

DOCTORAL THESIS

Performing Identities: Hong Kong Lolita Subculture in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This thesis explores the performative and cultural identities of Hong Kong female Lolita subculture, using data from narratives of their lives, art exhibitions and resources from online platforms. Lolita subculture originated in Japan in the 1980s and has become popular worldwide. Due to geographical and cultural proximity, Japanese Lolita subculture has quickly emerged and developed in Hong Kong in the following decades. Many young females who started joining the Lolita subculture in Hong Kong decades ago are now married adults with children. Many of these Hong Kong Loitas are still playing very active roles within the Lolita group. This research aims 1) to understand the formation and development of feminine identities of Hong Kong Lolitas over the past decades; 2) to examine how the symbolic meanings of style, experience and body have been represented and transformed as Lolitas become mature women; 3) to explore to what extent the “Lolita identification” can be understood as a form of performance, a creative art expression, re-gendering, resistance or a form of self-crafting fantasy identity.

Theoretically, Goffman’s work of dramaturgical theory, Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage and Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory are employed to evaluate the meanings and significance of Lolita identity formation in Hong Kong. Semiotic works by Saussure and Barthes are also used for analysing the codes of Lolita fashion styles and art-making, as well as relevant images and texts available in online platforms by Lolita participants. Methodologically, a hybrid qualitative research method was adopted for data collection, which includes life history, ethnographic interviewing and art-based research methods. Twenty Lolitas (aged 20 to 40) were invited for in-depth interviews. A series of artwork were produced and displayed in Macau and Hong Kong for the public as a means to further explore the questions of identity formation of Lolitas.

The study proposes that the development of Lolita subculture in Hong Kong can be divided into three main epochs from the year 2000 to the present time: the Justice Epoch (2000-2005), L.O. Epoch (2005-2010), and HK Lolita Epoch (2010-present). Data collected shows that the style, experience, body, and cultural identity of the group have changed in each epoch and that local Mong Kok Lolita style is a remarkable example of cultural hybridization as it reflects transnational and translocal features in its formation and development. The research also demonstrates how “Lolita” was interpreted and expressed as a form of “specific feminine” identity by artists, ordinary/popular audiences and the Lolita participants themselves. The emphasis on the aesthetics of fashion, the potential of artistic creation and expression, and the classic beauty of Lolita subculture are crucial factors for its continuous development globally and culturally in fashion markets and art creation arenas.