the classic style, and Interviewee C who follows the Gothic Lolita style, agreed on the demure and modest aspect of Lolita fashion by concealing the body. However, Interviewee D, who liked to wear sweet Lolita style, felt that Lolita fashion is “more about being innocent, chirpy and sweet”. It may be true to say that their definitions of Lolita fashion are basically the same but with slight differences depending on the individual and on their preferences.

All of the Lolitas interviewed were confident, very pretty, cute and happy wearing their Lolita fashion. Interviewees A and B in particular, who do not describe themselves as cute and feminine, feel that Lolita fashion “reveals their latent femininity”; by stimulating a girlish aspect, they seemed to get a more confident feeling. Lolitas may take cuteness, femininity and other good images from Lolita fashion and the supplement or reinforcement of those traits implants self-confidence. It was also found that Lolitas who do not necessarily feel a lack of femininity also experience more confidence through Lolita fashion. Interviewees D and E, who claimed that their intrinsic personality accorded with the image of Lolita in a way, felt that Lolita fashion is a good vehicle for projecting their personalities enabling them “to give themselves a boost” through their own unique individuality. This may suggest that Lolita fashion functions as a means by which Lolitas can express their ideal self-image as well as providing a unique identity for British Lolitas.

Lolita fashion’s influence on behaviour

According to the interviewees, some British Lolitas are affected by Lolita fashion to intentionally manage their conduct. Though the interviewees showed different opinions about the influence, most of them admit that they behave more politely and elegantly to a degree. Interviewees A and E agreed that they deliberately try to “behave and speak more politely”; avoiding poor behaviour, furthermore Interviewee A felt that her personality is “largely influenced by the fashion”. They all appear to believe that there are some appropriate qualities for Lolita fashion and that they try to act accordingly. Interviewees B and D on the other hand, felt that while the fashion may have some influence their characters had not really changed. They felt that they merely wore Lolita fashion to show more “girlishness to their characters”. Even so,

they both partially agree that others who wear Lolita fashion would be influenced to be more girly and elegant. While Interviewee C felt that the fashion had “no effect on her attitude at all, nor on her way of speaking” which she declared to be “quite coarse”; she believes that Lolita fashion expresses elegance and modesty, but is still just clothing and what fashion conveys for her did not relate to personal attitude. Overall the Lolitas felt that there were differences in the degrees of influence on a Lolita’s conduct depending on the individual. Although it seems that Lolita fashion is separate to attitude for some Lolitas, it is quite clear that there are some qualities that a Lolita is expected to uphold.

Occasions to wear Lolita fashion and attitudes towards social prejudice

It seems that most Lolitas do not always wear Lolita fashion even though they are very absorbed in the culture. Rather they wear Lolita fashion for special occasions, like the Lolita meetings or for clubbing and they sometimes mix and match a few Lolita fashion items with other styles for every-day wear. Although most of the Lolitas interviewed had engaged with Lolita and the fashion for a long time, they tend to feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar situations or people’s attention. Interviewee B felt that she would wear Lolita dress “if there were people present who are also Lolitas or people who understood and accept different styles”; stressing the lack of courage to wear Lolita fashion on a regular basis due to social norms. However they generally felt that the public’s responses were mostly positive towards them. Nevertheless some Lolitas had received aggressive or disdainful reactions and many expressed their concern about the prevalent social prejudice against wearing distinctive fashion in the UK. They did however still feel proud of their look and assert that Lolita style should not be changed; believing that they should wear what they want and that this

should be a step towards combating such prejudice.

The role of Lolita friends

It was observed that the online community provides opportunities to get to know other Lolitas. Most of those interviewed have made Lolita friends through the internet.

It seems that they enjoy the Lolita subculture with others rather than alone.

Interviewee D explained that “Lolita friends not only make her not feel alone in life but also make her wear Lolita fashion more often”. The existence of friends who have the same or similar tastes seem to bring a sense of relief, confidence and pleasure in the fact that the Lolita subculture is not really understood by outsiders. Also, the interaction with Lolita friends encourages them to be a more proficient Lolita. They act as advisers and informants for the Lolita subculture. Interviewee C feels that Lolita friends were very influential explaining that “her friend is a mentor” and she “learns and is counselled about Lolita style” from this friend. Furthermore, she is influenced to buy certain Lolita goods through her advice. Most Lolitas interviewed also thought that Lolita friends are important and the influence between Lolitas has more impact if the friends like similar styles of Lolita fashion.

Information and purchase channels

Due to the lack of availability of the fashion within the UK, Lolitas rely very much on the internet for information and purchasing Lolita goods. Those interviewed point out that the internet enables them to get the latest information about Lolita in Japan at no cost. It seems that regardless of various types of media, Lolitas easily obtain Lolita-related information online. Scanning Japanese Lolita magazines is the one of the most popular informative sources to which most pay attention to. Interviewees A and

C had visited Japan where they had bought Lolita goods. They also made their own Lolita dresses themselves. Other Lolitas state that they purchase most of their Lolita items via the internet. Their purchasing patterns can be divided into two types: The first form use the Lolita community and Japanese or Chinese internet shopping malls in order to buy Lolita goods at low price. The second type uses online agencies to request and to purchase Japanese Lolita brands' products without custom duty. None of Lolitas state buying Lolita products at local Lolita stores, while some recognize that a few shops in the UK do deal with Lolita items they did not show an interest in these stores.

The self and self-confidence

In order to further evaluate the impact of Lolita fashion on attitudes and behaviour and to further verify the general frequency of wearing Lolita fashion a questionnaire survey was designed to obtain opinions from more sub-culturists. Based on the answers to the questionnaire shown in figure 8 (48 responses), the respondents ages ranged from 14 to 31, with 20 to 24 being the largest proportion only two of which were male. Most had been involved in the Lolita subculture for less than 5 years. Almost half of those surveyed had more than 10 Lolita items and most had more than 5 pieces. As most Lolitas do not wear Lolita fashion every day, it can be said that the number of garments they possessed was not small.

The findings from the survey statements in section 2 of the questionnaire reveal that most Lolitas feel more confident by wearing Lolita fashion concurring with those previously interviewed. An assumption was made that Lolitas who felt a significant difference between their real self and their Lolita-self may feel considerably more

confident and comfortable when wearing Lolita dress. This hypothesis was tested; it was found that the longer an individual had engaged with the Lolita experience the least differences there were between the self and the Lolita-self. It would therefore appear fair to say that the period of participation in the subculture is relevant to the level of close relationship between the actual self and the Lolita-self and relates to the measure of self-confidence.

Conclusion

Through this article it can be concluded that British Lolitas enjoy their fashion and culture and that Lolita fashion serves to reinforce a unique and ideal image of self which and gives Lolitas more confidence and pleasure. It can also be concluded that many British Lolitas adorn themselves not only outwardly but also internally through self-control demonstrated through politeness as Japanese Lolitas do. Although the British Lolita fashion marketplace is not currently well-developed many Lolitas passionately pursue their style in a number of ways. They overcome many difficulties faced through the internet and through the existence of the Lolita community and friends are extremely influential in stimulating each other. The study however was not without limitations, a larger study would be useful to further investigate the extent of Lolita throughout the UK. Nonetheless, this article provides a platform for further study.

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