

# *Identity Crisis of Lolita Subculture: Resistance, Style and Incorporation*

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**Abstract:** Lolita is a new-arising subculture in China. However, Lolita subculture is facing an identity crisis. As a subculture, it follows the Birmingham School's theory "Resistance-Style-Incorporation", and weakness in resistance and ambiguity in style are the sources of their identity crisis, which will accelerate the ideological incorporation from medias and dominant culture. Under such circumstance, both Lolitas and dominant society should attempt to coexist with each other peacefully.

## 1. Introduction

Subculture is a major research topic for Birmingham school. Resistance, style and incorporation are cores of their research. Recently, one subculture called Lolita emerges in China. Lolita subculture became a fashion in Japan 30 years ago, and gradually it spreads to China. Lolitas mainly distinguish themselves with clothes. Generally, their clothes characterizes big dress, girlding and gorgeous design. The characteristics of Lolita subculture follow Birmingham school's theory. Current studies have researched the identity construction in Lolita subculture, but problems in their identity construction are seldom referred. And seldom do current studies study the process of incorporation of their culture. These are what this paper means to figure out.

## 2. The Issue of Identity Construction: Identity Crisis

New media is the major way for subculture community to find, obtain and accept the information in their circle[1]. To understand their identity crisis, we collect statistics that "What's your worst experience relating to JK/lolita/Han Chinese Clothing" on Zhihu, a new media platform, where one can ask and answer questions like Quora. And it chooses top 100 stories linking with Lolita based on its default order(according to the likes the answer has received, time, etc). Among these 100 answers, 75 are from Lolitas, and 25 are from non-Lolitas. And it shows that 46 of 100 answers are relating to bad experiences about Lolita's culture. Among them, 27 are from Lolitas themselves, and 19 are from non-Lolitas(see Table 1).

Bad experiences of Lolita's culture are mainly about their arrogance, exclusion, comparison in prices, brands and full-set, which disgust both Lolitas and non-Lolitas. Lolitas start to be uncomfortable about the culture they are in. They regard Lolita just as their hobbies, and deny that they are in this subculture, which means that they do not admit that there is a subculture constructed

beneath symbols of dress, that they are members in Lolita subculture. Deconstruction is occurring. And it is exactly the reflection of their identity crisis.

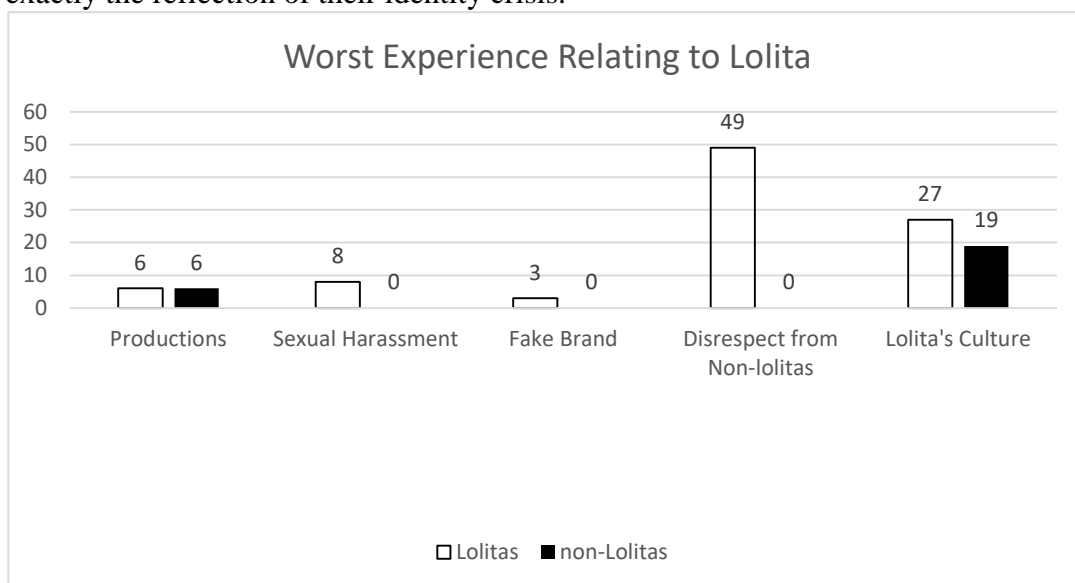


Table 1 3.Underlying Reasons: Resistance and Style

## 2.1 Weakness in Resistance

The subcultures the Birmingham School studies have strong resistance towards the dominant society like Punks. Subcultures like Punks arise due to the resistance to the policy at that time. But Lolita subculture is different, Lolitas do not have any policy tendency or think they are resisting the dominant culture[2]. But the truth is that resistance is the source of Lolita subculture. In their subconsciousness, they want to dress up like a princess whether she is good-looking or not, because they do not want to please others but only themselves. Lolita subculture is developed to resist the girls' dressing style in male-dominant society.

But it is a silent resistance[1]. The silence in subculture may lead to oblivion. The essence of their subculture is seldom referred, and it will certainly lead to weakness in resistance. They do not regard the dominant culture as the opposites, rather, they believe that they totally belong to the dominant culture. Dressing as a Lolita only in leisure is an evidence that Lolitas still consider themselves as a part of dominant culture. But actually there are some parts in the dominant culture that they should fight against and are not belong to. And it's like a scale, if the subculture's resistance is weak, the dominant culture will resist their resistance violently. If they are weak in resistance, the value system of dominant culture will influence them and causes their identity confusion.

## 2.2 Ambiguity in Style

According to Birmingham School, style is the core of their subculture theory. Hall indicated that "what makes a style is the activity of stylisation-the active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organised group-identity in the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of 'being-in-the-world'"[4]. Undoubtedly, clothes is one symbol of styles that distinguishes Lolita most. However, there are different views about what kind of clothes style can be called Lolita among Lolitas. Huang Xun found that the question that dressing what kind of clothes could be called Lolita had different answers. Some argued that only those who wearing

full-set (dress, shoes, accessories and dress-up) Lolita clothes had qualities to be called Lolita; but some proposed that those who owning only one dress could also be called Lolita. Nevertheless, she also found that all Lolitas interviewed indicated that a true Lolita must have enough passion for Lolita culture and those who only owned Lolita clothes are not[1]. It seems that there are two or three standards, and they are contradictory. If one have only one Lolita dress but likes Lolita pretty much, is she a Lolita? And how do they define “enough passion”? It is like a question that if a student doesn’t have good grades, is he a student? Some argue that grade is not the only thing to judge a student, but others argue that the grade is the key point to judge a student. Various views are unavoidable, but if the views decide the value system, the value system will be in disorder due to the polar different views.

The style of subculture represents their cultural identity and helps them express themselves[3]. As the divergence of definition of student reflects the chaos of an educational value system, the ambiguity of the style of Lolita subculture represents confusion of their cultural identity. The ambiguity of the style of Lolita subculture will finally lead to the confusion of their cultural identity. When recognition is lost in a subculture, their cultural bond will be easy to be untied. When their cultural cohesion vanishes, Lolita subculture will be lifeless and be easy to be incorporated.

### 3. Ideological Incorporation

According to the Birmingham School, after the resistance and style of subculture is formed, it is impossible for the dominant culture and capitals to ignore them, and they will contain and incorporate the subculture. And there are commercial incorporation and ideological incorporation. Commercial incorporation is that the capital turns it into products which are lacking of resistance style. The ideological incorporation is that the dominant society will cause people’s “moral panic” through media, thus exaggerating the danger of subculture and normalizing the subculture[3]. Both incorporations have impacts on Lolita subculture identity crisis, but this paper will mainly discuss the ideological incorporation.

#### 3.1 “Moral Panic” Caused by Social Media

This paper chooses 20 newspaper official accounts on weibo to study how the dominant medias define Lolita Subculture, and to further research that whether they are spreading “moral panic” to reach ideological incorporation. (See Table 2)

Name	News	Lolita’s Characteristics	Attitude
VISTA	Dad sewed Lolita Clothes for his daughter	Kids	Positive
	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative
	Sexual harassment hides in the second hand trade of Lolita dress	Problems in the production	Negative
Global Times	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative
Guangming Daily	Lolita dress's unreasonable prices	Expensive clothes	Negative
The Beijing News	Introduction of Lolita	12-30 years old, gorgeous dresses; particular cultures	Positive
	Sexual harassment hides in the second hand trade of Lolita dress	Problems in the production	Negative
China Daily	A fat Lolita was refused to take picture	Unpretty Lolita’s life	Negative

	Xie Anran, a model Lolita, works hard and buys Lolita clothes with all her salaries	Expensive and complex clothes, passionate, working hard	Neutral
	Muslim Lolita	Different races	Positive
Guangzhou Daily	A Lolita refused to take picture with a man and was abused	Disrespect from non-Lolita	Negative
Mu	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative
	Fat Lolita being refused to take picture	Unpretty Lolita's life	Negative
	Xie Anran, a model Lolita, works hard and buys Lolita clothes with all her salaries	Expensive and complex clothes, passionate, working hard	Neutral
	Someone wants to see Lolita's hairpiece dropping down who are playing turbo Drop	Disrespect from non-Lolita	Neutral
Beijing Youth Daily	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative
Legal Daily	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative
Chengdu Business News	Swindle of a Lolita producer	Problems in the production	Negative
	Lolita in Cosplay	Lolita and Cosplay	Positive
	A Lolita who wore fake dress was flung abuses in the street	Rude, sensitive to fake brands, spoiled	Negative

Table 2 through This Chart, We Can Find That 13 Pieces of News Show Negative Attitudes; 4 Show Positive Attitudes; and 3 Maintain Neutral Positions. the 13 Negative News Talk about Problems in the Production, Conflicts between Dominant Culture and Lolita Subculture and in Lolita Subculture Itself. in the Description, Lolitas Are Rude, Sensitive to Fake Brands, Spoiled, and Their Clothes Has Unreasonable Prices. the 4 Positive News Mainly Introduce Lolita Culture. the 3 Neutral News Are Introductions of a Lolita Model. They Depict Lolita's Clothes as Expensive and Complex, But This Model is Passionate and Hard-Working. It is Clear That over Half of News on the New Media Platform Basically Define Lolita Subculture as a Negative Image. Stereotypes Are Made That Lolitas Are Rude, Sensitive, Childish, Spoiled and Exclusive; Their Clothes Have Unreasonable Prices and Are Inconvenient; and It Had Bad Impacts on Society. Generally Speaking, They Are Objective News, But There is an Tendency to Exaggerate the Danger of Lolita Subculture and Avoid Talking about the Benefits It Take. According to Agenda Setting Theory, Although the Media Can't Influence How People Think, But It Can Affect What People Discuss. When People Are All Talking about Negative News Relating to Lolita, Lolita Culture Will Appear as a Negative Symbol for Dominant Cultures, Which Will Bring Moral Panic. and Due to Lolita subculture's Identity Crisis, It is Easier to Reach Ideological Incorporation.

### 3.2 Resistance from Dominant Culture

This paper argues that ideological incorporation is not only initiated by ideological systems such as medias, but also by dominant culture. The reason is that Lolita subculture resists the aesthetics of patriarchal society, such as good-looking, being sexy and pleasing men, or dressing simply like a man. Since the dominant culture has discourse power, it can reach ideological incorporation by denying the value of subculture's existence. And prejudice is one way to exclude Lolita and to incorporate it.

To study whether Lolita subcultures are facing prejudice and what levels of prejudice in China, this paper applies Allport's Scale. According to Allport's Scale, prejudice can be divided into five levels. First, antilocution, it means that talking about the targeted groups in negative terms. Second,

avoidance of contact with targeted groups. Third, discrimination, the targeted groups are discriminated against by denying them opportunities and services, putting prejudice into action. Fourth, physical attack on the targeted groups. The last, extermination of the targeted group[5].

From Part one, we find that 49 of 75 Lolitas' answers are relating to experiences of disrespects from non-Lolitas, which is over half of the total number. To have a deeper insight into it, we list its details as followed (see Table 3).

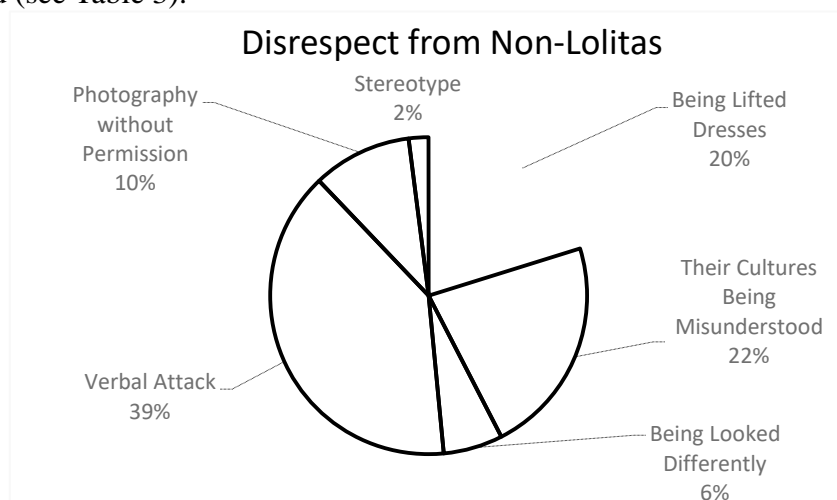


Table 3 20% Of Lolitas Once Were Lifted Dresses; 6% of Them Once Were Looked Differently; 10% of Them Were Taken Photos without Permissions. the Three Things Above Are Mainly Due to Dominant culture's Curiosity. But These Behaviors Express That the Dominant Culture Considers That They Are Strange, and Lolitas Will Feel Isolated. Verbal Attack Consists of 39% , Which Occupies the Most Share. Lolitas Once Suffered from Words Like "Why Do You Still Wear It Since You Are Ugly and Fat?" "It's Ugly." "You Are Too Old to Wear It." "It's Sexual." We Have Mentioned That the Lolita Subculture Resists the Male-Orient Fashion. the Verbal Attack is Exactly the Dominant Culture Resists Lolita subculture's Resistance. Disrespect from Dominant Culture Will Hinder Lolita Interest in Their Own Culture, and Thus Deconstruct Lolita Subculture. the Level of Prejudice is on the First Level, That is, Antilocution.

Nevertheless, this research's interviews show that 17 of 25 interviewees have tendency to avoid contact with Lolitas. They will not deliver hate speech in public, but they will contact Lolitas with carefulness, which indicates that they are terrified with Lolitas and unwilling to establish relationships with them. Since this kind of avoidance may not be easily noticed by Lolitas, especially others may not know that one is Lolita as she doesn't wear it in daily life, the real prejudice towards Lolita subculture has probably reached the second level avoidance in China today. Dominant culture is indeed resisting Lolita subculture with prejudice.

#### 4. Conclusion

The ideological incorporation is unavoidable. But when the dominant culture tries to incorporate a subculture, conflicts are inescapable, too. Subculture has always had conflicts with dominant culture. In Western countries, subcultures such as Punk and Goth have suffered from prejudice by some people in their dominant culture. In Britain, conflicts between Goths and others escalated into murder. A teenager murdered Sophie Lancaster and beat her boyfriend in 2007, only because the couples were goths. The end of the confrontation between Lolita and dominant culture like this is not in anyone's expectation. It is a necessity to notice this problem.

The appearance of Lolita subculture is to change girls' dressing style in the dominant culture. Due to their weakness in resistance and ambiguity in style, the mission for them to fight against

male-dominant appreciation is nearly forgotten. Maybe more emphasis on social responsibility rather than mere interest for them is a solution. And the dominant culture should be more inclusive and reflects its own problems.

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