LOLITAS, MOUNTAIN WITCHES AND SEXY GALS

JAPANESE FASHION AS REBELLIOUS STYLE FROM THE LOST DECADES TO NOW

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Abstract

Coinciding with the global economic stagnation of the 2010s has been a rise in the adoption of Japanese youth fashions of the 1990s and 2000s, called the Lost Decades. A time of prolonged economic stagnation in Japan, these street-fashion subcultures became known for their vibrancy and originality in resisting wider narratives of high youth unemployment and being labelled the Lost Generation. This paper explores the street-fashions of *gyaru* and Lolita, as proponents of a rebellious Japanese youth fashioning heterotopias of their own making, challenging prevailing narratives of femininity through social deviance, soft rebellion, and mortality. Comparing them to UK *gyaru* and Lolita communities, it explores how these styles are evolving to answer different subcultural needs outside Japan, which has been little studied. While capturing imaginations of youth globally, they bring into question as new knowledge the meaning of Japan to a new disenfranchised youth and the ethics of adopting subcultural dress from other cultures. Locating it within the specific cultural and historic environment of the Lost Decades, often understudied in relation to these subjects, this paper emphasises the need to reposition these fashion subcultures against the specific conditions within which they are practiced to better understand their underlying implications.

Keywords: *Japan; Streetstyle; Lost Decades; Gyaru; Lolita.*

INTRODUCTION

In existing literature on Lolita and *gyaru* fashion subcultures, prominent texts include Kinsella (2005) on early *gyaru* culture, Kawamura (2012) on Tokyo fashion districts, and Monden (2015) exploring gendered Japanese fashion subcultures. Recently, there have been studies on Lolita especially, which has developed into a mature international culture; Nguyen (2016) who takes a more theoretical approach, and Rose (2020; 2022), who focuses on the niche splinter styles of *fairy-kei* and *decora*. However, lacking in many of these studies has been the explicit contextualisation of the historical period and economic situation from which these subcultures spring. Likewise, apart from Tinelli's (2025) recent work on London Lolitas, little has been done on UK Lolitas, especially those referencing Japanese fashion subcultures outside fashion capital cities, and to date no evidence of study of UK *gyaru*. This paper aims to rectify that, reframing the development of Lolita and *gyaru* to the specific conditions of Japan's Lost Decades, continuing the work of Kawamura (2012) and Monden (2015) in comparing the two fashion subcultures. It also proposes new research in the exploration of the recent phenomenon of UK *gyaru* as an offshoot of Japanese subcultural fashion performed by UK girls, positing implications of cultural appropriation of Japan within the Lolita and *gyaru* communities.

This research draws on historical, economic, cultural and material analysis. Interviews were

conducted with individuals in the Lolita subculture community in the UK, recruited through Lolita-related events such as the 2023 Otoku World Japan Fest in Cromford Mills, Derbyshire, and the press opening for the 2024 Cute exhibition at Somerset House, London. Media analysis of UK social media sites for Lolita was also conducted, alongside that of UK *gyaru* influencer, Lizzie Bee, including an analysis of a video-recorded *gyaru* meet-up in Manchester in 2022, available online. Due to the sensitivity of Lolita and *gyaru* to social harassment, care was taken to anonymise participants.

BACKGROUND: THE LOST DECADES

In 1989, Japan's "Bubble Economy" (1986-1989) finally burst. After four years of unparalleled growth in land, stock and asset values, the Bank of Japan raised interest rates, halting the economic party of cheap credit, overvalued yen, and booming property and consumer markets. This lead to widespread consolidations, restructuring, bankruptcies, redundancies, and a nationwide graduate employment freeze (Andressen, 2002; Cargill & Sakamoto, 2008; Hamada, Kashyap, et al., 2011). With land prices only falling from 1991, the Bubble's effects took time to dissipate, turning into the "Lost Decades" (1990-2015) through the 1990s into the 2010s. This marked the end of the miraculous rise of Japan from the postwar period into becoming the second largest economy in the world, tipped to overtake the US (Hamada, Otsuka, et al., 2011; Mosk, 2008; Vogel, 1979). The Lost Decades of the early twenty-first century thus came to signify a new era of stagnation and unhitching of the twentieth century Japanese contract of hard work and loyalty with reward.

Instead, the Lost Generation emerged, drifting from label to label; NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), grass-eaters, herbivores (emasculated men), parasite children (adults reliant on parental support) and *hikikomori* (recluses/shut-ins). They reflected the conditions of insecurity in a newly hostile economic environment and social and moral panic. Influenced by a string of shocking events, from the late-1980s serial schoolgirl murders by *otaku* manga and anime fan, Miyazaki Tsutomu, to the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attacks by the Aum Shinrikyo Cult, Japanese youth were perceived by the media as a moral danger to society, alienated and unable to obtain or commit to respectable employment (Matthews & White, 2004). Subsisting on part-time jobs and shunning social responsibilities, the youth were seen as both victims of the economic climate and perpetrators of a national social and moral decline (Azuma, 2009; Brinton, 2011; Galbraith, 2019).

Yet concurrently, Japanese popular culture was booming domestically and internationally. From the fertile ground of the Miracle (1955-1973) and Bubble (1986-1989) economies, Japanese culture and design enjoyed a boom in prestige and attention. These included internationally renowned architects such as Kenzo Tange (1913-2005), furniture designers such as Sori Yanagi (1915-2011), fashion designers such as Rei Kawakubo and her brand, Comme de Garcons (est. 1973), and innovations in product design and technology, such as the development of the Sony Walkman (1979), and Nintendo Entertainment System (1985). By the 1990s, Japanese manga, anime, television, film, pop music and fashion were making inroads globally, becoming the basis for cultural soft power in the form of the government-sanctioned Cool Japan policy of the 2010s. Examples include manga and anime such as *Akira* (1988), *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996), and *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997); television programmes such as *Oshin* (1983-1984); films such as *Ring* (1998) and *Battle Royale* (2000); and streetstyle fashion as depicted in the popular magazine, *FRUiTS* (1997-2017). These new Japanese cultural products were characterised by a dynamic synthesis and cross-cultural collaboration of West and East, making them familiar and excitingly unfamiliar for global audiences.

While many twentieth century Japanese youth subcultures have been characterised by this dynamism of cross-cultural influence, the Lost Decades' street-fashion has particular appeal and influence. This was due to improved class conditions for more Japanese youth, who had grown up during the affluence of the 1980s Bubble Economy. Compared to other subcultural products such as manga, anime, and film, street-fashion also has a physicality, materiality, and immediacy, creating intimacy with the wearer. Worn on the body and associated with specific fashion districts, its performative and territorial aspects make both the wearer and Tokyo sites of cultural contestation and destination, attracting commentators and visitors through their visibility and embodied practice. The areas of Harajuku and Shinjuku became areas of vibrant subcultural fashion display,

creating meccas for performative fashion and impetus for a dynamic retail industry. Meanwhile, striking images disseminated by magazines in a flourishing publishing industry meant that street-fashion had wide influence and appeal nationally and internationally, with photographers such as Shoichi Aoki, founder of street-fashion photography zines such as *STREET* (1985) and *FRUiTS* (1997), becoming known for their documentary DIY approach.

GYARU, GANGURO AND YAMAMBA: FORMALISED DEVIANCE, FEMININE CHALLENGE, RACIAL REBELLION

Emerging from this fevered environment was the *gyaru* style. Characterised by bleached blonde hair, tanned skin, vibrant make-up and revealing, colourful clothing, the term, *gyaru* (for girls, *gyaru-o* for boys), derives from the English slang, gal. Frequenting the influential 109 department store, *gyaru* staked Shibuya as their territory, self-referring as gangs, with their own language, hierarchies, rituals, and rules of engagement. These included deliberately opaque slang combining abbreviations of Japanese and English words, and hierarchical structures with group leaders, deputies, and strict seniority system with enforced retirement (Kawamura, 2012).

With their own logic of cool, deviance went beyond *gyaru* fashion. Evolving from the bodycon women's fashion of the 1980s, *gyaru* prized social deviance beyond staying out late and clubbing. As Kawamura (2012) and Kinsella (2013) observe, unmarried cohabitation, promiscuity, unprotected sex, fighting, arson, drinking one's own urine, setting fire to one's own pubic hair – these were seen as behaviours raising one's esteem within the group, according to complex points-based systems (Arai, 2009). Contrasting this was a requirement to adhere to strict internal rules, including intergroup politeness, formalised voting, and strong group discipline. Rituals were rigorously observed, including formalised retirement parties for outgoing members re-entering conventional Japanese society through work or marriage.

While from a contemporary Western perspective these behaviours may seem standard teenage rebellion, within the Japanese context this deviance challenged not only social norms, but expectations for Japanese femininity. Coined in the late-nineteenth century, *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) became a byword for women's place in society, emphasising through education women's duties to the nation as second pillar to the husband/father in the family dynamic. Coinciding with the start of the Meiji Restoration and Japan's increasing militarisation and nationalism, this definition of women's roles was about upholding the social and moral fabric of society, while achieving national aims of population advancement and discipline (Tanaka, 1998; Tanimoto, 2012). Implicit were women's location inside the home, modesty, pre-marital chastity, marital fidelity, and responsibility and commitment to the education, development and care of one's husband, elders, and children. Against this, *gyaru* deviance was not only taboo-breaking but a direct rebellion against societal expectations of girls and women to remain pure, passive, and in service of others.

Ganguro and *yamamba* are an offshoot of *gyaru* culture and derive from the words, *gan* and *kuro* (exceptionally dark/black), and *yamamba* (mountain witch). Revolving around the Shibuya and Ikebukuro areas of Tokyo, both styles defined themselves through extreme tans, excessive, dramatic light-coloured make-up, light contact lenses, bleached, brightly coloured hair, hair extensions, and vibrant clothing and accessories (Kawamura, 2012). Easily misunderstood as blackface parody, *ganguro* and *yamamba* were engaged in a more nuanced challenge to the norm (Kinsella, 2005, 2006). Exhibiting fierceness and aggression, they broke with expectations of Japanese feminine passivity and shyness. The deep tans, meanwhile, rebelled against what Miller (2006) identifies as the prized *bihaku* norm of fair skin as refined Japanese feminine beauty. *Gyaru* girls identify tans as strong and cool, connecting femininity with strength and coolness through the tan and rejection of fair skin cultivated through staying indoors (Kawamura, 2012). Brightly-coloured clothing, hair and make-up emphasise the tan's darkness, enabling them to visibly stand out in public, not through beauty but strength of image. Using beach-like signifiers of Hawaiian leis and tie-dye sarongs, *ganguro* and *yamambas* portrayed themselves as fun-loving and allied to an internationalist outdoors that included Pacific beach cultures and "authentic living". As Befu (2001) has identified fairness as characteristic of essential Japaneseness in a practice of modern Japanese nationalism called *nihonjinron*, so *ganguro*, in rejecting fairness so dramatically,

demonstrated rebellion against constraints of integral Japaneseness as imprinted into their very skin. In this, *ganguro*, *yamambas* and wider *gyaru* tanning culture, provided a counterpoint to the mainstream practice and acceptance of *nihonjinron*, that had surged in popularity since the 1970s in tandem with Japan's rising economic fortunes. Tied together in what Sugimoto (1999) identified as the triangle of nationality, ethnicity and culture, Yoshino (1992) observed that the main proponents of *nihonjinron* were the "salarymen" (businessmen) as they endeavoured to explain Japanese working practices to the international community through the lens of cultural distinction and economic and corporate nationalism. *Gyaru* tanning became not just a rebellion against the dictates of idealised pale feminine Japanese beauty, but one in which young women from the periphery of the economic system were challenging the cultural, economic and ethnic nationalism promoted by patriarchal Japan.

However, while *gyaru* subcultures may have been a visible challenge to conventional social norms, *gyaru* rule-breaking was also framed as exorcising one's deviance before settling down, with retirement from gang circles necessary to re-enter Japanese society. Underpinning *gyaru* philosophy was the understanding that early deviance would promote stable mature adulthood, and Kawamura (2012) has observed *gyaru* to be more conservative than they appear. Despite apparent opposition to social norms, *gyaru* may provide an important outlet for youthful rebellion, facilitating the wider Japanese system of conventional gender roles sanctioned by marriage and corporate employment. This echoes the historic dismissiveness towards Japanese youth subcultures by mainstream society, seeing them as rebellious phases such as the 1960s *dankai* generation youth protest movement, who eventually graduated into mainstream jobs and society, or passive disengagement, such as with the 1970s *shirake sedai* youth and 1980s consumerist *shinjinrui* (Matthews & White, 2004). However, Arai (2009) has noted that *gyaru* perceived their subculture not as passivity nor pointless rebellion, but as a process of self-actualisation through which they would attain self-determination and future success in society. For its participants, *gyaru* was thus as much a career strategy as other character-building practices.

LOLITA: 'EXTREME GIRLING', FEMININE REFUSAL, SELF-CHERISHMENT

Developing concurrently in the early-1990s were the Lolita subcultures. While commonly confused with the Nabokov novel, Lolita fashions are a separate category, based around idealised eighteenth and nineteenth century Western fashions of girlhood, invoking the styles of Rococo, Victorian and Edwardian periods (Nguyen, 2016). These include the use of lace, ruffles, full skirts, ribbons, bows, bonnets and sweet signifiers such as hearts, toys, stuffed animals, and soft feminine colours. While Kawamura (2012) and Monden (2015) have identified Lolita fashion as originating from 1970s feminine brands such as Milk and Pink House, Lolita can be seen as part of a wider practice drawing inspiration from European cultural aesthetics. These include the enduring popularity in Japan of Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*; manga such as *The Rose of Versailles* (1972-73), featuring the eighteenth century Queen of France, Marie Antoinette; and mid-twentieth century artists such as Makoto Takahashi, whose illustrations featured young girls with large sparkling eyes in period Western dress. While undoubtedly influenced by the romanticism and decoration in 1970s and 1980s Japanese girl aesthetics (known as *hirahira*, an onomatopoeia of the fluttering of ribbons and frills), as Monden (2015, p. 113) notes, Lolita fashion does not draw exclusively nor faithfully from Western period dress, but engages with it as "transnational appropriation" that is creative and contemporary. Japanese Lolita effectively un-anchors Western dress, enabling it to become the locus for fantasy, wish-fulfilment and play.

Associated with the Harajuku area, surrounding streets from the 1990s became populated with Lolita fashion brands such as Angelic Pretty, Baby the Stars Shine Bright, and Atelier-Pierrot. Like *gyaru* subculture, Lolitas have a strong sense of community facilitated by specific language, centred around abbreviations for terms of dress, such as *coord* (a complete outfit of coordinated items) *wan pīsu* ('one piece' dress), and *cārdi* (cardigan). These often derive from the Japanese approach of abbreviating adopted foreign loanwords. Strict rules also tie the community together, featuring advice on skirt length, outfit creation, choice of fabric, quality, textile care advice, behaviour and rules of engagement whilst wearing a *coord*. Unlike *gyaru*,

Lolita subculture in Japan tends to be dominated by girls, who ostensibly are not required to retire, although, as wryly observed by a Lolita interviewed by Kawamura (2012, p. 66), it is "as long as you look young and don't have wrinkles around your eyes", indicating a natural aging out from active participation.

The most well-known and typical style is Sweet Lolita, with variations such as Elegant/Classic Lolita, Princess Lolita, Deco Lolita, and Pink Lolita. Drawing on a princess aesthetic, it was seen as a new wave of *shōjo* (young girl) culture that had developed since the early-twentieth century, catering to new consumer groups of schoolgirls and young women. Initially referring to cute stationary and other items known as "fancy goods" (*fanshī guzzu* or *komamono*) (Kinsella, 1995; Sato, 2009; S. Sugimoto, 2018), *shōjo* products soon expanded to include manga, literature, and fashion, with common themes being cuteness, coming of age stories and romance (Mackie, 2010; Treat, 1993). Taking inspiration from Butler's (2006) conceptualisation of gender as a sequence of performative acts which one not only is, but also does, Salih (2002), and Swindle's (2011) analysis of girlhood and "becoming-girl" as affective feeling, and observation of "girl" morphing in linguistic usage in the 1990s from noun to adjective – Lolita can be seen as an "extreme girling", where the practice of girl turns it into a performative and continuous verb. However, with Lolitas' emphasis on childhood, play, and innocence, rather than *shōjo*, Lolitas prefer the association with *otome* (maiden), and its members view it as a subculture created by maidens for maidens (Nguyen, 2016). In this is an important distinction between the English and Japanese translation. According to Treat (1993), rather than part of the binary of heterosexual relations, *shōjo* (and by extension, *otome*) constitute a third category of asexual gender, in which purity, innocence and chastity are virtues providing a foil and ambiguity in the formation of girl identity, allowing her to remain outside the constraints of sexual reproduction. Rather than being exclusive, Lolita is a style accessible through its emphasis on *kawaii* (cuteness) rather than *utsukushii* (unattainable beauty). *Kawaii*'s imperfections endow an endearing lovability, and a cherishing Lolitas draw on (Nguyen, 2016). Rather than solely a style, Lolita is a way of being in which enduring purity and inner authenticity is expressed through practice. Self-expression, living to one's values, cherishing, and surrounding oneself with lovable things take precedence over outside influences. Lolita can be seen as more individual than *gyaru* culture, with less pressure to conform to points, rules-based systems, and hierarchies, and more enduring with importance placed not on behaviour but an inner authentic self.

Yet, for all their positive relationship to *kawaii* and *shōjo* culture, Lolitas have also been critiqued as detached from production, creating themselves through consumerism (Nguyen, 2016; Treat, 1993). In the novel turned 2004 live-action film, *Kamikaze Girls* (Nakashima, 2004; Takemoto, 2002), denial of involvement with production becomes the defining moment for the Lolita character, Momoko. Throughout the story she refuses to engage with work, preferring to obtain money dishonestly to buy her outfits, only using her embroidery skills under duress. When presented with an opportunity to work for her favourite brand, Baby the Stars Shine Bright, she deliberately turns them down, choosing to remain true to her calling as a pure Lolita consumer. However, rather than a simplistic reading of idleness (which is unlikely, considering Momoko's determined efforts adhering to the Lolita lifestyle), this is more a declaration of utter commitment to inhabiting the elegant, leisurely, unlaboured life of a Lolita maiden. In a sense this is an extension of the retreat into childhood, escaping the demands of adult society to work. Against the intense consumerism of the preceding Bubble Economy years where youth culture focused on designer brands and material consumption, followed by the collapse of the employment market and disillusion with work during the Lost Decades – the development of Lolita as a consumer-focused, work-avoidant Japanese youth subculture can be viewed as a reaction to these conditions.

Against the pressures of traditional Japanese femininity, girlhood – especially non-Japanese girlhood – enables an escape from patriarchy. Unlike the open rebellion of the 1920s *modan gāru* (modern girl) or the *gyaru* (Miller & Bardsley, 2005), by denying female adulthood, Lolitas refuse to engage altogether in production and reproduction as "good wives and wise mothers". Within this is the inherent ambiguity of girl objects, explored by Handyside (2017) and Swindle (2011), in which objects of girlhood can be both liberating and limiting of female subjectivities within the constraints of a capitalist neo-liberal, mediated

landscape. Similarly, while performing this exaggerated femininity can be seen as adherence to a patriarchal construct, "crafting and performing *shōjo* through gestures, and particularly clothes, allows Japanese women to present themselves as being segregated from obvious sexualisation". (Monden, 2015, p. 85). Rather than positioned as acceptance or ironic refusal of female sexuality, performing Lolita bypasses sexuality itself, signalling a removal from the discussion and application of sexual labels.

Lolita is therefore a radical act, where performance of extreme girling disrupts social norms on several axes. The embrace of regressive femininity is a rejection of feminism and the demands on women to compete for equality, while in using the West as limitless space for change and possibility, is rejection of traditional Japanese values limiting women in a gender-stratified society (Kelsky, 2008). In a stagnating economy, where the demands of work to conform through one's body, behaviour, time and efforts provided fewer rewards and women were already disadvantaged, Lolitas' refusal to participate in production were also signs of "soft resistance" (Nguyen, 2016, p. 26) against a failing and unequal capitalist system (McVeigh, 2000; Monden, 2014).

Developing from the sweetness of the classic styles of Lolita, are splinter styles with comparatively darker elements. These include characteristics of *kimo-kawa* (creepy cute), *itami-kawa* (sad-cute), *busu-kawa* (ugly-cute), *guro-kawa* (grotesque/ horror cute), and *yami-kawa* (sick-cute). Seemingly at odds with Lolita aesthetics, they create a push-pull effect of opposite emotions, where sweet is offset by ugly, and the disfigured made adorable. The best known of these styles is Gothic Lolita, utilising the same frameworks of Victorian dress with a gothic twist, including dark colours and mourning, melancholic signifiers. Incorporating *kimo-kawa* and *itami-kawa*, Gothic Lolitas invoke the power of adorability to inspire affection and sympathy in things morbid or broken, signalling the acceptance for oneself at the heart of Lolita. Captivated by a morbidity and melancholy for the disappearing, Gothic Lolita manifest an honouring of lost childhood and innocence in their desire to freeze time. In a "death-like nostalgia" Gothic Lolita attempt to preserve their integral purity of maidenhood, creating an "eternal static reality" of the past, denying change that would impact on their sense of self (Nguyen, 2016, p. 27).

A further development from Gothic Lolita is the *guro-loli* (gruesome Lolita). Featuring elements of *busu-kawa*, *guro-kawa* and *yami-kawa*, they draw attention to and incite sympathy for the ugly, sick, disfigured, horrific parts of ourselves. Developing in the 2010s, these styles express more than denial of participation in the wider social and economic system through retreat into a fantasy past. Instead, through horror elements such as distressed makeup emulating soreness and wounds, bloodstained clothing, and medical implements such as c-pap masks and syringes as accessories, they actively engage with the diseased, disfigured and wounded as signifiers for sympathy, commenting on society as sick and cruel in its treatment of the disadvantaged. Through these styles, *guro-loli* teach us to see and treat people, including ourselves, as sympathetic beings, worthy of love, cherishment, and self-acceptance. Aligning with more traditional Japanese aesthetic philosophies such as *wabi-sabi* as the recognition of impermanence and imperfection, these Lolita can be seen as expressing a melancholic appreciation of transience and spiritual longing towards transcendence of the human condition.

GYARU AND LOLITA TODAY: CULTURAL APPRECIATION OR APPROPRIATION?

Since the 2010s, it is in the international sphere where Lolita and *gyaru* subcultures have developed further. Gaining pace through the 2000s, the 2013 Cool Japan government initiative helped propel Japanese popular culture as part of its soft power strategy. Notably, Sweet Lolita was the only street-fashion legitimised by the policy, establishing related events, communities, and retailers in North America and Europe, with significant online and commercial presence supporting communities that practice and disseminate the subculture (Kang & Cassidy, 2015; Tinelli, 2025).

Interviewing non-Japanese Lolitas in London and the Midlands area in 2023 and 2024, it was apparent that in addition to their appearance they have similar values to Japanese Lolita. On introduction, they offered their Lolita moniker rather than given names as their Lolita identity. Many of these referenced Lolita styles, like *fairy-kei*, or cute foods, such as cherry or *ichigo* (Japanese for strawberry). In contrast, Japanese Lolita names are often classic Western names such as Sophia or Charlotte. Rather than identifying as an adoption or performance, British Lolita insisted that Lolita revealed their

true selves. As a transformative, performative subculture, Lolita is more than dress; it is a medium through which practitioners inhabit their own authenticity, something Egner & Maloney (2016) observe about drag. These Lolita declare their dedication through life-choices that permit Lolita as everyday practice including choosing careers with a flexible dress code, demonstrating privileging of subcultural expression over economic production. However, unlike drag, UK Lolita continue the Japanese Lolita philosophy of refusing sexuality as a defining factor, a place of safety from unequal sexual relations. This is evidenced in the exclusive online social media groups on Facebook, which use coded acronyms such as EGL (Elegant Goth Lolita) to avoid open reference to Lolita, and strict joining policies that require knowledge and familiarity with Lolita fashion culture, designed to protect existing members and mitigate online sexual harassment. Nevertheless, through values of acceptance, self-affirmation, and care, Lolita can be seen as a queer-adjacent subculture, where hyper-femininity subverts existing structures, demonstrating what Whiteley and Rycenga (2006) identify as an alternative way of interaction and world-ordering.

Gyaru too has been making its mark on girl communities, with a vibrant presence through online communities, influencers, fashion, goods retailers, and in-person meetups. Contrasting with Lolita, there is less rejection of sexualisation, the style drawing more on the *ero-kawa* (erotic-cute) aesthetic. However, unlike Japanese *gyaru* circles, British *gyaru* do not mention delinquency or deviance, appearing to cosplay Japan as site for metamorphosis and alignment with internationalist values, as part of a larger transnational girling associated with East Asia. An example is a 2022 *gyaru* meet-up in Manchester, headed by the self-proclaimed *gyaru* influencer, Lizzie Bee (2022). Comprised of only girls, there was a mix of styles, with some wearing light-coloured *yamamba* makeup, but most dressed in a Lolita-aligned style called *hime gyaru* (princess *gyaru*), including full-coverage cute dresses, elaborately curled hair, cute makeup, with little sign of extreme tanning. Walking around Manchester, they visited East Asian-themed venues, including a photo-sticker booth, karaoke establishment, and manga-themed café. Rather than enacting Japanese *gyaru* socially deviant behaviour of sexual promiscuity, fighting or arson, the British *gyaru* participated enthusiastically in Japanese-themed consumerism, enacting the high voices, childlike speech and mannerisms of *burriko*, a regressive Japanese feminine style commonplace in manga and anime (Kerr, 2022). At no point did there seem to be any adherence to a Japanese-style *gyaru* hierarchy or organisational rules. However, while not necessarily rebellious in behaviour, the deviance was potentially in the challenge of Western women engaging in extreme Japanese *kawaii* culture as opposed to the Western feminine norm.

While retreating to childhood and play as protest against adult norms, international Lolita and *gyaru* access the styles differently from their Japanese counterparts, locating the site of play as Japan rather than the West. Whereas for Japanese Lolita and *gyaru* the fashion subcultures provided an imaginary alternative as an escape from the pressures of Japanese conservative femininity, today Lolita and *gyaru* styles are seen as synonymous with Japan rather than Western dress, an alternative expression of femininity as route to self-authenticity. This was evident in the use of Japanese-inspired names and activities during meetups. Yet, in becoming a Japanese aesthetic performed by Western girls, this appropriation can be critiqued as reappropriation of an appropriation, an exoticized and orientalist cosplay of Japanese cool rather than Japanese feminine rebellion referencing Western dress (Hinton, 2023). Here, the exterior form of Japanese street-fashion becomes the locus for Western feminine fantasy and escape, hollowing out the underlying meaning of the styles. Nevertheless, while there are aspects of Said's (2003) Orientalism at play, as Lolita takes inspiration from Western period dress, it could also be said to align to what Al-Azm (2000) and Gabriel and Wilson (2021) have identified as reverse Orientalism, through accessing Japan's use of the Occident as a place of otherness, as well as radical Orientalism in which the East is aligned and positively identified with from a position of solidarity in resistance against Western imperialism, racism, materialism, and in this case, Western patriarchy (Cohen-Vrignaud, 2015; Wu, 2018).

UK Lolita and *gyaru* are part of the wider debate around cultural appreciation verses appropriation, from consumer appreciation in response to demands for neoliberal multiculturalism by transnational capitalism, to recognition of the problem of cultural inequality where "other, often marginalized, cultures are transformed into palatable sources of consumable difference" (Cruz

et al., 2024, p. 963). These competing demands have led to tensions between calls for consumers to appreciate cultural diversity, alongside consuming responsibly, acknowledging the issues of cultural appropriation. In their work on ethnic consumers navigating these competing demands, Cruz et al. (2024, p. 963) identified this as consumer self-authorisation, a "reflexive reconfiguration of the self in relation to the social world through which consumers grant themselves permission to continue consuming cultural difference when confronting an identity-relevant tension between the ethnic consumer subject and the responsibilized consumer subject". It is in this mode that UK communities play in the ambivalent and amorphous space of Lolita and *gyaru* fashion as a form of consumer self-authorisation and actualisation, skirting cultural tensions around appreciation and appropriation.

CONCLUSION

Since Japan's Lost Decades and post-2008 global economic stagnation, youth subcultures have adopted Japanese street-fashion to express discontent with the breakdown of the social contract, where effort no longer guarantees economic reward, and a growing exclusion of youth from societal participation. The styles of *gyaru* and Lolita have been pivotal in giving femininity a fashion through which to express social and cultural deviance, soft rebellion, and alignment with internationalist values, whether that of the limitless spaces of the West or playful heterotopias of modern Japan. "However, rather than being escapist, these subcultures can be interpreted as refusal to participate in a tough environment defined by scarcity and threat." Despite the decadence, flamboyant excess can be a radical act during a time of economic stagnation and cost-of-living crisis; extreme girling and childish regression rebellion against the pressure to be sexualised and reproduce; and refusal to participate in economic production and patriarchal reproduction radical in a broken and unequal system. However, while not without problems, such as the nihilism within soft resistance and cultural appropriation by Western girl culture, the purpose of feminine subcultures like Lolita and *gyaru* is not to offer clear answers. Instead, they are tools of critique and a silent but visible method of protest for the dispossessed. "Rather than being good wives and wise mothers, these feminine subcultures of resistance actively work to be neither wives nor mothers, nor indeed good or wise. Instead, through deviance and frivolity, in the face of gendered structural limitations, they demonstrate courage, playfulness, self-authenticity, and ultimately acceptance and self-love, regardless of appearance."

In exploring how girl cultures have used *gyaru* and Lolita fashion to articulate discontent and resistance against a rigid social and economic order, this research widens out the scholarship that has historically focused on male-dominated subcultural fashions such as punk, as markers of rebellious fashion. It follows work by authors such as McRobbie (2000), Handyside (2017) and Swindle (2011) focusing on girls as subjects worthy of subcultural study. Examining current expressions in the UK, it contributes to studies of Lolita and *gyaru* that have predominantly focused on Japan, while positioning the subcultures against economic, historical and cultural context, it adds necessary context often under-applied in studies on Lolita and *gyaru*. Finally, limitations to the research meant more in-depth interviews and a wider selection of participants would have enhanced the scope of the primary research, and future work would involve engaging more deeply with UK *gyaru* and Lolita communities to draw out richer insights.

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