Empowered Princesses: An Ethnographic Examination of the Practices, Rituals, and Conflicts within Lolita Fashion Communities in the United States

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Empowered Princesses

An Ethnographic Examination of the Practices, Rituals, and Conflicts within Lolita Fashion Communities in the United States

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Under the Direction of Dr. Faidra Papavasiliou

4/28/2014

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Empowered Princesses

Rituals, and Conflicts within Lolita Fashion Communities in the United States
By Kyla Robinson

Under the Direction of Dr. Faidra Papavasiliiou
Abstract

Elegant Gothic Lolita, or simply Lolita, is a fashion subculture that began as a street fashion among the youth in Harajuku Japan. Lolita fashion is characterized by the modest and Victorian era inspired clothing that often features knee length skirts and dresses that are supported by petticoats, blouses with ruffles and pintucks, and legs covered by either stockings or socks. The Lolita fashion subculture has spread to outside of Japan and communities are now found in almost every US State. The purpose of this project is to explore the rituals, practices, and conflicts, in Lolita Communities of the United States, especially in the realms of behavior, dress, and sexuality. As with many cultures, there are a set of punishments and rewards for following or failing to follow the protocols that are set in place. I explore what these rules, behavioral protocols, rites of passage, and dress codes are, while also examining the punishment and reward systems that are in place. Participant observation, interviews, and auto-ethnography have been used. The Lolita fashion subculture is complex and hierarchical. An emphasis is not just placed on the clothing involved in the subculture, but also on the personalities and merits of each individual member and how they interact with the community as a whole.
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My academic interest in the Lolita fashion community started during my freshman year of college when I took introduction to Cultural Anthropology with a quirky and vivacious professor named Dr. Faidra Papavasiliou. Faidra gave our class a “simple” assignment: to immerse ourselves into an activity or culture that we were not familiar with, and write an ethnographic account of our experiences. I wrote about Lolita fashion because it was still topic that was still relatively new to me. The feedback that Faidra gave me on that paper changed my life forever and set me on that path that still leads me today. Not only was she supportive and genuinely interested, but she also encouraged me to explore what I was passionate about, and reassured me that these passions and interests could become academically recognized with the proper tools and training. Over the next few semesters of my undergraduate career, Faidra continued to motivate and inspire me to do the type of anthropology that I was interested in, and to not leave my own voice and experiences out of the process. She stuck by me even when I struggled in my personal life, and gave me a swift kick in the ass that I needed when I wanted to quit. I will never be able to truly convey how much of an impact she has made on my life and my academic career.

The rest of the GSU Department of Anthropology (in particular Dr. Cassandra White, Dr. Kathryn Kozaitis, and Dr. Jennifer Patico) did an amazing job of providing their knowledge and expertise to me and other students, through engaging lectures and informal chats during their office hours. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed working with each and every professor in the department and I am grateful for their patience and guidance. My peers have also been such an amazing support system while writing and researching for this project, and have really made the Department feel like a second home and a safe place to discuss our research topics.
I also would have not been able to write this honors thesis without the help of The Atlanta Lolita Community, and the numerous other Lolitas that have lent their experiences to this project. I have heard some of the most amazing “Lolita experience” stories while I’ve been involved in the community, and I am so grateful that I have been entrusted with giving them a platform. I hope that I’ve made you all proud. I consider this to be a work in progress that will forever change and grow with our community. Be good to one another.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for being amazingly supportive and caring during this entire process. You all have seen me at my best and worst over the course of researching and writing, and have always been there to remind me to be myself and to not forget to sleep. I would particularly like to thank my friends Greg Smith, Christopher Kim, Carlos Palacio, and Faust Barkovskii for going with me to Lolita meetups, looking over my paper, and for letting me rant when I needed it.

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This honors thesis is for everyone that has made a positive impact on my life and who has encouraged me to be myself and to do what I love. I am so thankful and appreciative.
Introduction

What is Lolita Fashion?

Fashion has been an important visual expression of culture since its inception. It is a visual and material illustration of cultural values, socio economic class distinctions, political affiliations, and many other aspects of our lives. Fashion trends change with these aspects as well and are often inspired by dominant group values. Modern cities have emerged as major arenas for cultural change and have sparked many of the fashion trends that are popular today. Unique street fashions are seen all around the world and have been documented by the media for their divergence from mainstream fashion. Hip-hop, Punk, Gothic, and Preppy all constitute street fashions with unique characteristics. Many of these street fashions have communities of participants that not only wear the fashion, but also shape the success of trends while banding together to create the environment that encompasses the fashion.

Lolita fashion is a fashion subculture that originated on the streets of Harajuku, Japan. A subculture is

“a group having social, economic, ethnic, or other traits distinctive enough to distinguish it from others within the same culture or society” (Random House Dictionary). Various groups of young people broke away from the gender, age, and dress norms of Japanese society and used their clothing as a medium of self-expression. Gender roles in Japanese society dictate that women should grow up, join the workforce, and then leave to start a family and to care for the home. Lolita fashion and other street fashion subcultures function as a silent but visual rebellion against society (Kawamura 2012:65). Gothic Lolita Fashion and Elegant Gothic Lolita (EGL) are used as umbrella terms for the fashion, but also refer to a particular substyle of the fashion.
The early stages of Lolita fashion originated in the 1980s, but the fashion in its modern form did not emerge until the 1990s. The fashion style is based on a modern take on Victorian and Rococo era clothing, and it is seen as elegant and modest by those who wear it. The overall look produces a highly romantic and idealized, doll-like appearance. The Lolita aesthetic is comprised of blouses with ruffles and lace, knee length full skirts that are held up with large petticoats, socks or tights that fully cover the knees, and a hair accessory, such as a large bow, to achieve the style. The full combination of all of these aspects is known as a coordinate or simply a “coord.” Wigs in both natural and unnatural colors, makeup, false eyelashes, and colored contacts known as circle lenses to give the iris an enlarged appearance are often worn by Lolitas to achieve a more flawless and doll-like appearance. Perfection in a unique and abstract manner is sought in every coordinate from head to toe, and is the goal of the overall fashion style. Lolita is a female dominated fashion and participants range from twelve years old to forty years old and up. In the communities that I am familiar with, especially in the US, I have observed that the average Lolita is in her 20s, is white or of European descent, and is upwardly mobile.

**Styles of Lolita Fashion**

While much depends on personal preference, there are distinct trends in various styles of the fashion both online and offline communities, both on the global and local scale. Favor is determined by personal preference, and is often influenced through trends seen in the international community (generally online) and in the local Lolita community (both online and offline.) I have observed that the international community is the dominant force when determining general trends, as information is disseminated in a top down effect. Each specific style follows the rules of fashion as a whole, but has certain defining characteristics that make them unique. As of 2013 and 2014, the main styles are Sweet, Classic, and Gothic Lolita.
Combinations of specific elements of the styles are not uncommon, and are often used to make unique coordinates and to match the individual taste of the wearer.

**Sweet Lolita**

The Sweet Lolita style has a childlike innocence and playfulness at its essence, and is one of the most popular styles among Lolitas in the US. The style is known as *Ama* Lolita in Japan, but the English translation is preferred outside the country. Sweet Lolita is characterized by pastel colors such as pink, lavender, mint, and yellow, and often features motifs on dresses (known as prints) such as candy and stuffed animals.

![Figure 1-An Example of a Print in Multiple Colorways (Credit: weibo.com/u1250442184)](image)

Sweet Lolita has evolved over the years into what is known as “Over the Top” or simply OTT Sweet. OTT is more decorative than standard Sweet Lolita, and often features large wigs in pastel colors, multiple hair accessories, false eyelashes, and themed coordinates to give a truly over the top aspect. Though some Lolitas would say that OTT Sweet is falling out of style, over the top aspects have been added to other styles, such as Classic Lolita. Less OTT Sweet coordinates are seen on Lolita websites that allow members to display their coordinates.
Classic Lolita

Classic Lolita is reminiscent of Victorian children’s clothing in the cut and style of clothing, and gives off a more mature, conservative, and romantic air than Sweet. While pastels may be used in this style; dusty pinks, browns, black, navy, and white are often used. The style emphasizes elegance and simplicity and is often seen as one of the styles to turn to once one is deemed “too old” to wear Sweet Lolita. Motifs include (European) royalty, antique books, roses and gardens, and classical musical instruments such as violins and cellos.
Gothic Lolita

Gothic Lolita has many similarities to the Gothic fashion subculture, and evokes a sense of dark romanticism. Bats, crosses, vampires, coffins, and other “Gothic” themes are used as motifs on dresses. While black may be the most popular color used, jewel tones and other rich dark colors are also used, such as wine red and royal blue.
Multiple other substyles have evolved out of the three major styles and are often based on visible themes. Notable substyles of Lolita are: Punk, Sailor, Pirate, and Hime (princess) Lolita. Ero, short for erotic Lolita, and Guro (reminiscent of a bloody, broken doll) Lolita are two less common substyles. LiveJournal member Teacupcracked noted that “[she] feel[s] like Ero Lolita was invented as a "space" for Lolitas to experiment with their more sexy side without tainting the rest of Lolita in the process. By giving it its own sub-style one can put all those [sexual and
sexualized] thoughts and concepts in its own box which is related to the greater whole but is by no means representative of the majority” (EGL LiveJournal Discussion, October 1st, 2013). Eroticism and sexuality are considered to be taboos in the Lolita community, and expression through Lolita clothing is often discouraged by the community. This taboo was one aspect of the community that I was interested to study, and impacted my research.

Figure 5-An example of Ero Lolita (credit: Arachnophobia)

Though Lolita fashion is mainly worn by women, men also participate in the fashion. Boystyle and *Ouji*, meaning prince in Japanese, are considered to be the male compliments to Lolita, though females wear them as well. When a male wears Lolita fashion in its feminine form, he is called a “brolita,” (a portmanteau of “bro/brother” and Lolita) or less often a “boy
Lolita.” When I asked Fiona, a 25 year old brolita who prefers female pronouns, what the key aspects are to make a good boy Lolita, she responded,

Courage. It’s not easy to cross dress MtF (Male to Female). Doing it in clothing that gets even females ridiculed is even harder. Wigs: Let’s be honest. Even females would struggle to make an outfit work [without] good hair. Body/facial hair (or lack thereof): Another issue that seems to be pretty well debated. There are boy Lolitas out there who feel that being forced to shave is almost... I don’t really have a word. Like if females doing kodona [or boystyle] had to cut their hair. [That is] Prob[ably] the best way for me to describe this. Good attitude: This goes for everybody.

The brolitas that I observed during my research seemed to have to do more than the average female Lolita to achieve the level of perfection that Lolitas seek, as was echoed by Fiona. Lolita enables participants to express and bend gender norms in different ways through clothing. While not all Brolitas and females that wear boystyle are transgender, those that identify as such are freely accepted in the community, as long as stylistic guidelines are
followed. Gender pronouns are not normally changed when a brolita wears Lolita fashion, or when a female wears boystyle, unless it is preferred by the wearer.

**How I got into the Fashion**

I became fascinated with Japanese fashion and culture when I was in my early teens and spent most of my free time and allowance money on Japanese related items. I was obsessed with reading manga (Japanese comics), watching anime (Japanese animation) with my friends after school, and was also a member of the Anime Club that met every Friday. I eventually started cosplaying in groups at local anime conventions. Cosplay (a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play”) is the act of dressing up as a character from a book, TV show, or even as an original character from your own imagination. Cosplay is a common hobby of those interested in anime and who attend anime conventions, but is also found in other subcultural circles such as gamers (people that play video games), sci-fi enthusiasts, and comic book fans. I eventually encountered Lolita fashion through anime and a friend that wanted to cosplay as a Lolita. At the time, I had no idea that there was a whole community, rules, and lifestyle surrounding it, nor how deeply it would become integrated into my life.
The first time that I encountered a Lolita in a full coordinate, I knew that I had to learn more. I found the aesthetics to be feminine, elegant, and a bit otherworldly. I remembered that my childhood friend, Anne, was involved in the community, but it seemed to be secretive and out of my reach. I can distinctly remember sitting on the school bus in middle school laughing with a mutual friend about Anne and joking that “she had joined a frilly cult,” which is why we had not seen her lately. She was very involved in the Lolita community online, went to every meetup, and seemed to only hang out with other people that wore Lolita. I could not figure out why since it was just fashion!
In September of 2010, I painstakingly put together my first Lolita outfit with the help of online guides and attended Anime Weekend Atlanta, the major anime convention that takes place in Atlanta every fall. Many members of the Atlanta Lolita Community were also in attendance, and held several informal meetups over the course of the weekend. I was very nervous about finally meeting some of the girls that I had talked to online, and I was upset that I arrived at the convention much later than I originally wanted to. It was hot, I was sweaty and uncomfortable in my new Lolita outfit, and I was convinced that I was going to have a bad day and something would go terribly wrong. I tried to act as ladylike and demure as possible (since I thought that was what all Lolitas were supposed to be) when I finally gathered the courage to introduce myself to a group of Lolitas that were sitting and waiting for the fashion show to begin, and was a bit taken back when they said that they had no clue who I was. I was a disheartened. The girls in the group started to laugh and one sprinkled me with glitter. “Just kidding!” she said, and proceeded to introduce me to everyone in the group. After following them around all weekend, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that they were nice and down to earth people. I officially considered myself to be a member of the Atlanta Lolita Community shortly after that and have been an active member since my first meetup.

**Why I Chose to Study Lolita and What I Chose to Study**

As I continued to be involved in the fashion, I noticed that it soon became more than just about the clothes, for both me and other participants. It was a lifestyle to some, but also just a way to occasionally beautify life to others. The Lolita community in its online and in person forms would eventually grow to be one of the most important aspects of the “Lolita experience.” I was sure that those who participated in Lolita fashion would strive to be elegant and ladylike, with an emphasis on manners and politeness, but I found this to be completely untrue. I began to
notice the unspoken hierarchies that formed in the groups based on things such as how much “brand” a Lolita had and how popular she was, the cliques of friends, the rituals, and several other aspects that were the defining characteristics of a subculture (which will be defined later). I decided that it was time to fully start exploring the subculture from the inside while also being an active participant. My research question eventually became: what are the major practices, rituals, values, and conflicts within the Lolita Community outside of Japan, and how do they impact the “Lolita experience?”

Lolita fashion as a subculture has been studied numerous times from its point of origin in Japan, but has rarely been examined in the US and other countries outside of Japan, especially from an insider’s perspective. I chose to study the rituals, practices, and conflicts in the Lolita subculture from an insider’s perspective to give new light to this fascinating subculture, and to also gain insight on subcultures in general. The Lolita community in all its forms serves as the main focus of my research, and plays a pivotal role in the experiences that are described throughout this essay. The images that are used to supplement the text have been collected from various Lolita related websites that are individually satirical, confessional, and for informational purposes. The images with text have been chosen to highlight particular sides of the community and the ideals of individual participants in a candid manner.

The idea of what it means to be a Lolita versus simply wearing the fashion was another topic of inquiry which was not made apparent until the end of my research. Each aspect of the Lolita subculture plays a part in strengthening the community as a whole by defining the rules and expected behavior of the members, while also shaping the outward appearance of the
community. I call the sum of all of these aspects, the processes, and the overall journey “the Lolita experience.”

Outline of Chapters

This paper will be divided into several chapters to critically examine different aspects of the fashion subculture, the Lolita community, and the Lolita experience. The methods used and a review of literature will precede chapter one, which will focus on the anatomy of a Lolita. The main components and symbolism of a Lolita outfit will be discussed, along with a look into Lolita communities across the US, and how and why members interact within them. Chapter two will build upon the information about Lolita communities, and will describe several of the major rituals that members of the subculture participate in. Chapter three will examine the functions of conflicts and gossip, within Lolita communities and chapter four focuses on bullying. A conclusion will be drawn in the last section of the paper.

Methodology

Participant observation, interviews, a questionnaire, and autoethnography were used throughout the course of the study. Because of my involvement with the Lolita community since August of 2010, I considered that autoethnography was a necessary method to employ to fully explore my research questions and to allow for self reflection. Participant observation was used both online and in person to gain a better understanding of interpersonal interactions between Lolitas in various settings. I observed and participated in numerous discussions on social networking websites such as Facebook and LiveJournal for the purpose of gathering data that was able to be generalized, but not specific to one person. Online discussions and interactions
occurred in various Lolita related groups and in private messages with the permission of the group moderators. In person interactions and observations tended to happen during public Lolita community meetups and when socializing with other Lolitas at private meetups at their personal residences.

When recruiting participants for interviews, I began by posting a discussion message in various online Lolita community groups (Local and general discussion groups) inviting Lolitas to share their experiences and stories with me. Any person that has identified as a Lolita at a point in their lives was invited to participate. Interviews took place both online through skype, instant messenger, and in person, depending on the preference of the participant.

A questionnaire was given to 30 members of various Lolita communities around the US towards the end of my research. The questions were open ended, and asked about personal history in Lolita, experiences, websites used, and their opinions on Lolita related matters. The questionnaire allowed me to obtain a broader sample to supplement the other methods, and to provide potential counterpoints and points of comparison.

**Literature Review**

To fully understand Lolita fashion outside of Japan (specifically in the US) as a subculture, one must first study the history of subcultural studies, the anthropological theories that are related to ritual, deviance, and what has already been written about Lolita fashion all over the world. The specific study of Lolita fashion in anthropology, sociology, and academia in general is not widespread. Various sources of literature pertaining to Lolita fashion, such as websites, blogs, and cartoons, are also relevant to understanding the subculture through an academic lens.
Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, is considered to be one of the cornerstones of subcultural research in the western world. Hebdige focuses on several British youth cultures (Punks, Mods, Teddy Boys, Rockers, and Skinheads), and makes many foundational theoretical contributions to the study of subcultures. Hebdige draws from Marxist theory, models derived from the Swiss linguist Barthes, and Raymond William’s ‘Culture and Society’ debate, to support his arguments and formulated trajectories that subcultures follow (Hebdige 1990: 6-11). Hebdige situates each subculture within its specific historical context in post war Britain, noting the significance of socioeconomic class as well as race in their formation. He demonstrates that while all of the subcultures have major differences, all have similarities in formation, structure, and influences.

Hebdige’s first argument is that “all aspects of culture possess a semiotic value, and the most taken-for-granted phenomena can function as signs: elements of communication systems governed by semantic rules and codes which are not themselves directly apprehended in experience” (Hebdige 1990: 13). His second major argument is that all subcultures more or less follow the same trajectory in evolution. The subcultures begin with a common resistance, which is then seen as radical by outsiders and the mainstream culture. This usually involves some level of fear, anxiety, or skepticism about what the subculture is demonstrating. After a while, the subculture undergoes a commodification of style, which is then available to the mainstream society. This could simply mean being able to buy certain types of styles that are important to the subcultures in mainstream clothing stores. When this happens, the symbolic capital of the particular style decreases. The Lolita fashion community has experienced this commodification of style, and voices their distaste at poor representations of the fashion in mainstream stores, but
has also celebrated the ability to find numerous “loliable” items that fit the Lolita aesthetic and are able to be used in coordinates.

While Hebdige is greatly respected, there are several critiques of his work. One critique is that his work does not easily translate to other cultural contexts because of differences in history and socioeconomic classes. He is also criticized for focusing too much on style and its components, instead of focusing more on youth rebellion. A thorough knowledge of Britain’s youth cultures that Hebdige examines is also necessary to fully understand the case studies that he presents because of his failure to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of each culture, which is another criticism.

Integrating anthropological theory and related literature is also necessary when studying Lolita fashion, especially in the realms of ritual, sexuality, and deviance. My research motivations are both in the purported ideals of the style, but also in the conflicts it engenders, especially in relation to tight social control mechanisms around particular aspects of identity expression and behavior. The Lolita subculture is deviant from mainstream society in that it is flashy and stands out in a fantasy way, but the subculture also has strict ideas about what is normal and deviant within the subculture, and tries to control and punish this deviance. Michel Foucault, Victor Turner, and recent theorist Gordon Tait, have contributed to the knowledge on each respective subject.

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault discusses the discourses that surround sexuality in the Victorian era, while also arguing that sexuality was not repressed as many people would believe. Foucault’s discussion of sexuality is relevant to the study of the Lolita Fashion Community, because sexuality is considered to be a somewhat taboo topic among members of the community, but repression is not as rampant as it would appear. The Lolita
Community discourages outright expressions of sexuality through wearing Lolita fashion, even through the substyle called Ero Lolita. This subversion creates strong taboos and conservatisms in the community, but discussion about sexuality in safe spaces (Lolita only areas online or in person) is allowed.

Foucault notes that “...there was a policing of statements. A control over enunciations as well: where and when it was not possible to talk about such things became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships” (Foucault 1990: 17-18). This idea, which is part of Foucault’s “The Repressive Hypothesis,” also mentions that discussion of sex and sexuality became codified at one point, which describes how it is seen in some circles of Lolita communities. This will be discussed in detail in the first chapter.

Gordon Tait also explores the discourses of the regulation of sexuality and subcultures, but among youth in *Youth, Sex, and Government*. Tait begins his work by briefly giving an overview of subculture theory, and cites both Hebdige and Foucault as major contributors. His main focus is on regulation, both inside and outside of subcultures, and self regulation as well as regulation by outside forces. Tait is troubled by the content of previous subcultural research, and wishes to offer a different and more beneficial and thorough approach over previous research done by others for the sake of the field of research and those who wish to expand upon it. He seeks to do this by “employing the notion of governmentality, this book provides a theoretical framework that can account for the historical specificity of formations of youth. (...)Second, by employing the notion of practices of the self, this book provides a theoretical framework that can account for the piecemeal construction of the youthful self” (Tait 2000: 11-12).
Wearing Lolita fashion is not just a visual statement. It is also a performance that is largely conducted through ritualized aspects of both the fashion and the community at large. While rituals within Lolita fashion communities may not appear to be very complex and cohesive on the surface, they follow many of the same rules and structures that rituals across many cultures follow. These rituals are important to examine to understand the overall phenomenon of the subculture. Victor Turner, expanding on the research of Arnold Van Gennep, pioneered the study of ritual, liminality, and the idea of communitas within his works. One of his most famous works *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* and his later work *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* both explore the various aspects of rituals, how they impact those involved, and what stages the members go through as both a participant and an observer. These stages will be examined in detail in the section titled “Rituals.”

The majority of articles that have been written in the last decade about Lolita fashion have mainly focused on those that live in Japan and utilize Japanese social networking websites to find communities. Lolitas in the western world experience the fashion and community aspects differently than their Japanese counterparts, which must be accounted for when relying heavily on articles written about the fashion. Theresa Winge, Masafumi Monden, and a handful of doctoral and masters degree seeking candidates have studied Lolita fashion from multiple angles. In *Undressing and Dressing Loli: A Search for the Identity of the Japanese Lolita*, Theresa Winge examines the symbolism of Lolita clothing and the aesthetic, the gathering spaces of Lolitas, and performance as ritualized identity. She thoroughly describes each of the substyles of the fashion, and also draws upon Victor Turner’s three phases of ritual to explore membership into the Lolita community. She concludes that “individual members of the Lolita subculture
interpret the Lolita aesthetic in unique ways that play a significant role in creating and maintaining the subcultural community.”

Masafumi Monden observes The Gothic and Lolita Fashion Community on the social networking website LiveJournal, and documented his findings in “Transcultural Flow of Demure Aesthetics: Examining Cultural Globalization through Gothic and Lolita Fashion.” By observing a global online community, Monden is able to have a cross cultural view of the community. He also examined the idea of the “child” and what childhood actually is, both in a Japanese context and a global context.

The other relevant studies of Lolita fashion have been conducted by university students for thesis work. These studies focus on Lolitas in countries outside of Japan and tend to be observations of communities from the perspective of outsiders who are just learning about the subculture. While each of the literature presented has built off of the contributions of many theorists, an emic perspective has yet to be found in subcultural research related to Lolita fashion.

In *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*, Yuniya Kawamura seeks to explore 5 major areas of Tokyo and their corresponding fashion subcultures. One of these areas is Harajuku and Lolita fashion. Though she approaches Lolita and other fashion subcultures from a purely Japanese based, etic, and academic standpoint, many of her observations about the overall look of the fashion are applicable to Lolitas in western countries. Kawamura’s research took place from 2004 to 2010, but many of her observations about Lolita fashion could be seen as out of date to a participant in today’s fashion. She concludes that “with the internet, subcultures are becoming borderless and are spreading to every corner of the world. The exclusive Lolita look in any country functions as a visible group identity for the teens, creates a bond, and becomes a shared
sign of membership affiliation. It is also used to communicate their ideas, intentions, purposes, and thoughts” (Kawamura 2012: 75). Kawamura fails to follow through with her goal in later chapters, and generalizes and over simplifies each of the subcultures that she examines, leaving much to be desired in her writing style and analysis.
Chapter I

The Anatomy of the Lolita

To fully understand Lolita fashion and the community aspects, we must begin to look at it on a micro level from the very root of the word, the aesthetics of the fashion, how an outfit is built, and the macro level function of the community in the Lolita experience.

The Word “Lolita”

The word “Lolita” frequently invokes the image of precocious and sexualized young girls that chase older men. This is possibly due to Vladimir Nabokov’s novel by the same name. *Lolita* tells the story of Humbert Humbert, an unreliable narrator in his late 30’s who falls in love with a 12 year old girl named Dolores or who he calls “Lolita.” Humbert becomes obsessed with Lolita and eventually has a sexual relationship with her once he becomes her step-father. The “blame” is put on Lolita from Humbert’s point of view and she is seen as the one that seduced him, hence the idea of Lolita being a precocious girl (Nabokov 1955.)

While Nabokov's novel *Lolita* has shaped the connotations of the word, the Japanese fashion called “Lolita” has a somewhat different origin. For years, the global Lolita community has debated upon why the fashion shares the same name with the controversial novel, but has not come to any sort of conclusion. Some say that the word “Lolita” is a nickname or diminutive for the name Dolores, which the Japanese found cute and adapted to the fashion, but this has continued to be debated. The connotations of the novel seem to only be focused on outside of Japan and references can be found in numerous movies, song lyrics by artists such as Lana Del Rey, and television shows.
I’m always the very first one to argue that lolita fashion have nothing to do with the book, but I’ve come to realise that I’m actually a Lolita as in the commonly accepted sense. I started having physical relationships when I was around 14, and now that I’m legal I have my wonderful boyfriend who is old enough to be my father... I’m not into ageplay or anything, and I don’t mix the two, it’s just how I am.

Don’t get me wrong thought, I love Nabokov’s book, and I think calling myself a Lolita is far stretched from the original character. But some people did call me like that.

“Melanie” also connected with *Lolita* through pop-culture. “Before I learned about Lolita fashion, Lolita was a personal thing. My ex used to call me Lolita because of Lana Del Rey” (Interview with “Melanie,” March 16th, 2014). When asked about the connection between the Nabokov novel and Lolita fashion, an informant, “Dolores Haze,” expressed that the novel is one of her favorite books and that she doubts that many participants of Lolita fashion have actually read the novel. “I read *Lolita* because I wanted to better understand the connection between the novel and the fashion. Even though the name of the fashion is just an unfortunate misnomer and...”
has little in common with the book beyond the title, it turned out to be one of my favorite novels of all time” (interview with “Dolores Haze,” March 16th, 2014). Becky, another Lolita, mentioned when discussing the topic with other Lolitas, “In all honesty, some names get tarnished forever. You don't see many people naming their kids Judas or Adolf or Jezebel. I just don't feel like the name "Lolita" should be that tarnished for a single novel that probably most people won't ever read. I had never even heard of it until I was in grad school, and only then because I had looked up the fashion first, and THEN discovered the whole problem” (comment on a discussion, August 14th, 2013).

Many Lolita fashion enthusiasts have debated for years whether or not to change the name of the fashion because of outside reactions of others and because of the associated sexual connotations. Lolitas are often faced with a strange reaction when they are asked what the fashion that they are wearing is called, and some prefer to simply say that they are wearing a “Japanese fashion” while neglecting to say the name. “When I told my coworker, she gave me a look and asked if I was involved in some sort of sexual club. After showing her a picture of what the fashion looked like and explaining that it had nothing to do with sex, she felt better” (interview with “Melanie,” March 16th, 2014).

The Atlanta Lolita Community recently held a vote to change their name to include other Japanese street fashions. Several members were vocal about wanting the name “Lolita” taken out of the group name entirely, because of the connotations. Lolita was eventually kept in the name to improve search results on Facebook.

In March of 2013, a documentary titled “Are All Men Pedophiles” was released by the Dutch director Jan-Willem Breure. The movie poster featured a Lolita wearing an Angelic Pretty dress, which caused uproar in the International Lolita Community. According to friends of the
model that posted on the EGL Livejournal, the Lolita did not know what the photo shoot that she agreed to would be used for. Lolitas around the world wrote letters and 10,456 signed a petition to have the poster removed.

With the promotional poster in which a girl is shown wearing Lolita clothes, her expression being overtly provocative and teasing, the producer and director are causing a massive harm to the Lolita community, leading people who does not know the movement to think that it’s about sex and ruining the hard work that thousands of girls have done during years. Due to this, we ask for the removal of the poster plus a formal apology from both of them. (change.org)

Sex and the expression of sexuality are highly stigmatized in the Lolita Community, and outright expression of one’s sexuality is seen as out of place and is discouraged. When asked about this “Lyn” said, “Outwardly yes, but not once you dig a little deeper. I find Lolitas are often pretty kinky or sexual, even if that part of them is separate from the fashion.” I have observed over the last four years that opinions about sexuality and Lolita are slowly changing. When I first entered into the community, sex and sexuality was never talked about in the groups
that I frequented, but now, it is becoming less taboo. Some local communities are more open to sexuality than others.

I can't speak for all communities, but, my own is not sexually repressive, we just don't show our sexuality visually in cloths. There's a kink Lolita group I'm a member of where Lolitas openly discuss BDSM, polyamory, etc. with each other. In my feminist group I openly discuss sex with the group, as well as sexual identities. Just because we aren't dressed erotically doesn't mean we aren't open to sexual expressions. (Lee, 22)

When asked about their feelings when an outsider sexualizes Lolita, one participant said, “I hate it when they do it by default. Some girls do express sexuality through Lolita, but to think that this is the primary goal of the fashion is just wrong on so many levels,” while another said “I feel there is nothing in Lolita fashion that is sexy except for Ero Lolita. It actually makes me upset to get on and stalked by guys just because of am wearing Lolita.”
The sexual stigma in Lolita also extends to other alternative lifestyles and subcultures such as ageplay and the furry fandom. Ageplay is a type of roleplay power exchange (usually sexual in nature), where a person assumes the role of a younger age (sometimes older), and engages in activities while in the headspace of that age. Much of the clothing that ageplayers wear are mistaken as Lolita fashion, and vice versa. This is because of the peter pan collars, ruffles, and lace found on dresses. The furry fandom is a subculture that is interested in anthropomorphic animals with human-like characteristics, much like the characters seen in cartoons. Members of the fandom take on a personal embodiment of the characteristics of an animal that could be compared to their “spirit animal,” and a small amount dress in costumes resembling the animal.

Lolitas not only reject associations with these groups, but actively ridicule members of the subcultures. This is because of the association of the childlike playfulness of Lolita fashion with the values of other alternative subcultures that are more focused on sex, or are also associated with sex. When a Lolita is also a member of one of these subcultures, and expresses affiliation in some manner, they run the risk of being publically called out or shunned. Fortunately, this trend seems to be diminishing as the taboo and stigma of sexuality is decreasing in the community, and is somewhat of an illusion. Foucault argues in the Repressive Hypothesis that sexuality in the Victorian era was actually not as repressive as modern society would believe, and that repression was an illusion. Though the Lolita Community gives the outward appearance of repression of sexuality, at the micro and individual level, the repression is not as strong as it would appear. Repression of sexuality is used as protection against unwanted connotations from mainstream society, and to create and maintain the image that they seek to create.
The Lolita Aesthetic

The Lolita fashion aesthetic values modesty and elegance of eras past, and an anachronistic eccentricity. Lolita fashion quickly catches the attention of those that see it and can often leave observers confused or with mixed emotions, some positive and some negative depending on what they associate with what they see. Lolita fashion also is heavily influenced by the Japanese idea of *kawaii*, which means cute. As of late, the idea of kawaii has spread outside of Japan, but the roots that are inherently Japanese continue to be the underlying tie. Kawaii embodies not only cute, but childlike innocence and playfulness, which Lolita fashion does as well in some styles, such as Sweet Lolita.

Lolita fashion has made significant changes since its inception. When the fashion first emerged in a form that could be called Lolita, it heavily featured cotton fabrics with lace, very
few printed dresses or skirts, and a smaller color palette than what is used today. Wigs and over
the top makeup were also rarely seen. What was in fashion in the early 1990s version of Lolita is
now affectionately referred to as “old school” Lolita.

Figure 12—“Old School” Gothic Lolita Bible Street Snap 2001 (credit: Avant Gauche)

The Building Blocks of Lolita

A Lolita outfit, which is known as a coordinate, is the full balance and presentation of
clothing and accessories that fit the Lolita aesthetic. The ability to put together a good coordinate
is a highly sought after skill in the Lolita community. Much like a person’s own fashion sense,
not all Lolitas have a good sense of coordination. Numerous groups have been started to help
Lolitas make better coordinates by giving constructive criticism, and also by setting examples of
exemplary coordinates. “Daily Lolita Coordinates” on LiveJournal and “Closet of Frills: Daily Lolita Coords” on Facebook are two popular places for Lolitas to show off their coordinating skills and to receive constructive criticism about their outfits. Poor coordination skills can result in outfits being called *ita*, which is a shortened version of the Japanese word *itai* which means “ouch” in Japanese. *Ita* is a derogatory term that every Lolita dreads being called. To avoid being called *Ita*, participants told me to not mix cosplay and Lolita together, to not wear cat ears, and to always wear a petticoat and bloomers.

When analyzing how Lolitas put together a coordinate, it is important to also take into account *why* each piece is selected. Why does one person choose to wear bloomers, but another does not? Each piece of clothing is influenced not only by personal choice, but also by regional tastes, and current trends in the international community as well.
Each piece of clothing that makes up a Lolita coordinate can tell a significant amount of information about the person wearing it. This knowledge is specifically geared towards other Lolitas. For example, the print or style of a dress, its authenticity, its demand in the community and rarity, can demonstrate what lengths a Lolita is willing to go to obtain the dress and an insight into their socioeconomic status. Dresses can often go from $100-$500, and the ability to afford dresses of that price can be a mark of high status. The presence or lack of a blouse or a petticoat can indicate how much of the “rules” a participant follows and how new they are to the fashion. The presence or absence of bloomers is often associated with the amount of modesty that a Lolita has. The balance and choice of accessories also demonstrates how well a Lolita can coordinate. The size of the headbow in a coordinate must also be just right. If it is too big, it detracts from the outfit and is called “a headeating bow” which is not currently popular.
Proportional headbows and bow like barrettes are currently in fashion.

Figure 14- A full sweet Lolita coordinate (~$700 USD) (credit: Poppy Noir)

The names of many of the clothing items have been made into acronyms and are referred to in the same way across all communities. It’s common to hear a sentence like “OMG, my SS finally got me in the GO to reserve the DDC jsk from AP, the matching OTKs, and that new Btssb OP” which would translate to “Oh my god, my shopping service finally got me in the group order to reserve the Day Dream Carnival (a Lolita print) jumperskirt from Angelic Pretty, the matching Over the Knee (socks), and that new Baby The Stars Shine Bright One Piece.” Almost any Lolita that has participated in the fashion and has community involvement would be able to understand what was said. Those who are not able to understand the acronyms of clothing are considered to be “noobs” or new people in the community.
The basis of every Lolita outfit is the petticoat. Petticoats work as the framework for how the dress will lay and what shape it will take in general and how much "poof" the skirt will have. They are usually made of organza or tulle, and consist of several layers. The most popular types of petticoats are cupcake or bell shaped, which give a full and poofy look to the skirt, and A-line, which creates an A shaped silhouette and is often found in Classic and Gothic Lolita.
The next major piece is the dress or skirt. Dresses can come in all different colors, styles, and cuts, but all fall under two or three categories. Jumperskirts (JSKs) are dresses without sleeves, one piece dresses (OPs) have sleeves, and a new popular style called a salopette, which is similar to overalls, but with a skirt. Salopettes are seen in more casual outfits, and are not necessarily considered to be Lolita by every member of the community. Skirts are mainly knee length or longer and fall under the category of A-line, rectangle, or high-waisted depending on their style and construction. Shorter skirts are often frowned upon for reasons of modesty, except in the case of casual “Lolita inspired” outfits.
Each individual dress from major brands is identifiable to Lolitas by a specific name. The name can be based on the print (motif) on the skirt, or it could be a random name assigned by the brand. Examples include “Melty Chocolate,” “Romantic Rose,” “Gloria,” and the infamous “The Most Beautiful Dog in the World and the Most Delicious Strawberry Frappe in the World” which has been shortened by Lolitas to “Longest Name.” I observed that being able to identify a print is a skill that most seasoned Lolitas have, and is an almost necessary skill to have when
interacting with other community members that follow brands.

Blouses with frills, pin tucks, and lace are worn with skirts, and under JSKs, salopettes, and rarely under OPs. The necessity of a blouse under a JSK at all times has been a topic of debate between Lolitas for years. Lolitas in warmer climates will often forgo wearing a blouse in favor of bare skin, a bolero, or a light cardigan over their dress to reduce the amount of layers and the heat of their outfits. Some Lolitas argue that this is breaking the rules and is aesthetically displeasing or ita, and others consider the blouse to be an important piece of clothing to reduce the amount of contact that a dress will have with bare skin. Lolita dresses are notorious for being difficult to launder, and some extreme Lolitas will forgo washing or dry cleaning their dresses for extended amounts of time to protect the integrity of the print and lace.
Accessories are a major component of any Lolita coordinate. Some will go to great lengths to obtain the matching headbow, purse, tights, or socks. In Sweet Lolita, numerous rings, bracelets, and necklaces resembling ice creams, lollipops, and other sweets are paired with coordinates. These are often made of plastic or acrylic materials. Classic and Gothic styles will usually feature more subtle accessories, but intricate headpieces that incorporate books, birds, flowers, and other aspects of nature have been on the rise. Gothic accessories can include rosaries worn as necklaces, roses, pearls, and lace gloves (Hellolace).

Without any one of these components, the Lolita coordinate is often considered to be incomplete or cannot be classified as Lolita fashion by wearers of the fashion. The balance and harmony of the combination of items makes or breaks the coordinate.
Shopping

There are several places where Lolitas buy their clothing, both online and in physical shops. Clothes that come from specific “brands” are highly sought after and are usually the most expensive. Lolita brands hold the same value in Lolita as mainstream luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Juicy Couture, and Michael Kors. Brand preference and hierarchy depends on the substyle of Lolita that an individual prefers, and also which brands are popular within the international community. This could be based on price and what prints and styles the brands release. One participant reminisced about Lolita shopping in the past,

“I came into the Lolita community when I was sixteen. I do use that term loosely, because in 2006, the community looked nothing like it does today. Brands did not ship to the US, with the exception of Meta, so it was even more of a niche market than it is today. Either you made your own stuff, or you shopped at one of the up and coming brands. Bodyline was garbage at that time, and Milanoo and her clones weren’t even thought of yet. Fan+Friend MIGHT be acceptable, and Anna House was all the rage with off-branders. Depending on who you talked to, and US indie brands like Sweet Rococo and . . . Oh, god, I forgot the name. They shut down, but for a hot minute, they were the shit.”

Angelic Pretty caters mainly to Sweet Lolitas and will feature many OTT prints and accessories. It has an English and Japanese online shop along with multiple physical stores in Japan, one in Paris (which is being shut down), one in San Francisco, and another in Shanghai. Metamorphose Temps de Fille (simply known as Meta), Baby the Stars Shine Bright (BtSSB), and Innocent World (IW), often cater to both a more subtle Sweet and Classic style, though Meta is known for out of the ordinary prints.
Figure 21-An example of dresses from each major brand

- **Angelic Pretty**
- **Baby the Stars Shine Bright**
- **Metamorphose Temps de Fille**
- **Innocent World**
Btssb is the only store with a physical shop in San Francisco, along with its main shop in Japan. The brand Moi Meme Moitie (known as Moitie), has been a historical fixture in the Lolita Community. The Japanese Visual Kei rocker, Mana, started the brand and called the style “Gothic Lolita.”

Now, Moitie sells highly sought after Gothic Lolita prints and Mana has had an almost cult following at times. Many Lolitas joke about “praying to Mana” when they want something Lolita related.
Brand items tend to cost anywhere from $50-$400 for items, are released with limited stock, and often only come in one size, which creates a demand that is significantly higher than the price. Some Lolitas will buy stock and then sell it for a higher price. This practice called “scalping” is discouraged by the community at large. Lolitas that buy stock and sell it at a reasonable resale price are preferred. Other shops that are not considered to be “brand” that cater to Lolitas are Bodyline, Fan+Friend, various Taobao (a Chinese marketplace) shops, and indie shops by local seamstresses.

There are many other avenues for Lolitas to explore when purchasing clothes. Online is suggested to be the best way by veteran Lolitas, as many of the prominent brands only have shops in Japan, France, and San Francisco, California. The method of acquisition is not as significant in Lolita as it once was before Brands began to ship internationally. The EGL Community Sales page on the social networking website LiveJournal has been around for many years, and is often considered to be the most trusted place to find second hand clothing. Various sales pages on Facebook have also been on the rise with the popularity of the social media website. Lace Market is the most recent second hand independent sales website to begin in the Lolita community. A shopping service (SS) can also be used to obtain clothing directly from stores in Japan or China. Shopping services are used in the case of popular releases that will sell out quickly and which need to be bought directly in stores, or when a product is only able to be shipped within its respective country. Services normally charge 5-10% and many Lolitas that routinely buy overseas have a trusted SS that they go to.
Waiting for new clothing to be mailed is often an exciting time for Lolitas and many Lolitas have an “incoming Lolita” album on their personal Facebook pages to display what they recently purchased. Fiona recalled the first time she received Lolita clothes in the mail:

They were a few bodyline pieces. Of the 2 dresses, one of them was a relatively short dress that had flowers on it and would go on to be the more popular of the two dresses and I was so excited when they came in. I specifically remember actually jumping and tumbling around my room from the excitement flooding out of my body (questionnaire answer from Fiona, March 27th, 2014).

Some Lolitas will make online reviews of Lolita products on their blogs and personal Facebook pages to detail the quality of the products and the customer service that they received. This enables other Lolitas to make informed decisions about their purchases before spending large amounts of money on any particular Lolita item.

Figure 23- A Lolita unboxing

Frills as Armor: Feminism, Rebellion, and the Gaze
When I first began learning about Lolita fashion in 2010, I stumbled across numerous discussions about why people wear Lolita, and how it affects them. These discussions mainly took place on the EGL Community page. In an EGL discussion from 2010, one user asked the community what their motivations and intentions were for wearing Lolita. This discussion has been replicated numerous times over the years. When I asked members of my Lolita community, members often said that wearing Lolita “makes them feel beautiful or pretty” or as one member put it, “It takes me back to a simpler time when everything was ponies and princesses. I love the idea of ‘being’ a princess, in the best form of the word...being an ambassador, showing kindness and thoughtfulness to people, being elegant and dignified, yet unashamedly feminine. I like that I'm rebelling against the typical standards of what a woman "should" look like” (facebook comment, March 17th, 2014).

Lolita is what could be considered a performative fashion subculture. Judith Butler, described performativity as “that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, 1993:13) and “discursive performativity appears to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make...[g]enerally speaking, a performative functions to produce that which it declares (Butler 1993:107). Lolitas seek to perform the ideals that are promoted within the subculture (modesty, elegance, and femininity) through their clothes, and sometimes through their behavior (though the instance of this performance is declining over the years). This visual performance is then viewed by the gaze of society, and other participants of Lolita fashion. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, expanded on the Lacanian theory of “the gaze” (the idea that an object can induce another object notes that “there
is pleasure in being looked at” and that the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud “associated
cocopophilia (pleasure in looking) with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a
controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1989: 17). The ideas of performativity and scopophilia
are intrinsically tied in the dynamic of Lolita fashion and the interaction of participants within
the community.

During my fieldwork, I was surprised to learn about the degree that many considered the
fashion to be a direct challenge to societal dress norms, and also to the male gaze. Mulvey
remarks that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The
determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure… In their traditional
exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance
coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-
ness” (Mulvey 1989:19). Lolita fashion participants challenge this by rejecting the
stereotypically feminine attribute of being passively pleasing for the male gaze (by wearing the
opposite of what is considered “sexy”), while still allowing themselves to be looked at and
displayed, but in a manner that is meant to be pleasing for themselves and for the gaze of other
Lolita fashion participants. This idea was echoed by several participants during the course of my
fieldwork.
This idea of rebellion against modern gender fashion norms has been examined by Hebdige in his subcultural case studies, Winge, Kawamura, and numerous other social science theorists. In western culture, women are bombarded with messages every day from their peers, the media, clothing companies, and numerous other sources that attempt to shape how a woman should look. Some feminists have argued that Lolita fashion is actually anti-feminist because of its extreme feminine look, its preference for etiquette and “domestic” activities, and that it infantilizes the participants. Many Lolitas that I have met have integrated Lolita fashion as an extension of their expression of feminism. Feminist Lolitas of Georgia was recently started on Facebook as a safe space for Lolitas that identify as feminist to gather and discuss various related topics. The code of conduct states that “We, the Feminist Lolitas of Georgia, aim to give voice to the feminine experience as we live it and know it. We are as strong as we are frilly, and we are
damn proud.” (Code of Conduct, February 8th, 2014). When asked about how Lolita and feminism have influenced her life, “Haylee,” the founder stated:

Lolita is sort of the ultimate fuck you to a society that objectifies me. Dressing as a doll like person is my way of saying that if I'm going to be an object, then I will be an object that is pleasing for me and me alone. Men love to tell me Lolita shrinks their boner, and woman love to tell me I'll never get a man if I wear it. I'm 100% my own desires and the unity of my sisterhood when I'm in Lolita. It's not for anyone else. I love repulsing the boys who make fun of me. I enjoy being free even if it's only in the context of spending time with my sisters in frills (Facebook comment, March 17th, 2014).

“Artie,” a general Japanese fashion enthusiast and feminist, asserted that:

“Especially in conservative Japanese society where women in particular are expected to look homogenous and a toned-down kind of pretty, Lolita and all alternative fashions there are a huge middle finger to the patriarchy. ...in a world where everyone expects women to look, act, and dress solely to please men, it [Lolita fashion] was always a very loud "I don't give a single shit" to people who expected me to dress 'normal' or 'sexy' all the time because that's what guys like” (Facebook comment, March 17th, 2014).

Other Lolitas do not necessarily agree with Lolita being a feminist movement. “Bunn,” a veteran Lolita, expressed that she does not consider herself to be a feminist because she enjoys being pampered. “I have no problem saying that I am not equal to men. I’m not saying that I am less, I’m just saying that we’re different” (interview with Bun, March 18th, 2014). She was raised in a religious household where traditional gender roles were in place, and she still abides and incorporates them into her daily life.

Some Lolitas that I spoke to simply do not identify as feminists, and in turn do not see the fashion as inherently feminist in nature. Though there were disagreements about the root of the fashion, all Lolitas that I discussed the topic with agreed that the fashion functioned as some sort of rebellion or resistance. As with most sentiments about Lolita, there are a wide spectrum of
opinions that are held by individuals based on their backgrounds, upbringing, and life experiences.

**The Lolita and Her Community**

Lolita fashion enthusiasts have formed communities around the world. Almost every state in the United States has a community, and many countries in Latin and South America, Europe, and Asia have communities as well. The international Lolita community is made up of dozens of local communities and individuals that participate through a network of websites such as Facebook, LiveJournal, Lacebook, etc and it exists purely online. Though it is an imagined community, the community is not any less real. The EGL LiveJournal is the international Lolita community website and has been the home for discussions and advice related to Lolita fashion since December of 2001. Posts are generally in English and anyone can contribute or start discussions related to Lolita fashion. LiveJournal itself also hosted numerous Lolita communities at one point. With the recent popularity of Facebook and other social media websites, there has been a decline in the use of the website and a transition from community groups on LiveJournal to Facebook. More and more attempts at bringing large regional groups together in person through Lolita specific conventions and events have been organized in the past decade. Rufflecon, Frill, and Enchanted are but a few of these conventions and events, and have gathered over 1,000 Lolitas combined.

Local Lolita communities make up the body of the international community. Numerous countries around the world have established Lolita communities. In the US, almost every state has a Lolita community. In Georgia, there are several Lolita communities. The Atlanta Lolita community is the biggest and is made up of members all across the state. The Athens and
Augusta, Lolita communities can be seen as subgroups of the main Atlanta community, as many Lolitas are members of both. The Savannah Lolita community also hosts their own meetups. Because of their distance, they are seen as separate from the Atlanta Lolitas, but still remain in the larger network of Georgia Lolitas.

Each local Lolita community has its own group name, identity, its known “e-famous” members (if any), and in some cases, its own contribution to the international Lolita community. For example, the Brisbane Lolita Community in Australia has been featured in numerous documentaries, parody videos, and general Lolita related content videos on Youtube. When I asked several participants about “famous” Lolita communities, Brisbane was usually the first to be mentioned. “I want to be a Brisbane Lolita! They always look like they’re having so much fun!” (Interview with Dolores, March 20th, 2014). The New York Lolitas, Los Angeles and San Francisco Lolitas, The Tea Party Club, and the Melbourne Lolitas were also listed among the best known and “famous” in the international community. Some of the aforementioned groups have been featured in local mainstream newspapers and on TV, but their main following comes from within the Lolita community.
Each Lolita community has an online and in person counterpart. Both are significant to how the community runs and how individuals interact among themselves and in the international community. Several communities also have strict rules for membership to their online community to keep non-Lolitas from joining and people that make the group uncomfortable, such as “creepy men” and others not interested in the fashion. There are a few communities that are notorious for their exclusionary rules. I encountered a slight problem with this during the course of my research. I joined the Washington-Seattle Lolitas in 2012 while visiting Seattle on vacation. After meeting a few Lolitas in person, I mainly kept in contact with them through private messages, and neglected to actively participate in discussions on the community page. During the recruitment process of this research, I posted a link to a questionnaire that I had also posted in numerous other Lolita communities. After a few hours of it being posted, I received a message from one of the moderators that explained that I was being kicked out of the community for being an inactive member, for not living in the state, and also because a few members of the group felt uncomfortable with me studying them, though I was not actively researching at the time.

When I asked a Lolita friend for advice on the matter, she reminded me that there had recently been a scandal close Washington (in California) with a Lolita that was filmed for a segment on the American cable channel TLC. The segment was called “My Strange Addiction: I’m a Living Doll,” and sought to show a day in the life of three people that considered themselves living dolls; one of them being a Lolita and another being a YouTube blogger that occasionally wears Lolita. Emily, a Lolita from California, was misrepresented as a girl obsessed with looking like a doll and wearing “dolly fashion” throughout the show. Emily was put in several humiliating situations, and hosted a tea party with her “dolly” friends that were very
obviously scripted. Lolitas that watched the show were outraged, and took to their blogs, personal Facebooks, and the EGL Community LiveJournal to express their feelings.

Public image in the Lolita Community is very important, which is one reason why there is so much backlash in the community when Lolitas are not portrayed in the manner that they want to be. Communities tend to tighten their membership rules when these events happen, and seem to be less keen on having academics or journalists that are “outsiders” in or around the community. Though I am a Lolita, this could have been a contribution to why I was kicked out, along with the reasons mentioned by the moderator.

Membership into the Washington-Seattle Lolitas, Portland/Oregon Lolita Tea and Cake Society, and many other communities require a potential new member to live in the state (or sometimes just a neighboring state) that they are applying for membership, a message to the moderator(s) of the community, and usually also require some sort of introduction post or a questionnaire about their interest in Lolita fashion. The Central Florida Lolita Society recently changed their membership rules because of a man that was stalking and harassing members of the community. They now require new members to attend a separate new member meetup, where personal identification will be checked. Extreme actions such as these are a normal reaction to threats from outside of the community, and are enacted to keep unwanted people out of the community.

The Atlanta Lolita community has both an online presence through its community group on Facebook, and also an in person presence when meetups occur. Though almost all Lolita communities have changed to using Facebook exclusively, LiveJournal was the original space
where groups would convene. The Atlanta Lolita Community was founded on February 10th, 2005 by the LiveJournal user emiko. The livejournal group thrived until around 2011.

The online Atlanta Lolita Community group is used as a place where members can find other Lolitas in their area, discuss relevant topics, and learn about new meetups and new trends in the fashion. Membership into the online community requires members to message a moderator with an introduction and an explanation of why they would like to be in the community. Many members are also from surrounding states that have Lolita communities. Because of that, The Atlanta Lolita Community and The Alabama Lolita Coterie often get together for meetups and many members are friends outside of the community. This is often seen in other communities that are close in location.

The Atlanta Lolita Community currently has over 370 members in their Facebook group. Not all members of the Facebook group are active online or attend meetups for various reasons. This number continues to grow as new members find the group online. Because of the recent expansion of the group online, there are currently 5 moderators which were voted in on February 19th of 2014. Moderators of the online community facilitate and oversee online interactions within the community, but do not have very much impact outside of the online community other than acting as ambassadors in public.

A few Lolitas that I interviewed were not members of their local community for various reasons. Some were once members and left after either having a negative experience. “I do not belong to my local Lolita community because it is very toxic” (questionnaire answer from “RaeRae,” March 25th, 2014). “Bonnie,” a Lolita from Atlanta echoed the same sentiments. “I
used to attend meetups. I don't anymore because I think, even though they're pleasant on the surface, they ended up affecting me in a slightly toxic way. I feel like attending meetups was a way of trying to gain approval or validation. Though I did make some really cool friends in the community, there's no way I'd ever attend another Lolita meetup” (interview with Bonnie, March 27th, 2014). Other Lolitas simply do not interact with their local communities because of scheduling conflicts, or other personal reasons. These are sometimes known as “lone Lolitas.”
Chapter II: Rituals and the Lolita

Journey

Rituals promote unity, reinforce traditions, and create a sense of belonging in those that participate. Rituals can be anything from religious rites such as baptism to taking pictures of children on the first day of school. Many subcultural communities engage in rituals through interaction to perpetuate the goals of the community. The Lolita community is no different. Though each Lolita community may have different ways of doing things, many have the same rituals in common. They all contribute and reinforce the ideas of the subculture, and bring members together. I’ve chosen to highlight several of the most prominent rituals and rites that were mentioned by Lolitas that I interviewed and also drew upon my own experiences. Not every Lolita experiences these rituals or experiences them in the particular order. The rituals that Lolitas participate in all contribute to the overall “Lolita experience” and what it takes to be a Lolita. The journey is neither linear nor ends at a fixed point in time.

Lolita as a Ritual

The overall process of wearing Lolita is a ritual that is often overlooked. Lolita fashion itself is highly performative, and is a visual expression of the values of the subculture. Emile Durkheim used the terms sacred and profane to highlight the dichotomy between what is revered and what is mundane in terms of religion. The process of wearing Lolita is sacred in the sense that it takes the wearer out of the profane world, and into a space of ritualized and coded practices. Clothing that holds more value than most is worn and special knowledge is needed to
interact with the community. Time and effort is necessary to put together a proper Lolita coordinate. Some Lolitas will plan their outfits weeks in advance and can take anywhere from an hour to three hours to get ready.

The process of getting ready embodies the movement from the profane to the sacred. Each Lolita has a particular ritual for how they put on their clothing, and what items go where. Special detail is paid to applying makeup and styling hair or wigs. Once the process is complete, the Lolita has transitioned from the profane to a sacred space that surrounds them.

Firsts

There are many “firsts” that occur during the journey of Lolitahood. A Lolita’s first outfit, first meetup, and first large annual event are memorable times that shape how they will interact with the community and others in the future. Putting together the first outfit can be seen as a rite of passage within the Lolita community. The wearer has journeyed from simply being an admirer of Lolita fashion to actually wearing it.

There are numerous handbooks, discussion posts, websites, and other material that beginner Lolitas consult when they decide to start wearing Lolita fashion. The Lolita Handbook which can be found on LiveJournal warns new Lolitas that “first and foremost - Lolita is an expensive hobby, in the sense of both time and money. Cheap clothing with no time or thought put into it isn't Lolita. Lolita is defined by its elegance, and elegance doesn't come easy and it doesn't come cheap. But it is easy to possibly to afford it through several different means” (Lolita Handbook, October 27th, 2006).
There are a number of online stores that sell low quality “Lolita inspired” clothing that some beginners fall into the trap of buying. These clothes often feature too much lace, use poor quality fabrics, and do not follow the Lolita silhouette or aesthetic. Ebay shops and the notorious website “Milanoo” are common culprits. Milanoo has a history of being an online shop that scams many people that buy from them. Stealing stock pictures of Lolita dresses from other brands, having over 30 other websites under different names, and making products of horrible quality are but a few of Milanoo’s sins.

![Expected vs Received Dress from Milanoo](credit: lolitatips.tumblr.com)

“My first piece of Lolita was a MILANOO dress. I got it for my high school graduation. It actually wasn't as terrible as some of the other dresses people have received from them... It was just slightly discolored from the picture.” (Questionnaire answer from ChiChi, March 26th, 2014). Some novices will ask their local Lolita community what they recommend or will ask for opinions about a particular dress that they want to buy. The need for opinions reflects that knowledge and community opinion is valued, and also that the first dress is a major milestone. I
asked all my participants about their first dress and was given many different answers about the quality and where it was bought from. Melanie recalled not knowing what Lolita fashion was when she bought her first dress. “I bought it [a JSK, headbow, and a pair of socks] as a Halloween costume, called it Harajuku, and went trick or treating in it. People thought I was Nicki Minaj. It was the most expensive Halloween costume ever!” (Interview with Melanie, March 16th, 2014). Little did Melanie know that the dress she bought was from the brand Angelic Pretty. The total cost of her “Halloween costume” was a bit over $300.

Other Lolitas fondly remembered their first outfits with a sense of humor and described their first outfits as “train wrecks” or *ita when they looked back at them. Holly Quinn remembered “When I put my first outfit together and wore it, I felt so accomplished, and ethereal, and the embodiment of an elegant, powerful woman. Absolutely beautiful” (questionnaire answer from Holly Quinn, March 25th, 2014). Sarah described her first outfit as “a horrible self-made skirt and bow and an altered lace blouse from my mom. It was actually soooo good to be in 'Lolita' for the first time” (questionnaire answer from Sarah, March 29th, 2014). Many other Lolitas echoed feeling beautiful and excited about their first outfits when they wore them for the first time. This demonstrates how empowering wearing Lolita can be to new members.

Occasionally there will be online discussions where members are encouraged to show a picture of their first coordinate in comparison to a recent picture of themselves in Lolita to show how they have improved their coordinating skills since they began. This enables them to have a visual representation of their pride in their Lolita journey, as well as having a sanctioned space to brag or inspire others.
I can distinctly remember shopping for my first Lolita outfit. I was preparing for Anime Weekend Atlanta in September of 2010, and decided to wear Lolita about three weeks before the event. I did hours of homework about the fashion and read everything that I could get my hands on. At the time, I felt like my choices were limited since I am plus sized, but I have since learned that there are many options for others like me and where the best places are to buy clothing for my size. I ended up buying two skirts, a light petticoat, socks, and two bows from an online website called Anna House, and a blouse from Kohl’s, a mainstream store. I hand sewed little pink bows to the ends of my blouse and attached $1 lace from Wal-Mart to the button panel. I was beyond proud of my outfit, and I felt so beautiful and princess-like. A year or so after putting together my first outfit, I hid all picture evidence of my first coordinate out of embarrassment, but I am now able to look back on my first coordinate, laugh, and remember how happy I was at the moment.

Figure 27- My first Lolita outfit
Once a novice has an outfit put together, they often attend their first meetup. Some novices attend meetups before obtaining their first outfit, and will come to the meetup in some other sort of Japanese fashion. The Atlanta Lolita Community hosts a “new member meet and greet” every year to make new members feel comfortable and to encourage them to make friends with other new members. One new member, Esther, that attended the meet and greet remembered, “I had an amazing time at the new member meet and greet. I’ve never felt accepted by a group so quickly and easily. It was very comforting and reassuring to know that there are so many other like-minded individuals living in this area, and getting to meet so many of them for the first time was truly something special” (interview with Esther, March 26th, 2014). The moderators of Lolita communities and the hosts of the meetups will often introduce new members to other members of the community.

“Being” a Lolita vs. Wearing Lolita

In the process of interviewing Liz, something very interesting was brought to my attention. The idea of “being a Lolita” is relatively new. In the past, participants of Lolita fashion might simply have said that they “wear Lolita fashion,” but the idea of being one was not widely heard. Being a Lolita as what comes after the first outfit has been worn or put together and feelings of connection with other Lolitas has been established, whether in a group/community, or simply knowing that the imagined community exists in general. I began to think about this and wondered where the idea might have come from. With the frequent usage of the internet to learn more about Lolita fashion, I believe that a sense of unity was created once local communities began to pop up on the web. The sense of being could have also occurred once the communities grew and traveled into other aspects of a wearer’s daily life. LiveJournal and Facebook function
in this case as social media, but also as a way to bridge the gaps between personal and private life.

**Leaving Lolita**

Occasionally there comes a time in a Lolita’s life when she contemplates leaving Lolita fashion in the community, or as one of my participants jokingly called it “throwing in the petti.” This moment can come after many years of being in the community and growing tired of the drama, or even from a lack of passion for the clothing. When a Lolita decides to leave the community, they begin the ritualistic process of purging their wardrobe by putting their items up for sale. This is known as the “Leaving Lolita Sale.” Molly told me, “I secretly love leaving Lolita sales, especially when my friends have one. I get first dibs on whatever they’re selling, and their dresses usually go for really low prices since they’re just trying to get rid of them” (interview, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014).

One ex-Lolita, “Jen,” told me her story of why she left Lolita. Her story was very similar to many others that I heard.

The best way to start is to explain why I got into Lolita in the first place. I've always been an outcast and discovering Lolita through a friend I was immediately pulled in, I was happy interacting and befriending others like me. I no longer felt like an outcast and felt safe, I left because I felt like Lolita was holding me back. I was so engrossed in the fashion trying to look my best, be the best in the community that I lost sight who I really was. I now realize I used Lolita as a means to get away from "the real" world. It was a means to get away from my problems instead of confronting them. Now that I have left, I feel so much better, like a weight has been lifted. I'm finally motivated to finish college and I'm slowly discovering who I really am as a person. (Personal communication, May 2nd, 2014).
Even after being bullied and facing problems with her local Lolita community, one participant told me, “I didn't leave LOLITA. I left the Lolita Community. I love Lolita too much to quit wearing it, but I have not and will not return to the community, despite attending an event here and there.”

Leaving Lolita can be an emotional time for the Lolita that decides to leave, as well as for their friends, their local community, and in some cases, the international community. If a Lolita is a prominent online member, and posts quality coordinates, their absence in the community is felt. I have had numerous friends leave Lolita during the time that I have been involved. I rarely see them anymore because of their involvement with other hobbies. At one point, I contemplated leaving Lolita because I felt as though I lost my motivation for wearing the fashion. I also became overwhelmed with some of the conflicts that occurred in my local Lolita community, and simply wished to not be involved.
Chapter 3: Conflicts and Issues

As in every community, conflicts and issues arise. When I originally began this project, I intended to avoid going into detail about some of the more negative aspects of Lolita fashion, conflicts being one of them. The more that I avoided it; the more I realized just how much the topic needed to be addressed. During my time as a Lolita, I’ve seen conflicts and drama tear friends and whole communities apart. On the other hand, I’ve watched Lolitas and communities ban together to stop harassment, price scalping, and numerous other hurtful and dangerous activities. Conflicts can bring out the best and the worst in people, and Lolitas are not immune.

In this section, I will explore conflicts within the Lolita community and their effects on the members and the ambiance of the community in general. I rely on my own experiences, and also on the experiences of the participants that I interviewed and that took the questionnaire to draw my conclusions. While not every Lolita or community experiences conflicts in the manner that I have presented, many should be able to relate in some manner.

Conflicts in the Lolita Community

When examining the Lolita community, I found that using “levels of analysis” worked best to illustrate and dissect the layers of what happens within the community. There are three basic layers in conflict, which I am concerned: the micro-level, the meso-level, and the macro-level. In the context of the Lolita community, individual members make up the micro-level, the local community functions at the meso-level, and the international and imagined community
functions at the macro-level. Conflicts occur on all levels, and can often begin at one level and move or expand to another.

I asked several participants to tell me about their communities and what sorts of things happen within them. Many mentioned prolonged conflicts between individual members, and a few noted that those conflicts had impacted their community in the long run. One conflict in particular was mentioned by several members of the Atlanta Lolita Community. This conflict would eventually become a “historic” conflict that is still talked about (in jest) to this day among some members of the Atlanta community. Most Lolitas that joined after 2012 do not know about the conflict in full, but have heard bits and pieces of the story from senior members. Though the conflict is joked about, the scars still run deep in all parties involved.

“I think it all began over a pair of wristcuffs,” Naomi reminisced. “It just spiraled out of control. A very Sweet girl (“Claire”) was running a group order and a woman, I’ll call her…Helga, ordered some wristcuffs, but Helga wanted Claire to deliver them to her or something. Helga started sending harassing messages to Claire, and when that got out to some people in the community, people stood up for Claire because she’s just so sweet, which made Helga really angry. Helga started sending harassing messages to other people in the community, which got people to gossip about her, and that just turned into a whole clusterfuck because eventually anyone who gossiped about her got a message. It got so bad that the mods of the comm held a vote at to see if she should be kicked out, which she was. People posted secrets about her, and I’m pretty sure that other comms remember it too. That woman was crazy to begin with. I heard that she’s been kicked out of every other scene that she’s been involved with, so I’m not really surprised. If she wouldn’t have been such a raging cunt and would have asked
nicely, people probably wouldn’t still hate her. I mean, this happened in like…2012 I think, but people still bring it up because it’s just so crazy and it’s such a weird situation.” (Interview with Naomi, March 25th, 2014).

Naomi’s account of the conflict between Claire and Helga demonstrates several interesting aspects of conflicts among Lolitas. The initial problem normally happens because of something Lolita related. Other Lolitas not involved in the initial situation also tend to get involved, which escalates the conflict to the meso-level. While the event was intense and changed the community forever, it is shrugged off as a joke. I observed that most other major interpersonal conflicts in the Lolita community are usually not joked about, and are often still perpetuated for years after the fact.

Naomi mentioned that “people posted secrets about her,” which refers to posting people to the LiveJournal community called Behind-the-Bows (often shortened to BTB and once known as Lolita Secrets). BTB is modeled after the popular Post Secret series, and allows for members of the global Lolita community to anonymously post a “secret” written in text on image. Behind the Bows was initially meant to allow for Lolitas to make Lolita related confessions, but has turned into an arena for airing vendettas, gossip, and generally negative feelings. By posting the contents of a conflict to BTB, the conflict escalates to the macro-level because it is now known by the global community, and others not involved can inquire about what has happened. Gossip often occurs in the comments and among Lolitas over private messages, in person, etc when an interesting or relevant secret is brought up.
Unfortunately due to the pugnacious nature of some Lolita Communities, conflicts among Lolitas are rarely resolved in a manner that would be considered mature and civil by mainstream society. Similar behavior can be found in other areas of life which are supposed to be governed by rules of civility and maturity, (such as sorority conflicts, drama between members of religious institutions, etc) which is also seen as the “adult world.” This does not necessarily imply that the Lolita world is not one of adults, but implies that the Lolita world has different behaviors that are considered acceptable. The concepts of adulthood and age are recognized, but the associated norms are not ingrained in Lolita culture. Lolita is escapism for many, and a chance for Lolitas to unchain themselves from the burdens of expected behaviors of their gender, age, and background.

Conflicts can go on for years or can die down once it is forgotten or if another conflict begins. If a conflict is big enough, members of the local Lolita community will sometimes leave and start their own unofficial group with their close Lolita friends, or will individually break off contact with the community, not attend meetups, and will only wear Lolita in their personal time. These unofficial groups are mainly groups of friends that will not adopt a group name, but others will have a large enough following to where they start a completely separate and organized Lolita community in the same area. Integration back into the original group is rare.

Gossip

Gossip among Lolitas is a truly fascinating phenomenon. It is both discouraged and encouraged, depending on when and where it takes place. Gossip functions as an outlet in which information is spread and is also a form of social currency between members of the community.
Gossip generally takes the form of being about a particular person or group of people, and their actions or behaviors that commit some sort of social faux pas. My first experience with gossip in the Lolita community came at my first meetup. Several members complained about a Lolita within their community that was not getting along with others or fitting in very well. She was also considered to not be well dressed. Each Lolita that spoke validated the other, and the gossip only ended when another subject was brought up. Though the Lolita that was being gossiped about never found out, this added on to the growing list of complaints against her.

Lolitas generally discourage gossip at large meetups where multiple friend groups or cliques gather. Cliques are tight-knit groups of friends that associate with each other. Cliques can be formed around common interests, but are more often formed around common personalities and values, such as their views on gossip and how much they accept it. Cliques are often relatively stable until conflict occurs within, or a member dissents from the overall group ideals. The level of power that a clique has within the meso-level community often depends on if they are viewed as intimidating or kind and welcoming. Both views have pros and cons. Cliques are important in conflict management because members of cliques are often available to defend their members against attacks from other cliques or from other individual members. This defense is called “white-knighting.”

When smaller, more intimate meetups happen, gossip is often one form of entertainment. Gossip is the ultimate social currency behind the scenes in Lolita, and is traded among various groups until it eventually makes its way to the person or people that the subject is about. The trading of gossip allows for new information to be integrated into the story or message, allows for clarification from those that were witnesses or those that know more about the situation, and
is the main way to build sociality. When gossip makes its way back to the subject that it is about, the person will either attempt to clarify the situation and the round of gossip will begin again, or they can attack the starter of the rumor if they know who did it or who was involved.

Gossip is also used to indoctrinate new members into the community and to warn them about who to hang out with and who to stay away from. This aids in building cliques, which depends on whom one runs into at their first meetup. Melanie recalled that the main type of discussion at her first meetup was gossip. She entered the community during a time of upheaval and attended a meetup where she was informed about what was happening and why. “I was worried about going to the meetup because of everything that was going on in the community, but curiosity got the best of me” (interview with Melanie, March 16th, 2014).

Gossip does not happen only during in person meetups, but also online in private
messages, or in secret groups created by members of the main community.

**Figure 28- An example of a defunct secret community**

A consequence of having online private messages is that there is proof of what was said that often cannot be deleted. Lolitas will sometimes take “screenshots” or “screengrabs,” which are photographs of their computer screen with the image of a particular webpage, message, etc. These screenshots can be used against those that participated in gossiping, and are used as proof of what occurred.

**Figure 29- A screen grab of a message that I received from a Lolita**
In the situation previously described with Claire and Helga, gossip fueled much of the conflict. Gossip took place in person, but also occurred in online spaces. The internet is its own arena in matters of conflict, and will be explored in the next section.

**Online Arenas of Conflict**

Lolitas use the internet for shopping, connecting with others, and keeping updated on new trends and releases from various brands. Other Lolitas utilize the internet for the aforementioned purposes, but also for reasons connected to drama and conflict. There are several online forums and websites that are used to discuss drama, and each has a different impact on the conflict that it hosts and perpetuates. When I first approached researching these communities, I was tempted to generalize all of them as negative spaces in Lolita without any merit, but after analyzing each of them, I changed my opinion. Though the communities promote and facilitate drama, they are also spaces of sharing and teaching what acceptable behavior is and what will be punished or called out. These spaces also exist to warn other Lolitas about possible scams or particularly bothersome people.

**GTFO My EGL** is a LiveJournal community that seeks to bring light to and call out the behavior of offending Lolitas. Most, if not all the posts revolve around something that was done online and often fall under the category of: stupidity (stupid people, pointless posts, dumb/repetitive questions, etc), scammers or scalpers, self-absorbed or elitist Lolitas (aka “special snowflakes”), or a specific offending Lolita. While this LiveJournal community appears to simply be a “wank community” (meaningless, negative, discussions), the community also serves as a harsh display of what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable within the Lolita Community. Members are able to comment in reply to a subject under a username of their
choosing, and there are five rules in place to keep everything running as smoothly as possible. Screencaps are encouraged to have a record of offending post or behavior and the deletion of comments or posts is not allowed within the community. I was surprised to see that members could be banned for harassment, since some Lolitas consider communities to encourage harassment or bullying. The rules of the community state that “trolling this comm, going into someone's personal journal and harassing them, serious personal attacks, anyone planning / posting any form of AIM / MSN / other harassment here where they went out their way to troll someone, and trying to evade a ban by making aliases” (gtfomyegl.livejournal.com).

Behind-the-Bows (or BtB) is another LiveJournal community that falls under the category perpetuating drama within the community. BtB was modeled after the popular series Post Secrets, and allows Lolitas to anonymously make Lolita related confessions through images superimposed with text. “Bonnie” noted that, “originally [Behind-the-Bows] was a place to post your own secrets related to Lolita. Like maybe, "I stole a headbow from someone because they
suck and I deserved it more” or "I have sex in Lolita because fuck all y’all", and while secrets like that still exist, a lot of it is just vague passive aggressive drama and rude comments on other peoples body/style/actions/beliefs/ whatever. It's a really shitty place” (Questionnaire answer from Bonnie, April 23rd, 2014).

Lolita Secrets preceded the community but was closed and purged of all posts in 2012. Behind-the-Bows quickly replaced the community, and now has over 1,000 members according to the page’s user info. When I asked my participants to describe Behind-the-Bows in their own words, “Benzy” described it as “A fighting ground where bitches gather for dominance” while “Usagi” described it as “…a place where people anonymously either flame each other and be immature, or out Lolitas to the community for bad behavior, either in real life or online. Often, some people just want to reveal their own secrets anonymously too” (questionnaire answers from...
Secrets are posted every Saturday, and many Lolitas that I spoke to excitedly await them. Each participant had a different reason for keeping up with the weekly secrets. Some browse the website for entertainment, while others use them to learn information about what is going on in other communities. “Blue,” a Lolita from California, answered that she reads the Secrets “because I end up laughing my ass off about the immaturity. But I actually enjoy when we make fun of the brands for posting weird stuff. (Like when the poses are weird or the prints make no sense, Mr. Yan)” (questionnaire answer, April 24th, 2014). Another Lolita, “Lady V,” mentioned, “I view to one, make sure I’m not posted; two, to make sure that people I know are posted or not; and three to look at funny general Lolita jokes” (questionnaire answer, April 23rd, 2014).

Bonnie echoed my personal sentiments about Behind-the-Bows “I used to browse it so I could keep up with what other Lolitas are talking about. I don’t have a reason to check it anymore so I don’t. It’s kind of a rule to be a "good Lolita" in a community. 1) wear great stuff 2) be nice and perfect 3) know all the drama in the local and larger community for discussion, but don’t participate in it. It’s pretty backwards and also damaging. You sort of have to gossip if you want to feel like you belong in the community, if you want status” (questionnaire answer, April 22nd, 2014).

The last online arena that significantly impacts the Lolita community is /CGL/. /CGL/ is one of the 63 sub-communities of the website 4chan.com, which is an English speaking imageboard website. The board is dedicated to topics about Cosplay and Lolita. Posts usually are made anonymously, but users have the option of posting under a name, known as a “trip.” Four
out of the thirty participants that took the questionnaire said that they browsed /CGL/, and most of the Lolitas that I interviewed also utilized the website in some manner. Blue described 4chan and /CGL/ as “...a hive of scum and villainy and /cgl/ is the hive of cosplay and gothic Lolita hate. Tis a silly place and you shouldn't go there if you don't want to have your feelings hurt. Go there if you want to laugh at the stupid shit people post” (questionnaire answer, April 23rd, 2014). “Berry” also negatively described /CGL/ as “a cesspool where people say all the things behind a veil of anonymity that would be better off said in public because it would never be as rude or mean” (questionnaire answer, April 22nd, 2014).

/CGL/ functions as an area where drama can be freely discussed, whether it is community drama in general, or drama purely targeted at one Lolita in the community. If one Lolita is constantly being posted to /CGL/, the poster of the thread is often said to be a “vendetta-chan,” (-chan being the endearing and diminutive Japanese honorific that is often used for children and young women). With the recent addition of janitors (moderators), /CGL/ has seen a decrease in postings that target one person. One of the official rules of the board states that “singling people out maliciously is not tolerated and will result in a ban. 4chan is not your personal army. The singling out rule applies to vendetta threads and replies being made to attack a specific person, as
well as predatory behavior like doxing. Discussing an individual in general isn't against the rules as long as it's done within context of cosplay/Lolita/j-fashion.” /CGL/ is also used as a space where the week’s Secrets can be discussed, and Secrets that were not posted before can be shown.

When asked about what threads they normally follow, one participant told me that /CGL/ serves a dual purpose in her life, and was not centered on drama and gossip. “I'm a cosplayer and Lolita. I look at stuff in my area, help with construction and coords. I look at "ita" threads so I know what I should never do so I don't even up on /cgl/” (questionnaire answer, April 23rd, 2014). “Lyn” also browses /CGL/ for similar reasons. “I like the sewing threads, the insp[irati]o[n] threads, and the "what is your community like?” threads” (questionnaire answer, April 25th, 2014).

Some Lolitas refuse to visit /CGL/ for various reasons. Five questionnaire participants and three interviewees claimed to consciously boycott /CGL/, though they knew about the community. The reasons why ranged anywhere from not wanting to be involved in a negative space to simply not wanting to lose time to browsing the website. Berry is one Lolita who stopped reading /CGL/ because she could not stop herself from participating in threads. Unfortunately, she is unable to utilize the positive aspects of the community, and misses the helpful internet shopping thread that is a permanent fixture of the board. I observed that Lolitas often mistrust other Lolitas who are known to post on /CGL/, and some will even lie about their involvement with the website to increase trustworthiness, or to evade being accused of posting in a negative thread.
GTFO my EGL, Behind-the-Bows, and /CGL/ are difficult spaces to navigate in the online Lolita community. While they serve as spaces to create and enforce normativity in the community, they also are often associated with a darker purpose; bullying. Cyber bullying has been a problem in mainstream society, and numerous other cultures that utilize the internet for interpersonal connection, and is on the rise and constantly increasing and evolving. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines cyber bullying as bullying that takes place using electronic technology, which includes cell phones and computers, but also communication tools including social media sites, text messages, chat, and websites. (Services n.d.)

The most comprehensive definition of harassment that I found was:

“repeated, unsolicited, threatening behavior by a person or group using mobile or Internet technology with the intent to bother, terrify, intimidate, humiliate, threaten, harass or stalk someone else. The harassment can take place in any electronic environment where communication with others is possible, such as on social networking sites, on message boards, in chat rooms or through email. Just posting a general opinion on a discussion board or in a forum is not considered harassment” (wisegeek.org).

According to statistics from the i-SAFE foundation, 1 in 3 young people have experienced cyber threats online and over 25% of adolescents and teens have been bullied through their cellphones or through the internet. The Cyber bullying Research Center also noted that mean, hurtful comments were the most common type of cyber bullying. Many Lolitas fall into the age range of the focus of the statistics, and use the internet as a communication tool. I personally have not
been a victim of cyber bullying in the Lolita community, but I know too many people who have both been victims and bullies themselves.

Bullying and harassment comes in many different forms in the Lolita community, and a discrepancy of what is classified as each exists in the community. One form of bullying and harassment can be seen in posting a Lolita to a conflict community. Stumbling on a picture of you on a /CGL/ thread or on a BtB post can be a scary moment, especially if it is presented in a negative context. In my first year of wearing Lolita, a picture of me and several other members of my community were posted to /CGL/ on two occasions. The first post was about another person that I was in the picture with, and the second was made by someone participating in a thread about funny pictures of Lolitas. I was relieved to see that neither one of the posts were negatively directed at me. During July of 2013, a secret was made about a sales post that I had made a week prior. The poster did not approve of the way I was auctioning a ring off, and thought that the minimum bid was too high and that the auction was unnecessary. I was a bit shocked to see the post, but I quickly forgot about it and went about my business.

I was very interested to see how other Lolitas would feel about posting and being posted to /CGL/, BtB, or even GTFO my EGL since it was such a big fear of mine. Only two of the questionnaire and interview participants admitted to posting a secret (but did not specify who or what it was about) on Behind-the-Bows, and five participants had a secret posted about them at some point in time. Eleven participants said that they had posted to /CGL/ at one point in time (but did not specify what type of post was made) and ten Lolitas said that they had been posted to /CGL/. A majority of participants and other Lolitas that I have spoken to during my time in the community consider (maliciously) posting someone to the community to be a form of bullying.
Answers included, “Yeah it's all definitely bullying and no one should do it,” and “absolutely. I think it's terrible to talk about someone anonymously online. It's too easy to forget that they are human, just like you. Bitching should be done with girlfriends in real life” (questionnaire, April 22nd, 2014). Other Lolitas were not so quick to label all negative postings as bullying or harassment. Lyn said, “I guess it depends. Some people do shitty things in their communities and I don't think it's a bad thing that they are exposed for that. I can't say I'm a fan people posting and complaining about other's coords; that is kind of low and I would consider that bullying,” and “Rissa” similarly agreed by saying, “It depends on the context but there is plenty of public shaming that goes on there as well. Some of my acquaintances have been on there before and there are some extreme grudges. We may not know the deal, but some stuff really should be handled a different way. They're trolls of course, but there's some messed up stuff too” (questionnaire, April 26th, 2014). Berry disagreed “If you don't read it then how does it affect you? People will always talk and gossip about other people but cgl is easy to avoid. You don't have to read it if you don't want to.” (questionnaire, April 26th, 2014).

Lolitas that have been posted to any of the conflict communities have expressed a wide range of emotions. Some have sought to “get back” at whoever posted them by instigating a search to find the perpetrator, while others have quietly dealt with the matter and moved on. “Jackie” said that she felt “Upset,” because “[the secret] was about [her] friend who had passed away.” Rissa disclosed that she had been posted to BtB and then to /CGL/ because of the related secret. “I felt a bit complemented that someone bothered to use the photo and curious as to who had done it and the person they were trying to contact as well as what the issue was. Being posted to /CGL/ freaked me out a bit since more people look at /CGL/. I've never been mentioned personally that I know of but my comm has been for awhile” (questionnaire, April
Berry on the other hand recalled that being posted to /CGL/ made her feel “like shit but I don't think it's bullying. I can choose not to read cgl or participate so I am in no way trapped having to deal with it. In order to feel bullied I would need to feel trapped or stuck, unable to escape from other people's actions.”

One participant, Artie, shared her story of bullying and how it affected her. Harassment and bullying in Lolita often extends to a personal realm, and can cause victims to fear for their privacy and safety both online and offline.

When I first began wearing Lolita, I decided to start a blog where people could vent about their fears and hopes for their fashion journey in an anonymous space, so that they could get support and hopefully not feel so alone. I started getting in confessions about girls’ fear of wearing their frills in public, being the only one in their community who liked a certain print, and stories about how their parents wouldn't let them wear the fashion. At first it was fun and overall helpful and the blog became surprisingly popular, until the hate mail started. People would find my personal blog and Facebook, blame me for 'confessions' that they didn't like, and harass me on there too. It got to the point that I had to change my name on every online site that I was a part of because I feared for my privacy. After a few months, these people would write the nastiest things about me on anonymous hate sites, and I finally decided that it wasn't worth the abuse and quit the fashion altogether. Now whenever I even see Lolita coordinates, I associate it with all of the hateful things that people had said about me on those websites; something that I used to love and make a part of my identity now makes me feel a pang of hurt just by looking at it, and the sad thing is that my story isn't as uncommon as you would think.

Bullying and harassment can also occur offline in Lolita, but online has been the most common location. Harassment also happens outside of the Community as well. When Lolitas enter a space occupied by non-Lolitas and mainstream society, negative interactions and harassment can occur. I can vividly remember the first time that I wore Lolita in public and had a negative experience. I had to take public transportation to a meetup and I was alone. The train that I was on was packed with passengers. Some people went out of their way to make snide
comments directly to my face (“That’s not sexy!” and “Hey little bo peep, want to see my wooly sheep?” were among the comments), and to even take my picture without my permission. One man actually jumped between trains to get a better picture of me, all while laughing. When I finally got to my destination, I was mortified and vowed to never wear Lolita in public again. I have changed my stance over the years, but I still know plenty of Lolitas that feel the way that I first did. Other Lolitas have told me similar stories of harassment in public, and some consider it to be a normal risk of wearing the fashion in public. “It’s almost like people forget that we’re humans too. It makes me sad. I just want to express myself and wear this awesome fashion in public, but sometimes it’s just not safe to do that,” (Interview with Naomi, March 25th, 2014). A Tumblr page titled “Lolita Paparazzi” has been made in response to the issue of being photographed without consent. The website information states that “this is a blog for Lolitas who have had enough of randomly being papped without their consent. No longer will we tut in dismay - oh no - today we SNAP BACK! You too can join the cause, submit your pics of the paps and fight back!” (http://lolipaparazzi.tumblr.com). Lolitas are encouraged to take photos of people taking pictures of them and to share stories about harassment in public. The blog also gives advice for how to deal with and prevent others from taking pictures without permission, and gives Lolitas a feeling of being able to take control of the situation when control is lost. “Lolita Paparazzi has made me feel better about wearing Lolita in public because now I can make people feel as uncomfortable as they make me feel! Two wrongs don’t make a right, but maybe this will show people that it’s not okay to take pictures of me without my permission!” (Interview with Naomi, March 25th, 2014).
Figure 33- A Lolita taking a picture of a woman taking a picture of a Lolita (credit lolipaparazzi.tumblr.com)
The Sweet Side of Lolita

While Lolita communities and the subculture in general have its negative aspects, there are many positive ones as well. The positive aspects are what keep Lolitas involved in the community, and are what continue to enrich the lives of participants. I asked several Lolitas to tell me what their favorite parts of Lolita are, and received many different answers. Answers ranged from “being a part of it has been one of the best parts of my life and it's taught me so much,” to “I have made a few great, REAL friends through Lolita, and I can dress up with them whenever I want, or do what I've always done and dress up alone whenever I feel like it, and it's awesome and freeing.”
Not all Lolita centered websites are negative. Lolita Valentines is a LiveJournal community that allows for Lolitas to anonymously post positive messages to other Lolitas. One Lolita that I interviewed said “I love loli valentines and the happiness that it brings to the people posted in the images.” Lolita Valentines are a way to complement Lolitas on their coordinates, to thank them for hosting meetups or other events, and to express love for their community and Lolita friends.

Lolita has also been an avenue for people to make new friends that share a similar interest. Numerous stories were told about “Lolita Besties” or best friends in the fashion. “Kuraku” explained that “I met my best friend through a LiveJournal community that was about helping you meet local Lolitas. It was friend-love at first sight. We love the same foods, and have the same strange taste.
in a lot of things.” Another told me that “we actually didn't know we both liked Lolita until I saw her post on Facebook that she needed help picking out a dress. We now have shopping parties together.”

While I’ve made numerous friends in my local Lolita community that I would consider my Lolita besties. As I’ve traveled and done research, I have also met Lolitas from all across the world. One of my Lolita besties lives in Seattle, and the other lives in Belgium. We keep in contact through many Lolita networking websites, but also as pen-pals. I always joke with my friends that are not in the community that Lolitas are everywhere, and that if a Lolita decides to travel to a different state or foreign country and needs somewhere to stay, advice, or any sort of assistance, the local Lolita community acts as an embassy and welcomes them with open arms.

Lolita has taught me invaluable skills and has also taught me the importance of being myself. One Lolita in the Atlanta community explained that Lolita is a sisterhood, and that the fashion encourages people to be the best they can be. That includes putting time and effort into their appearance, learning new skills, and having good interpersonal communication skills when problems arise. Participants of other subcultures have expressed similar feelings of unity, but I believe that Lolita has its own unique sense of sisterhood that is fostered through the fashion and through interactions with others. Participants of Lolita fashion are truly empowered princesses
(and princes) in their own right, and own the space that surrounds them.

Figure 35- First time meeting my Lolita Bestie in Antwerp
Conclusion

The Lolita fashion subculture has changed in many ways since its inception, thanks in part to the involvement of the internet into the daily lives of participants. The community has become a major aspect, which enables it to not simply be a fashion, but a subculture as well. Without utilization of the internet, the fashion community would look very different and would not be as widespread as it has become. The Lolita community functions in two overlapping arenas; the online and the in person. In person interactions and meetups supplement the online component and vice versa. The internet is central to the development of the Lolita Community (in both the meso/local and macro/international level), and is the dominant means of communication, event creation, and where conflicts occur and are played out. Offline interactions can instigate the aforementioned events, but rarely unfold in the in person arena.

Identification as a Lolita is not a process that all wearers of the fashion choose to claim. Community affiliation plays a large role in how strong the Lolita identity is in an individual, and influences the difference between being a Lolita and wearing Lolita in most cases. Affiliation with a Lolita Community (both local and imagined) can give a unique sense of unity, solidarity, and legitimacy that other wearers of Lolita fashion might not have, but also create an area that is prone to conflict.

Lolita communities employ a hierarchy that is abstractly acknowledged by community members, but functions much like other modern and western cultures and societies. Social stratification is based on: the perceived socioeconomic status of an individual, possession of material goods/wealth, amount of time in the community, contributions (both positive and negative), individual personality (how well it integrates with others,) and how well an individual is able to dress (ability to follow the aesthetic guidelines, expression of creativity, and
Because of the structure and practices within the Lolita Community, rituals are naturally found. The process of dressing in Lolita fashion itself is as a ritual, and community meetups and online events serve as rites. Lolita creates a sacred space that is owned by those who wear it encompasses the body of the wearer(s), their choice of clothing, and their sense of being as individuals. Lolita is a coded performance for the pleasure of those that wear it, the gaze of other Lolitas, and functions as a visual resistance against mainstream societal norms based on gender, age, and ability. This in turn creates feelings of empowerment, agency, and control. All aspects impact and shape the Lolita Experience in a manner that is unique to each participant.

Limitations and Future Research

This research can be expanded in the future to include other Lolita Communities around the US and around the world. The scope of the participants was adequate for the size of the study, but more recruits could be more beneficial in the future to diversify the sample. Demographic information including socioeconomic status could provide a point for comparison between Lolita communities, as well as enabling future research to delve deeper into these stratifications.

Future research in the Lolita Community can go in various directions, as the community is very complex. Issues of size and body image, age, and ethnicity would give more insight into more niche aspects of the community that are important to the overall structure. Lolita fashion as
a subculture will continue to expand and evolve as time goes on, which will present new information and avenues for research.
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