

# A lifetime dedicated to lolita with Kathryn A. Hardy Bernal

Interview by AllyRat.

**D**r. Kathryn A. Hardy Bernal is Head of Research and Postgraduate Studies at the Yoobee Colleges of Creative Innovation. She is also a longtime lolita and lifelong scholar who has spent the last 17 years researching lolita fashion within the academic sphere. Known lovingly within the New Zealand community as "that one girl who did her Ph.D on lolita", Kathryn has been kind enough to join us at Milk & Honey for an interview.

## What first inspired you to study lolita fashion?

I was first inspired to research Lolita fashion in around 2003 after visiting the exhibition, *FRUITS: Tokyo Street Style* at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia. While this exhibition showcased photographs taken by Shoichi Aoki on the streets of Tokyo, between 1997 – 2002, it also displayed a handful of actual garments, including some by Japanese Lolita brands, such as *Baby the Stars Shine Bright*. I was instantly drawn to the fashion and not only started reading what I could find, but began to adopt the fashion myself, by about 2006. I saw the Gothic Lolita style as an extension of my perpetual goth self.

In the conclusion of your 2011 Master's thesis *The Lolita Complex: A Japanese Fashion Subculture & its Paradoxes* you discuss the push back and dismissal over your idea to research the subculture. Would you be able to tell us a little about the push back you faced and how you overcame it?

When I began my research, the Lolita movement was largely unheard of, especially outside Japan, and, in any case, was extremely misunderstood. Those who were ignorant about its intentions were quick to draw associations with the novel, *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov. Therefore, particularly as a topic of academic



Kathryn posing for a promotional photoshoot for the 2007 Loli-Pop exhibition.

research, it was deemed by some to be inappropriate, or just considered to be too random and of no importance or interest. These misinterpretations were, however, what urged me to investigate its meanings, in order to identify and explain the real motivations behind it.

For the 2007 Auckland War Memorial Museum exhibition *Loli-pop!* You helped to create four unique original dresses to be displayed as examples of lolita fashion in the place of authentic ones. Where did these dresses end up? Do they still exist?

As curator of the exhibition at the Museum, my initial plan was to purchase authentic Lolita garments and accessories by leading Japanese brands of the time, such as *BTSSB*, *Moi-même-Moitié*, *Metamorphose*, *Mary Magdalene*, *Victorian Maiden*, *Innocent World*, *Atelier Pierrot*, *Putumayo*, and *Angelic Pretty*. However, whilst I was sponsored to go to Tokyo to carry out my research, I did not have the budget to buy the garments. It was so upsetting to hold these beautiful dresses in my hands and not be able to take them home! So, upon my return, I proposed that some of us who were lecturers in fashion design at Auckland University of Technology should create our own Lolita garments, inspired by the Japanese movement. Essentially, then, after the

exhibition, each of the designers took their dresses home. I still have the five-piece coord that I designed.

Your 2019 doctorate thesis *Lolita Latina: An Examination of Gothic and Lolita Style in the Mexican Environment* explored the unique relationship lolitas in Mexico have with their fashion, faith, history and culture. How did lolita communities of Mexico react to your research of them?

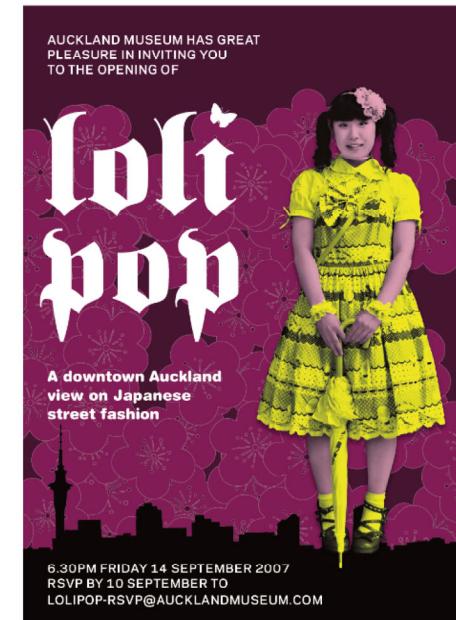
My thesis stems from actual correspondence with members of the Mexican Lolita communities, such as online chats, surveys, interviews, and face-to-face communication, in-person, during my visits to Mexico. All correspondents were formally asked for permission to have their opinions included. Therefore, as my research reflects the voices of the participants, themselves, there has been no adverse reaction. In fact, I am very much supported. In general, members have been happy for me to recognise and showcase them. Since my thesis has become accessible to readers, I have been praised for my understanding of their culture and also warmly thanked. Mexico is one of many countries where participants link lolita fashion to their unique history and culture.

What led to you researching the lolita community of Mexico specifically?

I had completed my masters thesis on the Japanese Lolita subculture and was, afterwards, looking at expanding that research to a doctorate on the globalisation of the movement, worldwide. Initially, my endeavour was to look at various international community case studies. Then, when it became obvious that the scope was too expansive, I narrowed it down to Latin American countries. The reason I chose that focus was that these countries were becoming progressively important as hotspots for the movement. I, therefore, interviewed members from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and a few of Latin-American heritage in the United States. In the end, I chose Mexico for the entire study because it became apparent that the Mexican community contributes most uniquely to ways of interpreting the Lolita fashion genre.

**A little off topic, but when I first described lolita fashion to my mother as a teenager, she assumed the fashion must be Spanish or Mexican due to her associating the name "lolita" with "Our Lady of Sorrows". So, it was a surprising throwback for me to see this link made in your thesis.**

For me, this is not off-topic at all. It is a thought that also crossed my mind many years before even embarking on my doctoral study. For the readers who do not make this connection, I will clarify that Lolita is a diminutive name for Dolores. In Spanish, the Virgin Mary, who is also referred to as Our Lady of Sorrows, is known as Nuestra Señora de Dolores, because "dolores" means pains, or sorrows. Therefore, Lolita, a nickname for Dolores, is a Spanish Catholic name and is associated with the innocence and purity of the Virgin Mary, which absolutely opposes the connotation of Nabokov's fictional Lolita. It is just one of the reasons that I was excited to research the Lolita movement in Mexico. And, as it turns out, my hunch was right. As the name "Lolita" represents something different there, so does the fashion. In Mexico, the innocent intentions of Lolita fashion have become sensibilities.



Promotional poster for 2007's *Loli-Pop!* exhibition at Auckland War Memorial museum.



Kathryn at a lolita meet up in Puebla City, Mexico in 2017.

In both of your theses, you discussed the controversial links between lolita fashion, perceived sexuality, fetishization and the Nabokov book of the same name. Did you face any criticism from the lolita community for doing so?

To be honest, I have sometimes been criticised and bullied over the years, and even cyberbullied by anonymous trolls. This has only come from people who have taken my words out of context and literally cut-and-pasted sections, while editing and omitting the frameworks. From the very beginning, my purpose has been to explain and emphasise the overarching innocent intentions and aesthetics of the movement and its participants.

Outside of the obvious academic achievements, how has lolita fashion affected your life?

From the start, the style resonated with me. It has become part of who I am.

You've been following the subculture since 2003, in your time how has the culture evolved? Both in New Zealand and abroad.

I think because of so many misunderstandings and misinterpretations, the endeavour was to keep the genre as pure as possible by not deviating from quite strict regulations about silhouette and design elements. I think that most of those rules are still important in order to maintain the identifiability of the subcultural style. However, as it is a fashion style, after all, it has shifted. If you go back to the early days, "old-school" Lolita was always made of cotton materials, and usually made in one colour, overall, from a limited choice of colours, to which they sometimes added a white trim, and those colours were quite specific. Then came patterned fabrics and motifs. Then came other fabrics, such as organza and chiffon. Expectations such as having to wear a blouse under a jumperskirt and the exact length of the skirt have changed. What hasn't changed is the stipulation that garments should be tasteful and elegant.

**After all these years of studying the subculture, do you still actively wear lolita fashion?**

As I've aged, I've moved more often to plain black Lolita garments, but they have always been a staple of my Lolita identity, anyway. I wear my proper Lolita dresses less often because I go out less often. But that is a result of my post-pandemic life, just as much as my maturity. Although, an elegant plain black Lolita dress will always find a way into my wardrobe, I believe. My everyday appearance is still a little or a lot gothic and so the Gothic Lolita genre suits my tastes the best. I could never separate myself from that.

**Thank-you very much, Kathryn for your time in attending this interview. If you are interested in reading Kathryn's research, please view the following links.**

**PhD:** <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/15329>

**MPhil:** <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/items/e4f256a8-1eff-4374-9349-e29f65328c3b>

**Published article:** <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/2/article/675394/pdf>

## Photo gallery



Kathryn and friend James Percy in 2008.



Kathryn and friends Reece and Ed in 2022.



A portion of Kathryn's Pullip doll collection displayed at the 2007 Loli-Pop exhibition.



Kathryn at her PhD confirmation presentation in 2016, proposing early ideas for her thesis.