

Women in Wonderland: Japanese Feminism in the Context of Lolita Fashion

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Figure 1: Simoneau, M. (2008, March 30). IMG_9381 A group of Sweet Lolitas walk together. [Photograph]. Flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/matthewsim/2435272370>

Writer's Statement

Coming from a fairly conservative country, I have always had a deep appreciation for subcultures that challenge societal norms. I wanted to know why people would go against the grain in a society that values harmony and uniformity. While reading about alternative fashion communities, I stumbled upon Lolita fashion. I was captivated by its intricate designs, spectacular visual presentation and complete disregard for practicality. It is hyper-feminine, but it does not adhere to male-gaze driven beauty standards. I found this paradox intriguing. There was a message behind the bows and frills, and I wanted to illustrate this in my paper.

My motivation for writing this paper is to challenge misconceptions surrounding Lolita fashion. It is often dismissed as frivolous or infantilizing, but I believe it is far more radical. Fashion is more than just clothing; it is a means of self-expression. I feel that women who dress this way have embraced Lolita as a means of reclaiming agency over one's self-presentation. They have found a creative way to state their autonomy and rebel against tradition, and they deserve to be acknowledged.

My goal for my readers is to offer a fresh perspective on fashion and feminism, and challenge preconceived notions of what empowerment should look like. I want them to realize that feminism is not about rejecting traditional femininity, it is about engaging with it on your own

terms. I hope that this paper sheds light on how Lolitas have created an identity independent of societal pressure, proving that femininity can be powerful instead of passive.

Abstract

Women's fashion in Japan has evolved through numerous trends and seasons. From the multilayered silk robes of the Heian period to the petticoats and blouses of Lolita fashion today, it is clear Japanese women's fashion has developed alongside feminist movements and reflects the change in societal values over time. In this paper, I will illustrate the feminist elements in Lolita fashion and how eccentric fashion subcultures like Lolita are a form of quiet rebellion against gender expectations and capitalist systems in Japan. The key questions I address are:

- What are the origins of this subculture?
- How has Lolita fashion evolved to reflect current feminist beliefs in Japan?
- How has the West influenced Lolita fashion?
- What role do men play in Lolita fashion?

Key words: Lolita, Lolita fashion, feminism, Japanese fashion

Lolita Defined: What is Lolita Fashion?

Lolita fashion is a Japanese alternative fashion subculture that takes inspiration from Victorian era children's clothing. Key elements of a Lolita "coord" (coordinated outfit) include bonnets, blouses, petticoats and Mary Janes. In the Lolita subculture, "kawaii" (the Japanese word for "cute") is the name of the game. The goal is to resemble a life size doll from an era that is not modern Japan. For example, the elaborate hairstyles of the Rococo era (18th century) have inspired many Lolitas to incorporate wigs and floral headpieces into their coords and the delicate fabrics of the Romantic period (19th century) inspired the dreamy looks that Sweet Lolitas are known for. Women in the subculture, usually in their late teens to early twenties, will spend thousands of yen on elaborate outfits to achieve a child-like appearance. Many members of the fashion subculture will complement their aesthetic choices with demure mannerisms such as speaking in a gentle voice or walking in small, measured steps. "The dedicated Sweet Lolita does not just wear the clothes of a child, but she will speak in a nasal, high-pitched voice, adopt a pigeon-toed childish posture, and carry around children's toys." (Yunker, 2011, p. 101). These mannerisms are rooted in a desire to embody both innocence and elegance, which aligns with Lolita's influences from the European aristocracy. There are many subgenres of Lolita fashion that fall in and out of popularity as the years go by. The distinct characteristics of each subgenre allow for a wide range of self-expression. Sweet Lolita, the most widely recognized subgenre, features pastel colors and playful, sugary motifs. Gothic Lolita makes use of corsets, dark colors, and religious symbols. Cyber Lolita features laser cut acrylic, bleached hair, and space themed accessories. These subgenres allow the wearer to experiment with different expressions of femininity while maintaining the core principles of Lolita: modesty, grace, and youthful beauty.



Figure 2: My Lolita Dress. (2024). A young woman models a Gothic Lolita dress [Digital image]. LeMiroir Moonlit Prayer Gothic Lolita Dress. Retrieved November 13, 2024, from <https://www.my-lolita-dress.com/>

Rococo Reborn: The Origins of Lolita Fashion

While the exact origins of Lolita fashion are unknown, most sources state that Lolita fashion began in the late 1970's. During this time Japan was experiencing rapid economic growth, a sharp increase in technological innovation, and many cultural shifts pertaining to consumerism and youth identity. Young Japanese who were desperate to escape the rigid societal expectations of post-war Japan embraced consumer-driven trends, but they were also nostalgic for trends that were associated with elegance and aristocracy. This nostalgia stemmed from a desire to balance tradition with a rapidly changing society. As Japanese women became increasingly exposed to Western media, their interest in historical European fashion grew. Rococo fashion appealed to them because it allowed them to break free from convention and assert their identities while still maintaining an air of grace and refinement. Rococo fashion is a decorative style of clothing that emerged in 18th century France. It is known for its playfulness and extravagance and features bell-shaped silhouettes, pastel colors and decorative elements like lace and ribbons. A popular example of Rococo fashion can be seen in *The Swing* by Jean-Honore Fragonard. The painting captures the era's ornate clothing and playful elegance.



Figure 3: Fragonard, J. (1767–1768). The swing [Online image]. Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved November 22, 2024, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fragonard,_The_Swing.jpg

As the economy began to stagnate in the 1990's, Japanese youth shifted their focus towards more introspective trends. Contemporary art and media saw a massive boom in Shojo (girl) culture, which centers around the aesthetics and interests of young girls. Shojo media features idealized depictions of femininity set in fantasy worlds where innocence, playfulness and self-discovery are central themes. Through Lolita, young Japanese women were able to take elements of Rococo fashion and turn them into an expression of youthful innocence grounded in Shojo. It should also be noted that although Lolita fashion is inspired by Victorian and Rococo clothing, it is not at all historically accurate. Instead, Lolita appropriates an era of European fashion that did not actually exist. It comes as no surprise, then, that Lolita fashion is also heavily influenced by illustrations of young girls in fiction such as *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865). Alice, like many girls in Shojo media, is depicted as innocent, delicate, and beautiful. These traits mirror the Lolita aesthetic and make *Alice in Wonderland* a natural fit for Lolita designers looking for inspiration. The earliest and most direct nod to *Alice in Wonderland* in Lolita is the launch of Alice and the Pirates in 2004. Alice and the Pirates is a sub-label of the Lolita apparel brand Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. This sub-label is dedicated to combining gothic and punk styles with whimsical themes from Alice's adventures. Many other brands have since released collections with similar motifs.

Girls Just Want to Have Fun: Lolita and the Feminist Debate

In the 1990's, feminism in Japan gained momentum. The most significant issue in the feminist debate was whether labor was essential for the liberation of Japanese women. Activists were against Japan's capitalist value-system and argued that women should be liberated through work-life balance. Many working-aged women in Japan shared this sentiment. The long working hours and strict hierarchies left little room for personal expression. In response, a large number of women turned to Lolita fashion to reclaim a sense of innocence and joy.

Due to the restrictive nature of the dresses worn and the childlike personas adopted by many Lolitas, it is often thought that Lolita fashion's influences are rooted in symbols of female oppression. However, in the context of Japanese society Lolita fashion can be subversive. The ideal traditional Japanese woman is modest, silent, and uncomplaining. Outside of her role as a daughter, wife or mother, she ceases to exist. Instead of countering these expectations directly, Lolita allows women to withdraw from them entirely. "This is women's armor against a society they feel they do not belong to, expressed in frills and high socks. The princesses of Lolita maintain their maidenhood at any age and indulge themselves in what brings them joy, cute and beautiful things." (Cothran, 2022).

Many people believe that Lolita fashion reinforces traditional gender roles by infantilizing women. "For instance, the trend for mature-aged women to dress like prepubescent girls is perceived by some as operating exclusively for an unhealthy, objectifying male gaze." (Monden, 2013, p. 171). However, Lolita's strong emphasis on youthful femininity challenges our understanding of what it means to be a woman in modern Japan. Its focus on modesty and playfulness is a celebration of women. It celebrates an idealized version of womanhood that is independent of male attention. Lolita fashion reclaims hyper-femininity and weaponizes it to assert autonomy, not to please or seduce. Choosing to dress for oneself in a society that often ties a woman's worth to her utility is a radical act. Lolitas challenge the notion that power must be masculine to be legitimate. Loud, in-your-face fashion subcultures like Lolita increase the visibility of the wearer and allow them to define their own personal identity. Women in this subculture are rejecting the sexualization and subsequent erasure of women as they age through their stylistic choices. They are also prioritizing personal joy as an act of resistance. By choosing to express themselves through elaborate craftsmanship, they relieve themselves of the pressure to conform to mainstream standards of beauty.

Not Nabokov's Girls: A Western Lens of Lolita Fashion

In the Western world, Lolita is perceived as exotic and unfamiliar. Its foreignness prompts Westerners to romanticize it as odd and eccentric. The style's emphasis on modesty and elegance is often misinterpreted as childish or overly restrictive. In addition to this, there is a misconnection between the fashion and the Euro-American definition of "Lolita". According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a Lolita is a precociously seductive young girl. The term is derived from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which follows a man named Humbert and his attraction to little girls whom he refers to as "nymphets". He falls in love with his neighbor's twelve-year-old daughter Dolores (nicknamed Lolita) and kidnaps her. "For Japanese Lolitas, the fashion's name has no connection to the 1955 Vladimir Nabokov novel. In fact, many are unaware of the book and film adaptations. Instead, the fashion is connected in their minds to ideas of girls and girlhood" (Nguyen, 2016, p. 16).

Unfortunately, the association between Lolita fashion and the inappropriate connotations of the novel has led to some confusion and controversy. For example, American singer/songwriter Melanie Martinez is well-known in the Lolita community for incorporating childish themes into her music while wearing Lolita. However, after an interview with *InStyle* in 2015, many members of the Lolita community were outraged. When asked about her clothes, she said "It all relates to childhood. On this tour, I've been wearing adult baby dresses - they're for people who are actually into that weird fetish." Martinez's interpretation of Lolita aesthetics lacks an understanding of the cultural significance and social dynamics of the fashion.

Despite these challenges, there are several growing Lolita communities in the Western world. These communities try to maintain the core principles of Lolita but often have difficulty navigating cultural differences and have to work harder to explain their fashion choices to outsiders.

Boys for Bows: The Role of Men in Lolita Fashion

With its focus on elegance and femininity, it may be surprising to learn that men have played a crucial role in the development and popularization of the Lolita subculture. Before the turn of the century, Lolita fashion was largely unknown outside of Harajuku. After the release of the movie *Kamikaze Girls* by Tetsuya Nakashima in 2004, Lolita became increasingly popular. Soon afterwards, Mana, the leader of the band Malice Mizer, became an influential figure in the Lolita fashion world. His personal style consists of both gothic and Lolita aesthetics and the launch of his brand Moi-meme-Moite did not only appeal to women, but it also invited men to explore a more delicate yet powerful style.

The result was a growing number of men engaging with Lolita through Boystyle, its masculine counterpart. Boystyle typically features breeches, waistcoats, blazers and button-up shirts. It allows men to embrace and display their vulnerability and softness by incorporating some elements of the Lolita aesthetic into their fashion without having to fully conform to traditional notions of femininity.

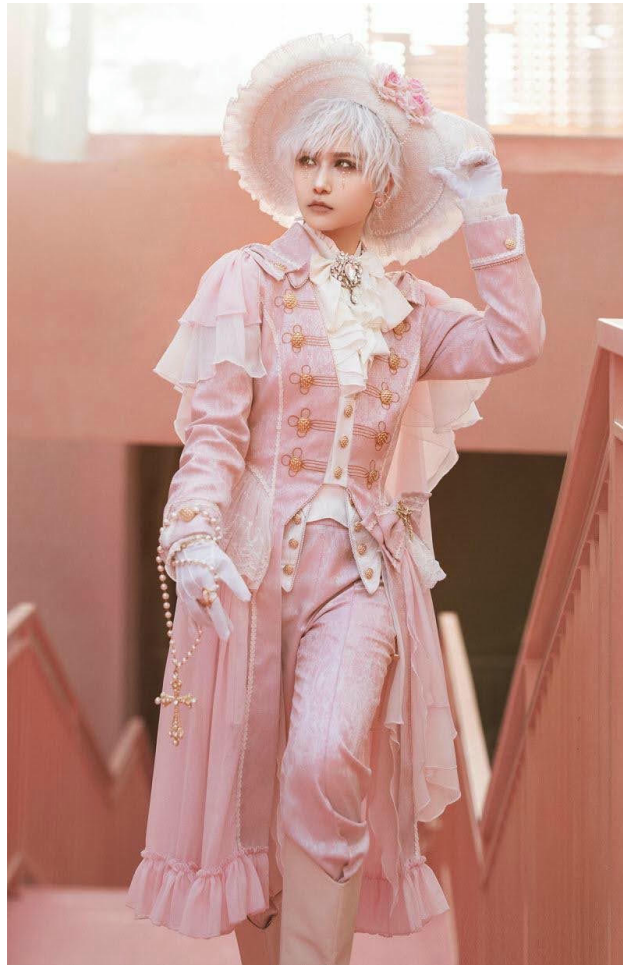


Figure 4: Immortal Thorn. (2024). An example of Boystyle [Digital image]. Immortal Thorn An Immortal Glass Castle Ouji Coat, Corset and Pants [Product]. My Lolita Dress. Retrieved November 13, 2024, from <https://www.my-lolita-dress.com/Immortal-Thorn-An-Immortal-Glass-Castle-Ouji-Coat-Corset-and-Pants-p2539923.html>

Lolita fashion is a misunderstood yet powerful form of self-expression and autonomy. It reflects the feminist principles of choice and empowerment. Through Lolita, many women (and men) can challenge tradition and define femininity on their own terms. Empowerment through fashion is important because it invites us to reflect on culture and gender. In the future, Lolita fashion may expand to include a wider range of body types, cultures and gender identities. It will likely become a creative space for people to explore their personal identity and self-expression as well as storytelling through clothing beyond mainstream fashion norms.

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