Beyond the Ruffles and Bows

Looking at the Lolita Culture as an Expression of Youth Insurgence Against Traditional Japanese Cultural Values

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DECALRATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Degree in 3D Design, Model Making, & Digital Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Signed: Louise Holohan

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ABSTRACT

The Lolita culture is one of extreme frivolity, utter cuteness, impeccable manners, and puffy skirts. Originally established as a subculture of the Japanese kawaii culture, the Lolita culture has developed into an iconic cultural phenomenon in its own right. This thesis explores the cultural context of the Lolita figure and her importance in contemporary Japanese society. By examining the socio-cultural context in which the contemporary Lolita grew up in, this thesis examines the validity in calling the Lolita culture an act of rebellion against the traditional social structures present in Japanese society.

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Introduction

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Lolita fashion can be observed as an outrageous spectacle to the oblivious eye. To its dedicated participants, the fashion serves as a portal to a meticulously constructed dream world. It is a world of pretty pink petticoats and laced blouses adorned with decadent silk bows, a world where the notion of childhood is perfectly perpetuated as the ideal state of being. Although commonly perceived as ostentatious, the trademark Lolita dress is drenched in meaning and importance for an abundance of its followers. The Lolita culture is a complex form of insurgence which challenges the traditional values of Japanese culture, and the societal expectations imposed particularly on young people in Japan. Armed with tulle skirts and frilled stockings, their ruffles act as a resistant but passive force. The Lolita fashion not only challenges the harsh social structures and degrading patriarchal norms present in traditional Japanese society, but it provides a deeper social commentary on the youth subcultures of Japan. Labeled as a 'rebellion with frills on', the Lolita fashion reflects women's empowerment as much as it highlights the darker truth behind Japan's kawaii façade.[1]

Lolita fashion is a style of dress most popular among young women in Japan in which participants dress in elaborate, doll-like outfits. The style began to emerge in the 1980's as a subculture of the cute aesthetic prevailing Japanese popular culture, known as the kawaii culture. Encapsulated by, but not limited to, puffy petticoats, laced corsets, pastel dresses, voluminous wigs, decorative silk bows, and Mary Jane shoes, the Lolita aesthetic is distinctively cute, sweet, and innocent. This genre of fashion essentially mimics the shape and design of clothes worn by children in the Victorian and Rococo era's while incorporating a bright and pastel colour palette. Other influences include the fashion of European fairy tale characters such as Alice in Wonderland, and European aristocracy such as Marie Antoinette.

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[1] Cameron, Deborah. "Where there's a frill there's a way to keep the men at bay." _The Sunday Morning Herald._ N.p. July 29. 2006. Web. 4 January 2021.

However, the Lolita fashion is more than a particular style of dress, it is a lifestyle choice by all who choose to participate.[2] The mannerisms of a Lolita are distinctly polite, and their routines strictly childlike. Chapter One will further discuss the history of this subculture, as well as outlining its place in present day Japan. Multiple styles have emerged from the classic Lolita aesthetic, however for the purpose of this analysis this thesis will focus mainly on the classic Lolita style of dress (Fig. 1).

Figure 7 'Moco Moco Bunnies' A Classic Lolita dress from the 2021 Angelic Pretty Easter Collection, screenshot from www.AngelicPretty.com. Model and Photographer unknown.

The purpose of Chapter Two is to consider the authentic Japanese cultural values which predicate the elder generation's perspectives on patriarchy, gender roles, and education. By examining the socio-cultural context in which the contemporary Japanese youth grew up, this chapter will examine the extent to which the Lolita

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[2] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.

culture has been culturally defined by these traditional values. Chapter Two discusses the environment in which the contemporary Japanese youth has grown up, and debates whether the Lolita fashion is an act of youth rebellion, or more so the rejection of adulthood.

Lolita in the context of this thesis refers to a style of dress influenced by, but not confined to, the character developed by Vladimir Nabokov in his novel Lolita. Serving as an analysis of material culture among Japanese youths, this thesis aims to unpack the contemporary meaning of the term Lolita in Japan. In Western culture the term is heavily associated with Nabokov's novel of the same name, which delves into the life of paedophile Humbert Humbert and his infatuation with a twelve-year-old girl named Lolita. Research has enforced that the Japanese subculture is a standalone concept and those who dress in Lolita fashion deny all affiliations with the Western connotations of the term. As reiterated by Laura Porzio in her ethnographic study of Lolita fashion, rather than encourage the sexualizing of children, the Japanese fashion poses as a form of expression which aims to challenge 'contemporary hegemonic femininities.'[3]

Although the term Lolita holds two contrasting cultural definitions, this thesis argues that they both share a similar ulterior motive; to rebel against a set of wider social conventions. Nabokov himself was known for being extremely critical of psychiatry, and publicly voiced his antipathy towards Freud's psychological theories.[4] The opening chapters of Nabokov's autobiography 'make disparaging reference to Freud', and there is record of one of his students witnessing Nabokov 'vehemently denouncing Freud.'[5] His passionate hatred towards psychoanalysis can suggest that his novel Lolita was an idle assault on the science of psychiatry. This claim is backed up by the narcissistic qualities of Humbert Humbert, and his manipulating use of narrative to evoke undeserved sympathy from the reader.

This thesis acknowledges the Western perspective of the term Lolita, one which is tied to the paedophilic lust of prepubescent girls. However, the Western Lolita will no longer be referenced on the basis that those who identify as a Lolita in

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[3] Porzio, Laura. "'I Want to Be Happy Looking at Myself': Lolita Style and Its Embodied Practices between Resistance and Urban fashion." *Trending Now: New Developments in Fashion Studies*, 2013, pp. 69-79.

[4] De La Durantaye, Leland. "Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem." *American Imago*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2005, pp. 59-73.

[5] De La Durantaye, Leland. "Vladimir Nabokov and Sigmund Freud, or a Particular Problem." *American Imago*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 2005, pp. 59-73.

Japan do not associate themselves with the novel, and that the only similarity between the two definitions is the ulterior motive of rebellion.

Chapter Three will introduce the Lolicon complex and examine its effect on the integrity of the Lolita figure. This chapter will also discuss the core values of the Lolita culture.

Figure 8 Two Matching Lolita's. Uploaded to the official Instagram account of Fruits Mag; a magazine which documented Harajuku outfits, June 2017, models and photographer unknown. Screenshot from Instagram.com.

Chapter One
The Rise of the Lolita

Introduction

Regarded as the epicenter of Japanese street fashion, the Harajuku district boasts an array of quirky clothing stores, contemporary street art, and outré fashion boutiques. This trendy Tokyo neighborhood is associated with the exhibition of an eclectic but innovative style known as Harajuku fashion. Serving as a runway for the city's style obsessed citizens to showcase their ensembles, the Harajuku district encapsulates Japan's fashion focused youth culture scene. One of the most intriguing substyles to arise from this scene, and also the main focus of this thesis, is the Lolita fashion. Popularised by the visual Kei music movement of the 1980's, wearers of this fashion dress to resemble an elaborate doll. This trend was accelerated into the Harajuku fashion scene by Japanese rock band Malice Mizer, who's lead singer, Mana, founded a gothic Lolita fashion label Moi-meme-Moitie in 1999. Although this marked a pivotal point in the accessibility and popularity of Lolita fashion, followers of Visual Kei music also played a substantial part in the development of this subculture by mimicking their idols androgynous fashion trends. The Lolita fashion has been predominantly endorsed, worn, and kept alive by young people in Japan since its early beginnings, and its presence is deeply rooted in Japanese youth culture today.

1.1 The Lolita Aesthetic

As mentioned previously, the Lolita aesthetic is a distinctively sweet and innocent style of dress which strives to accentuate the cuteness of the wearer. To epitomize the Lolita ensemble, it typically consists of a short sleeve dress with a mid-length, A-line skirt that is draped over a tulle petticoat. A high neck or collared blouse is usually worn under the dress to cover the shoulders and décolletage of the wearer. Each piece of clothing is decorated with an elaborate array of bows, lace, and ruffles, which sometimes feature patterns of animals, flowers, and sweet treats. The Lolita shoe of choice are comfortable Mary Janes, and the outfit is completed with an

assortment of headpieces, hair accessories, jewelry, handbags, and sometimes lace parasols. Younker declares in her journal of her time working in Lolita fashion boutiques that "if it is not cute, it is not Lolita".[6]

Figure 9 Mana wearing a gothic Lolita outfit, Tokyo, 1980's, photographer unknown, uploaded to Pinterest.com.

Originally established as a gothic mode of dress, the Lolita fashion has evolved and fragmented into three styles; Classic Lolita, Sweet Lolita, and Gothic Lolita. Although the themes and colour palettes of these subgenres are variable, the main principals of the Lolita fashion are streamlined throughout each of its substyles. Below is a set of images which were uploaded throughout 2020 to the Instagram account @Angelicpretty_official. This is the official account for one of the leading online Lolita fashion stores, Angelica Pretty, and each image depicts an outfit which is available for purchase on the stores website. The top set of images are regarded as gothic Lolita, which typically consists of a predominantly black outfit featuring

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[6] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110.

accents of deep reds, dark purples and sometimes gold or silver. Patterned fabric is not necessary and gothic dresses are often decorated with black lace or floral tulle. However, gothic patterns usually depict images of bats, coffins, and crosses if present. The bottom set of images are examples of classic Lolita outfits, which evidently feature brighter colours and appear somewhat more childlike than the gothic outfits.

Figure 10 A set of four Lolita outfits, screenshot from the Angelic Pretty website, photographer and models unknown.

It is evident after a brief examination that these two sets of images have seemingly contrasting aesthetics, yet they are able to coexist within the same style. As a youth subculture, the majority of information about the Lolita fashion is spread through word of mouth, social media accounts, and online forums. This thesis has consulted online Lolita forums in an attempt to delve into the world of Lolita from the perspective of its community in order to conduct research using an emic approach. The Lolita Handbook blogpost on Livejournal.com has provided this thesis with a valuable insight into the mechanics of Lolita fashion, as it provides a detailed account of how to achieve the ideal Lolita look in terms of dress and proper etiquette. This thesis has observed through studying this blog that this synchronisation of contrasting aesthetics is feasible because of the predetermined set of Lolita rules and guidelines which must be followed, to a certain extent, by each Lolita. These guidelines are parallel to those presented in fashion magazine entitled *Gothic & Lolita Bible*, which was released in 2001 by Index Communications in Japan. Endorsed by Mana, these magazines featured sewing patterns, outfit inspiration, and interviews with Lolita fashion idols.

The scrupulous set of rules that regulate the Lolita dress are as follows; it must not rise higher than two inches above the knee, the waistline should sit at the bellybutton, and it must always be accompanied by a tulle petticoat that should never protrude past the hem of the skirt.[7] As previously mentioned, this thesis agrees that the Lolita fashion is an act of rebellion against societal pressures and traditional expectations. It may seem uncanny to declare a fashion governed by so many meticulous rules as an act of rebellion. In order to truthfully define the Lolita fashion as a rebellion, a light must be shed on the Lolita lifestyle.

1.2 The Lolita Lifestyle

Sociologist Dick Hebdige's book entitled Subculture: The Meaning of Style aims to decode the underlying motives and reasoning behind subcultures and their fashion trends. In relation to the Reggae and Punk rock subcultures, Hebdige articulates that they can be regarded as 'expressive forms but what they express is, in the last

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[7] Lolita_Handbook. *Live Journal.* N.P. Web. 28 Dec. 2020.

instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives.'[8] This thesis agrees that Hebdige's theory is representative of the Lolita culture, though not fully. It is liable that a young Japanese person can be seen in this instance as one 'condemned to a subordinate position', but only in the sense that they are under the authority of the power. This theory can be accurately applied to the Lolita culture if the 'power' refers to the parents of the young person.

Professor of psychology Benjamin B. Wolman reports that it is a deep-rooted tradition for young people to rebel and 'fight against the socio-cultural systems of their parents.'[9] Both of these theories complement each other's viewpoints and will serve as backbones for the analysis of this thesis. Youth insurgence is a trademark quality of adolescence, but how can such an innocently sweet, pastel pink fashion pose itself as an act of defiance? Although the Lolita aesthetic does not immediately radiate rebellious qualities, the Lolita lifestyle as a whole is certainly defiant. To preface, any preconceived stereotypes of how a rebellious fashion should present itself have been dismissed in order to refrain from comparing this Asian fashion to those curated in the Western world. Albeit it is nowhere near as aggressively anarchic as the punk fashion movement of the 1960's, nor does it protest as fiercely Pussy Riot's baklava trend, but comparing it to Western fashion trends would dismiss the cultural importance of the Lolita figure entirely.

1.3 Adopted Personalities

The Lolita fashion is a personification of a frivolous Rococo born child, mixed with elements inspired by the cute culture that has permeated most every aspect of Japanese culture; the Kawaii culture. Although it draws a lot of its inspiration from the neoromantic notion of childhood, the personality traits of a Lolita are heavily influenced by the 1980's kawaii culture. Dr Sharon Kinsella, who is currently a lecturer of Japanese Studies at The University of Manchester, has focused her research on Japanese visual cultures, and her chapter in Skov and Moeran's *Woman*

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[8] Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* Taylor & Francis Group, 1981. Print.
[9] Wolman, Benjamin B. "The Rebellion of Youth." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, Vol 11, no. 4, 1972, pp 254-259.

and Media Consumption in Japan entitled 'Cuties in Japan' has been an insightful source for this thesis. The chapter details the kawaii culture's impact on Japanese youth culture fashion trends since the 1980's and in which Kinsella explains that the kawaii culture is a celebration of everything "sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced."[10] This cute culture has manifested itself in numerous fashion trends with one of the first being the burikko craze which saw young women dressing as 'fake children'.[11] Kinsella states that the kawaii fashion in Japan has always been more than just a style of dress as it 'was all about 'becoming' the cute object itself by acting infantile.'[12] This attraction to forced vulnerability has permeated through to the Lolita culture, most notably in their adopted personality traits. Although this fashion draws a large amount of inspiration from the Neo Romantic notion of childhood, the Lolita psyche and mannerisms have been shaped by Japan's obsession with cuteness.

Fig. 5 visually depicts the adopted personality traits common among the Lolita community. This image was uploaded to the Instagram account of Lolita fashion model and influencer, Misako Aoki, who was pronounced Japan's Kawaii Ambassador by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009 and is currently serving as president of the Japanese Lolita Association.[13] This image was taken in August 2019 when Misako (right) made a guest appearance on AbemaTV, an online Japanese television network where she gave host Ayaka (left) a Lolita makeover.

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[10] Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." *In Woman, Media, and Consumption in Japan,* Curzon, 1995. Print. P. 120.
[11] Ibid, p. 225.
[12] Ibid, p. 237.
[13] Lim, Therese Marie. "Here's Why You Should Follow 2009 Kawaii Ambassador Misako Aoki." *Cool/JP.* N.p, 18 May 2020. Web. 23 Dec. 2020.

Figure 11 Misako Aoki and Ayaka Komatsu dressed in Lolita fashion, screenshot of a post uploaded to the Instagram account @misakoaoki on August 27, 2019, Tokyo.

As seen in the image, the women are leaning towards each other in an infantile stance while contorting their feet into a pigeon-toed position. Their expressions are purposely innocent, and resemble those of a young, bewildered child. It appears that the women are huddled together, fanning their skirts as if they are a child who has been asked by their parents to pose for a photo in their new outfit. Along with the notably juvenile Lolita dresses, Ayaka is clutching a plush bunny teddy. It is not uncommon for Lolita's to carry plush toys, nor is it uncommon for them to partake in childlike activities such as eating sweets and ice cream.[14] After further body language analysis, the women can be depicted as awkward, uncomfortable or uninterested. However, they are representing the Lolita personality quite accurately, as it is one which strives to appear innocent, infantile, and dependant. Kinsella explains that cute culture has celebrated the apparent weakness, dependency and inability of young people rather than their achievements and capabilities.[15] It is evident that this

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[14] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110. P. 100.

[15] Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." *In Woman, Media, and Consumption in Japan,* Curzon, 1995. Print. P. 237.

has directly affected the Lolita culture, as participants choose to present themselves as an impeccably polite child. However, the Lolita only mimics the most pleasant personality traits associated with a young child, and disregards the temper tantrums, emotional outbursts, and occasional screaming for attention. She strives to present herself as a youthful but elegant young lady, the epitome of grace.

Figure 12 RinRin Doll in Angelic Pretty Lolita Fashion on the Street in Harajuku, 2017, Screenshot from TokyoFashion.com.

There are various accounts and theories which try to decipher the reasoning behind this fashion, and why its competent participants are transitioning themselves into dependent childlike figures. Kinsella argues that those who partake in a fashion trend

which involves dressing as a child, do so because they are chasing the feeling of nostalgia. As part of her research into Japanese visual cultures, Kinsella conducted a survey in Tokyo in 1992 in which she asked respondents to define what cute meant to them. She concluded that the majority of replies were dominated by themes related to childhood.[16] It is apparent that Lolita fashion serves as a portal in which participants can escape to their dreamy, childlike fantasy world. However, this thesis argues that the main focus of Lolita is not to perpetuate the feeling of childhood nostalgia but to reject the transition into adulthood.

As mentioned previously, the Lolita fashion is a personification of a frivolous Rococo born child and it is essentially romanticising a childhood which was experienced only by Parisian children of the 18th century. Since it is unlikely that any Japanese youth has experienced first-hand this exact childhood, this thesis argues that the intent of Lolita lifestyle is not to merely satisfy a 'nostalgia' towards a childhood that was never theirs. It is evident they have a strong desire to connect with a different form of reality and this can be regarded as a form of escapism from their current reality. Chapter two will discuss this further and identify some aspects of the Japanese culture which may inspire youths to reject adulthood and escape to a perfectly created dream world.

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[16] Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." *In Woman, Media, and Consumption in Japan,* Curzon, 1995. Print. P. 237.

Chapter Two
Rebellion, Rejection, or Redefinition?

'The whole life of the Young-Girl
coincides with what she wants to forget.'[17]

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Introduction

This thesis has determined so far that the Lolita culture is just as much a celebration of childhood, as it is a rejection of the transition into adulthood. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some reasons which could inspire a young Japanese person to partake in the Lolita fashion and lifestyle. Focusing on the impact of traditional social structures and cultural values, this chapter will also explore the viability of deeming the Lolita culture a rebellion. The majority of the information presented in Chapter Two was acquired from Dr. Yuko Kawanishi's book entitled Mental Health Challenges Facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Kawanishi practices as a psychological counselor and has specialized her research on the mental health and social issues in modern Japan.[18] This book has been a valuable piece of literature and has provided this thesis with a deeper understanding of the Japanese social structures and the psychological state of modern Japanese citizens.

2.1 Rebellion or Rejection?

This thesis has demonstrated that the Lolita culture can be regarded as a celebration of an ideal childhood. However, it is simultaneously a rejection of the transition into adulthood. As Younker reiterates, the Western views of adulthood are a stark contrast to those commonly perceived by Japanese children. Instead of being regarded as a time of freedom, Kinsella informs that "adulthood is viewed by many young people (in Japan) as a gloomy period of heavy burdens."[19] There are a multitude of reasons that could cause the contemporary Japanese youth to reject the

[17] Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl. Tiqqun, 2012. Print. P. 128.
[18] Author Unknown. "Yuko Kawanishi." _Lakeland University._ N.p. N.d. Web. 20 Dec. 2020.
[19] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". _Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,_ Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110. P. 103.

concept of adulthood, but this chapter will focus on the traditional social expectations which are imposed on them by their parents and the elder community. As stated by Kawanishi, young people in Japan are expected by their parents to hold a respectable career, marry a person who is equally, if not more educated, and be successful enough to provide sufficiently for their expected family.[20] Although it is evident that the contemporary Japanese youth has little interest in meeting these expectations, and attempts to postpone the transition into adulthood as much as possible. Much to the dismay of the older generation, the majority of youths are choosing to live a carefree life rather than follow in their parent's hardworking footsteps 'crawling up the corporate career ladder.'[21] It appears that the youths of today favor a more laid back lifestyle with little regard for their futures, and generally focus on 'simply having fun.'[22] This can be perceived as a youth culture who is rejecting the social norms by refusing to conform to the expectations imposed on them by their parents and wider community. It is also possible that those who choose to follow the Lolita lifestyle, are doing it as an extreme form of escapism from the adult world. By fully adopting a child's persona they are disassociating themselves with adulthood.

Kawanishi is rather critical of the contemporary Japanese youths. It is her opinion that the 'affluent, materialistic and consumption-orientated society' which evolved after World War Two has spoiled its younger generation.[23] The prosperous, advanced nation that is Japan was undoubtedly painstakingly carved out by its elder population, and she theorizes that the Japanese youths are idly reaping the payoff of their ancestor's endurance through the post war hardship. Although her opinion is valid, it corresponds to the age-old narrative that young people would not know what hard work is, even if it hit them in the face.

The Lolita lifestyle requires a large amount of dedication and effort, elaborate outfits, and the adoption of a whole new personality. It seems farfetched that a lazy teen would choose such a time-consuming pastime. Therefore, this thesis is hesitant to suggest that those who participate in the Lolita culture are lazy youths who are

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[20] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. P 103.
[21] Ibid, p. 99
[22] Ibid, p. 99
[23] Ibid, p. 105

looking for an easy way out of becoming an adult. Nevertheless, Teresa Younker's experience with the Lolita community coincides with Kawanishi's theory that the younger generation are lazily unambitious. She declares in her academic essay the following:

> "By acting selfish and childish, the Lolita contradicts nearly every single "traditional" Japanese value; self-discipline, responsibility, self-sacrifice, and hard work. She is saying, "I'm a spoiled, immature little brat and I like it that way!"[24]

This is quite a discouraging perspective of the Lolita fashion, and it leads this thesis to the assumption that those who partake in the Lolita fashion are simply bratty teens. However, it must be considered the volume of people who dress in Lolita fashion, whether it be solely for aesthetic purposes or for the selfish reason to reject the transition to adulthood, or somewhere in between. Inevitably there are a multitude of reasons why one might be drawn to the culture, and to stereotype each Lolita as lazy would be unrepresentative. Furthermore, when Younker worked in Lolita fashion store Baby, she learned that the women she worked with were very well educated. One of her colleagues had a degree in law but had chosen to work in the Lolita store since the idea of being a lawyer did not appeal to her, despite her parent's disapproval.[25]

2.2 Traditional Values

Ruth Kanagy, author of Japanese travel guide book, Moon Japan, states that the core values of Japanese society are ones which stress the importance of 'doing your best, not giving up, respecting your elders, knowing your role, and working in a group'.[26] These admirable cultural values are engrained in the Japanese psyche, and children are thought concepts like omoiyari, the importance of thinking of others, from a young age. [27] However, these traditional social and cultural values are potentially

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[24] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110. P. 101.
[25] Ibid, p. 102.
[26] Kanagy, Ruth. "Cultural Values of Japan." *Moon.* N.p. N.d. Web. 20 Dec. 2020.
[27] Kanagy, Ruth. "Cultural Values of Japan." *Moon.* N.p. N.d. Web. 20 Dec. 2020.

enfettering to the contemporary Japanese youth, particularly the concept of yasashisa.

Yasashisa is when a person refrains from exposing their 'raw, intense emotions' in front of an acquaintance, in fear that their acquaintance may feel offended or uncomfortable.[28] Kawanishi explains that it is perceived as rude or inconsiderate to cry in front of a friend, as the portrayal of emotions is embarrassing or unnecessary if it is not a happy emotion.[29] The young people of Japan in particular strive to show a strong sense of yasashisa in their relationships with their colleagues, friends, and family. Yasashisa can manifest in various instances, and it is even common for Japanese teachers to send their students corrections for assignments by email to avoid face-to-face criticism.[30] This indirect form of expressing a disagreement and the common process of expressing negative feedback through email are key factors which support the argument of this thesis. In relation to these findings, this thesis argues that there is a strong possibility that Lolita fashion is an indirect disagreement with the traditional and patriarchal social structures in Japan. Instead of growing up and facing adulthood, the Lolita culture promotes its community to live the life of a child. This concept reveals a lot about the ways in which Japanese youths tend to deal with negative emotions, and it is possible that the Lolita fashion was constructed as a passive act of rebellion against these social structures and expectations. Lolita fashion conforms to the concept of yasashisa, as its participants are not openly denouncing these traditional social structures. Instead they are adopting the persona and attire of a child while indirectly refusing to conform to the traditional expectations of working a creditable job, producing a family, and gaining an education. There is a dedicated section in the Gothic Lolita Bible which allows community members to indirectly express disagreements about a Lolita rule, a particular item of Lolita clothing, or even a fellow Lolita.[31]Although passive and indirect, this thesis believes that adopting the Lolita fashion as a way to reject adulthood, constitutes as an act of rebellion.

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[28] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. P. 102.

[29] Ibid, p.102.

[30] Ibid, p. 104.

[31] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.

Granted this carefree way of life poses as rather rebellious, Kawanishi explains that the majority of these youths are actually severely incapable of being assertive, and their nonchalant façade is a cover-up for their fear of adulthood. Kawanishi agrees that it is common practice for youths to postpone becoming an adult, but believes it is because of their weak personalities. She theorizes that they tend to live in constant fear of 'hurting and getting hurt'.[32] She also describes them as 'fragile and vulnerable creatures', which is coincidentally exactly what Lolita's inspire to be.[33] It is possible that partaking in the Lolita culture is a way for young people to avoid facing the negative emotions associated with adulthood. To deter these negative emotions, they choose to cocoon themselves in a fantasy world of lustrous colors, joyful activities, and immaculately polite characters. Perhaps it is not a representation of their apparent obsession with childhood nostalgia, but more an attempt to disconnect from the negative connotations of adulthood.

The traditional mentality of ittaikan can certainly be enfettering to the contemporary Japanese youth. Ittaikan can be described as a 'sense of oneness' which emphasizes the idea that each person is bound to their family, community, district, and country.[34] Research has suggested that it serves as a poignant reminder to Japanese youth that the shame of their wrong doings (acting out, failing to conform) is brought upon the groups which they belong to. In theory, this instils a strong sense of community and loyalty within the citizens of Japan, as the fear of upsetting someone is often too much to bear. This strong sense of oneness can be identified in the relationship between a mother and her child. It is often the case that a mother will live vicariously through her child and impose high expectations on them to succeed. Kawanishi suggests that the idea of growing up and pursuing a life independent from one's mother is causing a great deal of stress for some youths.[35] The strong sense of ittaikan and obligation which Japanese youths feel towards their mothers has meant that it might difficult for a young person to realize it is a separate being from its mother who is entitled to pursue its own life.[36] This thesis does not consider this a

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[32] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. p. 104.
[33] Ibid, p. 99
[34] Ibid, p. 138.
[35] Ibid, p. 115.
[36] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. P 115.

direct reason for youth insurgence against a traditional social value. However, it may pose as a reason for the longing to perpetuate a childhood through alternative forms once the inevitability of growing up has engulfed a young person's life. This apparent unwillingness to become an independent member of society has the potential to result in youths who want to embody the life of a child, or at least postpone the onset of adult responsibilities.

This mentality goes hand in hand with the concept of shigarami. According to Kimura and Tokuoka it is defined by "something that clings or something that is in the way".[37] Kawanishi's perspective is that it 'refers to the restrictive, binding fetters on one's psychology that prevent one from acting freely.'[38] Shigarami serves as a reminder to youths that they have an obligation to stay loyal to their family and communities while conforming to the social expectations imposed on them. These traditional mentalities are evidently restrictive and binding to youths who wish to express themselves and choose a life path which does not correspond with the traditional expectations. However, this thesis considers that those who dress in Lolita for the purpose of rejecting adulthood are in turn rejecting their obligation to stay loyal to their family's expectations. By refusing to partake in adulthood, one is rebelling against these binding social norms.

Although, this traditional mentality has not been lost completely and its legacy is visible through the core values of the Lolita culture. The Lolita community take pride in being extremely courteous to each other, and their meticulously constructed fantasy land is a space where like-minded Lolita's can express themselves freely through creative outlets. Although this binding mentality could pose as a reason for youths to rebel against traditional values, the Lolita community choose to rejuvenate the meaning of community and define it as one that is more fitting to their contemporary lifestyle.

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[37] Kimura, Yuji and Tokuoka, Kolichiro. *Managing Shigarami*, Kimura & Tokuoka, 2017. Print. P. 6.
[38] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. P 138.

2.3 Education

It should also be noted that the majority of parents of today's youth were educated with a strong emphasis on the hensachi criteria. The hensachi method was commonly used to measure a student's academic performance, and also classified students into ranks based on their likelihood of attending a prestige university.[39] Kawanishi reflects that this ranking system has affected the attitudes parents have towards their child's academic success. It is common for mothers to obsess over their children becoming high achieving intellectuals. Although it is apparent that the education system is no longer as gruelling, or exam focused, a five-day school week was only introduced from 2002. Prior to this it was mandatory that children attend school on Saturday.[40] The reason for including information about the Japanese education system is to identify another aspect of the Japanese society that exhorts pressure on the youth of today. According to Yasuhiro Nemoto in his book entitled *The Japanese Education System*, it is in school where 'children inevitably become submissive.'[41] If the youths of today endured a school system which taught them to be confirmative and submissive, then the Lolita culture both rejecting and redefining this traditional cultural value. While refusing to conform to the expectations that come with being an adult, the Lolita is being defiant and resistant against what the Japanese education has taught her; to be submissive to authority. However, there are submissive tendencies in the Lolita persona which are synonymous with acting like a child. This is another example of defiance against a traditional social norm but incorporating a revised version of it into the Lolita culture's values.

2.4 Conclusion

Rebellion and defiance are trademarks of adolescence. However, the Lolita subculture is a distinctive form of resistance to traditional social structures and cultural beliefs. The Lolita fashion can be regarded as a rebellion against societal

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[39] Kawanishi, Yuko. Mental Health Challenges facing Contemporary Japanese Society. Brill, 2009. Print. P. 79

[40] Nemoto, Yasuhiro. *The Japanese Education System*. Florida: Universal Publishers, 1999. Print. P. 19.

[41] Ibid, p. 52.

pressure to conform, the burden of filial piety, the traditional, exam focused education system, and the emphasis on a binding sense of community. The socio-cultural context which the contemporary Japanese youth grew up has evidently had a large effect on the means by which they reject societal expectations. Albeit an indirect rebellion, the act of dressing and acting as a child to postpone adulthood certainly has defiant and resistance connotations. This polite and elaborate form of youth resistance is culturally defined by the same traditional cultural values that a Lolita passively protests.

Chapter Three
Tainted Dreams

> 'The absolute vulnerability of the Young-Girl
> is that of the shopkeeper, who's merchandise
> can be stolen by any uncontrollable force.'[42]

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Introduction

This chapter will discuss the integrity of the Lolita culture as a rebellion by analyzing its core cultural values. It will also examine the Lolicon complex and its impact on the image of the Lolita figure.

3.1 Meaningful Mutations

Sociologist Dominic Strinati claims that we should examine subculture styles as 'mutations and extensions of existing codes rather than as the pure expression of creative drives, and above all they should be seen as meaningful mutations.'[43] It is the opinion of this thesis that the most meaningful mutation of an existing code which is expressed by the Lolita culture is its mutation of the contemporary standards of beauty. Regardless of the selfish and non-progressive reasons why the Lolita community choose to dress like a child, the Lolita silhouette can be regarded as a meaningful mutation which challenges the expression of hegemonic femininities. [44] Carved out by its customary bell-shaped skirt, the Lolita silhouette resembles the figure of a child. By concealing the wearers hips, chest, and shoulders, the dress aims to detach the wearer's body from sexual objectification. This innocent silhouette refuses to conform to the preconceived, mainstream notions of how a woman's figure should be accentuated through her clothing. This desexualisation of the wearers figure is undeniably empowering for the young girls who dress in Lolita fashion, and it teaches them to dress for themselves. As

[42] Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl. Tiqqun, 2012. Print. P. 130.

[43] Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* Taylor & Francis Group, 1981. Print. P. 131.

[44] Porzio, Laura. "'I Want to Be Happy Looking at Myself': Lolita Style and Its Embodied Practices between Resistance and Urban fashion." *Trending Now: New Developments in Fashion Studies*, 2013, pp. 69-79.

mentioned previously, the Lolita culture detach themselves completely from the sexual connotations surrounding the term Lolita in the Western world, as constructed by Nabokov's novel. Savage believes that the Lolita fashion promotes empowerment through 'a rejection of sexual desirability and of sexual maturity.'[45]

This rejection of sexual maturity can be analysed in two ways. On one hand the rejection of puberty and sexual maturation is to further embody the life of a child and to satisfy the unwillingness to enter adulthood on the basis that the wearer is too lazy to conform. On the other hand, it could be perceived that the Lolita community are admirably rejecting to acknowledge sexual maturity in order to disassociate themselves with the objectification of their body. This sexual objectification is unescapable in today's society, so by refusing to mature the Lolita is essentially refusing to enter a period where her body will transition into an object of desire. Above all, it is evident that the Lolita community are attempting to redefine the expression of femininity through fashion.

3.2 The Lolicon Complex

The integrity of the Lolita fashion is questionable, and it is tested profusely by the wider popular culture scene. Inside the fantasy world of Lolita is an empowering community of women who disregard the contemporary beauty standards, redefine the expression of femininity, and refuse to adhere to the patriarchal, traditional expectations if they do not suit their personal ambitions. Regardless of how much emphasis the Lolita culture puts on encouraging the empowerment of its community, the Lolicon complex will always pervade the same world the Lolita tries to exist in. The Lolicon complex refers to 'an adult males sexual attraction to young girls or girls with youthful characteristics'.[46] According to Savage, the Japanese media is saturated with discourse that focuses on the young girl as an object of desire.'[47] As previously stated, the Lolita community does not intend to tantalize men but they are subjected to unwanted sexual objectification from men who lust

[45] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.

[46] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110. P. 107.

[47] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.

after having sex with a sexually naïve young girl, without the burden of a mature relationship.[48] The Lolicon character can be seen most prominently in a sexually explicit genre of manga, known as rorikon, which often depicts women dressed as young girls who are subjected to scenes depicting rape and bondage scenarios.[49] These characters are aesthetically very similar to the Lolita girls, and they are also presented as infantile beings dressed in innocent, childlike clothing.

Rather than hold the consumer accountable for engaging with what is essentially 'virtual child pornography', Savage theorises that it was the over commodification of the shojo character through Japanese media that has led to the young girl being fetishized.[50] The word shojo translates to girl in Japanese, and represents the figure of a girl who is 'more of a myth, or something evanescent, something with no shape or actuality, rather it is the 'illusion of beauty.'"[51] This has undoubtedly tainted the reputation of the innocent Lolita, who's image has been misrepresented and defaced within the same context the Lolita was constructed.

However, in response to the Lolicon complex which developed in the 1990's, the Lolita culture has responded in their typically passive, but valiant manner. Kinsella explains that the Lolita culture altered their signature baby voices to sound more ladylike and mature, in an attempt to extinguish the association of their innocent selves with the figures presented in explicit rorikon manga.[52] This subtle alteration is one that proves the robust and resilient nature of the Lolita. Although the Lolita community take every effort to control their speech, clothes, mannerisms, they cannot control how the world perceives them. Nonetheless, they continue creating a reality for themselves which brings them joy and a sense of purpose.

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[48] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110. P. 107.
[49] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.
[50] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.
[51] Savage, Shari. "Just Looking: Tantalization, Lolicon, and Virtual Girls." *Visual Culture & Gender* (Online), 10 (2015): 37-46. Web. 14 Dec. 2020.
[52] Ibid, p.40.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that the Lolita fashion is much more meaningful than being a particular style of frilly dress. The Lolita fashion serves as a passport to the meticulously constructed dream world of the Lolita culture. It is one which celebrates the freedom of childhood innocence and encourages the adoption of an overly polite and childlike personality. In some cases, it can be regarded as a rejection of adulthood more so than an obsession with the nostalgia of childhood. This thesis has outlined the qualities of the fashion which constitutes it as a form of rebellion. Research has enforced that the fashion is most likely a rebellion against the traditional social structures and wider expectations imposed on young people in Japan by their parents. By choosing to embody the life of a child, one is indirectly refusing to conform to the responsibilities of adult life.

Although the Lolita culture has shown defiance against traditional cultural concepts such as shigarami and ittaikan, it has subtly incorporated them into its own values and practices in a way which enforces that the traditional Japanese values have not been completely disregarded.

However, this thesis does not exhaust every possibility which could result in a young person partaking in the Lolita fashion or adopting a childlike persona. It has not explored the possibility that some Lolita's may choose to dress in puffy skirt and Mary Janes shoes simply because they enjoy the style. On the basis that not all women who wear aviator jackets are longing for a reality in which they are a pilot, fashion is undeniably subjective to each individual. A further study which directly interviews young people in Japan who follow the Lolita lifestyle would be essential to fully decipher the overall attraction to participate in this cultural phenomenon.

This thesis has consulted Teresa Younker's academic journal *Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying*, which details her time spent working in various Lolita fashion boutiques in Tokyo. Overall her view of the Lolita community is poor, and she accuses them of shamelessly contradicting every admirable value of the Japanese

culture.[53] 'I'm a spoiled, immature little brat and I like it that way!'[54] Younker's outlook is disheartening, and it fails to consider the Lolita's admirable fight against gender norms, the expression of femininity, and the male gaze. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Lolita silhouette is similar to a child's in order to detach the wearers body from sexual objectification. The Lolita is an advocate for dressing for herself in a means that makes her feel comfortable. She promotes female empowerment and feminine strength, as nothing that she does is to gain the attention of a man, nor is it to make herself appear desirable to possible suitors. If nothing else, the Lolita community is a safe space where like-minded women can gather and relish in their pastel pink fantasy land. The Lolita lifestyle is a passport to a better world, where its community can find temporary solace from the harsh realities they are otherwise subjected to. Through elegant rebellion, the Lolita figure gracefully challenges her reality.

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[53] Younker, Teresa." Lolita: Dreaming, Despairing, Defying". *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs,* Vol. 11, no. 1, 2005, pp. 97-110.
[54] Ibid

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