

## **Returning in a Different Fashion: Culture, Communication, and Changing Representations of Lolita in Japan and the West**

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A Japanese fashion style called Lolita has gained a cult following in the West. The appellation of Lolita appears surprising given that the style has the characteristics of the clothes of a Victorian doll, which initially appears to have nothing to do with the famous book by Vladimir Nabokov. Using the framework of Moscovici's social representations theory, this article examines how different representations of Lolita have emerged and developed within Western and Japanese popular culture. The role of the cultural context in the formation of the different meanings in the use of the term *Lolita* is explained; and the potential for misinterpretation, when a representation from one culture is applied to another culture, is illustrated.

*Keywords: Fashion, social representations, Lolita, Western popular culture, Japanese popular culture, cultural context*

In 2009, the Japanese fashion company, Baby, The Stars Shine Bright, opened a store in San Francisco. This followed the opening of its Paris store in 2007. Another Japanese fashion company selling the same style of clothing, Metamorphose temps de fille, provides an online map of its worldwide customers, which includes most Western European countries as well as North America. The fashion style is reminiscent of Victorian doll clothing and is called Lolita (see Figure 1). The style has been picked up as a cult fashion style in the West—for example, in the United States (Monden, 2008), Germany (Zank, 2010), Spain (Porzio, 2012), and Australia (Staite, 2012).

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**Figures 1a & 1b. Lolita style.**

(a) A coordinated Lolita outfit.

Source: <http://www.metamorphose.gr.jp/category/select/pid/9596>

(b) Lolita style at Dolly House Runway 2013, University of California, Irvine; sponsored by Baby, The Stars Shine Bright (photograph by Peter Huynh).

Source: <http://www.facebook.com/PeterHuynhPhotography>

Lolita is a name of Spanish origin and is the diminutive of Dolores; Dolores Haze being the eponymous character in the famous novel *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, first published in 1955. A controversial book in the West due to its subject matter of a middle-aged man's sexual desire for his 12-year-old stepdaughter, *Lolita*, seems to be an unusual name for a Japanese fashion style. Indeed, Younker (2012) claims that the style is "not to be confused with Vladimir Nabokov's novel of the same name" (p. 97), and Carriger (2011) argues that followers of the style reject any sexual reference. So why are there these differences in the meanings of the term *Lolita*, and how do they relate to each other? This article analyzes Lolita in Western and Japanese popular culture to investigate how and why different uses of the term have emerged; and it examines their meaning through the theory of social representations to observe the processes by which these representations change and develop within and across cultures.

### Social Representations

This article explores differences in cultural understanding through the idea of “social representations” (de Rosa, 2012; Moscovici, 1998, 2008). “Social representations are multi-level meaning complexes, which are constantly in the process of innovation” (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.2). Although it has been argued that similarities exist between social representations and schemas or stereotypes (Hinton, 2000), the key aspect of social representations is that they are constructed through the communication within a culture, be it interpersonal or via the mass media. Moscovici (1998) argues that the circulation of social representations can be understood by analogy with money—they are held by individuals but circulate within a community. Hence, representations emerge through communication within a culture which become the “commonsense” views of the people in that culture. A new representation is linked to known representations (such as a car originally being viewed as a horseless carriage) through a process called *anchoring* but then gains its own independent status through *objectification*. Cultures can develop culturally specific representations (Moscovici, 1998) that result in differences in interpretation across cultures. For example, in the West, cartoons and comic books usually are seen as the province of children, yet in Japan this distinction is not made, with comics (manga) for adults being a significant feature of popular culture (Kinsella, 2000). Thus, although it might appear odd in the West to see a businessman on a train reading a comic book, this is not unusual in Japan (e.g., Jones, 2003).

Social representations can change due to the processes of social conventionalization, which can involve assimilation to existing cultural forms, simplification, elaboration, and social construction (Bartlett, 1932; Saito, 1996). Thus, representations change within a culture in accordance with the changing characteristics of that culture (Duveen, 2007). It has been shown that British views of Zen Buddhism (Saito, 1996) and Japanese schoolgirls as represented in British popular culture (Hinton, 2013) differ from their Japanese representations in accordance with these processes.

### Lolita in Western Culture

The term *Lolita* comes from the famous fictional work by Nabokov (1958, first published in Paris in 1955), detailing the story of a middle-aged pedophile, Humbert Humbert, in his corruption of 12-year-old Dolores Haze, the Lolita of the title, his stepdaughter. Humbert proposes a mythic quality of certain young girls like Lolita that drew on a Victorian association of female beauty and magical power (Veronina, 2006), whom he referred to as “nymphets” (Nabokov, 1958, p. 16). This could be seen as an attempted justification for his own passion by projecting his desire for her into an assumed quality contained within her. Yet Nabokov makes it clear in numerous places that Lolita never lives up to this myth, always disappointing Humbert’s imagination. No matter how much he tries to romanticize her, she disappoints him. At no point does Dolores in any way reciprocate Humbert’s desire. Indeed, when he visits her at age 17, she is married and pregnant—no longer the nymphet—and he still declares his love for her. She is astonished—still wanting nothing of him except some money to support her new family.

Although the book is peppered with Nabokov’s witty commentary on mid-20th-century American life, Humbert’s desire is portrayed as destructive to the girl and her childhood, and it drives him to murder. At no point is Lolita anything but a typical girl of her age and time: tomboyish (she has a tendency not to wash her hair), interested in movies, celebrities, magazines, and soda pop. She does

nothing to attract Humbert in any way. She does not dress or make herself up with any thought to attract him. She is simply not interested in him in any sexual way at all. This is a key point when subsequent representations of Lolita are discussed. The book is about Humbert Humbert's obsession: as Field (1967) wrote, "In *Lolita* Nabokov takes a mad obsession and follows it through to its even madder consequences" (p. 330). Lolita is the innocent victim of Humbert's coercion. Only in one or two poignant scenes, such as when observing an ordinary father and daughter, does Humbert gain any insight into the damage that he has caused to Lolita and her life.

The book, because of its subject matter, became very controversial in the West. But it also gained a huge amount of publicity. It has been translated into many languages, including Japanese. Nabokov had a copy of the Japanese translation, but he could not check its faithfulness to the original, which he did with languages he knew (Gold, 1967).

### **The Teenage Vamp**

Yet the Lolita of the book—the young, asexual tomboy exploited by the manipulative older man—is not the representation that is stereotypically thought of by the word *Lolita*. This is possibly because of the films that have been made, based on the book, present a very different representation (Vickers, 2008). In the 1962 film version of the book, the 15-year-old Sue Lyon was cast in the part of Lolita, and her age in the story was increased to 14 years. A curvaceous teenager, clearly postpubescent and physically mature, she was very different from the young girl of the book. In response to the marketing tease "How did they ever make a movie of Lolita?" *The New York Times* reviewer answered: "They didn't," arguing that "Lyons looks to be a good 17 years old" (Crowther, 1962) (see Figure 2a). Hence, in the movie, Humbert's desire becomes understandable rather than perverted. This was repeated in the 1997 remake, in which Dominique Swain (also older than 15) played an older version of Lolita. Whereas in the book Nabokov makes Lolita's tomboyish lack of interest in sexuality very clear, in this film Lolita acts in the opposite manner—flirting with and kissing the buttoned-up Humbert. The Lolita of the film has become a different character—older and coquettish and aware of her sexual appeal. Furthermore, the iconic image of Lolita, promoting the 1962 movie, wearing heart-shaped sunglasses and sucking a lollipop, offered erotic imagery absent in the book (Vickers, 2008) (see Figure 2b).



**Figure 2. The 1962 movie of *Lolita* directed by Stanley Kubrick. A mature Lolita, Sue Lyon, with James Mason as Humbert Humbert. The iconic advertising imagery of the film.**

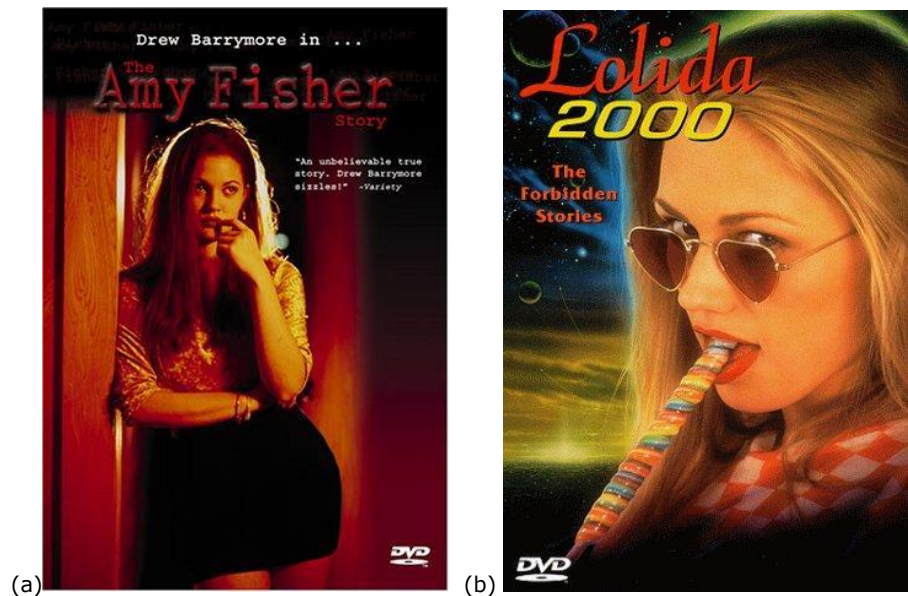
Figure 2a. Source: <http://www.filmposters.com/images/posters/8125.jpg>

Figure 2b. Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056193>

In 1959, Simone de Beauvoir associated Brigitte Bardot's performance in *And God Created Woman* (1956) with Lolita, further distancing the popular representation from that of the book. She argued that Bardot's active or even aggressive sexuality disrupts the male gaze, and, although this challenge ultimately fails, it indicates some degree of sexual autonomy (Tidd, 2004). Although Bardot was 22 when the film premiered, she was seen as the archetypal *jeune fille*—literally, “young girl” but typically referring to a teenage girl—a character absent from popular culture prior to the 1950s. And “Beauvoir is interested in the disruptive power of Bardot as a combination of ‘femme fatale’ and ‘nymphette’” (Tidd, 2004, p. 45).

In terms of social representations, the Lolita of the book is a negatively sanctioned representation—an older man seducing a young girl—which is viewed within the culture as both dangerous and transgressive—a socially heretical position—and thus is a representation to be avoided (Gillespie, 2008). For Lolita to be assimilated to existing cultural forms she may retain her childish characteristics but must become a physically mature young woman. Hence, by making Lolita older and sexually aware, she ceases to be the exploited child of the book and becomes, in popular culture, a teenage vamp. Rather than being a child, if she is physically mature as a young woman, then it is culturally more acceptable for her to display a sexual appeal. This altered version or distortion of the original representation can then be employed publicly, with a different focus from that of the abuse of a child by an older man, in terms of media discussions around the promotion of teenage girls (as models or pop singers, for example). While there are concerns about teen performers—such as whether they mature too quickly—the change in the representation may also be used as a source of publicity. There was controversy in the United States in

2008 when 15-year-old singer and actress Miley Cyrus was photographed by Annie Liebovitz for *Vanity Fair* magazine apparently naked under a satin sheet; yet Cyrus made the transition to continued success as an adult. The 17-year-old U.S. singer Britney Spears in 1998 with “. . . Baby One More Time,” and the 16-year-old French singer Alizée with “Moi Lolita” in 2000 both had highly successful debuts to their singing careers, presenting a sexy teenage Lolita image. This pervasive representation of Lolita (Durham, 2008) is now so well known in the West that it has all the characteristics of a stereotype (Hinton, 2000). Newspapers feature headlines such as “the Long Island Lolita” for a 17-year-old girl who shot the wife of her older lover in the early 1990s (Vickers, 2008). To Western audiences, Lolita is now a sexually mature teenager, as represented by the 17-year-old Drew Barrymore in the 1992 film *Poison Ivy* (and who also played the central role in the TV movie of the Long Island Lolita story in 1993; see Figure 3a) and the 19-year-old Alicia Silverstone in the 1995 film *The Babysitter*.



**Figure 3. Media images of Lolita.**

- (a) Drew Barrymore in *The Amy Fisher Story* (1993), the Long Island Lolita.  
Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106267>
- (b) Use of the 1962 poster imagery to advertise an erotic movie  
Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0130089/>

Lolita has become another name for a sexually seductive young woman anchored to known representations such as vamp or sex kitten. Thus, in popular culture, the original transgressive representation of the book is avoided and replaced by an older teenage girl, acting in a seductive and sexually assertive manner, which, retrospectively, encompassed characters such as those played Tuesday Weld at 17 starring in *Sex Kittens Go to College* (1960) and Carroll Baker, aged 24, in *Baby Doll* (1956) (Sinclair, 1988). The representation of Lolita has moved toward an adult woman acting in a childlike way.

And Lolita imagery (from the 1962 film) was used a promotional poster for the erotic film *Lolita 2000* in 1998 (see Figure 3b). This shift to adult sexuality is further demonstrated by the sale of Lolita lingerie by major retailers.

### **The Womanized Girl**

In Western culture *Lolita* is such a well-known book that reference to it has immediate impact. It is used to draw attention to legitimate concerns about the sexualization of childhood—as in the title of the article by Merskin (2004). The concern is that children around the age of Lolita (12 in the book) or even younger are being sold clothing that in an adult context would be viewed as sexually alluring, such as thongs or skimpy T-shirts, and that sexualized images are promoted to children and are featured in popular culture.

Yet Chong (2010) argues that the association of the sexualization of children with Lolita is problematic. She states that this situation “on first inspection seems one Humbert the pedophile would fully appreciate: the sexualization of young girls. But this would be to misunderstand both the passion that seizes Humbert and the separate infatuation that grips contemporary society” (p. 5). In the book, it is not Lolita’s age per se but her immaturity and innocence that appeal to Humbert Humbert. As Chong (2010) points out, Humbert makes it clear he is not attracted to her more sexually mature friend Mona.

Chong (2010) argues that popular culture in sexualizing the young girl has “womanized” her. The marketing of singers such as Britney Spears in 1998 combined their youthfulness with a precocious sexuality. “Underage beauties of the 21st century are, like Mona, packaged in such a way as to emphasize not their emerging maturity but their *premature* womanliness” (Chong, 2010, p. 8). The genuine concerns about pressure in popular culture on young girls to dress and act in this womanized manner therefore are inappropriately linked to the characters of Lolita and Humbert from the book, where it is made clear that Humbert’s abnormal lust is for the nonsexualized child.

However, this association can be understood in terms of social representations. In the popular discourse around the sexualizing of children, the natural concerns are for child protection and that the sexualization not only damages the children and their childhood but also puts them at greater risk from pedophiles. The reasoning appears to take the following line. If a girl is presented in a such way that, if she were a mature woman, she would be seen as sexually attractive, then the inference (that is, the social representation) might follow that this presentation of a child is assumed to be sexually attractive to a pedophile (by anchoring the representation to the known representation of adult sexuality), and the best known pedophile and his victim in popular culture are Humbert and Lolita. This illustrates that representations are developed through social communication and are part of what Moscovici (1981) terms the “consensual universe” that is the world of common beliefs rather than based on the logical analysis contained in the “reified universe” of scientific knowledge.

The interlinked Western representations of the teenage vamp and the womanized girl are very different from the description of Lolita in the book, which is deliberately written to present her as an

ordinary child of her age and time. Indeed, it is her clearly stated innocence and immaturity that starkly highlight Humbert's monstrous desires.

### **Lolita in Japan**

*Lolita* was first translated into Japanese in 1959 by Yasuo Ohkubo and published by Kawade Shobo ShinSha. However, as Zank (2010) notes, there was no parallel of the Western controversy in Japan. This may be because the association of a young girl with an older man has a long tradition in Japanese culture, although in a specific Japanese context. The young, unmarried girl, the *shoujo*, features often in Japanese culture (Treat, 1996). The *shoujo* has been represented as a romanticized image of uncorrupted innocence and beauty, a state that adults are keenly aware they have passed but still hanker for, like their lost childhood. To the Japanese, the cherry blossom (*sakura*) represents the transient nature of both beauty and life. Just as a puff of wind will dislodge the cherry blossoms from a tree, so beauty (and life) is fragile and brief, and contains within it a melancholy or sadness, representing the quintessential Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* (the sadness or sensitivity of things) that novelist Yasunari Kawabata outlined in his Nobel Prize speech of 1968 (Kawabata, 1968). The *sakura* contains a range of culturally significant metaphorical meanings to the Japanese, such as the fall of warriors in battle, but particularly the transient beauty of the *shoujo*. So, for example, a weary company director might, on a visit to a geisha house, fleetingly recapture a moment of youthful innocent pleasure in playing childish games with the young *maiko* (trainee geisha). In this context, the book *Lolita* can be interpreted in terms of Humbert's dreams of lost youth and first love (Zank, 2010) with the character of Lolita aligned to the romantic appeal of the *shoujo*.

In the famous 11th-century book *Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, the *sakura*, as an embodiment of purity, perfection, and beauty associated with the ideal young woman, is contained in the description of the young Murasaki no Ue. Murasaki no Ue is taken into his household as a child by Prince Genji, 10 years her senior, to train to be the perfect lady and to become his wife. Tyler (2009) notes the significance of this to Japanese culture by quoting the writer and Genji expert Tanabe Seiko, who "wrote that what Genji glimpses through the fence, when he first discovers Murasaki, 'has graven a little girl's appeal in the hearts of the Japanese.'" (p. 20). Tyler also notes that some Japanese authors saw Murasaki no Ue as a *tabula rasa* at this point by referring to her as a "living doll," although other commentators disagree. Genji treats her with respect, waiting a number of years before consummating the marriage.<sup>1</sup> She becomes his principal wife, and when she dies age 43, his grief cannot be assuaged.

Historically, this Japanese representation contains the idea of the young girl trained as the perfect companion for marriage. The image of the charming, submissive, and obedient Japanese girl to be molded into the perfect companion by the older man has had an appeal since the days of Genji for certain men, and was keenly picked up by Western (male) observers at the beginning of the 20th century, becoming a Western stereotype (Hinton, 2013). Yet in the early 20th century, gender relationships were changing in Japan, with the emancipation of women challenging this representation.

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<sup>1</sup> Although she is still around the age of Nabokov's Lolita.



In the novel *Chijin no Ai* (Naomi) by Junichiro Tanizaki (1925) the 28-year-old male protagonist, Jouji, takes the 15-year-old Naomi into his home, with the idea, like Genji, to train her as his wife. He waits until she is 16 before consummating the relationship. Yet his plans go awry. Naomi blossoms into a *moga* (a modern girl) and embraces Western ideas. She is unfaithful and finally turns the tables on him and offers a relationship with him on her own terms, which he, in his love for her, accepts. A Japanese reader knowing the story of Genji would appreciate the irony and the humor contained in the story.

Western authors have tended to see Naomi as a Japanese Lolita; McCarthy (2009) compares the two books, and Slade (2009) calls Naomi a "Lolita-like story" (p. 85). Although Lolita, too, never follows Humbert's expectations of her, there are significant differences between Lolita and Naomi. Historically and culturally, Jouji's romantic ideas follow from Genji, and, unlike Humbert and Lolita, his relationship with Naomi is not illicit. Unlike the story of Lolita, which ends in murder and tragedy, Naomi matures into her own woman, living life according to her own wishes, to which Jouji acquiesces. *Chijin no Ai* is a book about dealing with changing gender relationships rather than the destructiveness of perverted desire.

Although the shoujo may be perceived as immature and malleable, in Japanese literature, men seeing only the superficial beauty can be drawn into tragedy. It is not by chance that there is a Japanese phrase that a woman is like an iron fist in a velvet glove. The novel *Futon* (1907) by Tamaya Katai portrays an older man's desire for his teenage female student. She rejects him and goes off with another man. Like the story of Naomi, it is not the teenage girl's youthfulness that is the key issue in the Japanese story but her emancipation. These writers present the older man with his Genji-like wishes, only to find that the girl learns to make up her own mind; she is not the young Murasaki no Ue but a modern woman. The humor and the tragedy come from the dashing of the male character's "traditional" expectations. In the more melancholic novels of Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972), the young shoujo often do not match the romantic illusions of the male protagonist, and this disjunction can be the source of tragedy and sadness. While capturing their poignant beauty, Japanese literature also portrays the strength and power of these young women.

Seen in this context, the focus of the Japanese interpretation of *Lolita* is not in terms of Humbert's culturally transgressive sexual exploitation but on nostalgic, Genji-like aspects of male desire and his illusory romantic image of the shoujo. Humbert's behavior is not condoned, and the ensuing tragedy is not unexpected in terms of the representation in these Japanese novels. Yet, in this cultural context, there is not the pressure to turn Lolita into a more mature sexy vamp, as happened in the West. Lolita the shoujo may embody Humbert's romantic dreams, but she is also a modern girl with a mind of her own, coping as best as she can with Humbert's exploitation and the death of her mother. A key positive quality in Japanese culture is endurance (Harvey, 1995), the ability to survive the tribulations of life, which Lolita has: she is plucky.

### **The Shoujo**

Gender relations are critical to understanding the complexity of popular culture in 20th-century Japan. Whereas schooling developed for girls in the late 19th century, for most of the 20th century, traditional gender roles dominated Japanese society. The postwar economic boom led to the stereotypical

Japanese salaryman (*sarariman*) rarely seeing his family during long days of work followed by socializing with colleagues. Women were expected to marry before the age of 25 and then give up work to devote themselves to the family. Boys were encouraged by their mothers (*kyoiku mama*, or “education mama”) to study hard to get the best results in examination hell (*juken jigoku*) in order to get into the best universities and be recruited by the best employers for a job for life. Teenage girls, on the other hand, had an expectation of discrimination in the workplace followed by marriage and family. Thus, quite unlike expectations in the West, where adulthood was seen as a time of independence and personal freedom, in Japan, for both boys and girls, the prospect of adult life was viewed as one of hard work, responsibility, and duty—to the workplace for boys and to the family for girls. Hence, Japanese youth had no desire to move into adulthood from the relative freedom of their teenage years (White, 1993).

The by-product of this gender situation was that during the economic boom period between the 1970s and 1990s, teenage girls had good allowances and more leisure time than other members of society. Hence, they became a powerful influence in consumer society; indeed, it is argued that they became the quintessential consumers (Treat, 1995a). Thus, popular culture became highly influenced by their tastes. From the pop music of SMAP and Namie Amuro, *shoujo manga* (girls’ comics), to the novels of Banana Yoshimoto and the fashion styles of Takeshita Dori and the Harajuku area of Tokyo, the *shoujo* became a key determiner of popular culture. The high school girl (aged 15 to 19) in her recognizable sailor-style school uniform (*seifuku*) became the emblematic shoujo. Indeed, the uniform itself became a status symbol of this social group and was often worn outside of school as a fashion style of choice (McVeigh, 2000).

High school girls, the classic shoujo, were developing their own *kawaii* culture. *Kawaii* translates into English as “cute” but has a wider meaning (Kinsella, 1995). An attractive shoujo was definitely *kawaii*. Yet *kawaii* meant also childlike, soft, colorful, round, and cuddly. Sanrio’s character Hello Kitty is essentially *kawaii* (Kovarovic, 2011). Objects, people, and toys could all be *kawaii* (see Figure 4). From a Western perspective—where such objects are the province of only very young children—*kawaii* may have appeared infantile. Yet in Japan, *kawaii* was a culture that provided an escape from the harsh expectations of adulthood. Japanese high school girls were no less grown up or sexually aware than their Western contemporaries, but they had devised a culture of cute as a vehicle for expressing a romanticized imaginary childhood that influenced toys, art, fashion—indeed, all areas of popular culture. The shoujo knew that their time of relative freedom and pleasure would quickly pass, and a “nostalgia for present” was expressed by the characters of shoujo novelist, Banana Yoshimoto (Sanchez, 2006; Treat, 1995b).



**Figure 4. Cute culture.**

- (a) Teen actress Aki Maeda in *seifuku* (1999).  
 Source: <http://gallery.nihon-zone.com/v/Pictures/Maeda+Aki>
- (b) A *kawaii* Hello Kitty outside a convenience store in Takeshita Dori.  
 Source: <http://www.photopassjapan.com/tokyo-harajuku-travelguide/image79.html>

The cultural influence of the *shoujo* led to an intense media focus on Japanese high school girls from both within Japan and from abroad. One topic that was picked up on in the early 1990s was *enjo kousai*, or compensated dating. In this practice, middle-aged businessmen would pay high school girls to spend time with them (which might only involve sharing a restaurant meal but could involve sexual activity). In reality, *enjo kousai* was actually quite rare, the interest being a case of media hype (Kinsella, 2012). In Japan, the concern was about a society that had become so consumer oriented that some girls were apparently willing to prostitute themselves for consumer goods such as Louis Vuitton handbags. This became part of a discourse about consumerism, gender inequality, and values within Japanese society (Mamoru, 1997)—particularly questioning the striving for greater wealth without achieving happiness. The outcome appeared to be girls creating a *kawaii shoujo* culture as a contrast to an unappealing adult life and men (and women) seeking to escape their stressful lives into this *shoujo* world of nostalgic, romanticized youth. Thus, *enjo kousai* was not simply a case of male desire for a young girl or precocious sexuality.

Yet this was the way the practice was reported in the Western media, where the story appeared widely, including on the front pages of news magazines. Images of uniformed Japanese school girls were combined with reports socially constructed around a Western Lolita discourse, with headlines such as “Oriental Lolitas” and “Japan’s Dirty Secret: Schoolgirls Selling Sex” (Hinton, 2013). Ignoring the specific Japanese context and employing the representation of the sexually active Lolita, these articles represented shoujo culture as a lurid “cultural other” of schoolgirl sexuality and perverted male desire. Whereas enjo kousai ceased to be an issue in the Japanese media by the turn of the millennium (Kinsella, 2012), it continued to feature in Western media well into the 2000s.

### **The Lolita Complex: *Rorikon***

Kawaii culture had a wider impact on society as people questioned the endless struggle for wealth at the expense of happiness. Adults sought to capture some of the pleasures contained in kawaii culture, and objects such as roadwork signs and credit cards were designed to be kawaii (McVeigh, 2000). Yet, arguably, the strongest impact of kawaii culture was on teenage boys. The traditional macho male is not kawaii, so a new, more kawaii, ideal male emerged (such as the young male pop singers of the time). Male characters in manga comic books became less dynamic and more feminized (Schodt, 1983). Young men, having spent their teenage years in endless study, found it hard to relate to their more sophisticated female peers, despite enjoying the young women’s kawaii appeal. The term *otaku*<sup>2</sup> was applied to dedicated comic book fans who were seen as socially inadequate in dealing with girls. At the extreme end of this male anxiety were the *hikikomori*, youths whose only way of coping with life was to isolate themselves in their rooms with their computers, video games, manga, anime, and figurines (Horiguchi, 2012).

In Japanese culture, the increased power and influence of women (offering a threat to traditional male roles) along with the dynamism of girls’ culture led to anxiety among young men in Japan of both “fear and desire” (Kinsella, 2000, p. 124) with respect to the shoujo. What emerged was a genre of manga called *rorikon*, a Japanese abbreviation for Lolita complex. Erotic manga had been available for teenage boys and was viewed as providing a brief respite from their studies yet not distracting them from their work, as an actual relationship with a girl might do (Allison, 1996). Male anxieties about female emancipation and the sophistication of real young women led some young men to retreat into an erotic comic book world of the imaginary kawaii girls portrayed in rorikon manga or the virtual girls of animation (anime). In rorikon manga, the term *Lolita* represented a mythical shoujo—the opposite of the emancipated woman—undeveloped, cute, childlike, nonthreatening, and obeying the male characters’ erotic wishes, providing an imaginary world as an escape from the anxieties of engaging with real *shoujo*.

These fantasy Lolitas were not constrained by reality: they could have green hair; they could be aliens, androids, or robots; and they could be cat-girls with ears and long tails (see Figure 5a). But they had to inhabit a world outside of the adult sphere, a fantasy world both innocent and erotic: they had to be *moe*. Moe has similarities to kawaii but is more specific as an expression of male (otaku) desire. Manga or anime characters became pure fantasy objects of desire. Galbraith (2009) cites Rei Ayanami from the

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<sup>2</sup> A term loosely translated in English as nerd or geek.

anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* as a key moe character. Although seemingly a 14-year-old girl (albeit with blue hair), she is actually a clone with the soul of a nonhuman “angel” (see Figure 5b). These otaku developed an erotic attachment to the idealized (unthreatening) moe characters in manga and anime within a purely virtual world, which provided a space of male sexual fantasy. Indeed, the greater the inability to relate to real women, the greater the appeal of the young moe characters in anime (Galbraith, 2009). With their youthfulness associated with innocence, lack of threat, and life devoid of adult concerns and responsibilities, moe characters appealed to the otakus’ desire to avoid the adult world. The extremes of sexuality are portrayed but “without connection or influence beyond the moment of virtual interaction” (Galbraith, 2009, p. 12). The juxtaposition of purity and desire in these images sums up the anxiety of the otaku, played out in this fantasy world: “The desire to protect the subject’s innocence and purity is prized on the one hand, but continually destroyed with the other in erotic fantasy, an infinite loop of fantasy production” (Marcias & Machiyama, 2004, p. 51). Thus, the representation of the moe characters in rorikon is predicated on a series of factors within Japanese culture—essentially male youth culture—at a time of crisis in masculinity. The term *moe complex* could be seen as a more appropriate label within the cultural context. However, when viewed through the lens of Western media, rorikon manga was represented as transgressive male sexual imagery aligned to Humbert Humbert, to be avoided (Jones, 2003; Schodt, 1996). In Western media, enjo kousai and rorikon manga were represented as the two sides of a disturbing Lolita culture.



**Figure 5. Moe characters.**

(a) A cat-girl.

Source: [http://i305.photobucket.com/albums/nn236/kyothecat35151/Cat\\_girls/1.jpg](http://i305.photobucket.com/albums/nn236/kyothecat35151/Cat_girls/1.jpg)

(b) Rei Ayanami from the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996)

Source: <http://www.weareanime-cosplay.com/2013/01/neon-genesis-evangelion.html>

Yet Japanese kawaii culture sought the opposite of sexual experience: an escape from the stressful adult world, seeking to retain or regain an open-eyed innocence for enjoying a childlike world of romanticized simple pleasure. Indeed, rorikon manga actually formed a very small, atypical part of the Japanese manga and anime output, contrasting with the massive global success of an industry appealing

to both children and adults, such as the hugely popular animation of Oscar-winning director Hayao Miyazaki (born 1941), including *Sen to chihiro no kamikakushi (Spirited Away)* of 2001, portraying plucky young shoujo learning about life and overcoming life's difficulties in fantasy worlds full of joyful and nostalgic imagery.

### Lolita Style

At the same time, social change was occurring within popular culture—particularly in Japanese film and television dramas (*dorama*). Films such as 1997's *Baunsu ko gaurusu* (Bounce Kogals<sup>3</sup>) portrayed high school girls and enjo kousai, and *Densha otaku* (Train Man) of 2005 depicted an otaku developing a relationship with a girl. The changing world of marital relations and questioning the life of the salaryman were shown in doramas such as *Boku to kanojo to kanojo no ikiru michi* (The way we live) (2004). At the turn of the 21st century, there had been eight years of economic slowdown, and jobs for life had disappeared. Now women did not stop working when they got married, and over 80% of women worked in paid employment (White, 2002). Also, what once had been the province of the shoujo and the otaku had permeated Japanese art and literature, and Japanese cultural products such as toys, video games, manga, and anime were being sold worldwide.

In the 21st century, Japan is viewed as a source of exciting and creative popular culture. This is very visible in the impact of Japanese street fashion (Aoki, 2001, 2005). The shoujo were the creative energy in Japanese fashion, creating trends rather than following designer styles (Kawamura, 2006). The teenage *kogal* (or *kogyaru*) street style of the 1990s—with dyed hair, tanned face, short skirt, and loose socks—symbolized rebellion. Unconstrained by the traditional fashion industry, Japanese high school girls had generated their own fashion styles, drawing on influences from popular culture. They had even created their own “runway” on the bridge above Harajuku Station, between Shibuya and Shinjuku, that led from the Meiji Shrine down to the fashion boutiques of Takeshita Dori. Here, mostly on weekends, teenage girls turned out in the latest ornate fashions—for example, Maid, Lolita, Decora. Lolita and its variants (such as Gothic Lolita, Sweet Lolita, and many others) became one of the most popular. As a result, Harajuku Bridge became a stop on the tourist itinerary for Western visitors in Tokyo.

A key element of shoujo culture had always been romance. In the Takarazuka Theatre, women played both the women's and men's roles in romantic dramas hugely popular with shoujo audiences throughout much of the 20th century (Robertson, 1998). In a culture of gender inequality, a woman playing the idealized male lead could perfectly appeal to shoujo sensibilities. A famous shoujo manga, *Berusaiyu no bara* (Rose of Versailles), set in revolutionary France, features the main female character dressed and acting as a dashing male hero. In the 2004 film *Shimotsuma monogatari* (Kamikaze Girls),<sup>4</sup> the heroine dreams of living in a romanticized 18th-century France. She stands out as she dresses in Lolita style, eager to see the latest fashions in her favorite fashion store, Baby, The Stars Shine Bright (see Figure 6).

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<sup>3</sup> *Kogal*, derived from *koukousei gyaru* (high school girl), was a popular term in the 1990s for a high school girl style representing a non-traditional, somewhat rebellious attitude.

<sup>4</sup> From the 2002 book by Novala Takemoto.



**Figure 6. Actress Kyoko Fukada in Lolita style in *Shimotsuma monogatari* (*Kamikaze Girls*).**

Source: [http://www.aems.illinois.edu/events/filmfestival/filmfest\\_2008.html](http://www.aems.illinois.edu/events/filmfestival/filmfest_2008.html)

Lolita style taps into the Japanese shoujo fantasy of an idyllic childhood, a girl's world of frilly dresses and dolls. Eighteenth-century France and the Victorian England of *Alice in Wonderland* connote magical worlds for the shoujo in a culture where adult duty and responsibility remain less desirable than worlds of the imagination. The fantasy is both romantic and kawaii. In a culture where English words have a social cachet, famous Western girls with names like Alice and Lolita have a status from their literacy significance unrelated to any negative connotations they might have gained in the West. The names Alice and Lolita resonate with the shoujo as names associated with imaginary worlds of the past where such a childhood exists. But the characters of Alice and Lolita are also feisty, resourceful girls dealing as best as they can with the perverse adult worlds that are thrust upon them—whether it is the mad world beyond the looking glass or the bad world of Humbert Humbert. They are plucky shoujo striving against an undesirable adult world and, as such, represent the model shoujo in kawaii culture.

For 30 years, Japanese manga and anime fans have dressed up as their favorite characters when attending conventions. Although possibly originating from American science fiction fans, Japanese fans have embraced this costume role-play (or *cosplay*), taking on the identity of their chosen characters (Winge, 2006). Japan has a strong sense of the public self, undertaking appropriate behaviors in formal situations such as school or the workplace. However, outside the requirement for role-appropriate behavior is the opportunity to play. This allows young people the freedom to embrace cosplay. Dressing as

a Maid or a Lolita can be seen as a form of cosplay, and engaging with Lolita fashion can be seen as more than simply wearing a fashionable outfit.

To a Western eye, playing with dolls might be seen as a regression to childhood by these *shoujo*, but dolls (*ningyo*) have a wider significance in Japan. The white-faced geisha takes on the guise of a living doll, and there are doll festivals such as the *hina matsuri*, on a day celebrating both girls and dolls, when the spirits of the dolls are conciliated, and the doll may take on the spirit of the child now gone (Pate, 2008). As noted earlier in the discussion of Murasaki no Ue, a doll can describe the unformed person in the child. Lolita fashion taps into the shoujo sense of nostalgia and the attempt to capture a lost imaginary childhood (uncorrupted by adulthood). Having a doll or being a doll provides a vehicle for entry into that world—a safe world untroubled by adult emotions. And in that space where a real girl puts on her Lolita clothes, she is able to take on the identity of an imaginary resourceful shoujo in her cosplay until she is required to make her inevitable return to the ordinary, responsible life dictated by her role in the culture.

### **Return to the West**

For more than 30 years, Japanese popular culture has had a major impact in the West, particularly in terms of manga, anime, toys, and video games (Nakamura, 2003). This continues a complex interaction of culture between Japan and the West that has occurred since the opening of Japan to the West in the second half of the 19th century. From *Japonisme* (including Monet's love of Japanese artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige) and the success of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* in 1904 to the popularity of Arthur Golden's book *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1998) and the inclusion of Japanese popular culture in music videos such as the Pet Shop Boys' *Flamboyant* (2004) and Evanescence's *Everybody's Fool* (2004), the West was fascinated by Japan at both ends of the 20th century. The influences have been complex and interactive, with manga originating from American postwar comics and Western fans referring to themselves as otaku. The most Japanese of animators, Hayao Miyazaki, has drawn on Western influences, such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for *Laputa: Castles in the Sky* (1986), which also included a Welsh-style village, and English writer Diana Wynne Jones' 1986 novel for *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). His work also has been dubbed and distributed by Disney in the English-speaking world, where it has achieved success.

By applying social representation theory to cultural understanding, different representations can be seen to emerge in different cultures. Through the formation and change of social representations, the representation of Lolita has radically changed in Western culture from that portrayed in Nabokov's book. Bartlett (1932) and Duveen (2007) noted how representations are constructed according to the social dynamics within a culture. In the West, through the way the book was represented (and re-presented) as involving a transgressive representation of childhood sexuality, the representation of Lolita changed from the exploited child of the book to an older teenage sexual vamp portrayed in the movies. In the West, adulthood is viewed as a time of independence and personal freedom (White, 1993), with the implication that the sooner one becomes an adult, the sooner one can gain these benefits. Within popular culture, the success of young women such as Britney Spears, who achieved fame and fortune presenting a sexually attractive image, provides a representation of how to gain this independence and freedom, but it also stimulates concerns about the sexualization of young people. The term *Lolita* has been co-opted as part of the communication around these issues within the culture as the symbolic representation of the sexualized



young girl. The Western media, by applying this representation to aspects of modern of Japanese culture, have misrepresented the both the use of the term in Japan and its cultural context.

In Japan the idea of a young girl prepared for marriage has been part of cultural history, so the focus of the book *Lolita* was not on the relationship of Humbert Humbert and Lolita but on the individual characters—such as Humbert’s nostalgia for his first love and Lolita’s coping with his exploitation of her. This is positioned in the context of changing gender relationships in Japan. Twentieth-century Japanese literature has examples of a man’s expectations of a young woman’s submissiveness being overturned. Also, in Japan, adulthood has been viewed as a time of social responsibility and duty (White, 1993) with cultural debates around the nature of consumerism and values (such as happiness or the lack of it) and changing gender relations within society. The development of shoujo-generated cute culture has demonstrated a cultural nostalgia for an untroubled fantasy childhood free of the harshness of the adult world. Although driven by high school girls, it appealed to young people and adults in Japanese society. Changing gender relations impacted on teenage boys, with some finding escape from their “fear” of the shoujo through the manga subgenre of rorikon. For girls, the creation of shoujo culture provided a way of expressing themselves outside of traditional structures, and one key area of influence has been street fashion, including the development of Lolita-style clothing. Within this context, the term *Lolita* positively represents the young shoujo dealing with, or attempting to escape from, an unpleasant adult world. This representation of Lolita bears a closer resemblance to the Lolita in the book—a girl who wishes to enjoy her girlhood pleasures of celebrities, magazines, soda fountains, and tennis—than to the sexualized vamp portrayed in Western media. This Japanese representation of Lolita is the foundation of the fashion style. The nonsexual charm and sweetness of Lolita style also appeals to some girls and young women in the West (Monden, 2008), who then within their own communities transform and develop the meaning of the style beyond its Japanese origins (Carriger, 2011).

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