

The Three Epochs of Hong Kong Lolita Subculture: Cultural Hybridization and Identity Construction

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Abstract

Lolita is identified as a female oriented subculture phenomenon which came about in the 1990s in Harajuku, Japan. Youths in Hong Kong, because culturally and geographically in close proximity to Japan, will usually adapt their neighboring city Tokyo's cultural movements. This paper explores the development, meaning, significance of Lolita phenomena in Hong Kong from the postmodern historical and socio-cultural points of view. By assembling and examining the ethnographic data from face-to-face interviewees and materials from online resources between 2014 and 2017, we reviewed and proposed that there are three major epochs of Lolita subculture development in Hong Kong. The study concludes that the changes in online practices over the past two decades lead to the transformation of Lolita identity within the group. It also indicates that the development of Hong Kong Lolita subculture shows a positive impact of cultural hybridization. Moreover, through the active practice on virtual platforms, the group creates an imagined community for the participants to share their beliefs and dreams freely.

Keywords: cultural hybridization, gender performance, Hong Kong Lolita, personal identity, subculture, subcultural history

Introduction

Lolita, with the doll-like and Western classical costumes, was a Japanese born youth subculture around the 1990s. It is one of the extraordinary examples of global pop-culture, which has been studied and evaluated by media and scholars inside and outside of Japan in recent years. Japan and Hong Kong are geographically close to one another and since the 1970s, Tokyo, the capital city of Japan, initiates popular cultural movements which Hong Kong has followed. For example, Japanese pop music, animations, cosplay, manga, cutie stationary items as well as fashion magazines, are the essential substances for many Hong Kong people, especially children, teenagers and young adults, in their everyday cultural life experiences. As Bridges truly writes “the Hong Kong people’s “eagerness” to embrace Japanese-style popular culture and consumer culture which emerged so strongly during the 1990s” (2003, p.1055). Although, the flow of popular culture and commercial culture reached its peak during the 1990s, it is continually growing steadily. Therefore, it is not surprising that Lolita subculture has emanated and developed in Hong Kong for over twenty years since it was first introduced from Japan at the beginning of 2000.

By adopting Western clothing styles from Rococo (1750s-1880s)¹ and the Victorian period (1830s-1900s)², this group of young women present themselves as “Urban Princesses” in various subgenres of clothing style (Gagné, 2008). They usually communicate with each other through on-line platforms or organizing activities in private locations /settings, such as tea parties, private photo shooting in clubhouses or parks. In Hong Kong, some of the senior participants have turned from mid-teens to youth and from youth to more mature adults or mothers, however, for some reason, they are still playing active roles in relation to newly joining members.

Given the brief background of Lolita subculture from above, our research aims are: First, to review concepts and meanings of Lolita subculture which are commonly perceived by intellectuals within the field of youth subculture. Second, to explore the development of Lolita subculture in Hong Kong in the past two decades. Third, to analyze the impacts and significance of Hong Kong Lolita phenomenon from historical, social and cultural perspectives.

Methodologically, ethnographic data which was taken from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six Lolitas in 2017 are used. Group interviews with the core administrative members from a very popular online virtual community “HK Lolita” were also conducted. We collected data that essentially focused on the historical development of Hong Kong Lolita (phenomenon) from the time it first appeared in Hong Kong. Other data were mainly assembled by voice-message interviews via Facebook Messenger as well as reviewing key blogs that were written by the Lolita fandoms. We also use data from a pilot study which was conducted and collected during 2014 and 2015, because it helped to provide a general background of population, nature and characteristic of Hong Kong Lolita. To protect the personal identity of the informants, all personal names of Lolitas that appear in this paper are pseudonyms.

By collecting and analyzing the ethnographic data from field observations, interviews and materials from online resources, we came to a conclusion that there are three major epochs of

¹ Rococo fashion style refers to the designs tended to be lavishly ornate, with complex patterns and the finest of materials (Muscato C, 2018).

² Victorian fashion comprises various fashions and trends in British culture. Women usually wore dress with a long, tight, pointed bodice and full skirt supported on many petticoats.

Lolita subculture development in Hong Kong: The Justice Epoch, L.O. Epoch and HK Lolita Epoch. We examine these resources and believe that the development of Hong Kong Lolita has a strong connection with the transformation of media culture nexus. However, there have been very limited studies regarding the development of Hong Kong Lolita from perspectives of cultural and historical investigation. Scholars such as Vera Mackie and Issac Gagné have done extensive work on the study of Lolita subculture. The former contributes by investigating the formation of feminine identities and behaviors of Lolita in recent years (Gagné, 2008; 2010; 2013) whilst the latter focuses on the study of gender and feminism of Japanese women (Mackie, 2009; 2012; 2015). Their perspectives are from a western point of view and their focus were mainly on Japanese Lolita subculture development. As regards the development of Lolita subculture in Hong Kong, Helena Kwong has written an article on the identities and meanings of being a Lolita through interviewing ten Hong Kong Lolitas from secondary schools (Kwong, 2006). There is also a related study which focuses on the construction of a personal and social identity of Lolita through symbolic consumption (Rahman, Liu, Lam and Chan, 2011). However, their discussions about Hong Kong Lolita have not focused much on the macro-aspects of historical and cultural points of view. Therefore, we hope this paper can contribute to knowledge about Lolita subculture in Hong Kong in these aspects, as well as the significances and impacts of its development.

Background

Lolita Subculture and Its Meaning

Generally speaking, “Lolita is a predominantly female subcultural aesthetics whose participants strive to embody a “princess” theme through fashion and mannerisms” (Gagné, 2013, p.1). According to the media theorist and sociologist, Hebdige, subculture is a style that is constructed through a combination of numerous issues predominantly concerned by the youth who have distinct styles, behaviors, and interests. For instance, fashion, animation, dance, music and video games etc. (Hebdige, 1979). Therefore, Lolita is identified as a subculture phenomenon. It was born in Harajuku, Japan and was first introduced by Japanese youth visual rock musicians in performances known as “Visual Kei” in the 1980s.³

In the 1990s, the name of the Japanese Lolita subculture has created a new meaning that matches its original idea - “reflecting a modest, innocent, graceful, polite, and Kawaii image of a Japanese Lolita” (Winge, 2008, p. 50). Lolita group (male and female) continue to expand in major global cities, such as Seoul, Shanghai, Los Angeles, London, Paris and even in Scandinavia, e.g. Finland and Sweden. They usually communicate with each other through on-line platforms or organizing activities in private locations /settings, such as tea parties, private photo shooting various places. Nevertheless, in the very beginning Lolita subculture was disregarded by most Western countries. Although, younger age groups might learnt about this subculture through online platforms or magazines, such as *Gothic & Lolita Bible*⁴, it only drew many people’s attention and became internationally visible after the film *Shimotsuma Monogatari (aka Kamikaze Girls)* was broadcast in 2004. By adopting the best-selling novel of Japanese “maiden” subculture written by Takemoto Novala, the film became a box-office hit in Japan and a cult film in the West. The story showcases the friendship of two young girls

³ Visual Kei refers to “visual system” in Japanese, and the Visual Kei musical artists usually associate theatrical costumes and concert performances with an eclectic music on stage (Gagné, 2008).

⁴ This Japanese fashion magazine and book was founded in 2001. It focuses on the Gothic and Lolita fashions news and information. However, the first English-language volume was published seven years later. See (*Gothic & Lolita Bible*, 2020, August 3, in Wikipedia) for more information.

who come from entirely different backgrounds. One of them is a Yankī biker,⁵ whereas the other is a Lolita.

As for Lolita, it is known as a fashion from Japan that attempts to capture the innocence of youth, and nostalgia for the 19th century (Ann, 2005). The participants perform themselves as the noble women, by wearing European clothing styles, in the 17th to 18th centuries. Usually, the dresses were decorated with lace and ribbons along with bell-shaped sleeves (Breward, 1995). Accessories such as hats which were trimmed with feathers, flowers, and ribbons were always worn. Therefore, the design of Lolita fashion has strong associations with the fashion styles. With the Japanese emphasis on cuteness and modesty, a cultural hybrid was created, such as Sweet Lolita, Punk Lolita, Gothic Lolita, Classic Lolita, etc. Furthermore, Lolita fashion has been elevated to the status of art when nine outfits of Lolita fashion, the “Kitty and the Bulldog” exhibition, were displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London during 2012 and 2013. These outfits, including Gothic Lolita and Sweet Lolita were bought in 2011 from Tokyo, which emphasized the connections between British traditional fashion design and Japanese street style.⁶ As posted by the V&A (2012) on their official webpage for the exhibition:

A striking feature of Lolita fashion is the extent to which it is influenced by British culture: Alice in Wonderland, Glam Rock, the New Romantics, Gothic, Punk and Vivienne Westwood....

However, Lolita also refers to a nickname for Delores in Nabokov’s book *Lolita* featuring a preadolescent girl who is attractive and sexually responsive (Bishop, 2004). A further explanation concerning the connotations of Lolita will be presented in the following.

A Review on Lolita Subculture Studies

Lolita, fundamentally a girl’s name in English, is perceived quite differently in the West. The name is habitually associated with the title character in Nabokov’s novel by the same name. The novel depicts Humbert Humbert (aged 37) as an émigré academic scholar and admitted pedophile (Nabokov, 1997). He is obsessed with a 12-year-old girl, Dolores Haze, whom he recognizes as a “nymphet”. He becomes sexually involved with Dolores after he becomes her stepfather, and Humbert bestows upon Dolores a private name, “Lolita”. Therefore, the term “Lolita” implies a man’s sexual attraction to adolescent girls in Western countries.

McVeigh, who analyzed the cute and fancy Lolita look, from psychological perspectives, characterized the doll-like and innocent features, to be considered sexy from “a Western perspective – a particular type of euro-kawaii” (2014, p.176). This is because people associate certain type of fixed female dress with images, such as skirts with lace, rose flora pattern garments (McVeigh, 2000). With this view, Lolita and their dress may be associated as sexy and glamour from the male gaze in Western societies. However, as for the Lolita participant, her subjective intention may be different when girls read about other girls. It attains her self-identity from her relationship with other members of the Lolita subculture, that is, “Not-Yanki”. It discards anything excessively masculine and sexual implications (Mackie, 2012). Our informants also deny that there is any intended sexual connotation in the Lolita subculture. As our informants responded:

⁵ A Yanki is a subculture that was popular in Japan in the 1980’s and 1990’s. It is ordinarily used as a nickname referring to Northern soldiers during the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865.

⁶ See more information from the V&A (2012) “Lolita Fashion: Japanese Street Style”.

Outsiders should not regard “Lolita” as synonymous with a sexualized view of young girls. This is a really big misunderstanding. (Selo)

I don’t like people who links us with assisted dating, and we are not, of course! (Chacha)

According to Winge, Lolitas are usually young women “who dress in cute and modest fashion style without the overly sexualized appearance typically associated with Nabokov’s Lolita” (Winge, 2008, p. 47-48). Gagné (2008) also states that Lolitas have attempted to avoid the conflation of rorikon “Lolita Complex” by adopting nonstandard way of writing the word (rorita) for an alternate phonetic to enunciate the “kon” sound in the word.⁷ The generation of Lolita, therefore, is regarded as a “*movement represents a similarly powerful rebellion against the conventions of contemporary society*” (V&A, 2012). For instance, it might be partly produced to fight for the growing exposure of the female body in contemporary society. In many Western societies, the contemporary ideal feminine beauty is slim, fresh, sexy and young looking as it is represented (Abramson, 1995; Fitts & O’Brien, 2009). By creating themselves as a sweet and cute feminine image, which might carry furtive meanings, Lolita subculture expresses its resistance to the social order that defines their subordination. From this point, the construction of Lolita identity appears to be breaking down social rules and norms by challenging hegemony with its unique style – a practice that is very much against the grain of the majority (Cohen, 1997).

Unquestionably, discussions around Lolita become more prominent among researchers in the field of fashion and socio-cultural studies in recent years (Gagné, 2010, 2013; Winge, 2008; Bergstrom, 2011; Porzio, 2012). Theresa Winge (2008, p.62), for instance, judges that the performance of the Japanese Lolita subculture “creates a visual form of resistance against culture and provides both the subculture and its members with agency and identity”. Mackie (2009) interoperates that Lolita is a response against becoming a grown-up woman. Gagné (2013), also perceives the hyperfeminine aesthetics and shōjo-like⁸ behaviours of Lolita, actually reflecting young girls’ reactive fears against growing up and becoming adult women. Lolita has usually been perceived as mirroring the participant’s negation of maturity and social conformity to the normative mode of femininity (Matsuura, 2007; Monden, 2013). As shown in field observations, Lolita participants are not necessarily slim and or have tiny waists. They do not aim to attract the male gaze, but just want to create a cute childlike look as an expression of being a free person for choosing her/ his self-identity. Therefore, Lolita is not purely a choice of clothing, it also expresses their identity and lifestyle (Godoy, 2007). Nonetheless, there are no significant investigations on the historical and the impacts of its development in Hong Kong yet.

Lolita in Hong Kong

Lolita subculture has developed in Hong Kong for almost twenty years. It is estimated to be around three hundred active participants and two hundred passive participates,⁹ and the age range is from 15 to 40. In a population of about five hundred Hong Kong Lolitas, around 10%

⁷ Rori-kon (also abbreviated to Loli-con), which refers to middle aged men who have an interest in younger women (Kinsella, 2006).

⁸ In Japanese, shōjo refers specifically to a young woman approximately 7–18 years old. See Daijisen (大辞泉) for more information.

⁹ Active participates refers to Lolitas who dress in Lolita clothes and join activities physically (such as tea parties or fashion shows), while passive participates are refers to those who are active in online platforms.

of them are Brolitas.¹⁰ The data was revealed by four Lolita participants from the previous pilot study between 2014 and 2015, which helped to make available an inclusive background of population, nature and characteristics of Hong Kong Lolita. In recent years, not many of Lolita participants have physically presented themselves in the streets or their appearance being reported by the media. Rather, they choose on-line platforms and private locations for communication and gatherings.

Methods & Data Collection

Procedure

Based on the data collected in the pilot study mentioned above, specific interview questions for this research were set and sent via email or Facebook to the respondents before the interview. The purpose of the interview is to answer the research questions of the study and the main selected interview questions include:

1. What motivates you to adopt the Lolita style over many years?
2. From your own understanding and experience, what are the changes of Hong Kong Lolita over the past two decades?
3. What kinds of virtual/ visual resources that you have been using for the references in creating your Lolita style?

Face-to-face group interviews were conducted in cafés in July 2017 (Figure 1) and August 2017 (Figure 2). The researcher (this first author) then, made further individual interviews via phone, WhatsApp and Facebook in the following few months to follow up and confirm the accuracy with respondents. A summary of the selected data from all interviews with six Lolita participants from June to December 2017 shows in Table 1.

Figure 1

Group Interview with HK Lolita Administrative Members



¹⁰ “Brolita” is a name given to the male Lolita in the Lolita community; he dresses like a female Lolita.

Figure 2
Group Interview with Male and Female Lolitas



Table 1
A Summary of the Selected Data of the Six Lolita Respondents

Participant	Vini	Selo	Cat	SanSan	Angel	Kun
Age	29	29	33	32	34	34
Gender	F	F	F	F	M	M
Joining Lolita group at age	19	19	20	24	26	25
Education	Diploma	Master Degree	Degree	Master Degree	Degree	Diploma
Career	Design	Engineering	Design	Engineering	Engineering	Train Captain
Marriage /Child	Single	Married	Single	Married	Married	Single

As indicated from the data collected, the Lolita group acquire particular techniques for putting on makeup; learn what specific behaviours they should follow; study the history of Rocco and Victorian clothing style; design fancy Lolita accessories; search and purchase the limited design Lolita items from famous fashion bands within the group; attend tea parties and fashion shows etc. These activities usually mean large expenses of money and time that allow them to attain an “ideal-self”, which could not be reached in real life. For example, when they responded to the interview question: “What motivates you to adopt the Lolita style over many years”? One of the responds said:

It makes you look more beautiful, just like a princess that is the main reason for wearing Lolita dress. (Cat)

Creating their own unique dress or accessories also helps to express their personality and individuality (Rahman, Liu, Lam, & Chan 2011). As my respondents, Selo and Kele, who expressed that they would like to design their own outfits and accessories for matching the style of their dresses when they joined group activities. These items can be seen on their online social platforms for voting and selling. Such DIY practices of designing and creating their outfits are not common in other subcultures, and as seen from the photos posted on their social webpages, various activities such as market-fairs, café gatherings for dress swapping or inviting models or designers from Japan for special events have been organized. Our respondents expressed during interviews:

I always search posts from my favourite brands online or webpages for the updated styles and accessories, where I can also buy or sell second-hand dresses as well. (Vini)

You could hardly organize any events for our group activities without using online platforms...it has been always significant regardless the changes of the names or the structures of those platforms over the time. (Selo)

These online activities suggest that the Lolita group not just make good use of visual resources, but also virtual resources to create platforms for communication and business opportunities. From the data collected, we observed that the use of internet resources marks substantial changes of Lolita ecology in the past decades.

Data Analysis and Discussion

After providing the background information of Lolita subculture and its significations within scholarly discourses from above, together with the data collected from the interviews we can conclude and advocate that there are three significant epochs of Lolita subcultural development in Hong Kong. The three major periods are: The Justice Epoch, LO Epoch and HK Lolita Epoch. Detailed elaboration and analysis are discussed in the following.

Stage One: The Justice Epoch (2000-2005)

The Justice Epoch, as the respondents described, was the period starting around 2000 when the Lolita participants were scattered with a small population of around 20-50 and did not become a fully-fledged Lolita community yet. The term Justice was borrowed from an online virtual community platform called “Justice Forum 正義論壇” which was founded in 2004.¹¹ This was the most popular time of the forum engaging 2,497 online viewers and a total of 20,000 online page visitors. At that time the age range of the Lolita group was not as extensive as today, which was mainly from 15 to 20 years old, and rarely to see a Lolita who is over the age of 20.

Justice Forum provided an online platform for people who were interested in Lolita, Pullip doll and video game entertainment.¹² Lolita fans were attracted to join the community because it provided a lot of information about the latest Lolita fashion style, news and shops, and so on. In this first stage, Lolita was almost unnoticed by the Hong Kong public. Most of the participants were originally interested in frolicking Super Dollfies (SD) or members who were

¹¹ Justice Forum was online social platform found in 2004, which mainly provided information about animations, video games, leisure, for the members.

¹² Pullip a fashion doll created by Cheonsang Cheonha of South Korea in 2003. It was first marketed by Jun Planning out of Japan. Visit <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pullip> for more information.

active Cosplayers¹³. This can explain why the SD was typically considered as the right accessory for a Lolita doll (Staite, 2013).

At that time, it was very difficult to find Lolita clothing shops in the market. Because of the limited choice of Lolita fashion shops available in Hong Kong, and the cost of ordering the Lolita outfits from Japan was extremely expensive, many Hong Kong Lolitas preferred to make their own clothes, or accessories to attain the Lolita look. To some extent, such practices of homemade clothing also create a higher self-esteem and sense of satisfaction for the participants. As Simon Jones (1996) rightly perceives,

There are a significant minority of young people who sew and knit their own clothes for reasons (...) There is a symbolic as well as practical pleasure and sense of fulfillment for young people in being able to use their own manual skills and resources to make their own clothes (p.15).

Therefore, by reading magazines concerning Lolita clothes-making, in particular, Gothic & Lolita Bible, and surfing other online resources, participants in the Justice Epoch achieved their ideal look. Magazines were not physically available for purchase in the local market scene; they were bought only via online sources. Later on, some Lolita clothes appeared in shops in Tsim Sha Tsui,¹⁴ that is, Emily Temple and Shirley Temple¹⁵, which is actually mainly selling more affluent children's clothes.

At this stage, the participants were very cautious about how to perform themselves as a proper Lolita. For example, as explained by one of the senior participants (who have haven joined Lolita group over 10 years), in order to be a proper Lolita, they would follow all steps and suggestions that were recorded in those Japanese magazines. For unknown reasons, however, this virtual group faded away at the end of 2007. Then, many of the Lolita participants began to join the Lolita Online (LO) virtual community to continue being informed and updated with events or activities within the group.¹⁶

Stage Two: LO Epoch (2005-2010)

Lolita Online (LO) was founded 24 December 2005. It was a Hong Kong based international virtual community for Lolitas and attracted around 1,500 online visitors who were essentially interested in searching information relating to Lolita issues. Therefore, it attracts not only Hong Kong Lolitas, but also Lolitas outside Hong Kong. During this period, participants generally cared much about what “proper Lolita” is and what is not. “Proper” means original and spiritual, which emphasized the embracement of value and quality for being a proper Lolita. For example, in one of the blogs (posted on the 7th August 2005), which discusses the differences between a proper Lolita, cosplayer and MK Lolita in detail. This was because many Lolita participants wanted to maintain the elegant and noble image of a Lolita.

MK Lolita is a term specifically used for describing a negative comment for the image of Lolita in Hong Kong. MK is a local terminology which refers to Mong Kok Culture. Mong Kok is a

¹³ Super Dollfie, often abbreviated SD, is a brand of ball-jointed doll, or BJD, made by the Japanese company Volks.

¹⁴ Tsim Sha Tsui (TST) is an urban commercial area in southern Kowloon, Hong Kong.

¹⁵ Originally, Shirley Temple (named after the child film star) began as a kid's brand in the 1970s. It has a sister line to Emily Temple Cute. It is believed that the original customers grew up but wanted to keep wearing the little girlish styles (Carmina, 2008).

¹⁶ Lolita Online (LO), the forum had its original name called Headdress Online.

dynamic and complex place where old and new multi-story buildings filled with commercial offices buildings, shops and restaurants co-exist. It is also a popular place for young people to socialize and it has a history of the underground gang world called the Triads. Mong Kok has been depicted in triad films, as an area that the triads are highly active, and the clothing style of the triads has been denoted as MK style. Young people who try to imitate this style is called MK guys or MK girls. Here, MK Lolita implies a kind of lower class, uneducated, bad mannered Lolita.

As described by some of the blog writers of the community, the original Lolita look is a full set of Lolita clothing items from head to toe, including every detail, that is, wigs, make-up, and the patterns on the dresses and shoe style. Ideally, the dress, accessories or clothes should be imported from Japan's famous brands, such as Baby¹⁷ and Jane Marple, or at least clothes with fine qualities. Besides, the Lolita outfit should be worn in a proper manner, which means the air of "princess" or a girl from a "noble" class is an essential "spirit" of a true Lolita. This view is also verified by Gagné, as his informants repeatedly told him that, "Lolita is about having a Lolita spirit, which includes being "princess-like" regardless of the actual situations they are in"¹⁸ (Gagné, 2003).

In mid-2005, the film *Kamikaze Girls*, which was sponsored by "Baby", was broadcasted in Hong Kong. Same as in Japan, Lolita culture reached its peak in popularity and it was repeatedly reported by local media: magazines (e.g. Tong Touch and Next Digital), newspapers (e.g. SCMP and Oriental Daily), and television programmes (e.g. Sunday Report and Hong Kong Connection by TVB Jade).¹⁹ Since then, more and more fashion shops began selling the Lolita dress; accessories etc, in Mong Kok and other popular areas, such as Causeway Bay. Among the shops, there are two representative local Lolita shops: Spider and Lolita in Touch (LIT). Spider mainly features a black colour tone as their theme for designing elegant and luxury Lolita clothes. Conversely, LIT mainly focuses on Kawaii and girly elements.²⁰ These two shops are very popular within the Lolita group in Hong Kong. Take an example from one of the participants Kiri. She was interviewed by the local HK broadcast channels TVB on July 2015 and appeared on one of its many programmes "the Sunday Report", when she shared her 5-year Lolita life experience. She noticed that both Spider and LIT were very popular shops for Hong Kong Lolitas (including herself), because the quality was much better than those dresses that were made by themselves; however, the price is relatively cheaper than those famous brands imported from Japan.

Because there were some arguments over the post messages among the administrative members within the group, and because many visitors used Facebook for communications more often, some of the previous members of LO came to create a new group on Facebook, which led to the third stage of development.²¹

¹⁷ The original name of "Baby" is "Baby, the Stars Shine Bright", which has been shortened by the insiders.

¹⁸ "Princess-like" means a Lolita should behave well, speak well, and dress in a decent way.

¹⁹ "Sunday Report" is the TVB News Cantonese programs which aired since 1987. It is mainly investigating current social and cultural issues in a thematic way.

²⁰ Kawaii is translated as "cuteness", it is one of the most frequently used Japanese words.

²¹ Some of informants expressed that, it was actually due to arguments (e.g. the selection of posted images and online business issues) between the members and the administrators of the forum. Therefore, many members from LO shifted to the other online platforms.

Stage Three: HK Lolita Epoch (2010-Present)

The third stage can be understood as the current stage, and the name is drawn from the HK Lolita 公開專頁 (Figure 3),²² is a non-profit making group which was founded in September, 2011. Their goal of creating this virtual community is first to: “Provide Lolita Information, eliminate misunderstanding from Lolita Culture” and second is to “Regularly update the Lolita events and parties based in HK”. One of our informants, who is also an administrative staff of the community group, expressed that: because Facebook is more popular and being used by many Lolitas, they invited the previous members from the LO group, and transferred most of the members into the HK Lolita virtual community (over 3,000 visitors). They also strategically divided the visitors into three sub-groups under HK Lolita, and they are: (1) Lolita (insider only), (2) Overseas Lolita (founded in May 2016) and (3) HK Lolita second-hand platform (over 3,000 members), it attempts to provide a platform for selling and buying secondhand Lolita clothes.

Figure 3

HK Lolita Facebook Profile



Various gatherings (e.g. tea parties and workshops) are organized each month, which is referred to as: “call-monthly-gathering-invite as a way to unite group members and a chance to invite other Lolitas to join the group. Around 2013, HK Lolita Facebook page opened the page to the public. This was to provide more information for people who are interested in Lolita and invite others to organize market fairs, public activities such as models to visit Hong Kong and showcase the Lolita clothes, demonstrate how to use and wear makeup and/or accessories and to experiment being a Lolita. “When I was around 20 years old, many of my Lolita friends, including myself are “transforming”,” expressed by our informant Ali. She goes on to describe:

“Before we were wearing very girly accessories with pink rose and lacy dresses such as a sweet Lolita look – this is the most popular for us. However, we are in our thirties now and some of us are married and have our own children. I prefer to dress in a style that is more elegant and classical”.

Currently, the Lolita clothing style has become less restricted as the previous two stages. We believe that it is a strategy to attract new members which gave them flexibility to try Lolita

²² See (HK Lolita Facebook) for more information.

clothes in a more relaxed manner. Therefore, at this stage of Lolita fashion, many participants mix the Lolita style with their daily clothing.

Apart from the fashion shops, some of the upper floor cafés, such as Sugar Factory Café, founded in May 2014 and Papillon, founded in January 2015, also emerged and aimed to attract customers who were Lolitas or interested in the Lolita subculture. These cafés are usually run by young Hong Kong entrepreneurs.

Limitations & Reflections

As it is an empirical qualitative research, the research conclusions drawn was based on hard evidence, that is, gathering from Lolitas' real-life experiences from field-observations and individual interviews. In order to collect accurate and reliable information, several interviews had been conducted and ethical issues had been taken into account. Below are the limitations and reflections when conducting interviews and handling data in this study.

Trust

As the term “Lolita” can be perceived in many different ways when referring to western culture, Lolita participants expressed that they had a certain concern. They were worried that we (the researchers) might be spies from local magazines and might abuse their photos and data for other purposes that might harm their image. Alternatively, we have to judge whether the information they provided is true or not. Thus, mutual trust between the interviewees and the interviewer needs to be handled carefully, and indeed, it had taken a long time to build up and maintain the trust with the respondents.

Accurate Transcriptions and Interpretations

It is difficult to guarantee correct transcriptions or interpretations from the data because the understanding might vary between the insider (participants) and the outsider (researcher). Minh-Ha in her article “Outside In Inside Out” (1988) suggests, a good ethnographical anthropologist research is to represent others (insiders), and to be their loyal interpreters. In order to get the native points of view from the participants be their trustworthy interpreters, the techniques of coding need to be carefully reviewed and checked for achieving a better interpretation and accurate data analysis (McManus, 2003). This is because many of the specific terms, which were used within the Lolita subcultural group, especially some of the terms based on very local Hong Kong cultural context, could work in a very different way from our common understanding.

Ethical Concerns

Sometimes, it is hard to decide whether it is ethical to use certain data or not. For example, there are personal views on specific issues and photos posted by our informants that we found on public webpages. Although data from public websites and the information is supposed to be open to the community, for example, the HK Lolita, there is still an ethical concern as to how such information can be used. Hence, permission is still needed to use the information as the participant's wish should be fully respected. This is especially vital to male Lolita (Brolita) informants as they are relatively more sensitive about the disclosure of personal information.

For instance, one of the Brolitas interviewees told us his real-life story and his reason for being a Lolita. Although his life experience story was very inspiring and worth studying for LGBTQ inquiries within in Lolita subculture, the interviewee finally did not approve that we could use the data in this study. This challenge is taking into account in this study because Brolita could

possibly be identified as vulnerable populations as LGBTQ²³ within Lolita subcultural population. It is emphasized that, “research with minority groups is “necessarily an ethical and political intervention with participants” (Walsh-Bowers and Parlour, 1992, p.109) and as such the researcher should take specific steps to prevent harm to research participants and their environments” (Price, p.17). Therefore, specific following work might have to be done to seek the trust and permission for the particular data collection and analysis in the future.

Significance and Conclusion

McRobbie (1998) wrote that youth subcultures are symbolically engaged in their output of cultural forms, they naturally come to represent a particular historical moment and its generation. Based on the above discussion about the three stages of development of Hong Kong Lolita subculture, we can come to a conclusion about this subculture as below.

Changes of Online Practices Led to the Changes of Creative Activities

One of the significances of the Hong Kong Lolita development is the modifications of online platform practices leading to changes of creative activities within the group. In stage one, that is, the Justice Epoch (2000-2005), Lolita participants were relatively playing a passive role in terms of using online resources. Justice Forum was the dominate online virtual community platform providing information for the online users who were interested in Pullip doll and video game entertainment, but not just limited to Lolita subculture. They mainly collected and learnt about the latest Lolita fashion style, news and shops from these specific webpages and also relied on online magazine information. They were more enthusiastic to create their own DIY Lolita dresses and accessories. It was more common for the group to exchange information, such as where to get materials for dress making and which magazines revealed the most updated design through virtual space.

In the stage of LO Epoch (2005-2010), Hong Kong Lolita group drew much attention in the media, and it led the group to reach its golden era. This was because a number of media from local magazines, TV companies and online platforms made interviews with different Lolita participants. At this stage, because of the frequent exposure to the public through media interviews, participants normally pay much attention to formal Lolita style. By actively searching information about Japanese famous brands and Lolita activities via online platforms, participants would have debates on what are the proper style and the proper manners to be a Lolita. Local Lolita shops such as, Spider and LIT started their online business too. They promoted their Lolita products by using online platforms and selling advertising in local youth magazines for reaching their potential customers effectively.

In stage three, that is, the HK Lolita Epoch (2010-present), the group expands and transforms into new groups because the change of the virtual spaces and communities. Some of sub-groups have been formed under the online leading group: HK Lolita. Lolita participants are no longer just making clothes or accessories for themselves, but they are playing a very active role in using online platforms for selling and promoting Lolita theme activities. Some Lolitas would re-make or re-design other dresses to form a unique Lolita dress which suites their ideal style. These “art pieces” usually got lots of positive feedbacks (i.e. many “likes” and “hearts”) from other Facebook users. For example, our informant Kele (Figure 4), who has posted photos of

²³ LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. See (Petro, 2014; Price, 2011, p.7) for more information.

her own well-designed corsets, earrings and hair pins on the HK Lolita (Facebook) for sharing and selling. She gains much satisfaction in her creative amateur designer identity, as Kele states:

“Lolita online platforms really enables me to retain my own interest and earn some pocket money and most importantly, make me feel greatly fulfilled. It was very rewarding when I received positive comments and request for purchasing my self-designed accessories from my Lolita friends”.

Figure 4

Accessories Made by our Informant, Kele, for Qi Lolita



A Form of Cultural Hybridization

Lolita culture in Hong Kong can correspondingly be understood as a culturally hybridized form for it consists of interactions between a Western classical clothing style and the Japanese aesthetical concept of cuteness (Kawaii). Because of the great success of the Meiji Restoration around 1860s to 1890s,²⁴ Japan become much stronger in economics, political and cultural developments when compared with other Asian countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its cultural soft power was influential on other countries and places, including Hong Kong. Historically, the involvement in and influence of Japan on Hong Kong has been strong and remains ever so since post-war period after the end of the Japanese occupation. Lolita fashion style which is well accepted by a group of teenagers (especially girls) or young adults has established a unique position in Hong Kong youth subcultural history. Hong Kong Lolita also enhances the original Lolita style by combining traditional Chinese Qipao style into the new design called Qi Lolita,²⁵ or even the negative localized style, which is mentioned above, MK Lolita.

An Imagined Virtual Community

Since the 2010's the members of Lolita subcultural groups found a web of imagined spatial connections via Facebook and other online platforms. This spatial connection allows the participants to share similar interests, values and views on Lolita fashion style no matter where

²⁴ During the Meiji Restoration, the leaders acted in the name of restoring imperial rule to strengthen Japan against the threat represented by the colonial powers. See (Kissinger, 2011) for more information.

²⁵ Qipao is also called Cheongsam or mandarin gown. It is a popular traditional female body-hugging dress in China during 1920s-1960s.

their physical locations are. Therefore, the existence of online virtual communication platforms is nursing the development of the Hong Kong Lolita community ecologically. As Gagné states, “gathering at such spaces on online virtual community sites reflected an inherently social desire and purpose where they could reaffirm that there were others who had similar aesthetics” (2013, p.6).

Undeniably, the virtual platform accelerates not only the growth of Lolita subculture, but also enables the group to express personal interests, ideas towards life and people, and most importantly it also helps the participants to construct their specific identities. For example, Kun, who is a Brolita as well as a train captain, usually posts updated news about his job duty, details about services disruption of lines and expresses his view towards customers and the train company in rather humorous ways (sometimes also comprises vulgar words). This forms an interesting identity of a train Brolita within the group.

In short, the virtual platform has a very solid connection with Hong Kong Lolita identity formation and development since the birth of Justice Forum in 2000. The three stages of Hong Kong Lolita development show that the virtual space is very “real” to this subcultural community. Real-life Lolas rely on the e-platform to exchange formation about activities and exchange ideas, and most importantly, to swap Lolita fashion products and express their views on different aspects in life. We believe Lolita subculture will continue to exist and nourished by the virtual postmodern space.

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Illustrations

Figure 1	Group Interview with the administrative members of HK Lolita at Papillon Café, Mong Kok 帕比安紅茶書室	Photo by Lolita Participant (30 July 2017)
Figure 2	Group interview with male Lolita and female Lolita at Sugar Factory Café (a maid cafe in Mong Kok)	Photo by Lolita Participant (18 August 2017)
Figure 3	HK Lolita (Facebook Profile Photo)	https://www.facebook.com/hklolita/ online accessed 12/10/2019
Figure 4	Accessories, made by our informant, Kele for Qi Lolita sold in a Lolita Market Garden in October 2016, at the plaza D2 place, The space, Lai Chi Kok, Kowloon	Photo by S.F.Wong (2 nd October 2016)

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