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**Latina Lolita: Gender Politics and the Gothic and Lolita Subculture in Mexico**

**ABSTRACT**

*From its inception, the subcultural movement known as Gothic and Lolita has displayed an exchange of ideas between Japan and Euro-American cultures. More recently, however, the subculture has shifted, not only regarding traditional meanings, and the way that it operates, but also geographically, into communities on the periphery of its original sites of major interest. In the past few years, Latin-American nations, particularly Mexico, have become conspicuous hotspots for participation in the movement. This transition raises questions about differing socio-politics and cultural understandings, particularly associated with gender.*

*As a girls' subculture, Gothic and Lolita broke with historical, stereotypical frameworks that positioned subcultural movements from a male-dominated perspective. In Japan, it also demonstrated a resistance to established roles for, and expectations of, women. As such, it can be argued that the original Japanese Gothic and Lolita movement represented a new type of feminism. Over time, as the subculture transmigrated into other sites, especially the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and North-Western Europe, this context became less pertinent. However, the relatively recent growth of Gothic and Lolita communities in Mexico exhibits a new phase of the movement, which shakes up past meanings and understandings, yet again, especially in terms of gender politics.*

*How is gender understood within the Gothic and Lolita movement in a Mexican environment? Why is this movement becoming prevalent in Mexico? How does it operate? And how is it*

**KEYWORDS**

gothic  
Lolita  
subculture  
fashion  
Japan  
Mexico  
gender

*transformed from its Japanese origins? As both an “insider” and “outsider” researcher of the Gothic and Lolita subcultural movement, this paper reveals some of the outcomes to these questions via a critical analysis of ethnographic studies undertaken with members of the movement in Mexico.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Gothic Lolita (*Gosurori*, *Gosu-loli*, or Gothloli) is the most prominent face of the subcultural fashion-based movement known as Gothic and Lolita (G&L), which originated in Japan. The style of the Gothic Lolita represents a bricolage of transcultural sources, European, American, British, and Japanese, traditional and contemporary. Therefore, although the movement arose in Japan, it initially became influential in countries that share the existence of gothic subcultures, such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia.

Recently, however, the subculture has shifted, not only in terms of its original meanings, and the way that it functions, but also geographically, into communities on the periphery of its traditional sites of interest. In the past few years, Latin-American nations, and especially Mexico, have become the new hotspots for participation in the Gothic and Lolita movement. This transition raises questions about the transmigration of its ideas, particularly related to differing social politics and cultural understandings. As both an “insider” and “outsider” researcher, this paper reveals some of the results of my investigations into the socio-political issues associated with the Mexican Gothic and Lolita subculture, in context with the wider movement. It examines and critically analyses these outcomes via pertinent enquiries and observations made via ethnographic studies, which I have undertaken with members of the Gothic and Lolita movement in Mexican communities.

## **THE GOTHIC LOLITA STYLE**

The subcultural “Lolita” image, in simple terms, is recognized as being doll-like, or representative of a child-like woman. In recent years, Lolita styles have become less “child”-ish, and more sophisticated, or mature. This is due to the migration of the movement into other cultures that are not as obsessed with the *kawaii* (“cute”) phenomenon, as is a proportion of Japanese society. Although there are numerous subgenres of the Lolita identity, participants may be classed as either the Gothic Lolita or the Sweet Lolita, or simultaneously both. In any case, whatever the category, the appearance is often macabre *and* sweet.

Regarding the Gothic Lolita genre, specifically, the appearance can be described as that of a cute but creepy doll. Staple signifiers include, in various combinations: Black or black-backgrounded clothing; gothic motifs (bats, stained-glass windows, headstones, cats, crosses); gothic and mourning jewelry and accessories (crucifixes, rosaries, cameos); headdresses (veils, bonnets, lace headbands, floral wreaths, mini top hats); layers of petticoats, and bloomers; Mary-Jane shoes, platforms, Victorian or Edwardian style boots, or goth boots; and smoky eye-makeup. The image thus borrows tropes from traditional goth subcultural style. However, it merges the romanticism of gothic historicism with fashion elements from the Rococo period and the little Victorian girl silhouette to create a sweeter, elegant look.

### **A GIRLS' SUBCULTURE**

One of the main aspects that sets the Gothic and Lolita movement apart from other subcultures movements is that the Gothic Lolita identity is paradigmatically female. Prior to its emergence, before the late twentieth century, subcultural identities (such as the teddy, mod, rocker, skinhead, and punk) were framed, essentially, by the masculine persona and positioned as “white, working-class, male” phenomena. Dick Hebdige, one of the leading proponents of this male-dominated perspective in the 1970s,<sup>1</sup> later admitted in the 1980s that, historically:

[G]irls have been relegated to a position of secondary interest within both sociological accounts of subculture and photographic studies of urban youth, and [that] masculine bias exists in the subcultures themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The Gothic and Lolita subculture, on the other hand, is designated most prominently by the Lolita, the female image, and the phenomenon has developed as a girls' movement. Traditionally, according to the “rules” of Lolita style, girls dress to be girly, for girls, to impress other girls. There is a sense of “girl power,” or girlish solidarity.

### **INVADING THE “MALE” SPHERE**

In 1975, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber proposed that the absence of girls from subcultural studies was related to concepts of gender and “space.”<sup>3</sup> It was speculated that the “invisibility” of girls was due to the idea that they are seen to be more connected with the private, domestic sphere – to home and family life – rather than the street, or the public

realm, where subcultural activity is most spectacular. This is in-keeping with the Victorian notion of separate spheres, whereby a woman's duty was as "Angel of the Household," and the street was perceived as a male space, reserved for men, or by women escorted and protected by men.<sup>4</sup> The public sphere was no place for an unchaperoned "lady." Considered in context with Hebdige's contemporary male-centric observations regarding subcultural space, it suggests that, even by the 1970s, women were still being relegated to a secondary position regarding their place, at least within spectacular subcultures.

By the 1980s, the Lolita subcultural movement began to defy this historical hegemony by trespassing the male sphere, the domain of subcultural agency, both philosophically and geographically. At the time, this shift was even more significant as it arose in Japan, where it began as an alternative street fashion. Not only did it contradict the traditional male-dominated notion of how a subculture operates (it was neither "white," "male," nor "working-class"); and not only did it cross the boundaries of space; but it resisted the patriarchal structure of Japanese society whereby women's roles were still being constructed, and determined, according to their proximity to men.

## **WOMEN IN JAPAN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Until the twenty-first century, girls in Japan were traditionally raised to serve their father and brothers and then, directly afterwards, their husbands. According to Ruth Benedict (1967), this was their position in the mid-twentieth century:

Whatever one's age, one's position in the hierarchy depends on whether one is male or female. The Japanese woman walks behind her husband and has a lower status....<sup>5</sup> A woman... wants children not only for her emotional satisfaction... but because it is only as a mother that she gains status. A childless wife has a most insecure position in the family.... Japanese mothers [therefore] begin their childbearing early, and girls of nineteen bear more children than women of any age.<sup>6</sup>

It was thus for the roles of mother and wife that their training was based, while money for education went to their brothers.<sup>7</sup> In 1996, Ritsuko Matsumura was still maintaining that "Japanese parents raise sons and daughters differently."<sup>8</sup> And, in 2000, Elise K. Tipton claimed that Japanese girls were still being "socialized to make marriage and motherhood their primary goals."<sup>9</sup> She stated:

Women in their early twenties undergo intense pressure... to marry before they reach twenty-five. [After that a] common joke refers to them as “Christmas cakes...” Like Christmas cakes, they will become too old and stale after their twenty-fifth.<sup>10</sup>

However, it was also in the late twentieth century that “*onna no jidai* (the era of women) became a catchphrase, connoting [women’s] freedom, affluence, and independence.”<sup>11</sup> And, although there was still intense pressure to marry, the average age of first marriages began to rise. This period coincided with the emergence of the Japanese Lolita subcultural movement.

### **A FEMINIST RESISTANCE MOVEMENT**

For many reasons, particularly when it arose, the Lolita subcultural movement could be read in terms of a feminist statement, especially regarding its place in twentieth-century Japan. For one thing, it defied the rules and regulations placed on Japanese girls, in terms of societal expectations of their roles and duties. As discussed, it helped to break down boundaries of gendered space. But it did more than just take girls out into the male domain of the streets. It took them away, temporarily, at least, from the imposition of domestic servitude. As the age of consent is only thirteen, Japanese girls can still be married off, by arrangement, and become young teenage mothers. Becoming involved in a youth subculture, such as the Gothic and Lolita movement, diverts this traditional path. As an alternative lifestyle choice, it not only thwarts “appropriate” behavior but extends the adolescent phase into adulthood. The “little-girl” Lolita image, therefore, is more than a symbolic attempt to remain young but also a refusal to “grow up.” The longer one remains involved in the subculture, the longer one postpones having to take on adult responsibilities. As Ilya Garger has pointed out, the Japanese attraction to *kawaiisa*, of which the “cute” Lolita identity is a product, “is an appealing anodyne in a country marked by... the rigidity of its social hierarchy.”<sup>12</sup>

### **LATINA LOLITA: A NEW PERSPECTIVE**

Over time, as the Gothic and Lolita subculture has migrated from Japan into other cultures, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and North-Western Europe, its feminist agenda has become less pertinent. However, the relatively recent growth of Gothic and Lolita communities in areas on the periphery of these original centers, demonstrates a newer perspective. An examination of Latin-American sites, particularly Mexico, exhibits a new phase of the Gothic and Lolita movement, which shakes up past

meanings and understandings, especially in terms of gender politics. My latest study, which concentrates on the Mexican Lolita subculture, specifically, demonstrates that it can be considered in its own right.

At the head of the Mexican movement is “Briz Blossom,” one of my research correspondents. Briz is the administrator of her local Lolita community in Guadalajara, and leader of the Mexican movement, overall. She is officially recognized as the Kawaii Ambassador of Mexico, appointed by Misako Aoki, the Kawaii Ambassador of Japan (herself, employed by the Japanese government). Her position demonstrates that Mexico is recognized as a prominent location for the growth of the Gothic and Lolita subculture.

### **AN EXAMINATION OF THE GOTHIC AND LOLITA SUBCULTURE IN MEXICO: ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES**

Over the past year (or more), I have undertaken ethnographic studies with members from Latin-American Gothic and Lolita communities. These have included surveys, interviews, personal correspondences, and critical observations. I’ve received 120 extensive survey responses, comprised of 60 questions each, from participants in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Almost a third of the respondents are from Mexico, from 22 Mexican regions. After assessing all of the responses, I have become aware of patterns in the Mexican Gothic and Lolita communities that indicate a certain shift away from other cultural interpretations of the Lolita subculture. One of the reasons that the Mexican Gothic and Lolita movement has a specific flavor is that it is influenced by its own, rich Gothic and Baroque culture. Besides contemporary inspiration, there is also, of course, the influence of Mexico’s multicultural history, its indigenous and Spanish colonial past, and the fusion of motifs, iconography, art, design, architecture, fashion, literature, mysticism, spirituality, beliefs, and rituals, that stem from this unique environment.

### **LOLITA TRANSGÉNERA**

One of the most striking aspects regarding the development of the Gothic and Lolita movement is connected with gender. Since 2003, from my earliest days of researching and writing about the Lolita subculture, one of my main angles has been to acknowledge its place as a girls’ movement. As a girls’ movement, as I’ve already discussed, the way that the Lolita subculture operates is in opposition to the way that many historical subcultures function, just as my approach to my research differs from many traditional studies that have framed

subcultures in terms of the masculine perspective. A notable result of my recent studies, therefore, was to discover that 23% (almost a quarter) of my Mexican respondents, while they present as female, identify as either male, gender-fluid, or transgender. In fact, many participants, no matter what gender they identify with, say that one of the things they like about the Lolita subculture is that it is gender-fluid. When asking whether they see the subculture as a feminist movement, one of my respondents from Mexico claims:

Even beyond what everyone can call feminist, it [G&L] can be more. It's about new ways to see feminine beauty, or masculine beauty. An aesthetic movement that should be for anyone who wants to try it, and give it their own personal signs.

### **FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUALITY**

When also questioned about feminism and the Lolita movement in Mexico, I received many similar replies. A male thirty-something-year-old wearer of Lolita-style dresses declared:

Of course, it is [feminist]. In its very essential roots, this subculture is inclusive of all human kinds, whatever gender. In the Lolita subculture, there is a place for everyone, in the most amazing, kindly, and fraternal way.

Another female-presenting, male-identifying participant in his forties, who wears Lolita-style dresses every day, says, "Yes, it is a feminist movement. But, unlike other feminist movements, it is distinguished by being inclusive and tolerant in every respect." A younger member who identifies as gender-fluid, agrees, stating, "Yes, because it arose within [Japan], a strongly patriarchal society. Dressing in Lolita means [that] I do not want to be what you, Society, expects me to be." A woman in her thirties explains: "It is not exclusive. Both boys and girls can dress well in it, and feel good about it." And a younger male wearer maintains: "Yes, because it is a movement that seeks gender equality."

### **RE-DEFINING AND UN-DEFINING GENDER**

In Mexico, the Lolita subculture is still a girls' movement. The face of it is feminine and participants, no matter their gender, present themselves as female. The Mexican Lolita subculture is not, therefore, exclusively for "girls." While there are male, transgender, and gender-fluid members of other Lolita communities, in other cultures, including Japan, the shift in Mexico is seen in terms of attitude and acceptance, which is reflected in its number of

non-female-gender-identifying, female-presenting, participants. In Mexico, the Lolita movement is not so much a “girls’ club” as it can be elsewhere. The Mexican Lolita subculture is also still a feminist movement. However, its feminism is expressed more in terms of raising gender equality than fighting oppression of the female gender.

In this case, no longer is Hebdige’s statement true. Not only have girls stopped being “relegated to a position of secondary interest” within this spectacular subculture but “masculine bias” does not exist either. In Mexico, the Lolita subculture differs in that it is gender *inclusive*.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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Bernal, Kathryn A. (2017), 'Latina Lolita: Gender Politics and the Gothic and Lolita Subculture in Mexico', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand* (PopCAANZ), Wellington, New Zealand, 10-11 July, 2017, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp. 138-146. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2017/>.