The American Lolita Subculture:
An Exploration of Self-Authentication, Postmodernism, and Social Belonging

Miranda Williams, Anne Mitchell, and Nancy Hodges, Ph.D., University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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In the early 1980s, Japanese women used Lolita style to break from tradition and defy societal norms (Gagne, 2008). Instead of embracing the traditional roles of young adults, these women turned to "an imaginary world of lace, frills, bows, tulle, and ribbons" to escape the responsibilities of everyday life (Younker, 2011, p. 97). The Lolita style has since spread to other countries, including the United States, where it is identified as a subculture in which membership is expressed through similar modes of dress (Winge, 2008).

Defined as "distinct cultural groups that exist as identifiable segments within a larger, more complex social group," subcultures have been examined for within-group conformity expressed through dress (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000, p. 13). Although many subcultures have been studied, the majority of the research that exists has focused on male subcultural groups or male members of subcultures. Female dominated subcultures, like the Lolitas, have not received the same degree of attention. Further, most of the research to date has addressed these groups primarily in terms of sexual attractiveness (McRobbie & Garber, 1977; Rahman, Wing-Sun, Lam, & Mong-tai, 2011). However, women's motivations for subcultural membership are likely more complex, pointing to the importance of understanding the intricacies of meaning and identity associated with membership in female dominant subcultural groups like the Lolitas. Thus, the goal of this qualitative study was to address the gender gap that exists within the subculture and dress literature. To this end, the following questions guided the study: *What are the reasons for participation in the Lolita subculture among women? What does Lolita subculture membership mean to women? How do women use dress to communicate within the Lolita subculture?*

Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, participants were recruited via referrals and snowball sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen practicing Lolitas in the United States over a five-month period. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-taped with permission of the participant. Ranging in age from 18 to 28, all of the participants had been active members of the Lolita subculture for at least one year. Questions asked during the interviews included: *What does it mean to be a part of the Lolita subculture? How do you feel when you are dressed as a Lolita? How do you use Lolita dress to express your identity?* Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Data were analyzed via an iterative process, whereby the researchers identified commonalities and differences across the interview data in order to articulate the meanings of experience as

expressed by participants (Silverman, 2006). Participant responses were then compiled into three main themes: *self-authentication, postmodernism,* and *social belonging.* The *self-authentication* theme emerged from experiences that indicate a focus on building confidence and self-esteem through Lolita membership. That is, being part of a collective group allowed participants to transcend the appearance norms of everyday life, while moderating feelings of alienation and estrangement (Healy & Beverland, 2013). As an outgrowth of *postmodernism* in dress, the Lolita style creates an imaginative world where participants can comfortably convey their inner selves. Moreover, the style encourages a reliance on intergroup connections for approval and acceptance. Lastly, *social belonging* emerged through a well-defined hierarchy as exhibited by dress norms as well as assigned roles within the subculture. Commitment to the group was shown through brand allegiance and respect for the guidelines governing the subculture.

Results of this study indicate the extent to which the Lolita subculture actually helps female participants to integrate within society. As members of a female dominant collective, participants developed the confidence needed to form stronger intergroup relationships through shared norms, including those related to dress. Such findings are in contrast to those of the Japanese Lolita subculture, wherein the emphasis is on using the style to break away from the roles and responsibilities set forth by Japanese culture (Gagne, 2008). Future research is needed to explore how such differences evolved relative to the development of this subculture, as such research would provide deeper understanding of how subcultures are influenced, at least in part, by the broader culture in which they operate. Moreover, research that examines differences among Lolita groups within the United States is also needed, as such research would help to shed light on how dress is used to identify group membership and the subtleties by which it communicates specific roles within the subculture as a whole.

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