

# The Conformity and Subversion of Lolita Fashion to Male Chauvinism from the Perspective of Gramsci's "Hegemony" Theory

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**ABSTRACT:** This work illustrates the gender discourse in Lolita fashion. Lolita clothing is a kind of clothing in ancient European style which is adapted by Japanese designers, and Lolita subculture is cultivated by mass as a result of its popularity. Most of its enthusiasts are female, thus it will be beneficial to the development of female subculture if the gender discourse signified by Lolita fashion is analyzed thoroughly. Based on Gramsci's "hegemony" theory, this paper analyzes the male hegemony, female resistance and their "negotiation" in texts about Lolita fashion. They are divided into two categories, one is ideological and related to man's gaze, another is economic and related to division of labor between sexes. It is concluded that Lolita fashion or subculture is a field of "negotiation" between male chauvinism and female resistance. These two discourses tend to compromise with each other, while it is still difficult to tell which one is dominant at present.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The existing research on Lolita clothing is very limited, most of them are related to clothing design, and only a few are about cultural study. Predecessors have been concerned about the male gaze reflected in Lolita clothing and some suggested that it is related to women's desire to look younger in men's eyes; others believed that male gaze has nothing to do with it and this style promotes the independence of female aesthetic concepts[1]. Former researches lack sufficient discussion on Lolita's economic significance. They not only indicated that it expresses disagreement with the division of labor of women in industrial society, but also showed that it is conducive to the realization of women's independent ideal self, and did not clarify the relationship between these conclusions[2]. The theory of "hegemony" is only used to study the incorporation of Lolita culture by consumerism. To analyse a fashion of women, researchers need to pay attention to gender discourse, but no paper has fully focused on it yet. Based on Gramsci's "hegemony" theory, this paper analyzes the male hegemony, female resistance and their "negotiation" in texts about Lolita fashion.

## 2 CORE CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH METHOD

Here are introductions to the object, the main theory and research method of this paper.

### 2.1 Lolita fashion



Figure 1 Typical Lolita dress

Lolita is a style of clothing which has its origin in ancient European style and has been adapted by Japanese designers. Lolita dress is available to everyday wearing, but it still has characteristics of Victorian and Rococo fashions. The skirt is large and splendid, propped up by a petticoat, decorated by a lot of laces and drawings. A subculture

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and a communication-area are formed by its enthusiasts called Lo Niang, which means Lolita girls.

## 2.2 Hegemony

The theory of “hegemony” which is proposed by Gramsci suggests that culture is a stage where ruling class and ruled class defence against and “negotiate” with each other. Ruling class produces dominate ideology which is beneficial to their own interests and introduces it to the whole society. However, ruled class often appropriates and reinterprets it in order to create their original culture which struggles against this hegemony. Ruling class again tries to “incorporate” these reinterpretations by using ideological and economic devices, thus begins the process of “negotiation”. This theory is practiced by youth subculture which produces its original ideology by appropriating products of cultural industry dominated by mainstream ideology. [4]

## 2.3 Research method

Using the method of text analysis, this paper focuses on texts about Lolita fashion, and takes the hegemony theory as the basic framework to analyze the male hegemony, female resistance and the possibility of male's incorporation which is signified by Lolita. The text sources are as follows: specific clothing as images; relevant comments in online forums represented by “Zhihu”; Typical events in Lolita cultural circle which take “Baidu news” as an example.

# 3 RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 3.1 Ideological significance

Lolita clothing, as a foil to women's bodies, naturally involves the trouble of men's gaze. The gaze of man is a result of male chauvinism: women are objects gazed by men, while men are onlookers who enjoy the pleasure of gazing; as a result, women tend to shape their body images according to men's requirements. The origin of Lolita fashion is related to male desire, but after being appropriated by women, a relatively independent subculture circle is formed and it became into a place where male gaze and women's independent aesthetic taste “negotiate” with each other.

### 3.1.1. Paedophile

The word “Lolita” comes from Nabokov's novel Lolita. The heroine Lolita is a precocious girl who seduced a pedophile stepfather. The book was published in the 1950s, and its patriarchal perspective made “Lolita” a synonym for sexy little girls. Later, it was adapted into a movie whose heroine's dressing style was close resemblance to Lolita fashion. Compared between the image of her clothing below and Lolita dress above, it is easy to find correlations: vintage court style, lace decoration,

lace skirt, elegant printing, gentle temperament. As an “archetype”, Lolita clothing is obviously related to the paedophile aesthetic in men's subconscious, but it has deviated from the text above after being popularized in Asia. It was officially formed in Japan in the 1970s, and was adapted from the 19th century European fashion. During this period, European morality was conservative, with chastity as the virtue, and women's clothing was in Victorian style which was thick and reserved. Compared between the heroine's dressing and contemporary Lolita, it is obvious that her upper cloth and skirt are very short, giving hints of exposing her chest and lower body; while the latter covers the whole upper body with thick cloth and hides hip under layers of petticoat. Lolita in Victorian fashion is different from short clothes in the film signifying sexual hint and those extremely simplified contemporary daily outfit because it produces a sense of distance between sexes. The retrospection of this style is a rebellion against modern women's clothing which is becoming more and more exposed.



Figure 2 The heroine of the movie Lolita

### 3.1.2. Men's preference

Men's attitude is reflected in the Q & A “How do boys think of girls wearing Lolita?” in 2019. [4]The theme of more than a thousand replies is close, the typical example is as follows: “If you have an angel's face, the devil's body, even if you run naked, someone would praises you. If you look average, or even worse than average, and you are still wearing Lolita, then men would think you are even more ugly.” The wearer's body appearance is ugly, then the overall image is extremely disharmonious because the ugliness is highlighted by the dress. The body conforms to the male gaze, then every kind of dress has the same aesthetic values. The design of clothing has no special attractiveness to men and is a product of women's independent aesthetic attitudes, but after all, it is extremely exaggerated and tends to attract the scrutiny of others. The dress sets the requirements for a perfect fe-

male body, which complies the gaze of men. Women are compelled to improve their body images under the scrutiny of men in order to match such exaggerated dressing design. In addition, as it is mentioned above, the dress attempts to hide female body. However, in stead of stop paying attention to female body, male gaze tends to search for every small inch of exposed skin which is not covered.

### **3.1.3. Appropriate age**

The preset of appropriate age of wearing Lolita dress indicates the significance which is attached to the dress by women. President of Japan Lolita Association Misako Aoki put her Lolita photographs online when celebrating her 39th birthday in 2022. Reviewers commented: "Middle-aged woman is still unmarried, and is still pretending to be young and attracting public attention by wearing childish dress. It is a failure of women.[5]" It can be inferred from this text that the preset of reviewers is like this: Young women wear Lolita in order to attract men and Lolita is discarded after achieving the purpose of marriage. However, in China, 2021, the fashion of 55-year-old Xie Chuanqin was widely supported by netizen[6]. She is an independent woman with her own career of shoes production. She said people who see her, no matter what they think, at least they are happy, her behavior entertains both others and herself. This woman wore Lolita clothes at the age of not pursuing marriage, expressed her denial of catering to men.

## **3.2 Economic significance**

Under private ownership, men go to public sphere and work, women stay at home and do not work, thus the economic status of sexes is unequal. Nowadays, women are liberated from heavy housework and begin working in public space for economic status. The significance of Lolita clothing changes with time. It not only symbols the economic dependence of women in origin, but also is carried forward by post-modern cultural industry, reflecting the change of women's position in division of labor and consumption.

### **3.2.1. Childish fashion**

The influence of Lolita clothing first appeared in the pessimistic Japanese society after World War II. The "little boy subculture [7]" that resisted growth was widely popular and gave birth to childish fashion. In the 1970s, more Japanese women were engaged in labor, and their mothers' companionship decreased, which caused the repression of young people and leaded them to remedy their loss by wearing clothing in childish style. Childish fashion reflects women's escape from economic independence; However, as an alternative satisfaction, it eliminates their dependence in reality, helps women obtain a certain degree of independence and contribute to economic development without endangering male hegemony.

### **3.2.2. Division of labor**

Lolita clothing originated from European women's clothing in the 19th century. At the beginning of the Industry Revolution, men went out to labor and gained enough money to hire servants, thus women were freed from domestic affairs and often wore heavy dress which was a sign of being rich and free from housework. The Lolita girl in movie Nobara Takemoto resists the contemporary division of labor and evades the responsibility of independent women: "Ladies in the Rococo period practiced the ultimate realm that we who is called Lolita and discriminated against today can't achieve even if we want to pursue it." However, with the improvement of women's position in the division of labor, the dress is no longer a burden of labor. A relevant survey "the local development of Lolita subculture in China [8]" shows that students account for 76% of the Lolita group, while intellectuals such as civil servants, technological and financial workers account for the rest, and more than 94% use Lolita as a daily outfit. It shows that Lolita girls group has got rid of the traditional laborious work of women, and clothing has become a symbol of engaging in mental work which indicates their identity of leisure class.

### **3.2.3. Consumerism**

Lolita is a product of cultural industry, which is in line with Jameson's concept of "nostalgia": The cultural industry reproduces the past with simulacrum, but it is divorced from the real historical origin, thus it is just a unreal illusion of contemporary people; Mechanical reproduction weakens the cultural connotation of Lolita clothing about female dependence mentioned above. However, the former survey shows that 82% of Lolita girl are addicted to comics and animation culture, and 51% have some knowledge of Rococo culture; The heroine of Nobara Takemoto is the representative of Lolita girls who satisfy their nostalgia for the Rococo Era by consuming clothing excessively. They ignore the commodity attribute of dresses, so that the relationship between people while producing commodities is covered up by the social relationship between commodities themselves as objects. The worship of the mysterious content of commodities, such as the nostalgia for the Rococo period, makes women suffer from "commodity fetishism" and causes infinite consumption under the attraction of new products to strengthen the illusion of nostalgia. Under such a circumstance, they tend to shape their bodies infinitely according to men's aesthetic standard in order to match dresses, which is incorporated by male hegemony.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

Lolita clothing is a place where male cultural hegemony and female independent consciousness are intertwined. Male hegemony gave birth to its original form from both ideological and economic aspects. Women reinterpreted it and have done effective resistance in the process of achieving liberation. However, men still dominate cultur-

al production, Lolita fashion cannot avoid the “incorporation” of public opinion and consumerism, and gender discourses in it has been in a “negotiation” state for a long time. Fighting for cultural leadership is of great significance to women's liberation. Women's subculture needs to consciously prevent women from the incorporation of male hegemony while developing and carry forward the discourse that belongs to women alone.

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