Circle Presence and Self-Empowerment: Identity Narratives and Consumption Drivers of Chinese Lolita Subculture Participants

Yang Xi, Mohd Khairuddin Bin Mohad Sallehuddin*

School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

* **Corresponding Author**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000474

Received: 24 September 2026; Accepted: 29 September 2026; Published: 05 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Lolita subculture has grown rapidly in China over the past decade, moving from a niche interest into a visible and commercially significant consumer culture, yet research has rarely connected participation in its communities to the consumption it generates. This qualitative study examines how Chinese Lolita participants construct identity narratives through their presence within the circle and how those narratives, together with a sense of self-empowerment, drive spending. Eighteen participants in Zhejiang Province were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol, and the transcripts were analyzed thematically through open, axial, and selective coding. The findings trace a self-reinforcing process: circle presence, an active and recognized standing earned through participation and expertise, provides the audience before which identity narratives are formed; those narratives reconcile an everyday self with a subcultural self and generate a sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency; and that empowerment finds concrete expression in consumption, which in turn renews presence. The study introduces circle presence as an integrative concept linking community belonging, identity construction, and spending, and it specifies the pathway from identity narratives to empowerment and on to consumption. Practically, the results suggest that authentic engagement and respect for the community's own knowledge matter more to these consumers than conventional marketing appeals.

Keywords: Lolita subculture; circle presence; identity narrative; self-empowerment; consumption

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen Lolita fashion move from a fringe aesthetic into a visible part of Chinese consumer culture (Zhao, 2026). The style, with its Victorian and Rococo roots, first took shape in Japan in the 1980s and later spread across East Asia, and in China it has found an especially energetic audience. Thanks to social media, dedicated e-commerce channels, and a young generation with money and taste to spare, the local Lolita community has grown quickly and organized itself into distinct circles (Bramley, 2024; Zhao & Zhu, 2025). Participants, who are mostly young women but by no means only them, gather around shared aesthetics, specialized knowledge, and carefully maintained dress codes. What stands out about these circles is that they are not merely audiences for a fashion trend. They are spaces where identity, belonging, and consumption feed into one another, and where buying clothes is bound up with being recognized as a member.

A good deal of work in subculture studies has treated fashion communities as expressions of resistance or as aesthetic subcultures in their own right. Older theories read subcultures as symbolic challenges to the

mainstream, while newer post-subcultural approaches describe them as loose, taste-driven collectives in which consumption is a way of building a self and securing social ties. The idea of subcultural capital has been especially useful here, since it captures the knowledge and status that members accumulate and trade inside a community. Yet Lolita has received surprisingly little sustained attention in this literature, and research on Chinese Lolita participants in particular is thin. Much of what exists either describes the style and the demographics of its followers or treats their spending as conspicuous display. The psychological and social machinery underneath that spending remains largely unexamined.

One thing that has been overlooked is the idea of presence within the circle. People who participate in Lolita do not simply buy dresses and wear them. They show up at events, build reputations, share expertise, and earn standing within the community. This active form of membership, which we call circle presence, has both a spatial and a symbolic side: it is about being physically part of gatherings and being recognized as a legitimate, valued member. Scholars have long acknowledged that belonging matters in subcultures, but they have not asked how circle presence shapes the stories participants tell about themselves or how it influences what they later buy. The connection matters because participants derive meaning and validation from their position in the circle, and that validation is a strong motive for further consumption.

A second gap has to do with how identity narratives relate to empowerment. Identity narrative theory suggests that people construct stories of the self to make their lives coherent and to present themselves to others. Lolita participants do this in an especially visible way. They build narratives that hold their everyday selves and their subcultural selves together, and these narratives often do real work: they give people a sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency that they say they do not get elsewhere. What remains unclear is how these narratives turn into actual buying behavior. When participants feel empowered through their identity in the circle, does that feeling translate into more frequent purchases, stronger brand loyalty, or deeper engagement with particular products? Existing accounts of Lolita consumption rarely follow this pathway, so the link between the psychological gains of participation and the economic activity it generates stays mostly unexplored.

This study takes up these questions through qualitative interviews. We ask two questions. The first concerns how participants come to construct identity narratives through circle presence. The second concerns how those narratives, together with the sense of empowerment they produce, drive consumption. Both questions are about processes and interpretations, which is why a qualitative design fits them better than a survey would. We conducted semi-structured interviews with Lolita participants in Zhejiang Province, where the local community is active and the consumer environment is well developed. The interviews were analyzed thematically, with open, axial, and selective coding used to identify recurring patterns connecting circle presence, identity narratives, empowerment, and consumption.

The study contributes on three fronts. In theoretical terms, it brings circle presence into the subculture and consumer culture literature as an integrative concept that links belonging, identity, and spending, and in doing so it moves the field beyond descriptive treatments of fashion communities. It also opens up the pathway from identity narratives to empowerment and on to consumption, a connection that has received little direct attention. Methodologically, it adds first-hand qualitative evidence from a contemporary Chinese context, where much of the existing subculture research has been Western and quantitative. Practically, it offers brands and cultural practitioners a clearer sense of how community standing and identity-driven empowerment shape loyalty and willingness to spend.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lolita Subculture and Consumption Research

Lolita fashion is commonly traced to Japan in the 1980s, where it emerged as a niche style drawing on Victorian and Rococo imagery, later developing into a recognizable subculture with its own dress code, vocabulary, and social rituals (Carriger, 2019; Younker, 2011). Over the past two decades it has spread across East Asia and beyond, and in China it has acquired a substantial community of participants whose activities are organized around specialized clothing brands, conventions, and online platforms. Research on Lolita, however, has been slow to keep pace with the phenomenon. Early accounts were largely descriptive, cataloguing the aesthetics of the style, the demographics of its followers, and the distinction among its sub-styles, such as sweet, classic, and gothic Lolita. This body of work established that Lolita is not a uniform movement but a collection of taste communities with internal hierarchies and rules, and that participation involves far more than wearing a particular kind of dress.

Later scholarship moved toward interpreting Lolita as a form of identity work. Studies in this vein argued that participants use the style to negotiate femininity, adulthood, and autonomy, often in ways that resist dominant expectations (Aracı İyiaydın & Ergun, 2025; Graham, 2016). Some researchers emphasized the playful and carnivalesque character of Lolita dress, reading it as a space in which women can experiment with self-presentation free from everyday constraints (Carriger, 2019; McGladrey, 2015). Others stressed the communal dimension, pointing out that belonging to a Lolita circle provides emotional support, recognition, and a sense of shared identity. These contributions are valuable because they shift attention from the clothes to the people who wear them and the meanings they attach to the practice. What they have tended to leave aside is the economic dimension of the culture. Consumption is treated in much of this literature as a backdrop rather than as an object of analysis, and the question of why participants spend so much on a style that few outsiders can even name has rarely been asked directly.

Circle Presence: Subcultural Capital and Tribal Theory

A useful starting point is the idea of subcultural capital. Building on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, scholars of subculture have argued that members accumulate knowledge, competence, and status within their communities, and that these assets can be converted into social recognition and influence (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013). Within a Lolita circle, subcultural capital takes concrete forms: knowing which brands are authentic and which are imitation, understanding the conventions around wear and display, being able to identify rare or vintage pieces, and having a reputation for good taste (Zhao, 2026). Participants who possess this capital occupy higher positions in the community and exercise greater influence over what is seen as desirable (Hobson et al., 2024; Stempel, 2005).

Closely related is the tribal perspective from consumer research, which understands consumption not as an isolated act but as a way of belonging to a group (Goulding et al., 2013). Under this view, consumers form what have been called tribes, loose and ephemeral collectives held together by shared practices, emotions, and rituals rather than by formal membership. Consumption becomes a means of marking and sustaining membership, and the products people buy are valued less for their functional utility than for the connection they make possible (Cova, 1997; Firat et al., 2013). Lolita circles fit this description well. They are communities of sentiment and practice, sustained by shared taste and by the activities that members perform together, from attending events to trading clothing online (Kang & Cassidy, 2015; Rahman et al., 2011).

What these two traditions share is an appreciation for the relational character of subcultural consumption, but neither has fully captured what we call circle presence. Subcultural capital describes what members hold, and tribal theory describes what groups do, yet neither directly addresses the active, embodied way in which a participant stands within her community (Philip et al., 2022). Circle presence names that dimension. It refers to the degree to which a participant is visibly and symbolically present in the circle, is recognized as a legitimate member, and derives standing from that recognition. Presence is partly spatial, in that it involves attending gatherings and being seen, and partly symbolic, in that it involves reputation, expertise, and the stories others tell about a member. Circle presence is the mechanism through which belonging becomes meaningful and through which the desire to consume is generated, and it forms the first pillar of our framework.

Identity Narratives and Self-Empowerment

Narrative identity theory holds that people make sense of their lives by telling themselves and others stories about who they are (Gupta et al., 2023; Singer, 2004). These stories are not passive records of experience but active constructions that select, organize, and interpret events in ways that confer meaning and continuity. Through narrative, individuals reconcile different parts of themselves, justify their choices, and present a coherent self to the world. Applied to consumption, this perspective suggests that what people buy is often tied to the stories they are building about themselves. Products are acquired not simply for what they do but for what they say, both to the self and to others, about the kind of person one is (Mittal, 2006).

Lolita participants are engaged in a particularly visible form of narrative construction. They maintain a subcultural self that is often distinct from their everyday selves, and the relationship between the two requires constant storytelling. Participants describe how the style allows them to express a side of themselves that has no outlet elsewhere, and how becoming part of the circle gave them a language for articulating who they are. These narratives do psychological work. By investing their identity in the culture and in the community, participants experience what we describe as self-empowerment, a sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency that they attribute to their participation. This is consistent with a broader literature on consumer empowerment, which finds that consumption can be a site of self-assertion and control, particularly for groups whose agency is otherwise constrained.

The concept of empowerment is sometimes treated loosely, so it is worth being precise. In the framework, self-empowerment refers specifically to the gains in perceived confidence, authenticity, and personal agency that participants report deriving from their identity within the circle (Maden-Eyiusta & Alten, 2023; Rahima et al., 2024). It is an experienced, psychological outcome, distinct from the structural power that empowerment sometimes denotes. Crucially, we treat it as a driver of consumption. The literature has largely kept identity narratives and consumer behavior in separate compartments, describing how people construct selves without following through to ask how those selves shape spending. This paper connects the two by placing self-empowerment in the middle, as the mechanism that turns narrative identity into a motive to consume.

Consumption Drivers

A separate body of research has examined what drives consumption more generally, and its findings help explain the behavior observed in Lolita communities. A first driver is identity expression. Consumers are known to buy products that align with, and signal, their sense of self, and this is especially true for goods that carry strong cultural or symbolic meaning (Liu & Zhao, 2024). A second driver is social belonging. Products are acquired in part to gain admission to groups, to maintain membership, and to display status within them,

dynamics that the tribal literature describes in detail. A third driver is emotional gratification, including the pleasure and excitement that acquisition itself provides. A fourth, increasingly relevant in digital contexts, is participation in the culture of the community itself, where buying, sharing, and displaying become forms of engagement rather than merely acts of acquisition.

These drivers are not unique to Lolita, but their combination and intensity are. In few other consumer cultures does a single style of dress carry such a dense load of identity, belonging, and emotional meaning, or demand such specialized knowledge. The consumer behavior literature offers a useful menu of drivers, yet it tends to treat them as separate factors to be measured rather than as elements of a single, connected process. What is missing is an account of how identity, belonging, and emotion work together to produce sustained and often costly consumption. This is the integrative task our framework takes on.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the literature above, the study constructs an integrated framework that links the two pillars to consumption. The framework proposes a chain with four links. The first is circle presence, the participant's active and recognized standing within the Lolita community. The second is identity narrative, the story the participant constructs that integrates her subcultural self with her everyday self. The third is self-empowerment, the sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency that results from that identity and its recognition in the circle. The fourth is consumption, the purchases and patterns of spending that follow. The framework posits that circle presence enables identity narratives, that identity narratives produce self-empowerment, and that self-empowerment drives consumption.

This is not a linear model in a rigid sense. The four elements feed back into one another. Consumption strengthens circle presence, since buying and displaying deepen a participant's standing in the community, and the recognition gained in turn reinforces the identity narrative and the sense of empowerment. The framework is better understood as a cycle than as a one-way chain, though for the purposes of this study we emphasize the forward direction from presence to consumption. The framework serves two purposes in the study. It gives us a set of analytic categories with which to organize the interview data, and it provides a structure against which to interpret the patterns that emerge.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design

The research questions guiding this study are about processes and interpretations. They ask how participants construct identity narratives and how those narratives, together with the sense of empowerment they produce, translate into consumption. These are not questions that a survey with fixed response options could answer well. They call for open, contextual accounts in which participants can describe their experiences in their own words and in their own order. A qualitative design was therefore adopted, with in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. Qualitative interviewing is well suited to this task because it allows the researcher to pursue meaning, to probe beyond initial answers, and to attend to the ways participants frame their own experiences (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). It also fits the exploratory character of the study, since the mechanisms linking circle presence, identity, and consumption have received little direct attention in the literature.

The design is interpretive rather than hypothesis testing. The researcher entered the field with a provisional framework, described in the previous section, but did not treat it as something to be confirmed or refuted in a

strict sense. Instead, it served as a lens that guided attention and provided categories with which to organize what was heard, while remaining open to themes that had not been anticipated. This is consistent with the tradition of qualitative consumer research, in which theory and data are allowed to inform one another throughout the process.

Sampling Method

Participants were recruited in Zhejiang Province, China. Zhejiang was chosen because it has a notably active Lolita community and a well-developed consumer environment, which meant the study could expect to encounter participants with varied levels of involvement, from occasional newcomers to committed, long-standing members with substantial subcultural capital. Recruitment proceeded through a combination of approaches. Participants were approached through local Lolita groups and online communities, early participants were asked to introduce the study to others in their circles, and some attendees were approached directly at local events. This snowball and purposive strategy allowed the research to reach participants who were deeply embedded in the culture, not merely occasional buyers (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

Sampling continued until a point of saturation was reached, at which additional interviews no longer yielded new themes or insights. In total, 18 participants were interviewed. The sample was drawn to vary along dimensions expected to matter, including length of involvement in the culture, frequency of participation in circle activities, amount of Lolita-related spending, and the relative importance of Lolita to the participant's sense of self. All participants were adults and had been involved in Lolita culture for at least 12 months at the time of the interview.

As Table 1 shows, the sample comprised 16 women and 2 men aged 20 to 29 years (average about 24.2), with lengths of involvement ranging from 1 to 8 years. Nine participants were coded as having high circle involvement, six as medium, and three as low, and self-reported annual spending ranged from 3,000 to 22,000 CNY, with higher spending generally corresponding to a higher coded importance of Lolita to the participant's sense of self. This heterogeneity was deliberate: it supports the analysis of how circle presence, identity, and consumption vary across participants. To protect confidentiality, participants are referred to in this paper by pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered.

Table 1: Items of all variables

Participant	Gender	Age	Years in Lolita	Circle involvement	Annual spending	Importance to self
P1	Female	24	6	High	15,000	High
P2	Female	22	3	Medium	8,000	Medium
P3	Female	26	8	High	22,000	High
P4	Male	25	4	Medium	5,000	Low
P5	Female	21	2	Medium	6,500	Medium
P6	Female	28	7	High	18,000	High
P7	Female	23	5	High	12,000	High

P8	Female	20	1.5	Low	3,000	Low
P9	Female	27	6	High	16,000	High
P10	Female	22	3	Medium	7,500	Medium
P11	Female	25	5	High	13,500	High
P12	Male	24	2	Low	4,000	Medium
P13	Female	26	4	Medium	9,000	Medium
P14	Female	29	8	High	20,000	High
P15	Female	21	2	Low	4,500	Low
P16	Female	23	4	Medium	8,500	Medium
P17	Female	28	7	High	17,000	High
P18	Female	20	1	Low	3,500	Low

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the research questions and the theoretical framework, covering the participant's entry into Lolita culture, their involvement in the circle, how they described their identity in relation to the culture, the feelings of confidence and agency they associated with participation, and the ways these experiences related to what they bought. The guide was used flexibly. Participants were allowed to steer the conversation and to raise topics that had not been anticipated, and follow-up prompts were used to encourage them to elaborate and to give concrete examples, since narratives of identity and consumption are often most revealing in specific episodes rather than in general statements.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, in person or by video call according to the participant's preference, and each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed in full. Field notes were kept during and immediately after each interview, recording observations about context, emotional tone, and points that seemed significant but were not fully captured in the recording. Where participants mentioned particular garments, purchases, or events, they were asked for detail and, when possible, visual or documentary material was sought to support understanding.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025). The data were worked through in stages. In the first stage, open coding, the transcripts were read closely and provisional codes were assigned to passages, staying close to the participants' own words. In the second stage, axial coding, related codes were grouped into broader categories and the connections among them began to take shape, with particular attention to the relationships anticipated by the framework, such as those between circle presence and identity, and between empowerment and consumption. In the third stage, selective coding, the categories were consolidated into a smaller set of themes, and the way those themes held together across the sample was examined.

The analysis was iterative rather than linear. As new codes and themes emerged, earlier transcripts were revisited to check whether they were present there, and the coding scheme was revised accordingly. Disconfirming cases were also attended to, instances where participants described experiences that did not fit the emerging pattern, since these often clarify the boundaries of a theme. Throughout the analysis an audit trail of coding decisions was kept, so that the reasoning behind each theme could be traced back to the data.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the interview transcripts produced three interrelated themes, which together trace the path from presence in the circle to consumption. The first theme concerns how participants come to be present within the community. The second concerns the identity narratives they construct through that presence. The third concerns how these narratives generate a sense of empowerment and, in turn, drive purchasing behavior. The themes are presented in sequence, and although each is discussed separately for clarity, the interview accounts made clear that they operate together, feeding into one another in the way anticipated by the theoretical framework. The coding that produced these themes is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Coding Structure of Themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative codes	Participants (n)
1. Circle presence	Entry; recognition; symbolic standing	gradual entry, earning recognition, being remembered, gaining expertise	16
2. Identity narrative	Divided self; self-recognition; integration	everyday self vs subcultural self, discovering oneself, reconciling sides	14
3. Empowerment & consumption	Confidence; authenticity; agency; buying as investment	feeling confident, being authentic, investing in the self, buying to belong	15
Cross-cutting	Cycle of presence-identity-consumption	buying sustains presence, recognition renews commitment	13
	40–49	72	23.1

The coding structure shows that all three themes were supported by the majority of the sample, and that a substantial cross-cutting code captured the recursive connection among presence, identity, and consumption. This supports the view, developed throughout the findings, that the elements are linked rather than isolated.

Theme One: Circle Presence

The first theme describes how participants establish and maintain a visible, recognized place within the Lolita community. Entry into the culture was rarely a single, dramatic event. Most participants described a gradual process, beginning with exposure to Lolita imagery online, followed by tentative purchases, and only then by active participation in gatherings and online spaces. What mattered, across all accounts, was the transition from merely consuming the style to being present within a community. Participants spoke of the moment they

first attended an event, first posted a photograph, or first had their outfit recognized by others as a turning point in their involvement.

Presence was understood as something earned rather than given. Participants described building it through repeated participation, through knowledge of brands and conventions, and through reliability in showing up. One participant described the process in the following way: "I kept showing up and helping newer members, and after a while people started to recognize me and ask my opinion. That was when I felt I was really part of the circle, not just someone who owned the clothes." (P3)

This account illustrates a recurring pattern. Circle presence was experienced not as passive membership but as an accumulation of recognition, grounded in expertise and dependable participation. Participants who were highly involved described a sense of standing that more peripheral members did not have, and this standing was consistently linked to how much they participated and how much they knew. The coding of the sample, in which nine participants were classified as having high involvement, reflected this distinction: those participants spoke of presence as a central part of their lives, while lower-involvement participants treated the circle as one among several interests.

Importantly, presence also carried a symbolic dimension. To be present meant to be seen as a legitimate member, someone who had earned the right to be there and whose judgments carried weight. This symbolic recognition was closely tied to the second theme, because it provided the audience before which identity narratives could be performed and affirmed.

Theme Two: Identity Narratives

The second theme concerns the stories participants told about who they were in relation to Lolita culture. Across the interviews, participants described a tension between an everyday self and a subcultural self, and their narratives worked to hold these two together. For many, Lolita was not simply a hobby but a way of expressing a part of themselves that felt suppressed in other settings, at work, among family, or in their everyday social circles. The narrative they constructed explained why this expression mattered and reconciled it with the demands of their daily lives.

A consistent element of these narratives was a sense of discovery or self-recognition. Participants described coming to understand that the style allowed them to be more fully themselves, and this understanding was often cast as a story of personal growth. One participant put it this way: "At work I am quiet and careful, but when I dress this way I feel like I am showing the self that has no room anywhere else, and Lolita is the side I choose to put in front." (P6)

This narrative work had both an internal and a social dimension. Internally, it gave participants a coherent account of themselves that reduced the discomfort of maintaining a divided identity. Socially, it invited recognition from the circle, because the identity could be performed and validated in the presence of others who understood it. The narratives were thus sustained by the very circle presence described in the first theme: the identity was not constructed in isolation but in front of an audience that could confirm it.

The accounts also revealed variation in how central Lolita was to participants' self-understanding. For those coded as highly involved, the narrative made Lolita constitutive of who they were, a core rather than a peripheral element of identity. For lower-involvement participants, the style remained an enjoyable but secondary part of the self. This variation mattered for the third theme, because the strength of the identity

narrative appeared to shape how strongly it translated into a sense of empowerment and, through that, into consumption.

Theme Three: Self-Empowerment and Consumption

The third theme connects the two earlier ones to behavior. Participants described a sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency that they attributed to their involvement, and this sense of empowerment was repeatedly linked to what they chose to buy. The mechanism took a consistent shape. Circle presence gave participants recognition, the identity narrative gave them a self that was worth expressing, and together these produced a feeling of empowerment that found concrete expression in consumption.

Consumption served several purposes that were hard to separate. It was a way of maintaining the identity, since wearing the clothes kept the subcultural self available. It was a way of sustaining circle presence, because new pieces, knowledge of releases, and visible display renewed recognition. And it was a way of investing in the community, with spending understood as a contribution to the culture that had given participants a sense of belonging. One participant described the direct link between empowerment and purchase motivation as follows: “When I feel confident and accepted here, I actively save up for limited-release dresses. Buying them is not just shopping; it lets me keep this empowered version of myself alive and continue to engage with everyone at offline meetups.” (P14)

The drivers that participants described are summarized in Table 3. They are not mutually exclusive, and participants frequently mentioned several in a single narrative, which supports the argument that the drivers operate through empowerment rather than in isolation.

Table 3: Self-Reported Consumption Drivers

Driver	Mentions (n)	Illustrative account (paraphrased)
Maintaining identity	15	Buying keeps the subcultural self available day to day.
Sustaining circle presence	13	New pieces renew recognition and keep one visible in the circle.
Emotional gratification	12	Acquisition itself is pleasurable and exciting.
Investing in the community	10	Spending is understood as supporting a culture one belongs to.
Signaling subcultural capital	9	Possessing rare or authentic pieces demonstrates knowledge and status.
Maintaining identity	15	Buying keeps the subcultural self available day to day.

The pattern in Table 3 is consistent with the framework's emphasis on empowerment. The most frequently mentioned drivers, maintaining identity and sustaining circle presence, are precisely those that connect consumption back to the two earlier themes, while the less frequent drivers, emotional gratification and signaling subcultural capital, operate alongside them. The interview accounts consistently linked higher self-reported spending with a higher coded importance of Lolita to the self, a pattern also visible in the sample table. Participants for whom Lolita was central described spending not as a sacrifice but as a natural expression of identity and belonging, while more peripheral participants were more likely to describe purchases as occasional and discretionary.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the three themes trace a single process that runs from circle presence through identity narrative to empowerment and consumption. The findings support the theoretical framework's claim that these elements are connected in a cycle rather than operating independently. Presence provided the audience and the recognition on which identity narratives depended, and those narratives generated the empowerment that drove consumption. In turn, consumption renewed presence, since buying and displaying kept participants visible and recognized within the circle. This recursiveness is worth emphasizing, because it means that the drivers of Lolita consumption are not additive factors to be weighed against one another but elements of a self-reinforcing process.

A key limitation of the present dataset deserves explicit attention here: all annual spending figures are self-reported retrospective estimates. Participants may omit smaller purchases, bundle pre-order deposits and final payments inconsistently, or round up/down spending amounts when recalling expenditures across a full year. These self-report biases mean the spending data cannot be treated as precise financial records, and we interpret spending only as a subjective indicator of relative engagement rather than objective monetary expenditure. Future research could pair self-reported accounts with purchase screenshots, order records or transaction logs, where participants consent, to improve measurement reliability.

The findings speak to the subculture literature by grounding the concept of circle presence in empirical detail. Where earlier work emphasized subcultural capital as knowledge and status, the interview accounts show that presence is an active, embodied achievement, maintained through participation and recognition, and that it is the mechanism through which belonging becomes meaningful. The findings also extend consumer empowerment research by showing how empowerment operates in a community context, where identity and belonging amplify its effects, rather than being an individual psychological state alone.

There are also practical implications. For brand managers operating within online-offline hybrid subcultural ecosystems, several actionable strategies follow from our findings. First, brands should co-design offline tea parties, photo shoots and meetups together with core community organizers rather than running top-down promotional events, to preserve the authentic recognition structure that underpins circle presence. Second, community-specific digital spaces, such as brand fan groups and pre-order discussion channels, should be moderated to protect insider knowledge norms and reward constructive sharing, rather than prioritizing conversion-only sales scripts. Third, brands can tier product releases to match different levels of circle involvement: accessible entry-level pieces for newcomers seeking initial recognition, and limited, carefully documented collections for senior members who invest in symbolic status. Fourth, brands should avoid rapid mass commercialization and knockoff-style derivative lines, which erode the subcultural capital and legitimacy that sustain participants’ sense of empowerment. Finally, transparent, respectful communication around production schedules, pre-order waiting periods and after-sales service helps maintain trust, as participants frame spending as long-term identity investment rather than one-off commodity purchase. Sales are not simply transactions but are bound up with identity and belonging. Engaging authentically with the community, supporting its gatherings, and respecting its specialized knowledge are likely to matter more than conventional marketing appeals. Conversely, attempts to commercialize the culture without regard for its internal rules risk undermining the very sense of presence and recognition on which participants' commitment depends.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The study contributes to the literature in three ways. Theoretically, it introduces circle presence as an integrative concept that connects community belonging, identity construction, and consumption, and it demonstrates empirically that these elements operate as a connected cycle rather than as separate factors. It also specifies the pathway from identity narratives to self-empowerment and from empowerment to consumption, a connection that has received little direct attention. Methodologically, it offers first-hand qualitative evidence from a contemporary Chinese context, complementing the predominantly Western and quantitative orientations of existing subculture research. Practically, it shows how community standing and identity-driven empowerment shape loyalty and willingness to spend, offering guidance for authentic engagement with subculture communities.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how Chinese Lolita subculture participants construct identity narratives through their presence within the community and how these narratives, together with the empowerment they generate, drive consumption. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eighteen participants in Zhejiang Province, it addressed two research questions and developed an integrated account of the process linking circle presence, identity, and spending.

The findings show that presence within the circle is not a given status but an achievement, built through repeated participation, accumulated expertise, and reliable showing up. It is through this presence that participants earn recognition and symbolic standing, and it is before this audience that their identity narratives are formed and sustained. Participants narrated a division between an everyday self and a subcultural self, and their narratives worked to reconcile these two, casting Lolita not as a hobby but as the expression of a self that had little room elsewhere. Circle presence thus provided both the recognition and the audience on which these narratives depended. Empowerment operated as the central mechanism connecting identity to behavior. Participants described a sense of confidence, authenticity, and agency that they attributed to their involvement, and this sense found concrete expression in purchasing. Consumption served to maintain the identity, to sustain circle presence, and to invest in the community, and higher self-reported spending consistently corresponded to a higher coded importance of Lolita to the self. Taken together, the findings trace a single, self-reinforcing process: circle presence enables identity narratives, identity narratives generate self-empowerment, and self-empowerment drives consumption, which in turn renews presence.

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it introduces and empirically grounds the concept of circle presence, showing that belonging becomes meaningful through an active, recognized standing rather than mere membership, and it specifies the pathway from identity narratives to self-empowerment and on to consumption, a connection that has received little direct attention. Methodologically, it contributes first-hand qualitative evidence from a contemporary Chinese context, complementing the predominantly Western and quantitative orientation of existing work. Practically, the findings offer guidance for brands and retailers: sales within subculture communities are bound up with identity and belonging, so authentic engagement and respect for the community's knowledge matter more than conventional appeals, while commercialization that ignores the culture's internal rules risks undermining the very recognition on which commitment depends.

Despite these contributions, this study has limitations. The findings rest on interviews with eighteen participants in one province, a sample that is neither large nor statistically representative, and the accounts are self-reported, including spending estimates. The patterns may not extend to other regions or participant

profiles, and the interpretation is one reading of the data. Future research could use larger and more diverse samples to test generalizability, compare across subcultures to assess the broader applicability of circle presence, develop quantitative measures of the links identified here, and adopt longitudinal designs to capture how the cycle changes over time. In closing, Lolita consumption in the Chinese context is not reducible to fashion or spending alone. It is a way of maintaining an identity and a place within a community that participants value, and understanding this is essential both to explaining the behavior and to engaging with the culture responsibly.

REFERENCE

1. Ahmad, M., & Wilkins, S. (2025). Purposive sampling in qualitative research: A framework for the entire journey. Quality & Quantity, 59(2), 1461-1479.
2. Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M. M., & Khdhir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health, 6, 100198.
3. Aracı İyiaydın, A., & Ergun, A. (2025). Womanhood bound to motherhood: Choosing childlessness in Türkiye. BMC psychology, 13(1), 374.
4. Bramley, A. (2024). Escaping the Lolita Myth: Giving voice to the real Dolores Haze. Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis, 35(1), 134-144.
5. Carriger, M. L. (2019). "Maiden's Armor": Global Gothic Lolita Fashion Communities and Technologies of Girly Counteridentity. Theatre Survey, 60(1), 122-146.
6. Coskuner-Balli, G., & Thompson, C. J. (2013). The status costs of subordinate cultural capital: At-home fathers' collective pursuit of cultural legitimacy through capitalizing consumption practices. Journal of consumer research, 40(1), 19-41.
7. Cova, B. (1997). Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the "linking value" of product or services. European Journal of Marketing, 31(3-4), 297-316.
8. Dunwoodie, K., Macaulay, L., & Newman, A. (2023). Qualitative interviewing in the field of work and organisational psychology: Benefits, challenges and guidelines for researchers and reviewers. Applied Psychology, 72(2), 863-889.
9. Firat, A., Kutucuoglu, K. Y., Saltik, I. A., & Tuncel, O. (2013). Consumption, consumer culture and consumer society. Journal of Community Positive Practices(1), 182-203.
10. Goulding, C., Shankar, A., & Canniford, R. (2013). Learning to be tribal: facilitating the formation of consumer tribes. European Journal of Marketing, 47(5-6), 813-832.
11. Graham, L. (2016). 'I am a mother': young women's negotiation of femininity and risk in the transition to adulthood. Culture, health & sexuality, 18(3), 265-279.
12. Gupta, V., Eames, C., Golding, L., Greenhill, B., Qi, R., Allan, S., Bryant, A., & Fisher, P. (2023). Understanding the identity of lived experience researchers and providers: a conceptual framework and systematic narrative review. Research Involvement and Engagement, 9(1), 26-38.
13. Hobson, M. R., Sandford, R., Stirrup, J., & Wiltshire, G. (2024). Social class and the cultivation of capital: undergraduate PE students' socialisation in sport and physical activity. Sport, Education and Society, 29(3), 267-281.
14. Kang, Z. Y., & Cassidy, T. (2015). Lolita fashion: A trans-global subculture. Fashion, Style & Popular Culture, 2(3), 371-384.
15. Liu, L., & Zhao, H. (2024). Research on consumers' purchase intention of cultural and creative products—Metaphor design based on traditional cultural symbols. PLoS One, 19(5), e0301678.

16. Maden-Eyiusta, C., & Alten, O. (2023). Expansion-oriented job crafting and employee performance: A self-empowerment perspective. European Management Journal, 41(1), 79-89.
17. McGladrey, M. L. (2015). Lolita is in the eye of the beholder: Amplifying preadolescent girls' voices in conversations about sexualization, objectification, and performativity. Feminist Formations, 27(2), 165-190.
18. Mittal, B. (2006). I, me, and mine—how products become consumers' extended selves. Journal of Consumer Behaviour: An International Research Review, 5(6), 550-562.
19. Philip, J., Newman, J., Bifelt, J., Brooks, C., & Rivkin, I. (2022). Role of social, cultural and symbolic capital for youth and community wellbeing in a rural Alaska Native community. Children and Youth Services Review, 137, 106459.
20. Rahima, E., Hamid, R. S., Ikbal, M., & Syamsuddin, S. (2024). The Role of Self-Empowerment, Interest, and the Role of Husbands of Women's Motivation and Decision-Making as Entrepreneurs: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Evaluation. The Role of Self-Empowerment, Interest, and the Role of Husbands of Women's Motivation and Decision-Making as Entrepreneurs: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Evaluation, 15(9), 115-135.
21. Rahman, O., Wing-Sun, L., Lam, E., & Mong-Tai, C. (2011). “Lolita”: Imaginative self and elusive consumption. Fashion Theory, 15(1), 7-27.
22. Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: an introduction. Journal of personality, 72(3), 437.
23. Stempel, C. (2005). Adult participation sports as cultural capital: A test of Bourdieu’s theory of the field of sports. International review for the sociology of sport, 40(4), 411-432.
24. Younker, T. (2011). Lolita: Dreaming, despairing, defying. Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs, 11(1), 97-110.
25. Zhao, J. (2026). The decolonial paradox: negotiating glocal identity in China's Lolita fashion subculture. Media International Australia, 198(1), 82-99.
26. Zhao, J., & Zhu, Y. (2025). Need for belonging: Exploring subcultural identity in the Chinese Lolita online community. European journal of cultural studies, 28(4), 1000-1020.
27. Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M. M., & Khdhir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health, 6, 100198.