

# “嗨，姐妹，我能借用你的風格嗎？：歌德蘿莉 潮流在亞洲及其外沿地區之跨文化、跨文本發展研究”

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## 論文摘要

本文旨在探討香港、日本和中國以及全球青年扮成日本漫畫書和動畫卡通、視頻遊戲、電視秀、流行音樂樂隊中人物角色的歌德蘿莉主題裝束的風尚。文章將檢視個體追隨“歌德蘿莉”裝扮活動的根本原因和那些指引他們的多重跨文化、跨種族、跨文本的文學與歷史影響。

作為一項進行中的大規模研究項目的一部分，本次研究測試了斯通的通過對幻想社會化進程理解得出的個人發展與呈現外觀得體性的主張，同時也再次審視了艾澈兒的關於通過公開、私隱以及秘密自我穿著來溝通、探索個性的著作。這也同時考察了遊戲理論——空泛想象中空想傾向與表現在歌德蘿莉個性描繪中的作用，質疑了服裝作為掙脫自我限制而獲得多重身份催化劑的緣由。

訪問在選擇性的指導下進行，系選取香港和東京那些在私家場合以及公開場地或有組織的主題活動中都經常穿著歌德蘿莉裝束的人士。研究提問包括——對於歌德蘿莉參與者而言扮演一身外角色的意味何在，促使他們進行裝扮的原因，他們是怎樣去選定一個角色的，是否有一特定創意表達形式的存在，他們用於創意指引、亞文化反叛、秘密或公開表達自己的依據資源，他們為什麼又是怎樣應用裝扮來追求某個特別的哥德式幻夢的，以及在特定裝束下的性別社會化作用。

研究證明歌德蘿莉裝扮作為跨文化、跨言語經驗在諸多文化節點中因參與者的不同而產生不同的體現，這些不同取決于人口統計學與心理學特徵的剖解——身份的再次認定；從已知現實的逃脫，亦即對於重拾“可愛”童年無邪的嘗試；和那些引人注目的、常常間接依附於亞洲及其外沿地區中的清晰可靠的亞文化共同體。

**關鍵字：**歌德蘿莉、歌德風格、跨全球潮流、跨文化潮流、跨文本影響、歌德裝束、亞文化風格、歌德時尚、歌德軀體、歌德身份

# **“Hey sister, can I borrow your style?: a study of the trans-cultural, trans-textual flows of the Gothic Lolita trend in Asia and beyond”**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the trend for young adults in Hong Kong, Japan and China and globally to dress up in themed costumes as Gothic Lolitas assuming the persona of characters from Japanese comic books (*manga*) and animated cartoons (*anime*), video games, television shows, pop music bands. The paper will explore the underlying reasons why individuals pursue this ‘Goth-Loli’ dress-up activity and the multiple trans-cultural, trans-national, trans-textual literary and historical influences that guide them.

The study, which is part of an ongoing large scale research project tests out Stone’s ideas of the appropriacy of appearance in the development and presentation of self via the capacity of fantastic socialization processes, whilst also revisiting Eicher’s work on communicating and exploring identity through the dressing of public, private and secret selves. It also examines play theory, the role of fantasy-proneness and the manifestation of the fantastic imagination in the personality profiles of Goth-Lolitas, and questions why dress is used as a catalyst for escaping the boundaries of self and acquiring multiple identities.

Interviews were conducted with a selection of Gothic Lolitas in Hong Kong and Tokyo who regularly dress in a range of costumes in both private domestic spaces and public places or at organized themed events. Research questions included, what it means for Gothic Lolita participants to assume another persona, what motivates them to dress up, how they decide to choose a particular character, whether it is a form of creative expression, what resources they use for creative guidance, sub-cultural rebellion, secret or overt expressions of self, why and how they employ dress to pursue a particular Gothic fantasy and the role of gender socialization in this type of costuming.

Findings suggest that dressing up as a Gothic Lolita is transcultural, multi-vocal

experience across cultural sites representing different things to different participants, depending on demographic and psychographic profiles, including the reaffirmation of identity, and the escape from a known reality – in an attempt to recapture a “cute” childhood innocence, and the visible, often mediated adherence to a defined and reassuring sub-cultural collective in the Asian context and beyond.

**Keywords :** Gothic Lolita, Gothic style, Trans-global flow, Trans-cultural flow, Trans-textual influence, Gothic Costume, Sub-cultural style, Gothic fashion, Gothic bodies, Gothic identity.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will firstly address the Gothic Lolita trend in terms of the notion of dressing up and the presentation of the spectacular, non-normative presentation of self or of multiple selves. Next, I will examine this specific dressing up activity by the fashion tribe of Gothic Lollitas in terms of their assumed Gothic inspired identities. Finally, I will fuse these themes together by suggesting that although quintessentially Japanese in origin, the Loli Goth or Goth Loli tribes in South East Asia, as a form of cultural hybridization, have significant connections and share parallel universes with their global Goth Loli sisterhood and other neo style tribes, whilst adopting their own unique cultural take on their appearance and lifestyle underpinning this distinctive sartorial practice. In doing so, the Goth Loli trend masquerades as pure entertainment, yet can be seen as a form of dark fun, as a counterpoint to the postmodern pressures of the human condition in contemporary Asian Cities.

The following exploration into the Lolita dress up trend aims to uncover the underlying motivations as to why these individuals become involved in this activity from their own perspectives. In doing so, it hopes to identify the cross-cultural, transcultural and social influences that underpin this fantastic presentation of self, and the formulation and communication of identity through a dramaturgical costumed approach amongst this particular grouping of spectacular style tribes specifically within the city spaces of Hong Kong and Tokyo.

## **Extraordinary Dressing Up**

The wearing of an extraordinary costume connected to a theme symbolically transforms the identity of the player enabling them to re-present their ordinary self in a new guise through role play, only made possible “by doffing their ordinary dress and donning extraordinary dress so that play may proceed. Playing the role of the other requires that the player dress out of the role or roles that are acknowledged to be his own. Costume therefore becomes a kind of magical instrument.”<sup>1</sup> Stone’s analysis of the transformative quality of fantasy costumes adopted by children at play during their early phases of socialization has relevance to the process of dressing-up in costume as a general activity amongst people of all ages across a range of contexts from theatre, festivals and masquerade events to fan based subcultures. Yet, social interaction and collusion with a knowing audience is also required to validate the misrepresentation of self through costume play. The wearing of costume visually signals and denotes the boundaries between the costumed player and the non-costumed other as, the ‘differentness’ and secrecy of play are most vividly expressed in, ‘dressing up.’ Here

the ‘extraordinary’ nature of play reaches perfection in the presentation of self.

### **Presenting the Secret Gothic Self**

This paper’s main concern is the actual departure from the wearing of everyday, public clothing that represents or plays out legitimate roles, to a focus on the donning of spectacular costume in the guise of a Gothic Lolita for acts of themed play as a magical instrument of imaginative transformation. Dressing up enables the player in their presentation of self via their Lolita performances, to transcend the acknowledged roles first encountered in the fantastic socialization phase of childhood development.. This, I would suggest, is critical to an understanding of the function and purpose of adult dressing up. Here, the costumed player appears to be projecting the secret self into the public domain, adapting Eicher’s typology of the three selves manifested through dress via the public, private and secret selves. According to this model, in communicating an identity the public persona is revealed to everyone, signaling the demographic features and professional garb of the wearer, whilst the private self, familiar to friends and family, is based on the clothing of relaxation and leisure, and the secret self or bedroom self is a restricted zone reserved for the individual and intimates based on the wearing of fantasy dress. This tripartite model also has gender implications, according to Eicher, who proposed that women were more at liberty to pursue their fantasies and dress up as their secret selves, whilst men were more confined, as a rule, to expressing themselves only in public and private dress. Certainly, there seem to be more females involved in the Lolita dressing up brigade, although males are becoming increasingly involved as we will see later, constituting a sisterhood as one informant explained,

*“When I put on my Lolita costume, I feel like I look very different from everyone else around me and it makes me feel stronger – I also like the way that people look at me and notice me – it’s good to have admirers. And when I wear the costume with my Lolita sisters at a convention or party, I feel really happy just relaxing, having fun and sharing everything with my Lolita family.” (Sheena, Gothic and Sweet Lolita).*

### **Gothic Lolita Trend – Japanese Youth Street Fashion Context**

The creative and spectacular excesses of Japanese youth fashion on the streets of

Tokyo and its style and fashion vortexes - the Harajuku and Shibuya districts - have been of recent interest to academics and media commentators. The rationale behind this profusion of eyeball popping street fashion including street style tribes such as Gothic Lolitas may be located in the changing socio-economic landscape of Japan and Hong Kong over the past two decades. Against the backdrop of a protracted economic recession of the 1990s and its societal impact on traditional family life and social harmony with a “widespread feeling of disillusionment, alienation, uncertainty or anger.”<sup>2</sup> Japanese youth street culture has ironically flourished as an expression of creative individuality where fashion is being used to challenge the traditional conformist and collectivist value systems. Since the 1990s, the bubble economies of South East Asia particularly Hong Kong and China have enjoyed steady economic growth providing the educated post-80s generation with disposable income to spend on fashioning their identities and expressing themselves in a more public way than previous generations. In these locations, Asian value systems are changing for a new generation who spend more time collectively engaged in the safety of their peer group friendships than with family. This trend has been seen by many media commentators as a negative, regressive trend for post 80s young adults to turn to popular culture as an escape hatch from the pressures of reality into the sci-fi manga and anime fantasy worlds, embodied in the cute (kawaii) Lolita-esque, passive demeanor, for example, where a sense of belonging and self have become invested in their assumed Gothic persona, and their connection to its potentially anti-social, sub-culture, is often at odds with traditional Asian cultural values.

Fashion and outward appearance is always a useful barometer of the social condition and the prevailing mood of the times or zeitgeist as subcultures tend to emerge between surveillance and its avoidance - re-appropriating and manipulating the gaze from being scrutinized into the pleasure of being looked at.

### **Neo Style Tribes**

Yet, these style tribes from the young Kogal females of the mid-1990s Japan in their faux school uniforms, long white socks and heavy makeup across the excessively tanned, peroxide blonde Ganguro gals to the Yamamba or mountain witches and hyper-colourful Mamba all use appearance and clothing to communicate a visible identity with their chosen tribe by visibly signaling association with their community and difference from all others in the spirit of other neo-tribal ‘scenes’ who create dynamic identities and affinities founded on consumption.

## **Gothic Lolitas in Focus – Presentation of Gothic Self**

Amongst this profusion of style tribal groupings, enter Gothic Lolita from the late 1990s – or Goth Loli, for short. This is a fandom fixated by fashion and which also continues the Gothic preoccupation with clothes or costume in the search for self. The ‘look’ then is depicted by a hyper feminine take on the Victorian porcelain doll whose outfits comprise a black and white knee length dress or skirt in cotton or taffeta and a ruffled high neck blouse decorated with ribbon or lace trim with under petticoats or bloomers, worn with long knee socks, black platform shoes or boots and a black and white lace headdress. To complete the look, a black parasol, crucifix, black lace gloves and black lace or grosgrain/silk handbag often in the shape of a bat or coffin may be donned. In terms of bodily appearance, hair is worn long and curled, often in the form of a dark wig, make-up is minimal but based on death-mask like, white foundation, red or black lipstick and kohl or black eyeliner - all sparingly applied and only worn when dressed in character (in stark contrast to contemporary Western Goths).

The devil is in the detail of this outfit and its carefully combined component parts, but also in the sub-species which not only includes other forms of the Lolita look of which there are many stemming from the Shojo (young girl – neither naïve child nor sexually aware woman) culture. This neo-tribe includes amongst others, Sweet Lolita (Ama-Rori with pink and pastel coloured be-ribboned clothes) and Classic Lolita (more mature, classical Victorian) or Punk Lolitas (Rori-Pan) complete with leather, zips and safety pins, and also other subtle variations on the Gothic Lolita style as my Hong Kong Lolita informant noted,

“There are three types of Lolitas – gothic, classical and sweet. Sweet Lolita is usually associated with pink and white cute outfits, they bring along cute toys and dolls and usually wear their cute hairstyles like ponytails, bangs and curvy plaits. The gothic Lolita is all about death and darkness with black dresses trimmed with lace and dark accessories and make-up, whilst the classic Lolita is in the original historic style. But all three types of Lolita place an emphasis on fancy lace and layering.” (Maya, Gothic Lolita).

## **Gothic Lolita Geneology**

The actual origins of the Gothic Lolita style is debated amongst commentators but the common view appears to suggest that whilst the trend may be a backlash against Kogal girl cute or the Ganguro-Mamba fashion excesses – it also has its local

roots in the Visual Kei glam rock. Its star, Mana, the cross dressing, former lead guitarist of visual kei band, Malize Mizer, known in his on-stage persona to adorn himself in a high Victorian funereal mourning dress, complete with dark crinoline styled dresses, large wigs and somber make-up, and whose own fashion label, Moi-Meme-Moitie, encapsulates the Goth-Loli style and is credited with inventing the terms, Elegant Gothic Lolita and Elegant Gothic Aristocrat to brand his fashion diffusion lines.

This multiplicity of intertextual and transtextual sources of street style, celebrity and commerce clearly has parallels in the trickle up fashion trends of many 20th century street fashions from 1950s bikers appropriated by YSL in his formative collections, to 1980s hip hop trends endorsed by Tommy Hilfiger. In essence, for the Goth Loli style tribe the blending of sources and styles all add to the aesthetic of the look which is fiercely and slavishly authentic in its stylized black and white lacy clothes and accessories as directed by the Gothic and Lolita Bible which provides insider knowledge about Goth Loli clothes, accessories and make-up with advice on how to buy or create the Lolita look at home or off the shelf. Yet, as with most forms of sub-cultural style and the fashion system in general, it also gains credibility from borrowed interest and references literary, mediated and from the cultural Other.

Hence, whilst this style trend borrows its name from Nabokov's novel and visually references a literary and a subcultural Gothic tradition, it also connects with more home grown textual sources of influence such as visual rock music, Rozen Maiden manga, and Le Petit Cosette anime – and even cites Tim Burton's 2005 film, *The Corpse Bride* and Sofia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie Antoinette* which one Lolita informant confessed to being, "mad about those charming dresses and wigs" whilst watching it "every weekend before I dress up."

## **Gothic Lolita and Gothic-ness**

This leads us to question – what then is the real connection between Goth-Lolis and the Gothic? Also, in true Gothic tradition what, and how much if anything has been borrowed or plundered from the past and how does this manifest itself across cultural boundaries?

Gothic styles across art, architecture and literature – what we now in 21st Century call the creative industries – has always been about Visi-Goth-like "plundering the past for artefacts and ideas that will anachronistically express current tastes<sup>3</sup> in various revivals, that sought to articulate a mythic nostalgia for an imagined past that is not of the here and now. As a consequence, the Gothic, across time, space and place has always been based on multi-levelled meanings articulating various



cultural ideologies.

So, the Goth Loli trend is well placed in this historic process and resides alongside other global contemporary Gothic trends in citing and re-appropriating mediated texts of fashion, literature, film and music.

We can go so far as to say that Gothic texts in general, as with any text, are not solely rooted in their specific genre – nor do they belong to it, but rather have a dynamic relationship with it, referring to it or evoking the Gothic sensibility semiotically. The Gothic literary tradition was premised on accessories and props – to construct the narrative. In this way, Goth Lolis continue the tradition of utilising familiar Gothic motifs – black clothes, crucifixes, coffins, bats, pale skin and dark looks to signal and enact their identity in a liminal, performative and material manner, whilst also reflecting the shadow-like aesthetics and sensibilities of a Gothic world inhabited by the youth followers of global Gothic style and fashion trends as Takemoto self-reflexively observes,

“We are a group of people that is capable of wearing a tiara one day and the headdress of a servant the next, mixing the sacred and the common, the noble and the vulgar, angel and devil.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Gothic Differences and Similarities**

The Goth Loli connection with traditional Gothic sources resides more at the aesthetics of the surface than perhaps do other Gothic subcultures or neo-cultures, in the sense that it is really all about the visual presentation of the secret self, because visual identity is of paramount importance to the youth of South-East Asia, and unlike Western subcultural trends, music and literary sources are mere add-ons or props. Most Goth Loli respondents in this study when questioned about the meaning or source of the Gothic related it to Gothic Lolita trends, and failed or refused to connect outside of this frame. Yet, they did appear to aspire towards a mythical vision of, and a longing for, an imagined past of a historic romantic Rococo or Baroque European traditions, despite the fact that they appeared to mix and match their outfits irrespective of historical knowledge or authenticity. The surface expression of Gothic-ness at the corporeal level also aligned with a seeming avoidance of deeper ideological or intellectual articulation, unlike other Gothic neo tribes as related by one informant who insisted that Gothic Lolitas in Hong Kong came together at weekends,

“just to share costume ideas and gossip about life in general, and never, ever talk about work or heavy stuff like that” (Winnie, Gothic Lolita).

However, in terms of transglobal flows – or the flying geese trend – the Japanese Goth Loli influences in the past few years have largely spread outwards from the source – across Asia to the West, as evidenced in the media coverage of rock celebrities shopping in Lolita branded stores and Courtney Love’s collaboration on a series of graphic novels featuring a Gothic Loli styled heroine, Princess Ai, and Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku Girls backup band and launch of her accessories and perfume brand, Harajuku lovers. The commercialization of the Lolita style – which also has parallels with the wider and historic marketisation of Goth Subculture - is also evidenced in transtextual terms with one of the most popular commercial brands borrowing its name from a UK 1980s chart topping pop song, Baby the Stars Shine Bright by Everything But the Girl. The look has also influenced high fashion trends and couture collections of fashion designers such as John Galliano for Dior as Gothic influences periodically emerge as a mainstream fashion trend.

Back at street level, there are also a growing number of Gothic transnational global followers who access Goth Loli websites and blog sites appearing to have an insatiable desire for this ‘look’, and in the absence of access to prescribed Goth Loli brands make their own outfits guided by online advice from the virtual Goth Loli sisterhood. Such evidence of a growing globally oriented fandom supports the notion that cultural hybridity and exchange of transnational sub-cultural capital is founded on affinity rather than the darker forces of exoticism or orientalism.

This global following of Gothic Lolita lookalikes also supports Appandurai’s belief that transcultural flows do not emanate from one fixed point but are part of a more complicated, multi-layered ebbing and flowing of a tidal wave of cross-cultural capital. According to this notion, it is almost impossible and maybe irrelevant to locate the authentic source(s) of the Goth Loli style in any definitive manner.

## **Complexities of Lolita Culture**

Similarly, in terms of authenticity to source location, the Lolita style tribes in general have rarely been acquainted with the characters in Nabakov’s novel, nor do they connect with the Western sexualised, and fetishized readings of the Lolita trope or the middle aged male fantasies or Lolita Complex (rori-kon/loli-con) harboured by local men or the young nerdy otaku who frequent the Maid Cafes where the hostesses dress in black and white Victorian servant uniforms. Most of my informants both in Tokyo and Hong Kong strongly denied any sexual over or undertones in their personal dress-up agendas and categorically stressed, in binary oppositional terms, that when dressing as Victorian ladies or dolls that their intention was to be a kawaii-like, child-like, innocent “cute princess-like person”. This discourse is

articulated and extends beyond their physical appearance because Lolitas and Goth Lolis, in my observation, adopt soft voices, special lady-speech and exaggerated lady-like gestures. In this way, they insist that they are communicating their authentic “true selves” their “inner people” (unlike the cosplayers and maids who just outwardly engage in mimicry). This view was vocalized by one Lolita who claimed that she would be a Lolita for life in thought and dress which in her view enabled her to remain bonded to the Lolita sisterhood, whilst another lived for her Lolita meetings at the weekend. Perhaps typical of most sub-cultural or neo-tribes, Goth Lolis struggle to protect their assumed identities from redefinition by others who as playing out Western style fantasies, or being overtly sexual from the perspectives of other style tribes, media commentators or the male gaze.

They are also in a sense transtextually connected to the romantic 18th and 19th Century Gothic narrative representations of young females standing in the twilight zone between childhood innocence and adult sexuality, defenseless and vulnerable to corruption from male domination, subordinating reason to imagination and avoiding the pain of growing up.

Essentially, the Goth Loli emphasis on the innocent cuteness of their presentation and performance of the secret self are part of an expression of female tastes and preoccupations to an audience of like minded people sharing the same sensibilities in the same cultural demographic. Unlike accounts of other youth based, neo style tribes in the Western frame, including Goths, young females in Japanese and South-East Asian cultures play an active and dominant role.

In this sense, Goth Lolis are actively utilising clothing and appearance, as indeed do other style neo-tribes, to deploy gender relations in the face of societal expectations – by resisting the pressures to be the same as their peer group, or by avoiding conforming with parental and institutional notions of acceptable attire. Again, Goth Lolis are perhaps mirroring, unwittingly or otherwise, other style tribes including Gothic trends, across time, space and place in using Gothic inspired clothing signs and props to signify a sense of belonging to their own style community or neo tribe and a distinct difference from others.

Gothic Lolitas are also perhaps controlling their appearance and what it communicates - concealing or protecting their sexuality as the flounces and frills detract from their bodily shape, whilst the corsets and petticoats delineate a material and impenetrable chastity-belt like barrier between themselves and the potential male predator.

## **Dark Reactions to Gothic Looks**

But this, “You can look but don’t touch” message, has risks in terms of the reactions from external communities. As with the Goth subculture, Goth Lolis can experience negative reactions when they display their secret self in public in the form of stalker-like otaku, obsessive photography fans or more extreme reactions from members of the public with one Lolita being chased down a busy Hong Kong street pursued by an affronted male wielding an umbrella yelling, “Devil Whore!”

## **Gothic Lolitas: the Darker Side**

The dark side of the Gothic Lolita universe, whilst seemingly focused on a surface concern with faux Gothic costume and accessories, also periodically manifests itself in murder and suicide by Goth Lolis in Japan.

The Goth Loli sisterhood is also not all sweetness and light as some of my Hong Kong interview respondents suggested, as the obsessive quest for visual authenticity, beloved of many neo style tribes, engenders a critical community of commentators bordering on the bitchy through the Goth Loli social networking sites. As one of my Hong Kong respondents observed,

“You have to get the whole outfit looking totally right or you will see bad comments about you in the chatrooms or on your blog like, ‘Your hat and bag is not right and too cute – it’s not the Gothic Lolita way and your make-up is all wrong!’” And then you feel really small and have to try to do better, as people will be really watching your outfit at the next meet. I’ve known girls be depressed for weeks about that bad talk about them.”

## **Male Goth Lolis and Gothic Performative Androgeny**

The insider Goth Loli world however is not an exclusively female domain as young males are increasingly becoming involved. Whilst this points to a queering of the genre, many of the female Goth Lolis when questioned about it passed this cross-dressing trend off as boys just wanting to imitate their girlfriends, denying any notion of transgender subversion which is a contested site in this conservative cultural domain. Nevertheless, this also mirrors the performative androgeny, gender subversion, and gender fluidity of the wider Goth neo-culture.

## **Consumption Communities**

Critical to the construction of identity and sense-making for style tribes in general is the need to find expression in the secret self, both visually and materially, through commercially produced media and entertainment images, texts and products. The manga, anime or heroic character costumes of the Lolitas become the material forms or artifacts that rearticulate the original media texts and inhabit a mythical, conceptual space offering an escape from a known and lived reality. Consumption experiences have also been compared to sacred practices as they appear to fill an existing affective void for the consumer, which may also in this case be underpinned by the mythic and romantic nature of the anime and manga narratives from which the Lolitas derive their characters.

In parallel with other neo style tribes Goth Lolis are self confessed princesses of consumption spending large amounts of time and money on shopping and fashion, significantly paralleling the generic Gothic preoccupation with clothes and bodily adornment - which they use as a means of identity formation and a passport to an imagined community.

Such imagined communities are established amongst the Goth Loli tribe by shopping and purchasing Goth Loli branded clothes and accessories from dedicated retail outlets, constructing their own garments DIY style, appearing and performing in cityscapes in full costume, being photographed by otaku fans and uploaded onto their websites, reading Loli Goth based Manga and magazines including the seasonal style guide, *The Gothic & Lolita Bible*, watching Lolita themed anime and online games, and participating in online sites.

## **Subcultures of Consumption**

Notably, Lolitas also represent a niche media consumer group, reliant on the purchase of costumes and accessories tied into Japanese comics, animated cartoons, computer games, Hollywood movies and anime websites to create their authentic costumed selves as displayed at self-bounded events and meet-ups. As such, they are primarily avid consumers of a myriad of cultural texts, images and objects from a range of anime/manga/film genres which appear to satisfy a range of affective needs on both an individual and collective level.

The innate conservatism of Hong Kong society is perhaps also finding expression in the culturally varied interpretations constituting a variance in the geographical and transcultural representations of Gothic Lolita, for example. Many interviewed in Hong Kong made the distinction between the Japanese Lolita-esque

interpretation which is more adventurous in adapting this theme across a range of variants on a mix and match basis, compared with the doll-centric Mainland Chinese Lolita trend and the Hong Kong traditional approach which slavishly copies Japanese Lolita mediated prototypes, with only minor modifications in the practice of cultural transfer and local adaptation.

### **Playing at it – Just Serious Fun?**

But, this is the business of serious fun and games as the costume and make up are applied and accessories acquired, the Lolitas change their voices, poses and persona – they actually become Gothic Lolita as inner self.

The level of involvement appeared critical to the dressing up process whereby it appeared important for the Lolitas to fully enter a fantasy world whilst wearing their authentic costume, that becomes a reality for the player, and possibly more of a reality than the actual social worlds that they inhabit on a daily basis. Certainly, the players that I observed were fully engrossed in their role as individual characters or in cast ensembles, and their common enjoyment of the activity seemed to be the overriding consideration, creating a carnival atmosphere both visually and atmospherically. As the Lolitas struck a commanding pose in front of a bank of paparazzi-eque photographers and their forest of zoom lenses, these young people, normally self-conscious and shy, morphed into regal, haughty, darkly robed princesses.

It would appear that the Lolitas interviewed did relate to this activity as a form of reinventing childhood play, not only in the choice of some of the cute characters taken from their childhood memories, but also in the escapist tendencies noted by the Lolitas themselves in the search for their perfect world by dressing up as an idealised character that they admired and whose life they aspired towards. This is summarized in the words of Lolita Sheena,

“We dress as Lolitas and we become Lolitas because we have created our own world or paradise, which is perfect, beautiful, pretty, safe and traditional, like when we were children and no-one can stop us. And of course we have fun and are more relaxed and happy when we get together.”

Here, Sheena appears to be escaping, not simply back into her naïve childhood, as her Gothic Lolita-enrobed self, but the transformative journey that she is making is maybe taking her into a mythic, utopian domain, possibly based on a nostalgic recreation of Hong Kong’s pre-colonial past for a post-colonial, post-80s generation frustrated with their a-political existence.

Gothic Lolitas may thus be escaping into a fantasy world because they are dissatisfied with the normalcy or restrictions of their everyday lives, or they are searching for a misplaced identity, and finding alternative solace in the imaginary worlds of Gothic inspired anime and manga narratives.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, Gothic Lolita style tribe membership is not an end in itself, but an important social and cultural process that has tapped into and generated transnational flows of subcultural capital across a range of Goth related historic and geographic sites. It is the creation of a social world whose passport for entry is the wearing of fantastic Gothic costume, forming the basis of shared relationships that are dynamic and which shift over time within the structured setting of public conventions and meetings in real time and online. At the same time, it affords the individual Goth Loli player a way of celebrating individuality, whilst also expressing and performing the secret true inner self publicly, albeit within the safe confines of the Gothic collective in the seemingly entertaining process of dressing up.

By donning a Gothic material persona on the corporeal surface, it appears that the Gothic Lolitas have created and control their own paradise-lost with dark overtones, signalling a dark velvet-like form of rebellion, based on localized and transnational cultural borrowings.

## **Endnotes**

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