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Routinization of Subcultural Fashion and the Depoliticization of Youth Identity

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Abstract. Although subcultural fashion represented by 'three pits' (Hanfu, JK, Lolita) is becoming increasingly popular in China, the three pits and its related elements have entered mainstream fashion and are gradually shedding their subcultural identity. This paper aims to explore whether the routinization of three pits fashion necessarily leads to the erasure of its subcultural resistance meanings. Online questionnaire is utilized as a method and it was posted on the two largest social platforms in China (Xiaohongshu and Weibo). The respondents were three pits participants on this two social media. The results show that the commercialization of the style signs of three pits clothing by capital has led to the gradual loss of its resistance meaning for three pits clothing. Chinese youth no longer wear the three pits clothing to prove that they belong to a subculture group and they wear the three pits clothing mainly to construct their individual identity. However, the majority of the participants still identified themselves as practitioners of the subculture.

Keywords: Alternative Fashion, Generation Z, subculture, pop culture, Chinese youth

1. Introduction

Among the subcultural fashion styles originating in China and still exerting social influence to this day, the most representative are Hanfu, Lolita and JK uniforms. Among China's earliest developed and still influential subcultural fashion styles, the most representative ones are Hanfu, Lolita, and JK uniforms. Due to the high cost of purchasing these subculture styles of clothing, their enthusiasts were once jokingly called "the three pits", a nickname referring to participation in this subcultural community and endless related expenses.

The rise of Hanfu relied on the revival of Chinese traditional culture. Many young people were interested in China's history and traditional aesthetics and worked hard to spread and protect them. In the 2000s, foreign subcultural styles, especially those from Japan, were introduced through the Internet, magazines, films and television programs. Chinese young people came into contact with Lolita and JK uniforms (Japanese schoolgirl uniforms), and they accepted these subculture styles and localized them. Ten years ago, these three subculture styles were still not widely accepted by the mainstream public. Many people thought that these subculture enthusiasts dressed strangely or inappropriately and were not allowed to enter some public places. At that time, wearing the "three pit" clothing had a strong rebellious meaning. The challenge to hegemony that subcultures represent is not directly voiced by them; rather, it is expressed obliquely through style. The objections are

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lodged, the contradictions displayed (and, as we shall see, 'magically resolved') at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs [1]. The three pits enthusiasts resisted the hegemony of mainstream fashion, especially the restrictions imposed on them by society based on the ideal of 'proper dress' for women.

However, with the rapid integration and development of the global economy since the 21st century and the continuous progress of modern communication media represented by Internet technology, the popularity of many subculture styles in China has increased. Due to rising disposable income among Generation Z, many young people are willing to pay for their interests and identities. More and more Chinese people are choosing the "three pit" style.

The Chinese government has rolled out policies to revitalize traditional culture, while numerous popular historical costume dramas have boosted public acceptance of Hanfu. Now, taking photos in photo studios or visiting ancient buildings while wearing Hanfu has become a popular activity.

JK uniforms, due to their own uniqueness (it consists of a blouse and a short skirt, and the sailor suit and the suit are also part of mainstream fashion), are easier to be accepted by the mainstream than other subculture styles. Many Chinese people are not aware that these clothes actually originated from Japanese school uniforms.

Compared with Hanfu or JK uniforms, Lolita maintains its status as a subculture style. However, over the years, with the development of digital media platforms, information about Lolita fashion has spread to a wider audience and Lolita dressing practice received greater exposure to outsiders via various digital channels [2]. Nowadays, more and more young people are choosing simpler and more everyday Lolita clothing. On the one hand, many people hope to wear Lolita clothing to school or for commuting. On the other hand, many people are only attracted by its fashionable style and do not care about the gap with mainstream fashion.

More and more people are choosing the three pits style. The commodity form enables the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced commodities. However, as this subculture becomes normalized and commonplace, it loses its former function as an "identity declaration". It has instead turned into a purely "aesthetic consumption" activity. This research seeks to explore whether the normalization process leads to the disappearance of the resistance significance of subcultures.

2. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach using an online questionnaire. Based on previous studies and papers, this research adapted and integrated a questionnaire. The author uploaded the questionnaire to Weibo and Xiaohongshu, which are China' s most popular social media platforms and also serve as key online spaces for subcultural communities. Wenjuanxing (https://v.wjx.cn/vm/mBCbFVs.aspx), Excel, and the statistical software SPSS were used during the processing of the obtained data.

The questionnaire consists of 10 socio-demographic variables and 43 items. All items were measured using a 15-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The part of fashioning involvement and motivation was adapted from the scale of Manchiraju and Damhorst [3], the part of demand for uniqueness was adapted from the scale of Tian, Bearden, and Hunter [4]. The last part of the sense of identity was based on four levels: self-identity, social identity, collective identity and identity salience. Here is the link to the complete questionnaire. Questionnaire

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3. Analysis

3.1. How routinization dissolves ritual resistance

Wearing subcultural style clothing is itself a from of performance. Subculture enthusiasts are not merely expressing themselves, but rather enacting a social role within specific social contexts. According to Erving Goffman, The front, then, refers to the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during their performance [5]. For three pits lovers, their resistance does not lie solely in the clothing itself, but emerges through the interactive process of performance—observation—recognition. Subcultural clothing only gains its full meaning within specific gatherings, spaces or among specific youth groups. In fact, it possesses a kind of situational ritual structure. The three pits wearing is inherently a contextual performance, including makeup, hairstyle, posture, community etiquette and specific occasions. Take Lolita participants as an example. Many of them regularly attend the "tea parties" organized the online Lolita community, a cohesive space where members seek to maintain their identity and their belonging to the subculture. Therefore, the tea party was simply a setting for them. Setting is an element involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it [5]. Other Lolita participants in community are observers., and the bodies of Lolita participants are themselves a kind of personal front. Their identities were recognized by like-minded people, and they also interacted with groups with a subcultural style. Therefore, in the act of attending the tea party, the subcultural identities of lolita participants were confirmed.

However, as the three pits clothing became more and more common, the originally distinctive front-stage performances were integrated into daily life. Usually, three pits clothing is a kind of appearance. "Appearance" may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses [5]. People can identify the identity of a subculture group through their appearance, and at the same time, they can also determine the state they were in at that time. Nowadays, one can see many people wearing three pits clothing or clothing with three pits elements going shopping in ordinary malls or engaging in other daily performances. Although their attire is highly similar to subculture participants, the social context (the stage they are on) is completely different. These people's clothing is merely a display of personal aesthetic preferences; they do not need the approval of other enthusiasts to confirm their subcultural identity. Many people do not even wear complete three pits clothing sets but instead mix some individual items with their daily clothes (such as the coat of Hanfu paired with a T-shirt). Wearing Lolita, Hanfu and JK uniform has transformed from participating in a certain subcultural ritual to a style of fashion. The "resistant performance" that originally required specific occasions, specific groups, and specific physical practices has gradually become a style that can be worn at any time, viewed, replicated, and consumed.

When subcultural fashion enters everyday life, its meaning undergoes a transformation. Once the symbols of three pits fashion become aesthetic resources in consumerism society, wearing three pits clothing shifts from being an act of 'identity resistance' to embodying a 'lifestyle' and 'self-image management'. Modern consumption is not only about satisfying material needs; instead, it organizes one's lifestyle through goods, physical activities and aesthetic practices, and enables self-expression. Featherstone said that while the term 'lifestyle' has a more restricted sociological meaning in reference to the distinctive style of life of specific status groups, within contemporary consumer culture it connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's clothes is to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the consumer [6]. In the

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modern consumerist society, wearing subcultural clothing has transformed from an act of identity resistance to a lifestyle. Young people wear subcultural clothing not to stand out from the mainstream, but to showcase their taste in art and to display their individuality.

The emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life is an important feature in postmodern society. We can find that a similar decontextualization of tradition and a raiding of all cultural forms to draw out quotations from the imaginary side of life among the young de-centred subjects [6]. As a result, the characteristics of subcultural fashion have become elements within mainstream culture and commodities. The boundary between the three pits fashion and the mainstream fashion has also disappeared. For instance, the behavior of wearing Hanfu was previously strongly associated with the promotion of traditional Chinese culture. However, with the popularity and widespread adoption of traditional Chinese elements, Chinese traditional style has become an aesthetic. Many sports brands, cultural and creative brands, and catering brands have all incorporated 'China-Chic' (style of Chinese tradition) as an element and combined it with modern trend aesthetics. The original groups of Hanfu participants would emphasize the integrity of the style, including the complete set of clothing, makeup and hairstyle that conform to ancient Chinese etiquette. But now, more and more people regard Hanfu as ordinary clothing, and many people will mix Hanfu (such as the Mamianqun) with shirts to create a sense of routinization. In November 2025, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and six other departments jointly issued the "Implementation Plan for Enhancing the Compatibility between Consumer Demand and Supply and Further Promoting Consumption", listing "China-Chic" as a key area for cultivation. This indicates that Hanfu elements have been fully commodified and have become resources for mainstream aesthetics.

3.2. The routinization and individualization of identity motivation

According to the data collected from the questionnaire, participants' motivation for wearing three pits clothing is not entirely directed toward subcultural identity. In traditional subcultures, wearing three pits clothing is proof that 'I belong to a certain group'. Although China has always had a tradition of collectivism, in recent years, with the development of China's economy, the spread of Western ideas on the internet, and the social atomization phenomenon, Chinese people have inevitably become increasingly individualistic. A person's identity is no longer completely predetermined by the group, tradition or social role. In the previous paragraph, this article utilized Featherstone's theory to explain how the elements of the three pits clothing style have become part of mainstream fashion. The three pits clothing has become a resource for individuals to actively choose and shape their own image. For question 36 'Wearing the three pits clothing is to please yourself and gain aesthetic pleasure', the mean value is 4.62, which is the highest score. Respondents chose 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. The mean value of the next question 'To gain recognition and a sense of belonging from other enthusiasts in the community' is only 2.08. The comparison of these two results shows that almost all the participants believed that wearing the three pits clothing was for themselves, but only fewer than half of them did so to gain recognition from other participants wearing three-pits clothing.. The motivation for wearing the three pits clothing has weakened from "I am a member of the subculture" to "I choose to wear it in certain daily situations". Individual aesthetic preferences and subcultural identities have become separated.

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Table 1. Motivation

	Motivation	
36	Wearing the three pits clothing is to please myself and gain aesthetic pleasure	4.62
37	Wearing the three pits clothing is to gain recognition and a sense of belonging from other enthusiasts in the community	2.38
38	Wearing the three pits clothing is to express my individuality and distinguish myself from mainstream fashion	3.04

The explanations given by the participants for the three pits increasingly revolve around personal aesthetics, emotional experiences and daily situations, rather than their belonging to a certain group. The identity recognition for the three pits clothing choices can mainly be classified into four categories: self-identity, sense of belonging, cultural value and identity salience. The data on self-identity and sense of belonging are shown in table 2. The identity motivation has not disappeared; rather, it has become more diverse and context-dependent. This suggests that today's Chinese youth wear three pits fashion more for constructing their self-identity than for a sense of belonging to subcultural communities. Question 51 and 52 demonstrate that young people don't mind showing their identity as three pits clothing enthusiast in society. The identity motivation has not disappeared; instead, the motivation for wearing subcultural clothing has become more diverse and context-dependent.

Table 2. Self-identity

	Self-Identity	Mean value
42	Wearing three pits clothes is one of the important ways for me to express myself	4.00
43	The style of clothes perfectly matches my personal temperament	4.00
44	I can derive a strong sense of identity from wearing three pits clothing	3.81
	Sense of belonging	
45	I am proud to be a member of three pits community	3.27
46	I have a strong emotional connection with other members in the community	2.46
47	Participating in offline activities related to three pits (such as tea party, comic exhibition, etc.) is very important to me	2.35

Table 3. Identity salience

	Identity salience	
51	The identity of 'JK/Hanfu/Lolita enthusiast' is a very important part of my self-definition	3.65
52	Evan if no one around me is wearing any clothing related to three pits, I will not change my own preference	4.38

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Table 3. (continued)

53	If one day I no longer wear the three pits clothing, I will feel that I have lost a part of myself	2.73

In the modern society, the traditional, pre-determined paths of identity re gradually loosening. Individuals need to choose to construct their lives and identities. In the *Individualization*, the author mentioned that there is hardly a desire more widespread in the West today than to lead 'a life of your own'. The ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time [7]. After the reform and opening up, Chinese people, especially the young generation, have become more individualistic due to economic development, changes in family structure, and the influence of Western ideas. Not only at the individual level, but also at the cultural (group) level, Chinese culture has changed toward greater individualism [8]. Individuals increasingly need to organize their lives through their own choices rather than following the fixed paths provided by tradition. Many young people of Generation Z have started working and are financially independent. They yearn to control their own lives by showcasing their own tastes, rather than completely following mainstream culture or subcultures. Purchasing clothing is the most notable feature. For instance, many people enjoy combining different clothing items to create a unique style all their own. In addition, while culture was previously defined by traditions, today it must be defined as an area of freedom which protects each group of individuals and has the capacity of produce and defend its own individualization [7]. Everyone can express their understanding of subculture fashion in their own unique way.

The three pits clothing has evolved from a subcultural symbol that requires group recognition to acquire meaning, into a clothing resource that individuals can choose according to their gradually changing aesthetics, emotions and life situations. As a result, the subcultural identity has shifted from a relatively stable and holistic identity affiliation to one that individuals can invoke and adjust according to different circumstances. Young people no longer choose their clothing based on their identities, but rather construct their identities through their clothing choices. As Beck noted, individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced [9].

3.3. Capital no longer needs to "incorporate" rebels

The Birmingham School has explained how capital coopts the subcultural meanings of resistance. John Clarke elaborated on how the style is generated and commercialized. The core of various 'informal styles can be identified in a partly negotiated form of expression [10]. People achieve the dissemination of new meanings by reorganizing and recontextualizing items (goods, which were originally produced for specific markets), and this process is called subculture bricolage. The design of the clothing in three pits combines various existing elements. For example, Hanfu replicates the ancient Chinese clothing. While Lolita borrows elements such as lace, bows, exaggerated skirts and corsets from European vintage clothing, and creates a style different from vintage. What happens is not the creation of objects and meanings from nothing, but rather the transformation and rearrangement of what is given (and 'borrowed') into a pattern which carries a new meaning, its translation to a new context, and its adaptation. Subcultural styles identify the identity of group members by separating themselves and outsiders. However, the objects themselves do not inherently

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possess a fixed and unchanging cultural meaning; meaning is produced within cultural and symbolic systems. Since subcultural groups can appropriate some symbols and give them resistant meanings, capital can also re-code, commodify, and mainstream symbols that were originally resistant, thus entering the mainstream culture. Stuart Hall explained clearly that the practice of representation in *Representation* and mentioned that visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted [11].

As more and more people participate in the three pits clothing industry, a specialized market targeting three-pits fashion has inevitably emerged in China. At first, it was just a few small handmade enterprises composed of enthusiasts of three pits, but as production demands and market demands rose, the number of enterprises entering this field inevitably increased. At present, the three pits clothing market in China is still dominated by small enterprises and no large fashion companies have started to produce three pits clothing. However, many enterprises, in order to sustain their development (small fashion brands are prone to failure due to few customers and low profits), have begun to take on more orders and try to stand out among numerous brands by introducing more novel styles. If one brand launches a new and popular clothing item, other brands will also imitate its design in an effort to boost sales. For large-scale commercial concerns, the contrary pull of economical product standardisation and saleable novelty can be partially eased by the practice of evolving a "formula" for a particular trend, and exploiting it to the last sale [10]. Over time, the three pits clothing market has also adopted the concept of "trend" like the mainstream fashion market. On the one hand, you can see on social media platforms such as Bilibili and Xiaohongshu that enthusiasts of three pits clothing complain that the products are becoming increasingly homogeneous. On the other hand, almost all brands are launching similar designs, and consumers can only choose from these similar products.

Nowadays, capital does not even need to incorporate the rebellious elements of subcultures - in a symbolic consumption society, capital can directly extract, replicate and sell "style symbols". Consumers purchase the symbolic differences themselves, without having to accept the subcultural spirit behind them. Three pits clothing enthusiasts wear three pits clothing to pursue uniqueness. The individual's "need for uniqueness" may, in fact, become a resource for further commercialization in the consumer society. Baudrillard detailed in "The Consumer Society" why symbols themselves can become commodities. In "The routinization and individualization of identity motivation", this article explains the trend of individualization in Chinese society and how young people construct their own identities. It is important to grasp that this personalization and this pursuit of status and social standing are all based on signs [12]. In today's consumer society, people, especially women and young people, are encouraged to pursue "individuality". However, this individuality needs to be realized by purchasing the goods offered by the market. The clothing market is the best example. Annual fashion trends overturn prior ones, and this cycle repeats itself. Various fashion brands often borrow symbols from subcultures and re-interpret them, such as the "punk-ballet style" that was popular on Chinese social media last year. Fashion media encourage consumers to purchase these clothes in order to "create a difference" from others. However, the buyers of "punk-ballet style" clothing are neither punkers nor those interested in ballet. What consumers purchase is not the subculture as a complete cultural practice, but the symbolic differences provided by the clothing. And the symbolic differences introduced by capital often monopolize the fashion of that period. This is an absurd formula: monopoly and difference are logically incompatible. If they can be combined, it is precisely because the differences are not differences and, instead of marking a person out as

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someone singular, they mark rather his conformity with a code, his integration into a sliding scale of values [12].

Meanwhile, although no larger fashion companies have entered the three pits clothing market at present, large fashion brands can still break down the style of three pits clothing for commercialization, so as to make it more marketable. By 'defusion' we mean that a particular style is dislocated from the context and group which generated it, and taken up with a stress on those elements which make it "a commercial proposition", especially their novelty [10]. The "China-Chic" mentioned in the first chapter is the best example. Capital has created a novel consumption style by disassembling the symbols of ancient Chinese traditional styles. Besides fashion products, people can also see elements of the China-Chic in many other fields such as music, advertising, games, and even catering. Because many restaurants like to use China-Chic design on their takeout packaging, the China-Chic aesthetic has gradually become associated with low-cost takeout packaging. When the phrase "China-Chic takeout" becomes synonymous with low-grade catering products, it indicates that the China-Chic style has been completely commercialized. China-Chic aesthetics become entirely detached from Hanfu and traditional Chinese styles. In this way, the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the 'real' /commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones [13]. When terms like "Lolita", "JK", and "Hanfu" no longer require consumers to become an integral part of a specific subculture, but merely exist as purchasable, combinable and displayable aesthetic symbols. The target of capitalist appropriation is no longer a subculture with a clear sense of resistance, but rather the "difference" itself created by the subculture.

4. Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed explanation of how three-pits clothing became part of daily life in China. The market for traditional Chinese clothing still has not been "invaded" by major fashion companies, but the industry has been restricted from creating similar themes. Each brand began to set a standard for subcultural fashion, the original disruptive power of three-pits clothing was gradually dissipated during this process. The motivation for Chinese youth to wear three pits clothing has also begun to change. Previously, people wore three pits clothing to show that they belonged to a subculture group. Now, although people still wear three-pits clothing to distance themselves from mainstream fashion, they do so more to construct their own identities. Based on the questionnaire survey, we found that the two motivations of "building one's own identity" and "becoming a member of the three pits fashion group" often coexist. Finally, nowadays capital no longer needs to incorporate the rebels; instead, it directly commodifies the symbols of the resistance. Capital will directly adopt the symbols of subcultural fashion and reshape their meanings. Capital merely needs to commercialize and sell these subcultural symbols directly. Consumers do not need to know the original rebellious spirit of these symbols and the entire subculture's rituals.

This paper still has many shortcomings. The questionnaire survey did not collect a sufficient number of samples. Many experienced fans of three pits clothing brands may not have participated in this survey. This study also did not explore other crucial factors in the three pits fashion culture, such as gender and participants' geographic location. Future research on Sanqing Clothing can focus on the attitudes of residents from different cities in China towards three pits clothing, as well as the attitudes of participants of different genders towards three pits culture.

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