Understanding Lolita Fashion, the Sweeter Side of Japanese Punk

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Abstract

Lolita, a fashion subculture arising in the 1990s, is characterized by pastel colors, voluminous petticoats, lace trim, and an almost infantilized rendition of the feminine ideal. Needless to say, the formal qualities of the style are a far cry from what one would expect of a fashion that evolved from the English punk movement. However, lolita continues to embody the revolutionary spirit and radical individualism of punk. The subculture confronts patriarchal ideas about feminine beauty and the proper role of women, rebelling against those constructions by overperformance of feminity and modesty that reaches the point of caricature. Lolita fashion also serves to deconstruct peculiarities of sexuality in Japanese culture and media, namely the so-called Lolita complex (lolicon), a euphemism for pedophilic attraction, particularly when used in the context of anime and manga. The deconstructive and rebellious tendencies of the lolita subculture are not unique to it, but are represented in the broader late twentieth century Japanese zeitgeist through the fine art of Mariko Mori, Yayoi Kusama, Takashi Murakami, and others. Overall, lolita fashion is inherently transgressive, and should be acknowledged by scholars of fashion as a part of the broader punk movement of the twentieth century.

When one considers the aesthetics of the global punk movement, ruffles, petticoats, and frilled bonnets may well be the last things that come to mind, but these are some of the quintessential elements of lolita fashion, a subcultural movement that sprang to life in Osaka, Japan in the late nineteen-nineties (Ishikawa et al 2007, 2). The development of the style can be traced back to the English New Wave movement of the nineteen-eighties, and particularly the gothic fashions popularized in the Batcave, a West London nightclub popular among the city's alternative youths. At its core, the lolita aesthetic is inspired by the womenswear of the Victorian period (a trait it shares with its gothic predecessor), but incorporates elements of Edwardian fashion and childrenswear as well. From its origins on the streets of Osaka, lolita rapidly developed numerous sub-styles as it was disseminated throughout Kyoto, Kobe, and eventually Tokyo, including "classic" lolita (see fig. 1), known for A-line silhouettes and dark, natural colors; "*hime*" or "princess" lolita (see fig. 2), which draws inspiration from the court styles of France under Louis XV; and what has become the most famous example of the subculture, "sweet" lolita (see fig. 3), which eschews historicity in favor of bright pastels, fantastical prints, and a very liberal application of lace trim (Romano 2020). Even "gothic" lolita (see fig. 4), ostensibly the sub-style most closely connected to the subculture's roots in the British alternative scene, exhibits a softness, modesty, and concession to traditional femininity that would seem to detach it from the antiauthoritarian, revolutionary protest culture that united the British punks of the nineteen-seventies and eighties (Romano 2020). However, while the angularity and violent implications of punk fashion may have been lost in its evolution to Japanese lolita, the lolita subculture remains one of protest and radical non-conformity, particularly against the role expectations that were and are placed on young women in Japanese society. To that end, the

lolita subculture should be properly understood as one facet of the broader Japanese punk movement, one that transgresses cultural norms and exemplifies rebellion by exaggerated hyper-conformity to an almost caricatured notion of ideal femininity: Sexually pure, delicate, youthful, and old-fashioned.

Subculture has long been heralded as one of the most vibrant expressions of street fashion, driven from the bottom-up rather than top-down as more conventional couture styles tend to be (Svendsen 2018, 67). However, all subcultures, including lolita, entail more than a style of dress, but can involve taste in media, socioeconomic status, and cultural beliefs as well. The fashion itself then becomes a means of formulating both individual identity (as a person with beliefs and style not shared by the dominant culture) and group identity (as a member of the subcultural community), in accordance with the theories of Georg Simmel as put forth in his 1957 article, "Fashion," which reads in part: "Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation… At the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation…the desire for change and contrast," (543). While identification with a subculture does not necessarily entail political radicalism, as would seem to be the case with the English punk movement, it is inherently transgressive as it "Is not tied… into the larger cultural complex: it refers to norms that set a group apart from, not those that integrate a group with, the total society. Subcultural norms, as contrasted with role norms, are unknown to, looked down upon, or thought of as separating forces by the other members of a society," (Yinger 1960, 628). Considering this innate conflict between members of a subculture and those of the dominant culture, identifying the way in which lolita violates the established norms of Japanese culture becomes crucial to understanding its validity as a movement.

To understand the transgressive element of any subculture, it is essential to understand what norms and values are being transgressed against. While English punk was largely anti-governmental, expressing anarchistic and anti-monarchist ideologies in art, music, and fashion (Moliterno 2012), these sentiments are not clearly exhibited in lolita. Rather, one could assert that the hyper-femininity of lolita fashion is a product of Japanese cultural beliefs and values, which have been found to differ to a statistically significant extent from those of the United States and other Western countries (Levey and Silver 2006, 669). Among the findings of national surveys conducted in Japan and the United States in 1995 were that Japanese culture displayed "Greater pervasive group mentality" and is best defined by "Belief in a concrete set of unique cultural and historical traditions," (664). The surveys also highlighted differing role expectations of women in the United States and Japan, citing a higher income-gap, lower participation in the labor force, and higher likelihood of leaving the labor force upon marrying among Japanese women (665). The overall conclusion of these study was that gender inequality in Japan was significantly more pronounced than in the United States, likely as a reflection of "Greater traditional attitudes towards gender roles," (665). Perhaps the most significant finding of the study, at least as it pertains to the rebellious quality of lolita fashion, is that while traditionalist attitudes in general were more pervasive in Japan when compared to the United States, that traditionalism was felt much more strongly among Japanese men than women (670). That it is men rather than women that act as the driving force behind Japanese traditionalism, coupled with economic and political inequality in Japanese society and restrictive notions about proper female role-performance, serves as a potential explanation for the origins of the lolita movement. While English punk rebellion was often directed at particular figures in the British government, lolita

protests more generally against traditional values, especially in regards to the expected role of women in society. However, lolita does not rebel against the constraints of Japanese society by rejecting femininity, but rather by embracing it so fully that it reaches the point of satire.

Rebellion by hyper-conformity, referred to in some instances as "Uncivil obedience," has a history in Japan predating the lolita movement by several decades, and is perhaps best exemplified in the most famous performance by Hi-Red Center, a radical but short-lived art collective founded in Tokyo by Genpai Akasegawa, Natsuyiki Nakanishi, and Jiro Takamatsu (Hirasawa 2019). Performed in 1964, the group's so-called *Street Cleaning Event* was undertaken in response to demands from the Japanese government that the city present a clean image to the world in preparation for hosting the Olympic Games taking place that summer. In the event, a group of half a dozen artists and performers lead by the core members of Hi-Red Center began sweeping, wiping, and scrubbing the busy streets of Ginza (a ward of Tokyo known in large part for its wealth and extravagance), in a clear parody of the actions the government encouraged citizens to take in pursuit of cleanliness. Many passers-by are reported to have mistaken members of Hi-Red Center for actual employees of the Japanese government, adding a further ironic element to the *Street Cleaning Event* performance (Hammond 2014). In *Shelter Plan,* also around the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the group parodied the government's messaging that aimed to placate wartime hostilities of the Western world. For this performance, the group claimed to be operating on behalf of a fictitious company known as the "Shelter Plan Conference", and invited visitors to a room in Tokyo's Imperial Hotel wherein they were painstakingly measured and fitted for single-occupancy nuclear bomb shelters, none of which were ever actually produced (Hirasawa 2019). To say that Hi-Red Center served in any capacity

as a direct precursor to the lolita subculture would no doubt be a gross oversimplification, but the group's activities throughout the nineteen-sixties suggest that protest by way of parody rather than outright rebellion has long been a part of the Japanese zeitgeist.

Lolita, like punk and other subcultures, arose in part as a result of growing desire for identity formation among a disempowered group at a time of particular sociocultural instability. Indeed, the nineteen-nineties, when lolita first came to prominence in Japan, are sometimes referred to as that country's "Lost Decade" due to the severe economic recession that occurred in the wake of the prior decade's economic bubble collapsing (Vandenbroucke 2018). Economic crises are known to have a more significant impact on young people than their older, more financially secure counterparts (Verick 2010), likely propelling the rise of lolita and other Japanese youth subcultures over the course of the Lost Decade. This is particularly apparent when one considers that in the earliest years of the movement, lolita fashion was often handmade, suggesting a desire for well-made, unique clothing that could be obtained at a relatively low cost.

Of course, it would be remiss to speak of the formulation of alternative group identity brought about by the lolita movement without acknowledging its connection to the larger and less provocative *kawaii* (Japanese for "Cute") trend that begin in the nineteen-sixties and was propelled to international prominence by the release of Hello Kitty by the Sanrio Company in 1974 (Yano 2009, 681). Both kawaii and lolita fashions are known to incorporate vibrant pastel colors, a youthful aesthetic, and heavy accessorization, causing confusion among outsiders to the relevant subcultures that the two are synonymous. However, despite their superficial similarities, lolita is clearly distinct from kawaii, as it entails more cohesive rules for proper dress, and has a

historical character not shared by the broader kawaii style. Lolita features its own brands, publications, gathering places, and idols, all of which are embraced and identified with by members of the subculture. One notable example, *Gothic & Lolita Bible*, a quarterly magazine circulated by Index Communications in Japan between 2001 and 2017 (and briefly in the United States between 2008 and 2009) incorporated clear allusions to religion into its title, affirming the importance of subcultural identification to lolitas, both in Japan and internationally (Loo 2007). Particularly considering its origins in a time period of economic instability in Japan, these shared cultural touchstones among members of the group support the notion that lolita first arose to fill a void of uncertainty by offering members the opportunity to experience a community outside of the tumultuous and often repressive cultural mainstream.

Japanese feminist artists of the late twentieth century have touched upon the need for a reimagining of what it means to be a contemporary Japanese woman, no doubt tapping into the same uncertainties and dissatisfaction as the original lolitas of nineteen-nineties Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto. For instance, the self-portraiture of Yayoi Kusama over her nearly seventy year career reflects the artist's deep longing to understand her own identity and place in the universe, a conundrum that she has never been able to reconcile (see fig. 5). These self-portraits are composed of countless small geometric elements as a reflexion of incomprehensible complexity, but ultimately remain quite two-dimensional (Smith 2012). In her autobiography, Kusama wrote: "My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it…How deep was the mystery? Did infinities exist beyond our universe? In exploring these questions I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life," (Kusama

2003, 23). Overall, uncertainty has been a significant theme throughout Kusama's work, and particularly uncertainty in regards to role and identity.

Mariko Mori, a slightly younger contemporary Japanese artist, has undertaken similar explorations of female identity in Japanese society, oftentimes making literal the idea of objectification and its effects on the female psyche. One of Mori's first performance pieces, *Play With Me* (1994, see fig. 6), centers around the artist's transformation into a child's toy robot, complete with metallic breastplate, epaulettes, and leg plates, and explores the idea of the female form as an object for entertainment and consumption (Holland 2011, 9). Throughout the performance, Mori's demeanor is shy and demure, in stark contrast to the overtly sexual skintight leather jumpsuit and sculpted breastplate of her costume (10). This contrast between childlike innocence and physical maturity is inescapable in lolita fashion, which itself incorporates the aesthetics of childrenswear and touches open the theme of objectification, as wearers of the fashion often intentionally strive for a doll-like appearance (Romano 2020). Considering the similarities between Mariko Mori's performance art and the overarching themes of the lolita subculture, it is worth noting that Mori herself modeled gothic lolita fashion for *Cutie,* a Tokyo-based fashion periodical, in the formative years of her career (4). This suggests that the conceptual framework for her art and that of the lolita subculture may be more closely related than one would suspect.

Play With Me, through its juxtaposition of childlike *habitus* with exaggerated secondary sex characteristics, also alludes to a final transgressive quality of the lolita subculture; one that is interwoven into its very name. While members of the group would argue that their fashion is inherently desexualized (and indeed, the high cut blouses and distaste for exposed skin

associated with the style would seem to support that position), the pedophilic connotation of the term “Lolita” is inescapable. The movement shares its name with the title of a 1955 novel by Vladimir Nabokov, which details the obsession of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged literature professor, with his twelve-year-old stepdaughter, Dolores (who is eventually given the nickname, “Lolita”). The sexualization of Lolita by Humbert is continual and explicit, beginning in the book’s opening passage which reads “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul,” (Nabakov 1955, 1). A decade later, the title of Nabakov’s magnum opus was referenced in a 1966 psychological case history of pedophilia by Russell Trainer, *The Lolita Complex,* which further cemented associations between the name “Lolita” and sexual taboo.

Indeed, it is significant that lolita fashion, which aestheticizes a childlike appearance and is directly inspired by historical childrenswear, arose in a country where “Online ads for so-called JK [(*joshi kosei*, a female high school student)] businesses still abound, where a hug, a massage or an outright sexual service from a girl in a school uniform is only a phone call away,” (Otake 2017). Professor Masahiro Morioka, a philosopher and ethicist at Waseda University, has dedicated much of his career to exploring the unsettling commonality of the Lolita complex (colloquially referred to simply as “lolicon”) in contemporary Japan (Otake 2017). In his self-exploratory book, *Confessions of a Frigid Man: A Philosopher’s Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men’s Sexuality*, Morioka attempts to discern the origin of the Lolita complex’s pervasiveness among Japanese men, writing that, “when it comes to [prepubescent] girls… there is also the sense of a ‘dangerous’ cuteness that cannot easily be put into words. This awareness of a ‘dangerous’ cuteness comes from something being shaken deep within me, and intuitively it seems that it must be something sexual,” (2005). *Confessions of a Frigid Man*

seems to touch upon the core ideology of the lolita subculture, which presents a "dangerous" transgressive cuteness in opposition to traditional ideals of (adult) feminine beauty. The movement seems to acknowledge the ubiquity of the Lolita complex in Japanese society, while rejecting it by presenting its members (for the most part, adult women), in the the manner of prepubescent girls. This creates an unsettling juxtaposition among men who would otherwise be attracted to the lolita, with or without pedophilic tendencies of their own: Is it taboo to be attracted to an adult woman dressed as a young child? Can attraction to an adult woman be entirely separated from her public presentation through fashion, which alludes to the style of a prepubescent girl? If they cannot be separated, is attraction to an adult woman dressed in lolita fashion pedophilic in its own right? Lolita fashion does not appear to seek an answer to these questions, but merely to provoke them, thereby challenging Japanese society's tacit acceptance of the Lolita complex and asserting the right of young women to embrace innocent, "dangerous" cuteness on their own terms.

The very same paraphilia that seems to be deconstructed by lolita fashion has been explored in recent Japanese fine art as well, suggesting that examination of the Lolita complex has been a subject of some interest in Japanese creative circles. In particular, the Lolita complex has been a significant focus of Takashi Murakami throughout his career, and particularly in his work throughout the late nineteen-nineties. Four years prior the establishment of his Kaikai Kiki art production company and the release of *Superflat* (2001), Murakami introduced *Hiropon* (1997, see fig. 7) to the art world, blurring the line between art and pornography while forcing public and academic scrutiny of the Lolita complex and its near omnipresence in Japanese manga and anime (Cornyetz 2012, 181). The larger-than-life sculpture appears to have pulled straight

from manga, and features oversized eyes; a large, round head; and a minuscule, upturned nose, all of which are characteristics associated with human infants and are known to elicit a positive response in adult viewers (Cho 2012, 6). However, these infantile qualities of *Hiropon* are shockingly juxtaposed with hyper-sexualized features. According to Nina Cornyetz's colorful assessment, Hiropon is "Narcissistically engaged in…her own ejaculations… happily squeezing gallons of milk into a jump rope from her mammoth breasts with nozzlelike nipples," (2012, 183). The piece builds upon the anime archetype of the *bishojo* or "beautiful little girl" while making the implicit sexualization that often accompanies that trope gratuitous and irrefutable (183). It is also significant that *Hiropon* lacks a vagina, meaning that (were she real) she could not serve as an equal partner in sexual intercourse, but merely as a fetishistic masturbatory aid. Murakami reinforces this point by positioning *Hiropon* alongside a second sculpture, *My Lonesome Cowboy* (see fig. 8), a nude male figure engaged in aggressive masturbation and brandishing a lasso made from his own ejaculate (184). Finally, it should be noted that "Hiropon" was the brand name given to legally produced methamphetamine in Japan in the nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties (Adelstein 2016), and in relation to Murakami's art is likely intended to reference the addictive and destructive aspect of sexual excess, as well as the stranglehold of the Lolita complex on Japanese popular media. Of course, *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* have not been received without criticism. Writing on the debut exhibition of the two sculptures, Jerry Saltz wrote that "[Murakami's] essential vision of this world of surface is fairly clichéd and immature. His ideas about sex, consumerism and fantasy -- especially in recent works -- have a dated familiarity," (1999), and yet, *Hiropon* and *My Lonesome Cowboy* are effective at conveying Murakami's anti-lolicon message *because* they fall back so heavily on

cliché, forcing the viewer to confront any fetishistic desires their own head-on with little possibility of claiming ignorance to the themes expressed in the works.

The sexually transgressive aspect of lolita fashion is a quality found in more conventional punk movements as well, as attested to by Christopher Soto in his memoir "What Growing Up Punk Taught Me About Being Gender Nonconforming," which details its authors experience formulating a nonbinary gender identity by as he embraced the punk subculture (2019). Soto writes that "Being punk meant being an outcast, and it taught me how much society can isolate people that are different," in reference to the inherent conflict between members of a subculture and those of the dominant culture they rebel against (209). Given that subculture by definition disregards mainstream social mores, it should come as no surprise that subcultures including punk and lolita, embrace sexual behavior that is often discouraged by those outside the movement. In Soto's particular case, the rejection of conventional public presentation through punk fashion prompted him to begin to question the validity of mainstream notions of gender, leading him to ask, "Does gender have to be stagnant or can it move? Why is gender so policed? Why can't gender fluctuate? Why can't we be illegitimate in our genders? What does it mean to call someone illegitimate in their gender?" (210). Similar questions have been raised by members of the subcultural Queercore movement of the late twentieth century, a punk offshoot centered around the celebration of LGBTQ+ identity through music, fashion, and activism (Du Plessis and Chapman 1997, 46).

Though Japan lags behind most Western countries in regards to LGBTQ acceptance and pro-LGBTQ legislative action, and no peer-reviewed research has been conducted surrounding the prevalence of LGBTQ identification within lolita or other Japanese youth subcultures,

anecdotal evidence suggests that there may be a significant overlap. For instance, while the vast majority of lolitas are female, a growing number of gay and gender non-conforming men participate in the subculture as well. These men, colloquially known as “Bro-litas” embrace the style with despite its clear associations with traditional femininity, and while some choose to view this sartorial preference as a form of cross-dressing, others simply view it as a means of self-expression, without any particular gendered connotations (Tierney 2017). Loli, a twenty-five year old male lolita, stated in an interview with Vice that, “The lolita community… is very supportive of male lolitas,” and that “Among the 25 lolitas [in a fashion show at a fan expo], three of them were male,” (Tierney 2017). Alex, another Vice interviewee who identifies as gender nonbinary, added when speaking of the subculture that, “it's a very fluid kind of movement, and it feels different every day.” Overall, acceptance of gender nonconformity and LGBTQ+ identification among lolitas is likely a result of the subculture’s broader transgressive character, which has defined the community since its inception in the nineteen-nineties.

Despite lolita fashion’s radical aesthetic departure from its origins in the English New Wave movement, the subculture has retained the characteristic rebellious and transgressive tendencies of more conventional punk styles. By embracing an almost infantilized version of the feminine ideal into adulthood, lolitas participate in a radical deconstruction of the so-called Lolita Complex, calling into question the morality behind a pedophilic undercurrent that permeates sexuality in contemporary Japanese life. All the while, the fashion offers young women (and the rare “bro-lita”) an opportunity to express their individualism in a way that is not accepted by the mainstream culture, allowing for the simultaneous formation of individual and collective identity through fashion in accordance with the theories of Georg Simmel. For the way

the subculture has promoted the transgression and reinterpretation of deeply-held principles of Japanese society and culture, it seems only reasonable to rethink lolita fashion as but one pastel thread of the colorful tapestry that is the global punk movement.

Image References

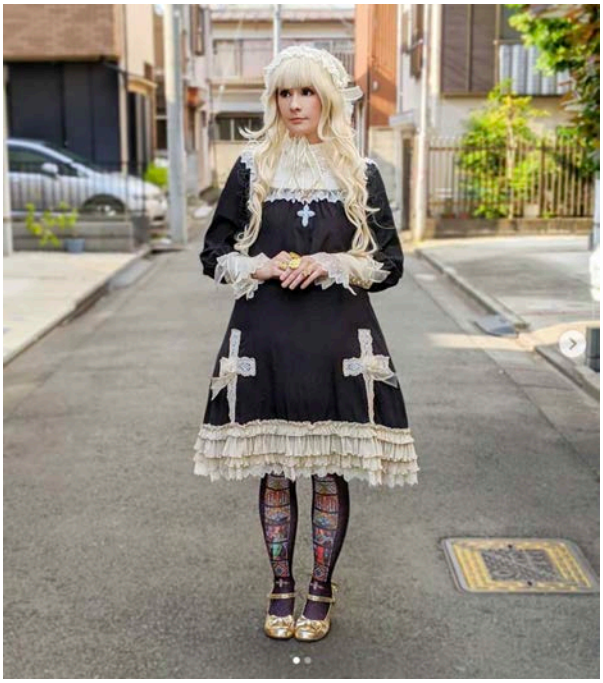

Figure 1: Instagram User @airymichelle, dress by *Baby, the Stars Shine Bright*, "Classic Lolita," April 30, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_m8_ivjHi2/

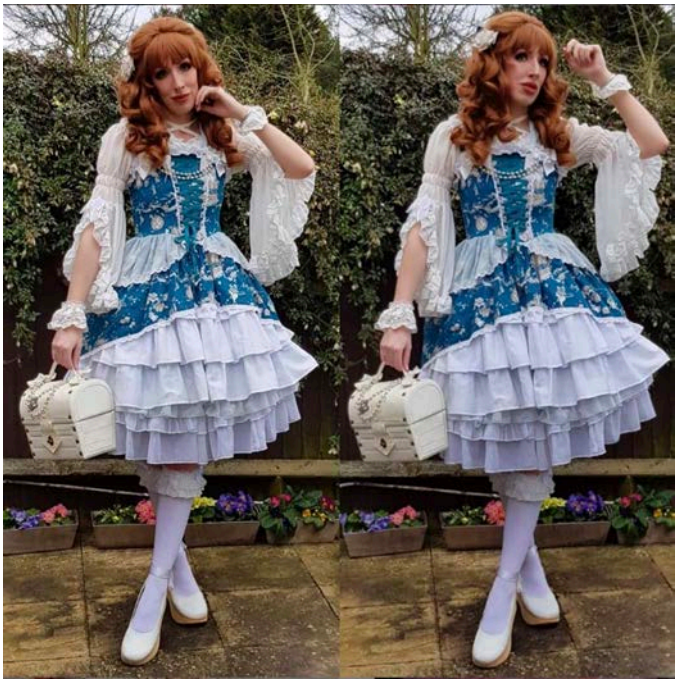

Figure 2: Instagram User @pastel__pumpkin, dress by *Alice and the Pirates*, "Hime Lolita," April 4, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B-jhf-jjGTX/

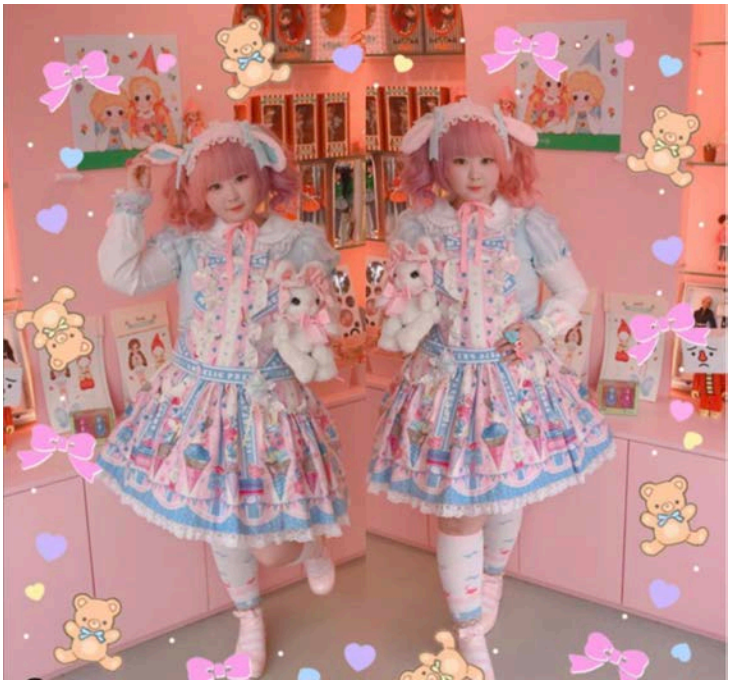

Figure 3: Instagram User @lolita_ballong, dress by *Angelic Pretty*, "Sweet Lolita," April 30, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_m4rWGDMDy/

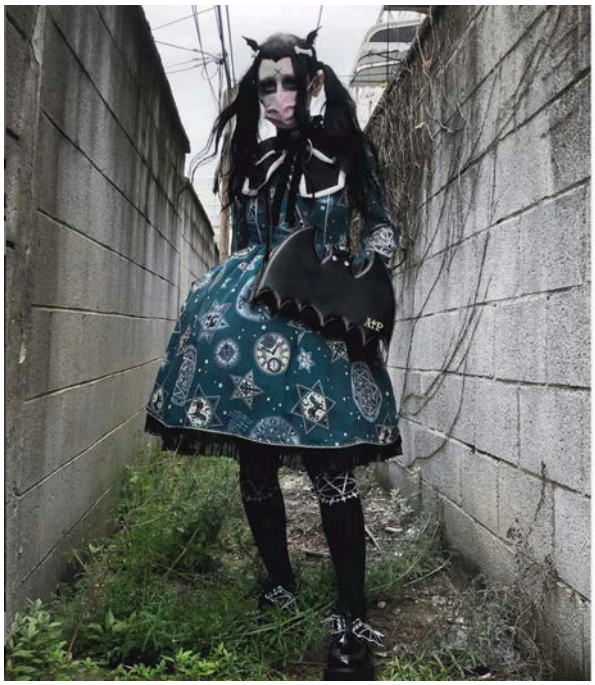

Figure 4: Instagram User @diabsoule_, dress by *Angelic Pretty*, "Gothic Lolita," April 29, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B_lBtP_HxWJ/

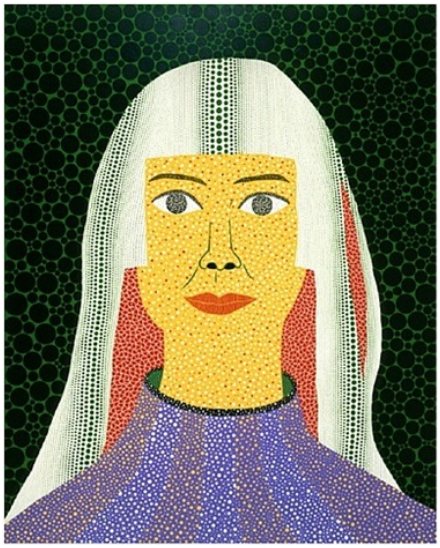

Figure 5: Yayoi Kusama, *Self-Portrait,* 2008, Acrylic on Canvas, 227.3 × 181.3 cm. Accessed April 27, 2020. https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-24-spring-2012/infinity-on-single-canvas

Figure 6: Mariko Mori, *Play with Me,* 1994. Accessed April 27, 2020. http://www.marthagarzon.com/contemporary_art/2011/08/mariko-mori-cybergeishas-technonolgy/

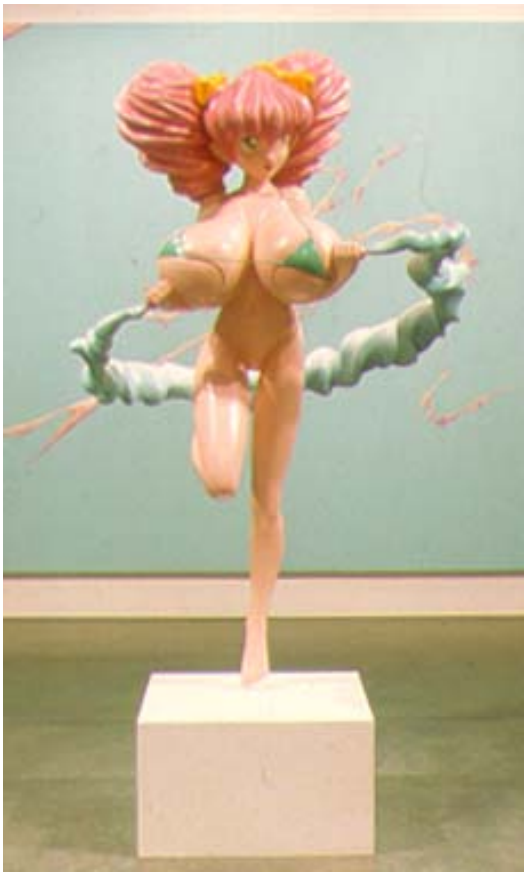

Figure 7: Takashi Murakami, *Hiropon,* 1997, Fiberglass, 223.5 x 104 x 122 cm. Accessed April 29, 2020. http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/saltz/saltz8-26-99.asp

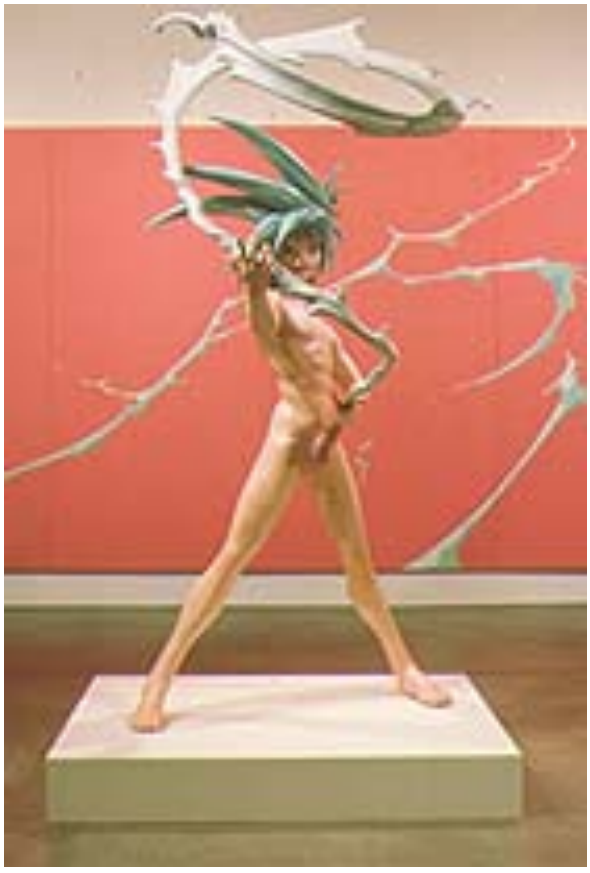

Figure 8: Takashi Murakami, *My Lonesome Cowboy,* 1998, Fiberglass, 254 x 116.8 x 91.4 cm. Accessed April 29, 2020. http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/saltz/saltz8-26-99.asp

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Research Summary (in lieu of presentation)

Originating on the streets of Osaka in the 1990s as an outgrowth of the English New Wave and associated fashions, lolita is a fashion subculture that continues to embody the rebellious and transgressive character of more conventional punk movements. This is in spite of the fact that as a style, lolita is defined by influence from historical Victorian and Edwardian womenswear and childrenswear (with an outsized emphasis on lace and ruffles) as well as the *kawaii* trend that emerged in the Japan in the 1970s (of which the Sanrio Company's *Hello Kitty* is the most famous example). While one might think at first glance that the modesty, innocence, and exaggerated femininity of lolita fashion are anathema to the violent rebellion implied by punk style, the subculture nonetheless promotes subversion of Japanese standards of proper female presentation and role performance through "uncivil obedience," a form of protest that entails adherence to the letter of a law of guideline while completely ignoring its intent. In this case, while modesty and femininity are expected of young Japanese women, lolitas emphasis these characteristics to the point of caricature or satire. This is similar in concept to the protest art of Hi-Red Center, a radical art collective formed in Tokyo in the 1960s.

Lolita fashion also serves as a vessel for identity formation, just as all fashion subcultures do. Particularly, lolita seems to derive from a sense of existential angst and uncertainty brought about by economic collapse experienced throughout Japan in the 1990s, which are referred to on occasion as the "Lost Decade," which also serves as the conceptual framework for the self-portraiture of notable installation artist Yayoi Kusama. As for the specific identity that is being formulated, the doll-like, almost infantile appearance that is desired by lolitas alludes to objectification (a theme that is also explored in performance art by Mariko Mori) as well as the "Lolita complex" or "lolicon," a euphemism for the sexualization of underage (and especially prepubescent) girls, usually in the context of manga and anime. Indeed, the term "Lolita" immediately calls to mind the 1955 novel of the same name by Vladimir Nabokov, which details the pedophilic desires of Humbert Humbert towards his 12-year-old niece. Deconstruction of the Lolita complex was and is widespread in Japanese art, and is a main focus of Takashi Murakami. Overall, lolita fashion seeks reclamation of youthful beauty and "dangerous" adolescent cuteness on the lolitas own terms, flying in the face of sexualization that is sometimes prematurely forced upon Japanese women by the ubiquity of the Lolita complex in media. Finally, the style emphasizes femininity as masquerade by welcoming male lolitas or "bro-litas," suggesting that the idea of cuteness and modesty as intrinsic qualities of femininity is itself a social construct.