

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE AND INTO THE CURIOUS REALM OF COSPLAY

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

To my dog, Gypsy, who had to forgo hours of walks and playtime in order to supervise my writing.

To my loving parents and younger brother, who are the foundation of my success with their unconditional support.

To the cosplay community who welcomed me with open arms.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures	viii
Abstract	ix
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Costume	21
Costume versus Dress	21
Other Costume Communities	26
The Production Process of Cosplay	30
Crossplay	33
Lolitas	37
Collective Identity	40
Chapter Two - Conventions	43
Convention Space.....	43
Celebrities.....	46
Competitions	53
From Attendees to Staff Members	58
Why Cosplay?	59
Chapter Three - Performance.....	66
A Storyteller is Born	66
Comrades in Costume	69
Trial and Error	72
When It Rains, It Pours	74
That Magic Moment.....	76
Conclusion	77
Katsucon 2016.....	77
Authenticity and Adaptation versus Appropriation	82
Social Cohesion.....	85

References	88
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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1	22
Figure 2	30
Figure 3	33
Figure 4	35
Figure 5	38
Figure 6	44
Figure 7	49
Figure 8	52
Figure 10	54
Figure 9	54
Figure 11	57
Figure 12	61
Figure 13	62
Figure 14	63
Figure 15	68
Figure 16	70
Figure 17	71
Figure 18	79
Figure 19	83

ABSTRACT

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE AND INTO THE CURIOUS REALM OF COSPLAY

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A person cosplays to engage in a social experience, feel support, have fun, and illustrate their creativity. Cosplayers hold common values that are traditionally found in theater, such as a dedication to artistic purity, duty to proper research, and commitment to characteristic standards. Simply put, cosplayers can pick a character, research the background and personality of the chosen character, and carry out a performance in a realistic-looking costume. This process creates a sense of authenticity, meaning that the person is so true and sincere to the character that the performance is believable. Through a literature review, interviews, and participant observation, I conclude that cosplay fosters social cohesion that transcends most societal subdivisions (age, gender, race, sexuality, geography, socio-economic status) and allows individuals to come together to form a community.

INTRODUCTION

“Your vibe attracts your tribe.” This phrase has popped up in the last few years on college campuses and as one college cosplayer rephrased it with cosplay in mind, “We are all weird here.” Cosplay allows individuals the freedom to be different and pick their family. Cosplay is a word that combines ‘costume’ and ‘play.’ It is used to describe the act of dressing up and acting as fictional characters, specifically, characters from manga (Japanese comics), anime (Japanese animation), animated movies, TV shows, video games, books, board games, and more. Characters can be male, female, asexual, alien, robot, et cetera. Cosplaying is an individual and group phenomenon with participants varying in age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. Cosplay is a relatively new phenomenon and subculture in the United States. It originated in Japanese magazines and marketplaces in Japan in the 1970s. Many artists and vendors cosplay as a tool to promote their own anime or manga by drawing people’s attention to their product. Journalist and founder of Studio Hard Deluxe Inc., Nobuyuki Takahashi, is credited for coining the term “cosplay” (Rahman, et al. 2012: 318). Cosplay is a subculture, activity, and tool; it has become a major cultural force and new kind of social performance that has crossed international borders.

In the 1990s, cosplay became more popular outside of Japan, especially in other parts of Asia, Australia, and the United States. According to a study reported by Ito in

2002, millions of manga volumes were sold on a weekly basis and several hundred manga cafes were operating in Tokyo alone (Rahmun, et al. 2011: 319). Weekly magazines, such as *Shonen Jump*, produce chapters of manga for their readers each week. Manga is a booming business not only in Japan, but also in many other countries, especially the United States. Cosplay's rise in Western popularity followed a boom of anime/manga demand in the West. Anime first became popular in North America with the airing of TV shows such as *Dragon Ball Z* and *Sailor Moon*, later setting the stage for cosplay.

Cosplay has spawned its own cultural forms and types of performances. For instance, out of cosplay, 'crossplay' emerged as a subtype. Crossplay is a gendered performance that evokes connections to traditional Japanese aesthetics in Kabuki theater (Leng 2013: 99). Not just Japanese Kabuki, but also historic European theaters that had male actors portray female characters, as women were not allowed in the theater. Today, the new theater for cosplay are cosplay conventions. Conventions are held at various times of the year and in different cities around the world that continue to attract people of multiple ages and varying backgrounds who are interested in learning about Japanese culture as well as cosplaying from their favorite fiction.

Cosplay brings people together in both the virtual and the real world, when cosplayers socialize in-person and online. Online, they will message about ideas and interests relating to a "fandom," a term referring to a specific fan base. They will then meet at conventions to strengthen social ties or create new ones based on this common interest/hobby. When cosplayers socialize, and show off the costumes they labored over,

they create an inclusive environment regardless of age, gender, and personal beliefs, that is focused on the participant's producing creative adaptations of fictional characters. While cosplayers may have different interpretations of the characters they choose to perform as, this variation does not lead to social conflict, but instead adds to the social experience and cooperative nature of this group of people. Cosplayers demonstrate their personal passions through their characters, and in the process become someone different for a short period of time. This performance is akin to Erving Goffman's ideas regarding performance and identity. Goffman states that when an actor, or in this case, cosplayer, takes on an established social role, she will find a particular "front" has already been established for it (Goffman 1959: 27) A "front" refers to an insignia of office or rank, clothing, sex, age, race, physical appearance, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, and bodily gestures. When a cosplayer takes on a role, the identity of that character is already determined, which will help guide how the cosplayer will perform. The identity of the character is usually a partial reflection of the cosplayer's own personality and desires. In cosplay, one kind of performance is gender fluidity, meaning gender is not fixed, and is usually termed as gender-bending or crossplay. One example is a male Ariel from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989). In the animated film, the character Ariel is female, but this cosplayer cosplayed as a male version of Ariel, thus becoming a crossplayer. This particular cosplayer has several crossplaying costumes of different Disney princesses, though his favorite is Ariel. He uses social media to show off about his costumes to his followers. As discussed below, cosplay fuses social media and in-person interactions in such a way that strengthens players' bonds to one another. This

bonding is especially powerful as other aspects of in-person social engagement have decreased due to social media and access to other forms of instant communication in general.

Cosplay is an egalitarian subculture that encourages creativity and active participation among its members. It is a free-for-all performance where one actor on the proverbial stage can instantly find oneself being joined by other cosplayers whose characters are from the same fandom. In this way, one's audience can become part of the performance. In everyday life, a stranger would not approach a person on the street who is wearing a ballgown and ask for a picture. Yet, at cosplay conventions, that same stranger would not hesitate to go up to that cosplayer in a ballgown and strike up a conversation and/or ask for a picture. At cosplay events cosplayers are in "character." There are two different types of attendees: general attendees who do not cosplay and cosplayers. My research seeks to document this cultural and social phenomenon and to understand whether cosplay is solely about individual expression and to what extent it is also a form of social cohesion.

Like the world that Alice encountered down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, cosplay is a curious and fantastical part of modern day culture where nothing is what it seems. Individuals who participate do not identify as their normal everyday self, but transform into fictional, fantastical characters. Cosplay is becoming an increasingly popular subculture that transcends different countries and social norms. This kind of modern-day dress up is not just limited to Halloween; cosplayers attend events throughout the year. Cosplay appeals to both kids and adults. Conventions, or gatherings

of fans that feature cosplay, are filled with families, groups of friends, and individuals of all ages, many of whom tend to dress in the same theme, such as characters from a TV series, demonstrating an individual and social dimension to this subculture. Fans are consumers as well as producers of culture, one with a range of symbolic meanings. Cosplay can be understood as a culture of costuming that occurs beyond theater and typical dress-up: “The purpose of cosplay is to create a look-a-like of a character. Fans mimic the character not only through dress, but also through the styling of wigs or hair, and make-up techniques” (Lamerichs 2014: 114). As fans continue to consume certain books, shows, and music, cosplayers pay the ultimate compliment to entertainment culture by trying to recreate specific characters using their own bodies and imaginations as mediums.

Cosplay is about simulation, role-playing, and performance. Individuals use events, such as conventions, to temporarily escape their daily stresses, burdens, anxieties, boredom, and disappointments, and enter a fantastical environment (Rahman, et al. 2012: 333). This fantasy is one that they take part in and contribute to, a world where an empty convention center becomes filled with characters, costumes, and (formal and informal) performances. Cosplay conventions are well outside the realm of normal interaction; the manner of participants’ dress and behavior does not fit into what is considered “normal behavior.” Cosplay subtypes and genres illustrate how identity fluidity is accepted, including those who crossplay. Crossplayers are cosplayers who dress as the opposite gender. Factors of acceptance depend on who they choose to cosplay as and their own interpretation. An audience member will evaluate the performance (Bauman 1977) and

the result will either be acceptance or rejection. If the audience member accepts the performance, then they will typically engage in conversation with the cosplayer and asking questions about why they chose the character and the process in assembling the costume and prop. If the audience rejects the performance, their displeasure can manifest in several ways passive-aggressive. The most likely rejection reaction by an audience member will have them suddenly ignore the cosplayer and go about their day. However, in some cases, some members of the audience will post mean and hateful posts on social media about what they did not like. Rarely will the disgruntled audience member confront the cosplayer. But if they do, the comments are typically racist and/or body-shaming. Of the 47 cosplayers I interviewed, two women stated others have called them racial slurs to their face, and two have been body-shamed for being plus-size. One woman, cosplaying as Esmerelda from Disney's the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), loves to cosplay, despite the potential racism. She was once called a racial slur because she was Asian, dressing as a gypsy character. While racism and body-shaming are present in the cosplay community, it is the minority, with almost every other cosplayer saying how they love cosplaying because of the acceptance from others and the support they receive through friends.

Though the creation of a costume can to be an individual project, cosplay quickly becomes a social affair. An individual is divided into two parts, a performer and a character (Goffman [a] 1997: 23). Performance is defined as an activity of an individual that occurs during a specific time, along with their continuous presence before a particular set of observers and over which they have some influence on their informal

audience. The performer is acting out a certain pattern of behavior for the benefit of the audience, and so the performer must be sincere in their efforts, or the actor will not be taken seriously (Goffman [a] 1997: 105). The terms “performer” and “audience,” evokes ideas of theater, with actors performing a play for a specific audience. Cosplay is also an informal performance, one that reveals the performative aspect of identity, due to the clothing and manner adopted by the cosplayer (Norris and Bainbridge 2009). Cosplay encourages expression of identity with a choice to be made by the individual of the role they take on. A female does not have to cosplay as a female character. She can cosplay as a male character, or even an alien whose gender is unknown. Cosplay can be considered a liberating practice, since it does not restrict individual behavior solely based on socially assigned gender, sexual orientation or sexual preference. The audience is anyone in the general vicinity whose attention is caught by the cosplayer. The cosplayer in turn must be able to switch into the character she is playing in an instant when she realizes she is being observed, or when someone engages her in conversation. When entering a role, the cosplayer is an actor. She embraces a whole array of action encompassed by the corresponding role, which implies a doctrine of socialization. Meaning, behavior is influenced by social influences and nonverbal rituals. For example, fans learn from watching Japanese anime later reenact manners of a specific character from that anime. There are three aspects involved in a performance: 1) an expressed attachment to the role 2) a demonstration of qualities and capacities for performing it 3) an active engagement in the role activity at hand (Goffman [b] 1997: 36). In short, the actor must be committed mentally and physically to the role and be willing to actively carry it out. For instance, it

is not enough to simply be dressed as the character when the audience is watching; the cosplayer must act as the character as well, and fully embrace the role through using minute gestures that will make the audience believe in the performance. The veracity of the performance establishes social trust between cosplayers, through a kind of social recognition. Social trust leads to greater social cooperation and cohesion.

Cosplay conventions are hubs where connections are made and strengthened. They are a place for cosplayers to network amongst themselves, as well as with professional cosplayers (cosplayers who are paid to cosplay as specific characters to promote a product), producers, panelists, and regular attendees. The goal is to create and maintain social bonds that produce a greater social cohesion where the ties go beyond the convention hall. Social cohesion, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as an act that works toward the well-being of *all* its members by fighting exclusion and marginalization through the promotion of a sense of belonging and trust.

Trust creates variations of friendship and fosters more socialization among a group of people that might not normally interact. Visiting friends and acquaintances is one of the most important American social practices, but in the past several decades, this kind of socialization, and general togetherness such as weekly poker games, has declined by roughly twenty percent (Putnam 2000: 95). Robert Putnam conducted his study at the turn of the millennia, and since then, technology and social media have become even more advanced and integrated into an individual's everyday life. Along with social connections, Putnam shows how civic and political engagement decreased as well. My research asks: To what extent can cosplay be considered a new form of socializing?

There are dozens of cosplay conventions all over the country, not just Japanese cosplay conventions. Each cosplay convention has similar traits, but they all have different themes, people, panels, volunteers, et cetera, that make them unique and exciting. Participation at social events such as church and poker games would decrease because the same thing occurs each time. The same game is played, or the same socialization occurs after church with the same people and general topics (weather, kids, job, et cetera). But with cosplay, many cosplayers will take on different roles on different days or at different conventions. With those roles, there will be varied reactions, depending on the audience and on how well the cosplayer performs. A character can be both unchanging and changeable. The possibilities regarding character adaptation encourages others to renew their efforts at every activity they attend (Goffman [d] 1997: 139). Because there is always some sort of visual stimulus to capture an audience at a moment's notice, it is up to both the attendee and the cosplayer to be open to creating an active performer-audience relationship. Cosplay offers incredible variety and requires cosplayers to continually innovate.

Putnam considers hobby clubs to be the “quiet revolution” in American society, fitting in somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of small groups and social movements. These groups are encouraged through self-expression and intense friendship (Putnam 2000: 149). Cosplay is a hobby group, because the informal performances cosplayers give when they interact with others at conventions are the result of “the build-up”, which includes watching anime, reading manga, and crafting costumes and accessories based on the parent text (also known as the original source). The

cosplayer creates connections to others who share their hobby, even if they do not share a liking for a specific character or parent text. Cosplayers are connected by leaving their typical, everyday identities behind for a long three-day weekend, when cosplay conventions occur, to demonstrate their passion consisting of knowledge about the character of an original source. Fandoms come together and spread knowledge through panels and workshops in a growing community. Otakon, an anime cosplay convention held in mid-August in the Maryland-D.C. area, was originally hosted in Baltimore for almost 20 years, but in 2017, it moved to Washington D.C., in order to provide a larger venue to hold the ever-growing number of attendees. In the United States, cosplay events are a welcome source of revenue for local businesses, especially the food and hotel industry that house and feed the attendees.

Cosplay has taken different forms around the world. In Australia, cosplay communities develop within anime clubs (Norris and Bainbridge 2009). On weekends across global cities, especially in Asia, cosplayers habitually dress up and meet in public spaces, such as public parks and themed cafes in urban areas. In these spaces, they take photos, roleplay, and socialize. Alternatively, cosplayers gather at organized commercial and non-commercial anime conventions and comic book festivals that are held throughout the year (Peirson-Smith 2013), which creates a festive atmosphere that promotes camaraderie and friendship. Parental influence also plays an important role in their child's perception towards cosplay (Rahman, et al. 2012: 334). In Japan and the United States, parents are relatively supportive. Parents believe it is a good stress outlet for their children, a part of their freedom to express themselves, and a way to build new

friendships (Rahman, et al. 2012: 335). By supporting their creativity, parents are instilling a sense of independence and agency in their children to choose who they temporarily wish to be. Cosplaying becomes a community project, even involving people outside the cosplay community, such as adult mentors, family, and friends.

Community in the cosplay world is different than a neighborhood or religious community. The cosplay community is a mixture between community and “meetup”. “Community” is an abstract sense of belonging through a social network (Putnam 2000: 274) that can be in-person or over the internet or some form of communication medium, while a meetup is a local community of people that come together for face-to-face gatherings that happen in real life (Meetup.com 2017). At first glance it is a meetup between cosplayers as the members and the entertainment companies that runs the conventions as the organizers. However, there is more to it than that since cosplayers use the conventions as a focal point to reconnect with friends they made online or at previous events, making it more like a community.

(Cosplayers) claim that close family members, and even teachers, were supportive of their cosplaying, and consider it a healthy pastime, offering advice and support in the form of costume modifications and photographic assistance...the female cosplayers often received financial support from their parents to help construct their costumes, thereby signaling family approval in material terms (Peirson-Smith 2013).

As families and friends assist the cosplayer, it becomes a communal event. Cosplayer

groups tend to be friends, who often make costumes together and cosplay on the same theme (Okabe 2012: 234). One way for parents to show their support is financially, but also to show appreciation for cosplay culture and to encourage their own children's creativity. Many cosplayers in Japan are women, mainly college students or people in their twenties, that normally lead conventional lives (Okabe 2012: 225). Conventional lives do not normally include dressing up as a hobby. In the United States, the age range and gender diversity of cosplayers is wider. While many cosplayers are young adults, there are a number who are adults with family members who also cosplay or are just there to be supportive or to chaperone. When family and friends support a cosplayer in their creative endeavors, it builds those interpersonal relationships and creates social cohesion outside the cosplay community.

What makes cosplay a unique social practice? While it is normal for people to dress up for Halloween, it is uncommon to dress up the rest of the year when it is not a holiday or mainstream event. In this manner, cosplay questions cultural norms (Norris and Bainbridge 2009), making it unconventional in terms of identity and gender. While there are other costuming events that can be considered cosplay, including Renaissance festivals and Civil War reenactments, those participants dress up following a specific theme or a time period, whereas Japanese cosplay is focused on popular cultural characters. Cosplay is an identity marker, transforming an individual identity through the reproduction of an idealized character (Rahman, et al. 2012: 334).

The social cohesion instilled by cosplaying lasts longer than just a three-day weekend convention. Cosplayers not only form social bonds at conventions, but also

online, where they form communities that extend to the physical world. On the Internet, they can be available to one another 24/7 and act as a support group as well as a hobby group. There are several overlapping types of social support, including social integration and network support, which is defined as the following:

[Cosplay]...enables people to feel a part of a group whose members have common interests and concerns. Such relationships reflect more casual friendships, which enable a person to engage in various forms of social and recreational activities. Online fans and hobbyist groups exemplify this, as their very existence is predicated on a desire to organize around common interests for social and recreational purposes (Baym 2015: 93).

Helping others online may give people a sense of efficacy. Offering support may lead to receiving the same in the future, creating a cycle of support through giving and receiving. Even though the community is found online, it is still a real community and has a sense of unity; “The sense of shared space, rituals of shared practices, and exchange of social support all contribute to a feeling of community in digital environments. Shared identities are also important. These include personalities and roles assumed by individuals” (Baym 2015: 96). The personality shown to a virtual community might be different to the one they show in the physical world.

Similar to cosplay is fan culture, which has also grown in popularity. Folklorist Lynne McNeil (2015) focuses on vampire fan culture and discusses how the internet has played a role in how vampires are portrayed, especially with memes from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight*. More importantly, fandom, fanart, and fanfiction are very

much a participatory culture. One example of fanfiction is *50 Shades of Grey* by E.L. Janes, which was originally a fanfiction based on the vampire protagonist, Edward Cullen, from Stephenie Meyer's young adult romance novel, *Twilight*. This type of participatory culture can be linked to cosplay, because in both fields individuals show their interest for a series or movie by costuming as a character, and thereby, bringing that series/character to life. Online fans show their knowledge about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight* by creating witty memes and fanfiction.

Another aspect of fan communities that takes place outside of conventions are collector groups. While collecting might be considered a solo act, collectors form their own communities to show one another their pieces, give advice, as well as buy and sell their own pieces. Sharing is a common factor that generates intimacy and personal relationships. While collectors might hunt for objects in solidarity, they enjoy and seek out the collective support of the group (Ellis 2012:186-187). Like cosplay itself, collecting is both a solitary and communal activity. Online interaction which is a solitary act on the part of the individual, leads to online communities to then connect to social worlds and interaction offline. Auctions and art shows are also held at conventions, where collectors may purchase favored items and artists show off their talent in-person and not just online

The magic of cosplay doesn't end after an event but is continued and strengthened online. It is an experience which builds on the social cooperation and trust that is demonstrated at cosplay conventions, contributing to the overall social cohesion of this community. My research aimed to study cosplay as a social phenomenon in the United

States, and specifically in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. One aspect of socialization that is often under scrutiny is the way the people interact with each other, especially within the scope of cultural festivals. Cosplay offers a unique view of that interaction, and as the cosplay convention attendance is growing, it offers a new understanding of why people like to cosplay and what the attraction is. In addition, the way people interact within the world of cosplay is unique, by creating a space where anybody can be whatever they want to be, without judgment, whether it is male, female, robot, alien, deity, or Other. Choosing one's character is an important factor in cosplay.

Research Questions

My main question I tried to answer through my research is to what extent can cosplay be considered a new form of socializing. From that, several other questions emerged: To what extent does cosplay foster social cohesion? How does performativity in cosplay enhance this social cohesion?

To address my research questions, I visited three different cosplay conventions where I conducted participant observation and interviews, as well as attended a George Mason University Cosplay Club meeting and event. The first convention site, called Nekocon, was in Virginia Beach, and the second one, called Katsucon, was hosted in Maryland on the Inner Harbor; the third, called Anime Mid-Atlantic Con, was held in Norfolk, Virginia. While each convention lasts three days, I conducted my research on Saturdays, which is the peak time frame for attendance. In total, I interviewed 48 individuals, 47 cosplayers and one helper, at the various conventions. I chose adult participants, the

primary age ranging from 18-30 years old, based on the complexity of their costume; complexity being an indicator of dedication and seriousness of purpose to cosplay successfully.

At the conventions, age, gender, and ethnicity were noted, but was not the main basis of my sample. Subjects were approached based on the complexity of their costume and if they were with friends. The complexity of their costume determines “authenticity” level, and I approached cosplayers on both sides of the spectrum. Those whose costumes seem to take little effort and those that must have put in many hours. Cosplayers use informational websites and social media (by getting feedback from friends) when researching how to assemble certain parts of the costume. They also buy accessories from niche markets and vendors, such as websites that specifically sell different cosplay costume pieces. The costume is the final “product,” and by approaching those whose costumes are more complex than others will reveal evidence of the social network that is the foundation for the subculture. I analyzed both the “product” and the network behind it, in order to understand the social cohesiveness of the costume production process.

Participants were asked to answer questions about their costume, character, and experiences at past conventions. After the interview, I requested the participant pose for a picture. I did not offer suggestions on how they pose, but time and time again, each cosplayer chose a pose that was based on their character’s personality.

My research also included participant observation. For the first two conventions I attended, I was a general attendee; meaning I did not cosplay. However, like both general

attendees and cosplayer attendees, I did go up to various cosplayers whose characters I recognized and asked for their pictures, as well as engaged them in conversation. For the third convention, I cosplayed as a character from an animated movie I loved when I was a child, Kayley from *Quest for Camelot* (1998), which enhanced my understanding of the process of successfully cosplaying, especially the network behind the cosplayer, such as family, friends, and social media that give tips on how to cosplay or making costumes. I also attended a GMU Cosplay club meeting and cosplay event. The meeting was the first meeting of the semester where they laid out events and workshops for the rest of the semester. I later attended Cosplay Wars, where I was part of the audience, and got to see the finished product of several costumes assembled in a matter of hours by several four-person teams.

Cosplay is a subculture and a community. And, like every culture and community, there are individuals who can be mean and spiteful to others who are enjoying themselves. They are bullies. The two main ways bullying occurs at conventions are through comments involving body-shaming and racism. The cosplaying community is not perfect, because bullies exist everywhere. When I questioned 47 cosplayers about any negative experience they might have at conventions, 43 of them responded that they did not have any negative experience, or that their negative experience involved costume malfunctions. The remaining four talked about their experience with racism and body-shaming. Each of these cosplayers were women and non-white; three are Black and one is Asian. However, while they have experienced bullying through racism and body-shaming, it is not something that occurs at every convention. These women do not let

bullies ruin their experience. So many others love their costumes and performance, that they do not give power to the bullies, but instead to those who are able to look beyond part of the physical appearance that can't be changed.

In this paper, I have posed several questions regarding cosplay:

- ❖ Is cosplay solely an individual act and expression of themselves?
- ❖ To what extent can cosplay be considered a new form of socializing?
- ❖ To what extent does cosplay foster social cohesion?
- ❖ How does performativity in cosplay enhance this social cohesion?

To explore and answer these questions, I divided the paper into three sections: Costumes, Conventions, and Performance. In these chapters, I will demonstrate how cosplay fosters social cohesions through freedom of expression. Specifically, freedom in choosing identity and gender, and how that plays out in cosplay, a performative community. The conventions and college events I attended demonstrate how social networking in a cosplay community is formed and maintained. Social networks reinforce healthy norms and help an individual stay healthy (Putnam 2000). Those same social networks have been undergoing a transformation with the rise of modern technology and social media, but one positive way those social networks are being used are to continue to develop and maintain the relationships formed at cosplay conventions. Social media and online communities are used to develop relationships created at cosplay conventions; however, the Internet is not enough for cosplayers to keep up an active relationship. Cosplay also points to the limits of the Internet as a social environment. The Internet helps them connect with others, create their costumes, learn about new styles and events, et cetera;

yet, cosplaying is dependent on the face-to-face interactions and enactments between cosplayers. The Internet has connected fellow cosplayers across the country, if not the globe itself.

Cosplay has been able to become a cross-cultural phenomenon due to globalization. The reduction in the idea of space, not just geographically, includes cultural separation. The decrease in cultural separation reduces the complexity of interactions between different cultures in the different “landscapes” (Appadurai 1990), which describe five aspects, or landscapes, in which culture flows across the globe: ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, financescape, and ideoscape. These five landscapes are imaginary worlds based on the historically situated imaginations of individuals and groups in the world. Cosplay takes advantage of two out of the five landscapes: mediascape and technoscape. The mediascape involves the movement of media transnationally, allowing different cultures across the globe a view of “Other.” The technoscape is the movement of technology cross globally, in which the global market plays a role. Though various media and new technology allows cosplay fans to connect with Japanese popular culture, even if they are across the globe. Due to the increase of mass technology, communication has increased to such a high capacity that the boundaries between the landscapes have blurred. Historically, each landscape was disconnected from one another due to a slower rate of communication and travel (Appadurai 1990: 296-297). But today, the Japanese popular culture travels worldwide through online entertainment companies, such as Netflix, allowing non-Japanese individuals to view what is popular in Japan. While slower, Japanese book publishing is

also popular in the United States after the manga is translated to English. Cultural globalization has brought cultures together, instead of oppressing them. With the spread of mass technology, instead of Western culture spreading East, Eastern culture moves West, Eastern culture has found success and a loyal fan base that had assimilated into a niche community.

CHAPTER ONE: COSTUME

*“Most characters I do are me.” George Mason University Cosplay Club Member,
Freshman*

Costume versus Dress

Cosplaying is a declaration of personal identity and membership within this subculture¹ (Hale 2014: 11). Through dress, an individual can illustrate his or her creativity in everyday life. When people dress, by choosing different styles, types of clothing and accessories, they show the world what they believe their identity to be. Some common stereotypes surrounding appearance include gothic/emo, preppy, jock/athletic, country, et cetera. While these types may be more typical, more creative and unusual styles are found outside of everyday life. A “costume” is clothing of another place or another time, or as clothing fit for performance, such as during Mardi Gras in New Orleans (Shukla 2015: 3). Dressing in everyday life is relatively consistent from person to person, meaning, that everyone has a style that they follow. A person dresses to accommodate social and environmental factors and to reflect personal aesthetics and identities (Shukla 2015: 1). The way a person dresses reflects their age, gender, occupation, and personality.

Other differences between dress and costume are time and motivation. When a person

¹ A **subculture** is a cultural group within a larger culture that have beliefs or interests that vary with the original culture, also referred to as the mainstream culture.

wakes up in the morning to dress, they give limited thought to what to wear that day. While a typical outfit for a day might take over an hour to decide upon, a costume takes hours and days of planning and assembling. A costume on the other hand involves more time, energy, and motivation. Every piece of clothing and accessory is precise and has some function (Shukla 2015: 4). Sometimes, typical daywear and costume cross paths – some clothing used in an official occupation may also be used as a costume, such as a nurse’s uniform. A uniform is part of a registered nurse’s everyday wardrobe and requires very little thought; however, someone who dresses up as a nurse for an occasion, such as Halloween or a cosplay convention, will put a great deal more thought into their costume.

Costumes function as a way for individuals to elect, embrace, and display special



Figure 1
My first-time cosplaying as Kayley from Quest for Camelot with my sword, Excalibur. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

identities that can’t be expressed through daily dress (Shukla 2015: 5). All dress, even

costume, is an expression of the wearer's identity. Costume provides an outlet for the expression of certain identity markers that allows for a deeper communication of meaning and understanding (Shukla 2015: 15). For example, in everyday life, I am not a rebellious heroine. However, for the Anime Mid-Atlantic convention in Norfolk, I cosplayed as Kayley, from Warner Brothers' *Quest for Camelot* (1998). The animated movie is about an adventurous girl, a young blind hermit, and comedic two-headed dragons who are on a quest to find the lost sword Excalibur to save King Arthur and Camelot from a rogue knight. Kayley is a sheltered and naive young woman who wants to go out into the world and do heroic deeds, but feels trapped by society (and her mother's) expectations of her. I have always felt a connection to Kayley, even as an adult. When I was younger, I attended school, instead of going out to find adventure. Today, I go to my full-time office job, instead of adventure seeking. By cosplaying as Kayley, I illustrated the desire to seek adventure. Before I ever cosplayed, I loved dressing up. Every Halloween for the past decade, I've dressed up as a Renaissance maiden. I chose this costume for one night out of the year because I am intrigued by the idea of chivalry. One Halloween, when I was six or seven years old, I dressed as Sailor Jupiter from the popular Japanese animated series *Sailor Moon*. I chose her because she was tough, a master at martial arts, and doesn't apologize to society for not fitting the mold of a proper young lady. Through my choice of dress over the years, I've shown the world who I wish to be: a maiden, an adventurous heroine, and a confident fighter. At a cosplay event, I don't feel silly for dressing up as a character from one of my beloved childhood movies, but instead feel welcome by other attendees who notice my costume and recognize my character.

Visually, an observer first notices another person's clothing or their actions. At conventions, what catches a person's eye is the cosplayer's costume. Cosplay can't exist without the costume. The first step in a successful cosplay is the costume. The second is the performance of the character that links the clothes and the individual's actions together. A study conducted by Kimberly A. Miller (1997) investigated dress as a means to communicate private and secret aspects of the self. When an individual observes another's dress prior to verbal communication, the dress then sets the tone for the potential future interaction. Dress is necessary to establish, maintain, and alter the self during communication (Miller 1997: 224). Cosplay conventions do not have a claim on dressing up. Cousins to the cosplay subculture are masquerade and historical reenactment. Masquerade is best known for the kind of costume one would see at renaissance fairs, balls, or for holidays such as Halloween. There are various dress-up events around the world during different times of the year. In the United States, the most notable of these events is Halloween. Halloween is not just for children to dress up; it's also for adults. While cosplayers use conventions and other local cosplay events to dress in costume, most mainstream Americans dress up only during Halloween. Like cosplayers, those who dress in costume during Halloween are intent to see and be seen (Belk 1994: 107) which creates an environment of fantastic socialization. While Halloween gives the rest of the population a chance to dress up like a cosplayer might, there are several ways the two costuming groups differ. The first is the comradery and socialization aspect. Those who dress up for Halloween will still stay in their comfort zone. They will go to a party with friends they know or go trick-or-treating in a neighbor

with neighbors they might know socially. For cosplayer, while a convention is a comfort zone, the attendees are all generally strangers, with some prior friendships reconnecting. There is also a higher percentage of strangers who will look and evaluate a person's costume at cosplay events, versus during Halloween. There is a higher level of quality that goes into costume making for convention costumes, rather than just buying it from Party Depot. Even though the two groups differ, they both are fantastic socialization for participants.

Fantastic socialization occurs when an individual acts in a non-realistic role (Miller 1997: 223). Fantastic socialization is typically found in children playing dress up, wearing princess or alien costumes out in public. Adult fantastic socialization often occurs in private (Miller 1997: 224) because it is not socially acceptable to dress as someone else in everyday life, Halloween being the exception. For one day, an adult can dress extraordinarily and is less likely to be criticized for it. Cosplay is a bit different than dressing up for Halloween, however, because this subculture allows individuals to dress as characters on other days of the year and readily explore different aspects of their identity, or self. "Self" is similar to identity because the different selves are more apparent, depending on the context of the situation and environment. According to Miller (1997), the self is communicated in three ways:

- 1) the "public self", which is the one that everyone is aware of and communicates a person's age, sex, and occupation.
- 2) the "private self", which only close friends and family see. It is indicated by relaxation and leisure activities with people close to the person, and is expressed

through fun dress

- 3) the “secret self” which no one sees, except someone a person is intimately close with, and in which an individual can express their creative imagination through fantasy dress (Miller 1997: 223-224).

What is normally considered a private self is given full power to become public during Halloween or, for cosplayers, through various conventions and cosplay events. Cosplayers do not mind displaying their fantasies and desires to an audience when they dress up because the other attendees are not just random strangers but part of the community simply through their interest in cosplay or Japanese anime and manga.

Other Costume Communities

Maintaining community is important to a costume culture. In cosplay, conventions serve to maintain relationships within the community that were either formed online or in-person at previous events. There are typically three main features that unite the public during celebrations: religiosity, spectacle, and fun (Shukla 2015: 40). While religion does not play a role in cosplay, spectacle and fun certainly do. Cosplayers are not the only type of costuming clubs or communities out there. Costume-based communities also include reenactment groups, such as the Society for Creative Anachronism. The Society for Creative Anachronism considers reenactment a game, like a theater production. But unlike a traditional play, there is no stage or script. Members of the Society for Creative Anachronism dress as quasi-realistic medieval/renaissance characters, which is only slightly different than a general cosplayer because their costume is historically based:

[Costume] centers on the premise of time travel, of transporting oneself and spectators to another time and place. The specificity of the time and place vary, as do the degree of authenticity, the levels of tolerance of inaccuracy, and the skills of performance” (Shukla 2015: 117).

There are two rival groups in the Society for Creative Anachronism – the “Authenticity Mavins” and the “Fun Mavins.” As the names suggests, one group is dedicated to authenticity and accuracy, while the other’s main goal is having fun. In either case, the Society for Creative Anachronism calls for a heavy investment of time and money in developing a costume and expanding an individual’s wardrobe. Some members gain pleasure not just out of dressing up, but also out of being officially recognized for the accurate costumes that they make and wear (Shukla 2015: 119). Cosplayers have a similar mentality. Cosplayers get an adrenaline rush or thrill from their work being recognized and rewarded by that recognition and potential praise. Different costuming events, not just cosplay conventions, have participants investing hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars into costumes for an event. However, cost is secondary to the pride the participant feels during the festivities (Shukla 2015: 39). The costume is a means to an end. Cosplayers feel immense pride in their costume, especially when they create most of the costume and/or prop themselves, rather than having it store-bought. There are developmental stages in the Society for Creative Anachronism similar to cosplay. The longer a member is a part of the society, the more time and commitment they have invested, the higher their personal standards of authenticity, and, therefore, the better the costumes (Shukla 2015: 121).

The term “magic moment,” refers to a person getting an intense feeling of authenticity, “of being momentarily transported in time and space” (Shukla 2015: 129). Authenticity can have different definitions to different people. Whenever there is a costume or role-playing event, people are in various modes of dress. As Shukla (2015) found, a person may choose to dress exactly according to a time period, or just throw on a simple tunic. Authentic garb is not a requirement; “it is not essential to social functions, to camaraderie, physical exercise, feasting, dancing, and having fun” (Shukla 2015: 130). True authentic garb, such as a 17th century Renaissance festival, is a garment actually made in that time period and preserved until it is worn in the present. It is highly unlikely someone at a renaissance fair or Civil War reenactment would have clothing that is centuries old. Reenactment is not about creating a centuries-old fictional persona, but about reenacting the lives of people living during that time. The life and story of the person is already fact, which reenactors learn through autobiographies, journals, family history, et cetera. Regardless of where the individual finds the character’s background, authenticity comes from using materials similar to those used back then, keeping true to the style of dress (i.e. not wearing a Roman toga to the Battle of Bull Run reenactment).

The Society for Creative Anachronism, reenactments, and cosplay conventions are spaces where personal achievement and a different persona are performed and celebrated (Shukla 2015: 131). In these types of costuming communities, there is a sense of camaraderie because the communities are built among themselves (Shukla 2015: 151). There is no physical structure to permanently tie them together, such as school or work. While cosplay conventions take place at convention centers and Society for Creative

Anachronism events take place in open fields, they are not societal institutions. The social bonds that form are forged through the people and not the institution. When individuals dress up, they leave their mundane lives behind them for a short time. They are still in the “real world” – they still use money, must complete basic functions and tasks to live, and socialize in general. The term “the real world” is disliked within the Society for Creative Anachronism because it is an abstract idea of what is and is not. The Society for Creative Anachronism is the real world. The other place is a dull, mundane, and routine place where a person doesn’t have any power, where they can’t be a hero or villain. Cosplayers feel the same. They are in the real world when they cosplay, but they take a step back from their normal routine and identity. When costuming, a person feels they have more of a choice of who they want to be and explore their own identity without backlash from their regular community.

Shukla (2015) found that some Civil War reenactors choose to portray “villains” of history. While these men are considered the villains, they were also human beings. They have their own history with a versatile personality that brings diversity to the battlefield. Reenactors are history lovers, and even when studying the “bad guys” of the past, they are still learning about history and can create a fuller picture in reenactments. Reenactors are in an impression management position, where they project an idealized version of the character they represent (Goffman 1990). The same is true for cosplayers. Cosplaying allows an individual to dress as a hero, but the reverse is also true because they can become a villain as well. Cosplayers choose a character they admire or relate to, which in turn brings out the best/most interesting deemed quality of the chosen character, whether

hero or villain.

The Production Process of Cosplay

“It takes a village to raise a child” is a common saying. The same can be said for a group to make a successful cosplayer and is one of main reasons that cosplaying promotes social cohesion. One person can cosplay successfully on their own. However, as the number of people involved in the collaboration increases, the budget increases, the plans become more elaborate, and materials and props become more professional and authentic. “The costume must function to define the character visually by setting it in time and space by establishing its age, gender, social class, and personality” (Shukla



Figure 2
My dad using his power tools to craft a sheath for my Excalibur prop. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

2015: 210). In cosplay, individuals are their own playwright, director, and costume designer, though it is not unusual to outsource in order to complete the tasks. For my own cosplay for Anime Mid-Atlantic, I had help. I used my friends and family as sounding boards when trying to figure out how to assemble my costume and what to make for a prop. Originally, I was torn between making the sword Excalibur, Kayley's father's shield, or a backpack shaped as the two-headed dragons from the film. My dad used his power tools to build my sword prop and sewed and glued on the final details of my costume. My mother took pictures as he worked, and I assisted in constructing my sword. A local tailor sewed parts of my costume together that were beyond my own sewing capabilities.

One important part of costume design is for the actor to determine the emotional root that they forge with the character (Shukla 2015: 213), or to figure out what connection the actor has with the character and how that can be brought out in the design. For example, during the conventions that I attended I saw and talked to several women cosplaying as Belle from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Each individual chose to portray her differently. Some wore the iconic golden ballgown, while others chose her blue village dress, her pink winter gown, or designed an original design of gold and red battle armor (the colors that empathize the iconic red rose and Belle's golden ballgown). When choosing a character to cosplay, the individual must feel some connection to the character. Cosplaying is an art form because one's identity must be malleable enough to become someone different.

The art of the actor is to inhabit the character through his body. An actor

aims for a notion of truth, and costume is one venue for the achievement of realism in art. Costumes affect actors through how they make them feel—both how the costume feels physically against the skin and how the actors feel psychologically while wearing those garments (Shukla 2015: 229).

If a person does not feel a connection, that aim for truth is gone, and psychologically, the performance just becomes a shallow act. The separation between the cosplayer and the character must be fluid. The cosplayers do not have to truly believe they are the character, but they must identify in some way for the costume and act to seem authentic. When there is a connection, costumes assist in strengthening both the connection and the performance. “Acting is a transformation of yourself into this character. Even though you are using yourself, you want to be seen as this other person. With a new name, maybe a new accent. A new look, hairdo, whatever...costume is part of that transformation. It really helps you solidify. It’s like a lever” (Shukla 2015: 244). Costume is a gateway into the character and a person’s secret self. By separating the theatrical aspects of costume and performance, it is possible to see how cosplay brings together both elements to create a new social practice.

Crossplay

In crossplay, individuals still participate in costume-play; however, they dress up in costumes modeled after characters of a different gender or species. Crossplay is about staying true to a character, but it can also be about wanting to take on a different gender identity for a variety of reasons. When females crossplay as males, it is done in part to avoid the “male gaze” (Hale 2014: 23). It allows them to dress as strong and intelligent characters that they identify with and yet not worry about being overly sexualized. That is not to say all female characters are portrayed as simple-minded compared to the male characters, but there are popular stereotypes where even the female protagonists have to



Figure 3

A Crossplayer cosplaying as Ariel from The Little Mermaid. He loves crossplaying as various Disney princesses because he sees attributes in each princess that he embodies in real life. A designer friend, David McCarthy, created this costume. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

continually be rescued by their male counterparts or their intelligence is overshadowed by their sexuality. In this way, the world of cosplay can mimic gender roles in the real world. Crossplay attempts to subvert those roles and expectations.

Male-to-female crossplayers typically exert extra effort when costuming themselves, “masking their male physiques by enhancing feminine characteristics to create a female body” (Leng 2013: 95). Some male crossplayers focus on being hyper-feminine in order to be considered successful. Many male crossplayers have long hair, for instance, a symbol for femininity. Crossplayers try to empathize with feminine stereotypes in order to think more like real women. Crossplay is becoming an increasingly popular trend in the ever-growing cosplay community (Leng 2013: 91). At any time of the day and any place in any convention, there seem to be dozens of crossplayers. One of the cosplayers I talked with loved to cosplay as Ariel from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989). He has done several variations of Princess Ariel and views himself as a hardcore cosplayer; he may spend hundreds of dollars on a single costume and wear it to many conventions, thus making it an investment. This investment in the cosplay subculture is both in himself as a cosplayer as well as his own his own identity. The phrase “The clothes makes the man” is appropriate in a cosplay setting. When a cosplayer puts on the costume, they stand a little straighter and walk more confidently. In a typical day, the same result occurs after putting on formal wear. After walking around confidently at an event, the effect lasts when they change into their everyday clothes, because they remember that feeling of confidence.

Crossplaying is a symbol of rebellion against mainstream conceptions of gender

and sexuality because it gives a different perspective on gender fluidity and identity formation from “drag” (Leng 2013: 101). Dressing in drag tends to be understood as men dressing as women, and they are considered either transvestites or homosexuals. While the overall process of crossplay contains elements of drag performance (Leng 2013: 96), it is still vastly different because crossplay doesn’t indicate sexual preference or even one’s sexuality. According to Judith Butler, gender can be understood as a cultural performance whereby “the gendered body is revealed as performative, suggesting that it



Figure 4.
Female cosplayers crossplaying as humanoid characters of Scar and Simba from Disney’s The Lion King. These two crossplayers met that morning and had been introduced by a mutual photographer friend. They became fast friends and spent the rest of the convention group cosplaying together. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 1990: 136). As stated previously, cosplay is a combination of the words “costume” and “play.” The word “play” suggests a performative aspect to this hobby. Cosplay encourages gender and even species fluidity through the enactment of a character by an individual; in cosplay, one chooses a character and a gender that is not necessarily based on their biological sex or species. This choice would be an example of what Butler describes as the body being a “passive medium” on which cultural meanings are inscribed (Butler 1990: 8). Individuals use their body as a canvas to show appreciation toward a character by mimicking them using clothing and gestures. Cosplayers can dress as aliens, animals, or supernatural creatures. The George Mason University Cosplay Club held a competition, Cosplay Wars, for one of their social events. The challenge had competitors form groups, shop for materials, and then make a costume in over a span of two days and 10 hours. The theme was Humanoid Pokemon, based on the Japanese anime, *Pokemon*. The most popular type of crossplay is dressing as a different gender of a different species using the same character, meaning gender and species lines are crossed. “True gender,” writes Butler, “is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only products as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (1990: 136). Crossplayers may not be questioning their own gender or sex, but because they appreciate a character and are inspired by them, they are willing to outwardly change their gender temporarily. It takes skill for a male crossplayer to become feminine. While many transvestites might be homosexual, crossplayers are not necessarily homosexual (Leng 2013: 103). On the

contrary, it is only during cosplay events that a person might crossplay. But it is not because of the gender of a character that an individual chooses to crossplay, but because of the character itself – it is a character driven-assignment of gender. Successful crossplay occurs when a cosplayer effectively ‘crosses’ to the other gender; it is mainly determined by compliments from other cosplayers, as well as a number of photography requests (Leng 2013: 104). This attention gives a sense of validation when others acknowledge their efforts and deem it a success. Cosplayers view this gender-bending as an extreme sign of devotion and artistic expression, rather than simply an alternative manifestation of drag performance (Leng 2013: 99). Cosplaying as non-human is more common than crossplay. Crossplay is an aspect of contemporary costume fandom that has earned the support from the larger fan community (Leng 2013: 91). Gender is viewed as performative and can be inscribed by societal norms and repetition.

Lolitas

Costume and character representation enable the expression of personal and social desires, especially those that might not have any other outlet in daily life. Character representation in cosplay exists in two basic forms. The first is “discrete representation,” which involves the material and performative reproduction of a recognizable subject from a particular body of texts such as the character’s costume, personality, and backstory that make them recognizable and thus a form that can be shared between the individuals who understand everything the character is and represents. (Hale 2014: 10). The second type of character depiction is “generic representation,” which does not focus on reproducing a

specific character. It engages in general character typology, such as a warrior, superhero, zombie, pirate, ninja, or robot. Generic representation tends to be more formulaic and archetypal. They reproduce generic structure with minimal deviations, or, for the most part, they all share a basic set of relative features and consistency (Hale 2014: 12). Generic representation can include original fantasy and sci-fi characters or Lolitas. Lolitas are ultra-feminine “girls” who seem more like dolls.

The term “Lolita” originates from Vladimir Nabakov’s novel *Lolita* (1955), but the current Lolita subculture has no direct reference to the novel or any sexual connotation. (Rahman et. al 2012: 7). Lolita is not a character, but a style of cosplay, that has young women dressing up like a type of doll with frilly, Victorian/Edwardian clothing styles. The goal is to project femininity and innocence. Lolita subcultures have popped up in

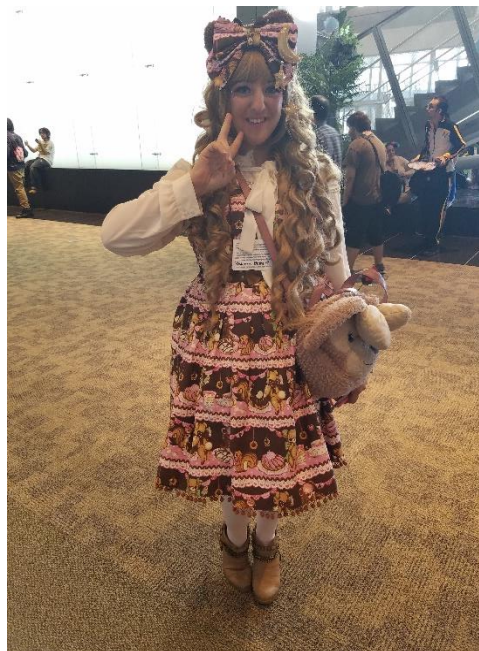


Figure 5

A bear-theme Lolita’s motivation: “Lolitas are cute and dressing up as one makes me feel cute.” Photo by Margaret Haynes.

Hong Kong, China, the United States, and many other parts of the world. Under this subtype, there are many Lolita subgenres, including Gothic Lolita, Sweet Lolita, Punk Lolita,

Classic Lolita, and Princess Lolita (Rahman et. al 2012: 8). The general age of those who cosplay in the Lolitas subgenre ranges from teenagers to young women. Lolitas participate in this fandom for a sense of freedom and escape: “By wearing a childlike Lolita style in a fantasy setting, the wearer may enter into an imaginary world and momentarily remove her/himself from everyday reality” (Rahman et. al 2012:10). Participation in the Lolita subculture is an expression of socioeconomic uncertainty, academic discontent, job disappointments, and a sense of personal failure or dissatisfaction (Rahman et. al 2011:10). Like other cosplayers, Lolitas wish to leave their doubts, failures, and other disappointments behind to become strong, confident figures. Lolitas, with not a hair out of place, wish to experience a sense of perfection. Therefore, in whatever subgenre a Lolita dresses up, she uses clothes to reconstruct her self-image in at least two different ways: “First, some Lolita subculturalists used the Lolita style as a tool to hide their undesirable self...second...to construct individual image” (Rahman et. al 2011:22). Lolitas use this style to become more feminine to have a better body image of themselves. Lolitas are always meant to be cute, though not necessarily sensual. Cosplay conventions allow Lolitas to be like other cosplayers who meet up, exchange tips and tricks for perfecting their costume, and receive trust and validation about their private self through a shared costume mode. At Katsucon in 2016, I was waiting in line at the coat check and there were two Lolitas in front of me. I complimented one on her wig and

the placement of small stars and bells in it. Her friend laughed and said that only at conventions are they comfortable wearing such a wig, and with dresses to match.

Collective Identity

When cosplayers come together, they leave behind their daily identity. There is a strong sense of family at cosplay conventions. While there is always some criticism of cosplayers and their choices, there is an overwhelming amount of support toward cosplayers as they express their identity in choosing their characters. A sense of community is fostered at conventions and can be maintained over the internet via forums, YouTube channels, Facebook pages, et cetera. Cosplay is not an everyday identity, but is something that, like a mask, an individual takes out of the closet every so often to rejoin an accepting community, whether it is their first-time cosplaying or their seventy-seventh.

The Society for Creative Anachronism and Civil War reenactments are like cosplay because each group uses costuming events to socialize. Through socialization, a collective identity forms amongst the individuals to form a bonded group, instead of just a cluster of people. The “forming a collective identity through a shared costume mode... performed costumes led to social identities and offered opportunities for social interaction” (Shukla 2015: 251). Cosplaying is a social network that is found both in-person and online. While various social networks center on different shared interests, values, tastes, and the formation of alliances, cosplaying and other communities such as

Society for Creative Anachronism and Civil War reenactment have a network that is mainly expressed through costumes. Characters and their costumes are chosen by the cosplayer because they can fulfill certain desires, "...desires for social connections, for the preservation of heritage, for the right to protest or educate—costumes are made and work to answer the inner need to create" (Shukla 2015: 261). Cosplayers connect through different media, such as cosplay tutorial websites, YouTube videos, and Facebook pages, which are popular venues for cosplayers to learn from one another. Communication at their fingertips allows a sense of comradery to foster in between conventions and other cosplay events.

In a cosplay community, dressing up in costume is a normal occurrence. There are hundreds of cosplay conventions and events throughout the U.S. every year. However, in mainstream American culture, Halloween is the most popular costume event. It is the most conspicuous occasion for costumed performance. It is the one day of the year when many people, adults and children alike, wear costumes to school, work, and parties. Just like Halloween, cosplay conventions give a person a chance to try out different versions of themselves. Halloween is more about the simple act of dressing up than the performance found in cosplayers. One person does not have just one identity. Each individual has many identities, each a different version of themselves that appear in various contexts and under different conditions. A person is someone's child, parent, sibling, spouse, partner, friend, enemy, classmate, coworker, employee, et cetera., and each aspect of their overall identity acts differently based on the context and audience. Each are different identities that they carry.

Cosplay is both calculating and passionate. It is about individuals expressing themselves in a specific way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others to evoke a specific response from the audience (Goffman 1959: 6). Many cosplayers, especially veterans who have been cosplaying for years, will have a variety of costumes and will cosplay as a different character each day of a convention. Several members of the George Mason University Cosplay Club have multiple costumes and cosplay as a different character the week leading up to Halloween. Their identity is fractured into several identities, though fractured, like a mirror, when it still reflects. The same is for a person. The person is still the same, but more personalities of the various characters get their day to shine. It is not a split personality disorder, but most characters have a signature trait, such as wisdom, confidence, arrogance, a quick temper, and so on. A person has various personality traits, and based on the character chosen, certain traits are more pronounced than others. “When an individual appears before others, he unknowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part” (Goffman 1959: 242). When a person cosplays as several different characters at one convention, she is demonstrating to the other attendees that she will encounter them several times over the three-day span, and they will have the chance to see the different projections of that cosplayer, and reveal more facets of herself - like how Kayley reveals an aspect of my personality others might not otherwise see.

CHAPTER TWO - CONVENTIONS

“There is a freedom here, being something different and new, even if its only for a few days.” – Cosplayer portraying Azura from “Fire Emblem Conquest”

Convention Space

At cosplay conventions the main decorations are the cosplayers themselves. “The social construction of space is the actual transformation of space—through peoples’ social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of a material setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning” (Low 2000: 128), which creates spatialization of that space. Meaning, the space is not just a geographic location, but has a social custom or culture attached to the space. Conventions are three days long, and during that time, the space becomes a safe place for individuals to be free to express their love for what is widely known as a “geek” culture. Conventions are a significant aspect of fan communities, which are also known as fandoms. Cons serves as “communities of practice” and “taste cultures” that foster meaning through a network of texts, objects, and performances (Hale 2014: 5). This space in the convention center is transformed by the cosplayers



Figure 6
Open group cosplay photoshoot at Katsucon 2017. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

themselves. At specific times of the day, cosplay photoshoots spring up in lobbies where any cosplayer may join in. There is a certain order to these photoshoots; it is not just a free-for-all. Convention employees provide order with a designated amount of time for each cosplay group and regulations on where to pose and how close the audience can physically get to them. Dozens of phones are out, snapping pictures to preserve the memory of that moment made special by the splendor of the costumes and the poses of the cosplayers. Many professional-grade cameras are also present, some being wielded by actual professionals, but most are in the hands of other cosplayers who enjoy taking pictures of others as much as they like being photographed themselves. There are also scheduled exhibitions featuring dancing and acting by professional cosplay groups. These events showcase their work while acting as advertisements and recruiting tools for their

particular group. Depending on the convention, the size of the space varies. Katsucon is spread out over several buildings, while Nekocon and Anime Mid-Atlantic are confined to one building, though span over several different floors. Attendance size determines venue. One local convention, Otakon, which is held during mid-August, was originally located in Baltimore, Maryland, at the convention center, but due to increasing size, in 2017, the venue changed to the Washington Convention Center in D.C. to better accommodate the ever-growing crowds.

Cosplay conventions attract people of all ages and backgrounds. Attendees include people in regular street clothes and actual cosplayers. Cosplay conventions are for multicultural enthusiasts and entertainment. Volunteers are the backbone of every con, acting as general room security, coat checkers, registration clerks, gophers, and more. Conventions are also made up of panels, workshops, masquerades, a “Dealers” or “Merchants” Room, art auctions and sales, and photo opportunities provided by professional and amateur photographers. Cosplay is both a cultural phenomenon and an industry that forms into a creative hobby and lucrative business for those who wish to sell their fanart or fanfiction to fellow cosplayers and attendees. Social cohesion promotes a sense of belonging and trust that includes fostering a hobby into a business for some, whether it is being a professional cosplayer or arts vendor. Volunteering and working at a convention is a way for other individuals to give back to this community that they feel a part of. The cosplay community is not just for general attendees and cosplayers, but also the volunteer, staff and vendors.

Cosplay establishes a unique subculture within a fandom that is intimately

connected to the convention. Cosplay constructs a carnivalesque space in which popular characters are mediated and celebrated (Lamerichs 2014: 115). The environment is created for and by cosplayers that provides a variety of social interactions: “cosplay merges fantasy and reality into ‘carnavalesque’ environment and spaces, where individuals have permission to temporarily masquerade as someone or something other than themselves” (Leng 2013: 101). Even though the convention space is also used to host business conferences, weddings, and seminars, when cosplayers come, the space is wildly transformed. There are no decorations out in the halls, public areas, or panel rooms, but the cosplayers transform the space into a festival that celebrates individual creativity over mutual interest of various fandoms. Conventions are “expressive contact zones” where vernacular and popular culture converge, and where fans bring the fantastic to life through cosplay (Hale 2014: 7). The cosplayers themselves perform the feat of transforming the space into an extraordinary escape from their daily routine for not only themselves, but the other attendees. While the convention space is important for social cohesion, it is not *the* most important factor. The most important factor is the cosplayers themselves. Through the use of costuming, they can transform any space into something festive, making the cosplay community mobile, based on the movements of the cosplayers. Social cohesion in cosplay is not only linked to a specific place, but to the people themselves.

Celebrities

Cosplay is a temporary form of escapism for millions of people around the world

as they attend cosplay events and continue to strengthen the bonds within this subcultural community. Cosplay is different than other forms of entertainment and escapism, because the participants are both highly active and essential to a convention. Cosplayers are both the actors and the audience. While cosplayers are being photographed, they are also watching, admiring, and photographing other cosplayers whose own performances they appreciate. Besides admiring from afar, many will begin a dialogue with other cosplayers, where they share praise and tricks of the trade, such as shortcuts in making parts of their costume. While there are thousands, if not millions, of cosplayers, in the United States alone, there are a select few who are professional cosplayers. Those few make an income as a cosplayer by advertising for games, events, TV shows, et cetera. For the professionals, this career grew out of a hobby. One such model, Amie, attended conventions as a cosplayer, where her attention to detail in her costumes, her boundless energy, and her enthusiasm drew the attention of the owner of a merchant booth who wanted her cosplay to advertise their product. That was the start of her cosplay career. She commented in the article that cosplayers love what they do and that that is more authentic than hired help (Stone 2015). Professional cosplayers act as subcontractors to conventions and are also responsible for keeping up with their fan base. It is not uncommon for a professional cosplayer to have at least half a million followers for each social media platform, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Another professional cosplayer, Lindsey Elyse, breaks down her cosplaying income into five categories: Appearance fees, travel stipends, modelling work connected to cosplay, products provided to her for her work, and the profit received from selling signed photographs and

merchandise (Stone 2015). Top tier cosplayers earn between \$70,000 to \$125,000 a year (Stone 2015). In the cosplay community, professional cosplayers are considered celebrities, along with voice actors, anime producers, and manga authors, because they each hold a large quota of subcultural capital and authenticity.

Subcultural capital is a type of knowledge which is only recognized as valuable within a subculture (Hill 2003: 61). Cosplayers are not the only ones who can be authentic in their well-made costumes. “Celebrities” of this subculture include anime voice actors, bloggers, and manga artists and writers in addition to professional cosplayers – many of whom have panels at conventions. These types of celebrities are mythically positioned as the authentic source of their fan adulation, especially those who ‘truly’ become that character when they cosplay, rather than being divided between character/actor identities (Hill 2003: 71). Many otakus, or fans, with a deep knowledge base of the parental text, also use conventions to promote themselves, especially those who create fan art or fanfiction (Eng 2012). Parent text is the original source material that the cosplayer uses for inspiration. It can be a book, animation, cartoon, video game, board game, et cetera. Some otakus will rent out booths in special areas reserved for artists, often called Artist Alley, where they can sell their artwork, fanfiction, or other creations. Many otakus will also cosplay, increasing their subculture capital based on the character they choose to represent, how well-known the character is, and how well the otaku portrays the character. For any cosplayer, it is important to do right by the character. Many cosplayers choose a character because the character is relatable. If they don’t portray a character as they appear and act in the parent text, then they disrespect

themselves and the character. When I attended Nekocon 2017, I met a young woman cosplaying as Commander Lexa, from the sci-fi TV show *The 100*. The character she had chosen, Lexa, was a strong leader, who was both fair but steadfast to her beliefs and people.² In her personal life, outside of cosplaying on weekends, she is an executive assistant. She relates to Lexa because both of them are in leadership roles and have to be both strong, yet fair and personable. Being able to portray characters accurately is



Figure 7
Female cosplayer of Commander Lexa from the American sci-fi TV show, *The 100*. She chose this character because Lexa is a strong, respected female leader who is willing to listen and be flexible, yet not be easily swayed. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

² I use past tense because by the time she cosplayed as Lexa, the character had already been killed in the show.

especially important for otakus who have a deep understanding of the parental text and are more likely to catch the nuances. The woman cosplaying a Lexa considers herself an otaku. Self-proclaimed otaku status is not just for cosplayers, but also

for celebrities. Many of the celebrities are otakus because that deep knowledge base adds to their own authenticity level, boosting their popularity.

In 2016, Adam Savage, a celebrity and self-proclaimed otaku, known for his part in the TV show *Mythbusters*, gave a TEDTalk about his experience cosplaying. The characters that cosplayers choose to represent are a key aspect in understanding cosplay: “What we choose to put on is a narrative of our life, who we are and who we want to be” (Savage 2016). Children who like dress-up tend to be drawn to cosplay, and later become a part of the active community in order to continue their passion. Costuming plays a key role in storytelling. For example, Comic-Con, a large convention in San Diego, is a costuming mecca. People come from all over the country to show off their costumes. Cosplay is not just limited to Japanese anime and manga, though that is where it originated; it has also spread to Western fantasy and science fiction, both film and literature-based, such as comic books. Cosplayers, while trying to stay true to the character they cosplay, still try to add their own interpretation in some way: “(They) will mash-up, bend them to their will and they change them to be the character they want them to be in those productions...they let their freak flag fly. They rehearse their costumes. They work hard on their pose to make sure their character looks good on your camera” (Savage 2016). Cosplayers practice the character’s gestures, posture and way of

walking, and personality quirks. It is not just a basic performer-audience relationship – everyone injects themselves into the narrative to make it their own. Cosplay helps us reveal oneself to others and connect with something important inside of them. The first time Savage attended Comic-Con, he cosplayed as the character No Face from Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001). No Face is a semi-transparent spirit whose body resembles a long, black-cloaked tube. When necessary, his body can sprout arms and legs, and his face is an ominous, smiling mask with purple highlights where his eyes and mouth should be. Savage carried around chocolate gold coins and when someone requested a picture with him, he would give them a gold coin. As the actor, he drew his audience into his performance with the use of the gold coins. But, his attendees/audience became part of the part of the performance/narrative when Savage soon discovered that people would chase after him to return the coins or not accept them from him at all. They did this because it is considered bad luck to accept coins from No Face. The lines for the audience and performers blur at conventions when attendees who recognize the parent text find themselves drawn into the act themselves and they base their actions on how they would themselves react to the character/role being portrayed, instead of to the individual doing the portraying.



Figure 8
Several members from the cosplay group “Mizfits” cosplaying as characters from Bleach. Komamura is on the far left. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

At Nekocon, 2016, I encountered an amateur cosplaying group, called the “Mizfits.” Their group is based out of Lynchburg, Virginia. The person I interviewed cosplayed as a Humanoid Fox creature, Komamura, from the Japanese manga, *Bleach*. He has been cosplaying for 22 years, at over 17 conventions. He and his friends choose a parent text to cosplay from and meet in someone’s basement or workshop to build their costumes together as they watch the anime for inspiration. In this case, they watched several seasons of *Bleach* as they stitched, glued, and outfitted their costumes. During this time together, they bounced ideas off one another of how to make the costume and bonded over this mutual interest. They are an amateur cosplaying group because, while they sometimes earn commissions for their appearances and costumes at different events, it is not a steady source of income. Their group is together for the comradery, with the

profit being a fun bonus of their hobby. They trust one another throughout the entire cosplay process, from conceptualization in their workspace to the “performance” at the convention. The cosplayer, Komamura, has been cosplaying for twenty-two years for a total of seventeen conventions. His favorite time cosplaying is with the Mizfits, because they get motivation and inspiration not only from the anime they watch together, but also each other.

Competitions

Conventions have more than just panels, workshops, and shopping for attendees. They also have events: open photoshoots, costume contests and formal balls, to name a few. At Anime Mid-Atlantic 2017, I attended two costume competitions. The first was Cosplay Pose Off: Magickal Girl vs. Sentai Warrior. The second was the popular Cosplay Masquerade, a Saturday evening event, with the line forming along the corridors throughout the entire floorspace.

The Cosplay Pose Off took place in the middle of the day. The event did not start on time as people trickled in and the M.C. shanghaied cosplayers that fit into the Magickal Girl or Sentai Warrior category from the audience to participate. A Magickal Girl is typically a young school girl who is endowed with magic powers and fights evil. A Sentai Warrior is character that is part of a group, usually color themed, like the American TV franchise, *Power Rangers*. Overall, there were 13 contestants and about 40 people in the audience. All the contestants were female, except one. He was a stocky, six-foot-tall mountain of a man in his twenties, dressed as a Japanese school girl. Contestants



Figure 10
Cosplaying as Metatron, this contestant's favorite part of cosplaying is the attention she receives when people ask for pictures because it is a confidence booster for this normally shy person. She also loves being able to socialize and make new friends. Photo by Margaret Haynes.



Figure 9
A second pose by the cosplayer Metatron. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

sat in the front row, Magickal Girls on one side of the aisle and Sentai Warriors on the other. The Pose Off had three rounds. For each, the contestants from each category would get up on stage, strike a pose, and in the end, only one cosplayer would reign supreme and be dubbed the “Grand Champion Poser!” The audience were the judges – it was up to them to determine their favorites by applauding the loudest. This competition had nothing to do with the costume, craftsmanship, or accuracy. This event was based solely on the pose, according to the M.C. However, while the pose was what counted, if the costume was well crafted, then the pose would seem more authentic. For myself, it was hard to

separate both. The first round had four sub-rounds as one person posed off against another person on the team. But by the end of the first round only four remained. For the second round, the M.C. asked the audience to pick a themed pose, but the audience refused, so his only directive to the competitors was “go nuts!” For this, cosplayers went through a series of poses instead of just one. The second round only had one cosplayer who was eliminated.

For the last round of Cosplay Pose Off, there were three contestants, and each had three turns to pose. Like in the previous round, each performed a series of movements before the last pose. In the end, the winner was a young woman cosplaying as Metatron (neo-version) from *Undertale*, a 2015 American videogame. Second place went to the male crossplayer Japanese school girl, and third place went to a Magickal Girl. I talked to the Metatron cosplayer after the competition. Outside of cosplaying, she told me she is a shy, anxious person. She was drawn to this character’s flamboyant and confident personality because it contrasts with her own. She was excited to have won the Pose Off and considered it the best confidence boost of the day. She has cosplayed several times before and loves the public recognition she receives, especially in a competition, because it gives her the vindication her normally shy self needs.

Later that evening was the day’s main event: The Cosplay Masquerade. The line spanned around most of the third floor, beginning to form two hours before the doors officially opened. The large conference room that the event was held in could hold up to 500 people. In the front of the room, there was a stage, like those temporarily set up at functions such as weddings and dances. Above the stage was a professional lighting

system and in the middle of the room was a professional camera, so the convention could keep a record of the event. Seats filled every nook and cranny of the space. People were still trickling into the room even as the event began. Many stood along the walls to get a better view of the stage and cosplayers. This competition takes preparation, practice, and commitment. Those who sign up are required to attend several rehearsals and coordinate a layout of their routine with the director, as well as a music arrangement with the sound crew. Individuals have 90 seconds and groups have 4 minutes for their performances.

The masquerade had 16 performances. One of the first performances was a young woman cosplaying as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. Her costume was styled after Belle's gown from the ballroom scene in Disney's 1991 animated film. For her act, she sang "Belle." Her ball gown seemed authentic with fabric that appeared high-end quality and the folds hanging exactly like the original gown. While singing, she stayed in one position, center stage, with her hands folded demurely in front of her, her face slightly tilted up toward the lights as she completed her song. Acts over the next several hours included various skits, as well as a few cosplayers striding on stage, striking a pose, and leaving without any fanfare. Those that only posed left the crowd confused because the masquerade is more than just posing, it is a performance, like one might find in a traditional theater. After the judges had finished their deliberation, the awards were given out for the following: The Judges Awards, Best in Novice, Best in Advanced, Best in Youth, and Best Overall Craftsmanship. The latter focuses on the detail, accuracy, and ingenuity in costume design. One point that was made clear in the Masquerade rules was that commissioned costumes or costumes that consisted mainly of bought items instead of

handmade pieces were not to be allowed to compete for craftsmanship judging. If a friend or family member assisted in the creation, that is different, but the cosplayer had to be the main creator. When the awards were being presented, the fan favorite based on applause was the youth cosplaying as *Star Wars* Jawa costume, with his father cosplaying as an Imperial Officer behind him. He did not win the Best in Youth category, but did receive a Judge's Award and Honorable Mention. This child demonstrated that cosplaying is not just for teenagers and adults, but also for children, families, and even convention staff



Figure 11
Two friends and coworkers cosplaying as Azura from “Fire Emblem Conquest” and “Birth Right.” Azura from “Fire Emblem Conquest” is on the right, while Azura from “Birth Right” is on the left. They chose the characters based on a music video they enjoyed. Photo by Margaret

members. Convention staff also participate in cosplaying when they are off shift.

From Attendees to Staff Members

Cosplay is not just for the attendees; staff members also partake in the festivities. During my visit to Nekocon 2016, I encountered two female cosplayers who I originally thought were just attendees, but during my conversation with them, I discovered they were both staff members, and had their ID badges tucked away in their bags they kept close by. Both cosplayed as the same character, but from different music videos, thus the two different costumes. Azura from “Fire Emblem Birth Right,” the cosplayer in the blue/white gown, is a senior staff member and the head of the event planning committee for the convention. For a convention staffer, the job spans six months out of the year. She works at a local hospital as a data clerk for the rest of the year. Originally, she started working for the convention as a volunteer emcee for their karaoke event. Everyone loved her energy, including management, so they hired her for the following year. For the past eight years, she climbed the ranks to be the head of event planning. During her years working at Nekocon, she met her friend, the other woman cosplaying as Azura, who is now a judge for cosplay competitions. The other Azura cosplaying from “Fire Emblem Conquest” video also started out in Karaoke. During the con off-season, she is not working for the convention, she is a park ranger. When talking about their cosplay experiences, both have had fans following them around, and others who won’t take “no” for an answer when they want to take a picture, which is usually when they are working and do not have the time to pause for pictures. Overall though, both love their jobs and

consider themselves type-A personalities only during conventions, which is a general theme among cosplayers: picking a character who is more emboldened than they are in real life.

Why Cosplay?

Over the span of a single day at three different conventions, I interviewed 48 people – 47 cosplayers and one cosplay helper – about the overall cosplay experience. My interview included the following questions:

1. Why did you choose that character?
2. How many hours, roughly, did it take to make the costume?
3. How much, roughly, did it cost?
4. What is the response from other cosplayers?
5. Is this your first time cosplaying?
6. How many cosplay conventions have you attended?
7. Do you always go with the same character?
8. What traits drew you to this character?
9. Have you ever had a negative cosplay experience?
10. What is your favorite part about cosplaying?
11. Do you consider the people you meet at cons your friends? Do you keep in touch afterward?
12. Do you think there is a “dark side” to conventions?

13. Do you consider yourself an otaku?
14. Do you think you embody your favorite characters in “real” life?
15. How often do you read or watch anime/manga?

Through these questions, I gauged their reasons for cosplaying and why they chose certain characters over others. I gained a general sense of the conventions, and if there is a correlation between the amount of money spend on costumes and props versus the number of cons the cosplayers have attended. I had two hypotheses that I hoped would assist in answering my research questions. One: The more conventions an individual cosplays at, the more money they will spend on their costume and props. Two: Individuals will choose characters that they either share some personality attributes with, or wish they did, making cosplay as a form of emulation. Through these two hypotheses, I hoped to discover how money plays a part in cosplaying. Meaning, is cosplaying only for the middle and upper class or can anyone, despite socio-economic status, participate. I also wanted to find out how much of personality traits of characters also play a factor.

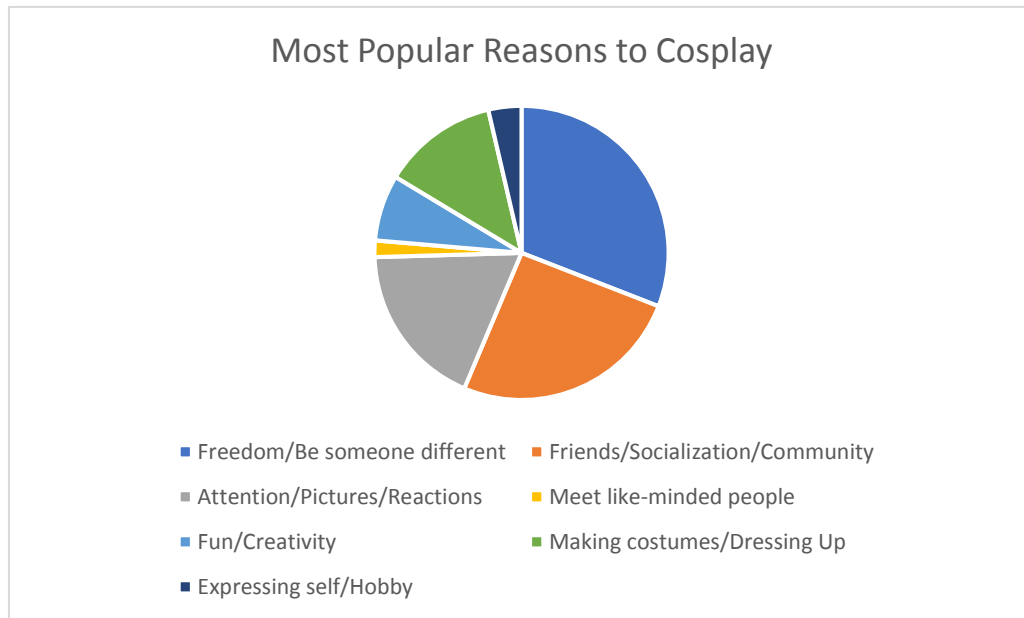


Figure 12
Many cosplayers gave multiple reasons for cosplaying. Out of the 48 people I interviewed, 47 were cosplayers.

For my first hypothesis, the reality of my expectation was reversed. Instead of spending more money in relation to the number of times a person cosplays, it seems that the majority spent less than \$300 on their costume, and the largest cluster is less than \$100. After talking the cosplayers, I have come to find that keeping a budget matters, especially if they have more than one costume. Some will spend hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars on a single costume and props, but many do not have the funds to do so. Instead, they find bargains online, in craft stores and thrift stores. Closet cosplaying is also popular, which is when a person will use what they have in their closet as the foundation for the costume. For my second hypothesis, I found that the majority feel they share key personalities traits with their chosen character. Or, that they wish they

could be like that character.³ Based on the responses I have received, I have found that almost every cosplayer I've talked to loves to cosplay for the socialization. One male cosplayer, cosplaying as Prince Phillip from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), loves to cosplay with his female friends. They will dress up as female Disney character, and he will dress up as their male counterparts. For him, cosplay events are like a family reunion, "It's like we all come together at a family gathering. There are lots of



Figure 13
Cosplaying as Prince Phillip from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), he is attending Nekocon 2016 with three female friends, also cosplaying as Disney characters.
Photo by Margaret Haynes.

³ It is hard to quantify my hypothesis, due to changing interview questions. Based on my past con experience, I would change or add interview questions for the next, so I did not use the exact same questions at each con.

compliments and bonding with my friends.”

There are several different reasons to cosplay. The most popular include the feeling of comradery, the freedom to be different, and the adrenaline rush of performing in front of others while their photo is being taken. Being a cosplayer, I felt more connected to the cosplayer community than when I was a general attendee. A part of my soul was on display for thousands to see and I was accepted with open arms. Through cosplay, I was able to share a part of myself I might not have been able to verbalize otherwise. I feel the same when I see and talk with the other cosplayers. Cosplaying gives us a sense of understanding, forging stronger bonds to this community. I felt like all the



Figure 14
The Halo fighter cosplay couple. A Pennsylvania couple brought together by a Virginia cosplay convention. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

cosplayers were my comrades in costume.

Cosplay conventions are a setting where like-minded people, who share similar interests, meet face-to-face. Some arrive as attendees and leave with a job offer for the next year. Many make social connections to others that they will later see at other conventions or the same one next year. One couple I interviewed had met at a past convention in Virginia. As their friendship grew during the convention, they discovered that they both not only lived in Pennsylvania, but also live within driving distance from one another. Despite living and going to Pennsylvania conventions, they met at a Virginia convention, both cosplaying as characters from the same parent text: *Halo*, an American videogame. Now, they are best friends and socialize outside of cosplay conventions.

While conventions are a wonderful mechanism for bringing people together and creating a sense of community, not all conventions are created equal. This is most apparent when I traveled to Anime Mid-Atlantic. Katsucon is a large-sized convention, in terms of attendance and convention space. Nekocon is a medium-sized con. In comparison, Anime Mid-Atlantic is a very small convention. Anime Mid-Atlantic spans only one hotel, spread over several floors. Typically, at conventions, Artist's Alley and the Dealer's Room would each have their own warehouse-like room that functioned like a stereotypical marketplace. Each business would have their own stall, hocking their wares. While the Dealer's room had its own large room, Artist Alley was divided onto two floors, with the vendors/artists setting up shop in the corridor hallways, making it an actual "alley." This was the first time I had seen this layout, and it felt cramped. Other, bigger conventions also have booklets that go into detail about what each panel,

workshop, and event is about. Anime Mid-Atlantic did not have an information booklet, only a two-page schedule for the entire weekend. They also didn't have a map of what was held on the various floors, creating confusion among the cosplayers not familiar with this particular con. Despite all of this, the atmosphere of the convention is like larger cons, with cosplayers being just as enthusiastic, despite the smaller crowds and confusion.

CHAPTER THREE - PERFORMANCE

Performance - “All activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” Erving Goffman (1959).

A Storyteller is Born

Performance is viewed as situated behavior, which is rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts. Part of context is the setting, or event that calls for the performance. The term “event” is used to designate a “culturally defined, bounded segment of the flow of behavior and experience constituting a meaningful context for action” (Bauman 1977: 27). Cosplay is a costumed culture. Instead of just seeing a person randomly dressed up, members of this loose, yet tight-knit community know that a person is cosplaying, even if they do not know who the character is. On a Friday evening, an hour before attending a George Mason University Cosplay Club meeting, I had been eating my dinner in one of the campus cafeterias. As I was eating, I noticed two tables away from me were a group of cosplayers. One cosplayed as a Hogwarts student. She wore the student uniform of a witch, with the Hufflepuff emblem on her cardigan. The others were cosplaying as characters I did not recognize. Even though I didn’t recognize them, I still knew they were cosplaying from a Japanese parent text, based on the

Japanese style anime clothing that is normally found in Japanese anime/manga. While eating, another student goes up to their table and strikes up a conversation and asks for a picture. Three of the cosplayers pose, all in a crouching, praying position as the student takes a picture. This student became an active audience as he engaged them in conversation, asking questions: what they cosplayed as, why they chose that character, and the process they used to make the costume. The questions he asked focused on the cosplayer's tale of the cosplaying process and how they transform into the character they portray. He focused on the story behind the costume and character, rather than the finished product. As at cosplay conventions, one of the ways social bonds become strengthened is through the recognition of the process of cosplaying – the choice of character and creation of the costumes and persona- and not just the final product or performance. This recognition was on display even in the cafeteria interaction.

Anyone is a potential storyteller because there is no special training to become one (Bauman 1977: 30). Cosplayers are storytellers in their own right because while there is no special training, there is practice and hard work to have an extraordinary cosplay. Cosplayers use costumes and their own bodies to recreate the characters they play. Even Original Cosplayers can use the parent text as a guide to create a new character, yet that character must be able to be easily placed in the specific text, such as a Jedi from the Star Wars Universe. A cosplayer can create a new Jedi not found in any comic or movie, but based on the style of costume and familiar props, the audience can place that character in that fictional world. Cosplayers watch tutorials online, attend panels and workshops at conventions, and go through trial and error before their costumes and performances are



Figure 15
Group cosplaying as the main characters from the Japanese anime “Ouran High School Host Club.” Photo by Margaret Haynes.

perfected.

Performances, events, and roles cannot be done in isolation. They are mutually interactive and interdependent (Bauman 1977: 31). One colloquialism is “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” The same is true in cosplay: does a cosplayer successfully cosplay if there is no one around to see them? The answer is no. Cosplay is not meant to be done without an audience. During my interviews, the majority state that they like to cosplay because they love being photographed by others and socialize with others in costume. Those aspects are central to the cosplay experience, in fact they define it. A performance is not a performance if there is no audience. A person can climb up on stage and recite a Shakespearean monologue,

but without an audience, it is not a performance.

Comrades in Costume

Cosplaying does not have to be a solo act. Friends and family members are often found doing a group cosplay. They become a team that picks one parent text, such as a TV show, and all dress as different characters from that one text. When a group member noticed pictures being taken, they will quickly alert the others in the group and delve into the role of that character. Goffman (1959) uses the terms “performance team” or “team” to refer to “any set of individuals who co-operate in tagging a single routine” (Goffman 1959: 79), meaning, anyone not acting alone. In everyday life, a team might be a doctor or nurse who are both interacting with the same patient. Unlike single cosplayers, there is a group dynamic that does not occur with just a single cosplayer and the audience. In a team, or group cosplay, any member has the power to give the performance away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct. Each teammate relies on the good conduct and behavior of their teammates (Goffman 1959: 82). Group cosplaying a strong sign of trust amongst friends because it illustrates a reciprocal bond of co-dependence.

Trust in the cosplay community is fostered through social capital. “Social capital” refers to networks of relationships among people who live and work in a society, enabling that society to function effectively. The more connections a person has, the greater social capital a person is considered to possess (Putnam 2000). In cosplay, it is not simply about dressing up as a random character, but dressing up as a character that



Figure 16
Warrior Disney Princess Group Cosplay. Pictured from left to right: Elsa, Jasmine, Megara, Ariel, Snow White and Mulan. Missing is Belle. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

individual admires and/or can identify with. Even when a group cosplays together, each member still must feel some connection to the character, or else it feels shallow and uninspiring. Whether it's just a single cosplayer, or a group cosplay, it is up to the cosplayers to elicit energy and a positive response from the observers.

Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens, the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience (Bauman 1977: 43-44).

An example of this control is open cosplay photoshoots during the cons. This is when a single cosplayer becomes part of a group cosplay temporarily. During a designated time and space in the convention hall, a crowd gathers; many are simply onlookers, while other cosplayers waiting for their parent text to be called so they can cosplay. When the parent text is called, the cosplayers go into the ring, which becomes a stage, and the



Figure 17

A supernatural creature, unknown by myself, created an uncanny atmosphere for the observers around them. The creature/cosplayer moved slowly and deliberately, making the observer believe they are the sole focus of the creature. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

crowd gets bigger as attendees want to see how cosplayers have remade their beloved

characters. Onlookers increase as cosplayers interact with other cosplayers from within their own parent text and create a performance through their poses that the crowd can recognize. While the cosplayers might be strangers to one another, because they recognize the characters, a relationship is immediately formed and they each know how to pose and use one another. For example, if there are two cosplayers on stage, but they did not know each other beforehand, but their characters are established as enemies in the parent text, then they know how to interact with one another to create a superior pose that will captivate the audience. When a cosplayer poses for others he is making a non-verbal request, “he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess ...in general, matters are what they appear to be” (Goffman 1959: 17). In short, as he poses, he asks the audience to believe in his performance and that for an instant, he is that character based on all the time, effort, preparation and now performance he has given to the character.

Trial and Error

It takes practice to be able to draw in the audience into the performance. As I learned firsthand, cosplay is largely about trial and error when it comes to making the costumes and props. I chose to cosplay as Kayley from *Quest for Camelot* (1998) for two reasons. The first and foremost was the emotional connection I felt. But what sealed the deal was what I already had in my closet as a starting point. After mentally overturning my closet inside out and comparing it to characters I liked from various TV shows,

movies, books, et cetera, I have seen throughout my life I finally chose Kayley based on a pair of shoes I had bought during a New Year's sale months before. Kayley wore a pair of boots that were similar to the ones I bought and that was good enough for me. The costume was relatively simple enough, consisting of the boots, leggings, purple tunic, two under shirts with different sleeve lengths, and a hair tie. I found parts to my costume at thrift stores, department stores and box stores. The original garments were several long sleeves shirts, a dress, and leggings. With the help of my dad and a local tailor, I transformed pieces of clothing into an undershirt, a tunic, and trousers. In the end, I spent less than \$150.00, the shoes being the most expensive part of the costume. Even though the costume was not expensive, I hoped it would be recognizable by others.

The first person who tried to identify my costume was not part of the con, but was a passerby on the street. He thought I was a character from the Legend of Zelda. It was disheartening, but I knew this could happen. I knew from the beginning when I chose this character, that some would not recognize her, since she is from a Warner Brothers film, not Disney. After the mistake in identity, I tried to be positive, and think that even if only one person recognized me and ask for a picture, I would consider this a successful cosplay.

The next person to mention my costume was the winner of the Cosplay Pose Off, the young woman who cosplayed as Metatron. After our interview, she got a strange look on her face that I later deemed a "Eureka!" moment because in the next instant she asked, "Are you that girl from Quest for Camelot?"

"Kayley." I supplied.

"Yes! Kayley! I love that movie! That was one of my favorite movies growing up. I have never seen a Kayley cosplay done."

I was thrilled that she recognized me, even if she did not remember the name of the character. She asked for a picture, and I was ecstatic to oblige. I struck the pose I had been practicing before the con: Legs apart, one hand on midway on the scabbard of Excalibur, and the other on the hilt. I partially pulled the sword from the sheath, looked up and smiled. Like any good cosplayer, she took several pictures on her smartphone.

When It Rains, It Pours

After that first person recognizing my character, the recognition poured in. The next person to comment on my costume was not focused on my costume, but rather my Excalibur sword prop. I had been at Artist's Alley, when a man stopped and commented on my sword, saying it was well-done. I replied my dad was the one who made it, which stunned him (bugged eyes and all). He suggested my dad should switch professions and become a sword maker/cosplay prop designer. He commented that he loved the detail. After the exchange, he walked away, and a teenage girl came up to me. She LOVED my Kayley cosplay and thanked me for choosing this character, saying characters from that movie are rarely cosplayed. As I posed for a picture, another passerby slowed his walking speed to snap a picture, since I was already posing for the girl.

Once pictures were done, I made my way to the Dealer's Room, where I was stopped again because another cosplayer recognized my character. She was cosplaying as Barbie from *Barbie of Swan Lake* (2003), and requested a picture and told me about how

it made her feel nostalgic, since *Quest for Camelot* (1998) was one of movies she watched frequently growing up. I felt the same about her costume, having watched the Barbie movies when I was younger. In turn, I also requested a picture. Even though we were both cosplayers, in that moment, we were also one another's audience.

The last person to mention my costume was another cosplayer, though she approached me differently than the others. I was getting off an escalator when a woman cosplaying as Poison Ivy from *Batman* called out, "Where Garrett?" (Garrett is the young blind hermit and Kayley's love interest).

Responding from an unconscious reflex, I replied, "Still looking for him!"

She was a bit confused by the response and Sam, a friend with whom I had been attending the convention with, jumped in to say how it was a fun fantasy of mine to meet someone cosplaying from *Quest for Camelot* (1998) as well, especially Garrett, so we could spontaneously cosplay together. After the explanation, she complimented my costume and requested a picture. I enthusiastically complied. While I posed, it occurred to me that I said something "out of character" and I should have replied with, "He is still in the Forbidden Forest" or "He is off making another net." I realized my mistake and silently vowed to rectify it if someone else asked me a similar question. Originally, I feared no one would recognize my costume, but I was greeted with enthusiasm by those who did, and nostalgia by those who had watched the film growing up. The feeling of being part of the "in-group" as a cosplayer versus just an observer is awe-inspiring. It feels as if I gained access into an inner circle I didn't know existed before. Now I want to continue cosplaying and even try group cosplaying, so my friends can experience the

same feeling. In the beginning I was simply an observer. I could not fathom what it would feel like to participate as part of a cosplay audience, much less a cosplayer who would interact with an audience as part of an informal performance and then field questions after initial greetings and conversation. When I interviewed others, I could hear the pride in their voice as they discussed previous cosplay characters and the steps they took to assemble a costume. After cosplaying, I hear that same tone in my own voice.

That Magic Moment

While the cosplayers gain a sense of pride and accomplishment when dressing up, other attendees also get a sense of awe when spotting the costumes and pride when they recognize the character. “In the theater, actors and their audiences – whether they participate actively or passively – journey together to other times and places, experiencing other cultures and personalities. In the theater social collaboration and artistic achievement flourish, and costume provides the channel for that grand pursuit” (Shukla 2015: 199). The cosplay community is not just for cosplayers, but includes the general cosplay attendees who do not cosplay. Even though not all attendees cosplay, they still enjoy others cosplaying, since it shows a sense of comradery for shared fandoms and hobbies.

CONCLUSION

A person cosplays to engage in a social experience, feel support, have fun, and illustrate their creativity. Cosplayers hold common values that are traditionally found in theater, such as a dedication to artistic purity, duty to proper research, and commitment to character standards. Simply put, cosplayers can pick a character, research the background and personality of the chosen character, and carry out a performance in a realistic-looking costume. This creates a sense of authenticity, meaning that the person is so true and sincere to the character that the performance is believable. Through a literature review, interviews, and participant observation, I conclude that cosplay fosters social cohesion that transcends most societal subdivisions (age, gender, race, sexuality, geography, socio-economic status) and allows individuals to come together to form a community.

Katsucon 2016

Through my own personal experiences at conventions, as both a general attendee and a cosplayer, it is evident that social cohesion at cosplay events is based on cooperation and comradery. The first convention I ever attended was Katsucon in 2016. My friend, Sam, and I drove on a cold Saturday morning to the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center in Maryland. Several hours after arriving, Sam and I were walking down an aisle in the Dealer's Room when one of the security volunteers came up to tell us

that we had to exit the building immediately. We were effectively herded outside. Due to the urgency from the volunteers, we were not allowed to retrieve our coats from coat check, and quickly found ourselves outside in the cold. Outside temperatures were below freezing and the constant wind added to our despair and confusion. The exit we had been forced through to the yard led to the Inner Harbor river. Near us were about thirty other people of different ages, gender, ethnicity, and costume. Within minutes we all huddled like penguins conserving body heat. The only ones who did not rotate to an outside position at one point were kids and girls wearing skimpy costumes. The kids and girls wearing skimpy costumes were considered weaker and needed to be protected. (Please note: the girls were considered weaker at the time due to having less protection against the cold weather, and not because of their sex). A group of cosplayers dressed as Furies in colorful animal costumes came by and acted as an additional barrier to the cold. Anyone that came over was welcomed into the huddle demonstrating how cosplayers are instinctively accepting of one another, regardless of appearance or social background. In the few minutes since the group had formed, a sense of comradery had been forged, making each person protective of the other, regardless if they had been strangers only a short time ago.

About ten minutes later, a security officer told us that we had to move away from the building, citing a safety hazard. Our group moved to the yard by the river and slowly dispersed, trying to find new shelter from the cold. We had been at the bottom of a slope, so our next goal was to get to the top, which was street level. We were not the only ones with that idea. Several others started to climb the slope. One girl, whose costume

included four-inch heels, was having issues with the hike. Several other people in front of our group went to help her. One person positioned himself in front of her to guide her up the hill. Another went behind her to push her up, while acting as a safety net in case she fell. She made it to the top safely. The others had formed loose circle around them, ready to jump in if any more help was needed. Cosplay is based on cooperation, rather than aggressive competition (outside of actual event competitions, which are typically good-natured). It was not a competition of who could get to the street faster, but a group effort to make sure everyone arrived safely.

On the street, we saw other people and cosplayers milling about outside the hotel. Several fire trucks and ambulances were handing out blankets and towels to cosplayers



Figure 18
My Furry rescuers during what I now call the Great Fire Alarm Incident of Katsucon 2016. Photo by Samantha Ouellette.

who needed to conserve their body heat. With our cell phones, we checked the Katsucon Facebook page, trying to find if any information about the incident had been posted. The convention organizers apologized for the inconvenience and said they would keep us informed when it was safe to come back inside. While waiting, we came alongside several Furies at a corner. One of them gave me a long hug, helping me stay warm. He eventually let go and left to go walk around with his friends. About a half hour later, the firefighters gave the all-clear signal to go back inside. I later ran into the Furry who had temporarily kept me warm. I gave him another hug and thanked him for his earlier kindness. For the rest of the convention, the hot topic of conversation was the fire alarm and anecdotes of how each attendee coped. One common thread in each retelling was how others would go above and beyond to make sure others were safe and secure, like my penguin huddle.

At the beginning of my research I asked several questions. The most basic and the foundation question was: Can cosplay be considered a form of socialization? The answer is yes. Individuals come together and become a group. This social and cultural phenomenon from the 1970s has become a community that is found in various parts of the world today. For example, during the Fire Alarm Fiasco of Katsucon 2016 (as I dubbed it), I forged connections with people I will most likely never meet again. But if I did see them again, I know conversation would flow with no difficulty, based on the shared experience and common interests. While a person may want to cosplay to explore their identity, the ultimate motivator for costuming is the desire for social connections to cultivate friendships (Shukla 2015: 253). Comradery is valued in many social groups

because that connection builds a sense of community. The convention created a foundation for a community, and the cosplayers added another layer to the community atmosphere when strangers came together to look out for one another's well-being.

The most popular reasons to cosplay are for socialization, comradery, and the feeling of freedom to be someone else. A person has many facets to themselves, some they keep hidden and do not typically share with the world. Using cosplay, individuals allow themselves the freedom to be different from their typical self and release parts of themselves they keep hidden, until they see a relatable character they use as an avatar to display certain personality traits. Societal expectations do not typically allow for fantastic socialization, except for on specific holidays. Cosplay events combat this society's limited fantastic socialization by having conventions almost every weekend in different parts of the country. Cosplayers themselves will attend local events or host "armor parties," which is when cosplayers will meet to build parts of their costume and socialize. While cosplayers will meet and socialize at events outside of conventions, conventions act as the focal point for socialization and stage for the costume and performance aspects.

Authenticity and Adaptation versus Appropriation

In cosplay, the key to a successful cosplay is authenticity of the character. Authenticity has several aspects in cosplay. The first is how close the physical resemblance between the cosplayer and character are after fulling donning costume (and make-up). The second is how similar the performance is to the character, such as mannerism and behavior. Lastly, is the enthusiasm of the cosplayer. A cosplayer does not have to be an exact physical copy of the character. This is especially true for those who make creative license changes to the characters, but the characters are still recognizable. For example. At Katsucon 2017, there group cosplay of men cosplaying as gender-bending, humanoid Spartan warrior Evees with various evolutions from the Japanese anime TV show, Pokemon. The group would march around Katsucon 2017 and give a Spartan warrior yell, fall in formation as if they were in battle, and march forward, spears at the ready. Their creative license that combined historical warriors with cute, but feisty forest-Pokemon creatures, and enthusiasm, achieved authenticity, even if they were not physical replicas of the Pokemon. However, there can be social pressure to look exactly like the character. Unfortunately, some cosplayers are criticized by other attendees for unchangeable physical features, such as height, freckles, skin tone (Hernandez 2013). The cosplayer, Esmerelda, as mentioned in the introduction, was called a racial slur and criticized once because she is Asian, yet cosplaying as a European gypsy from a Disney animated film.

Another source of criticism and stigma is from people outside the convention, who do not understand the costuming culture. There is usually criticism from the public due to the “obvious sexual overtones (e.g. erotic connotations and cross-dressing)” (Rahmun, et al. 2012: 322). Generally, cosplayers are self-conscious when going outside the venue into the public, and tend to go in groups. They are aware of the social stigma of dressing up outside after childhood (Peirson-Smith 2013). While fantastic socialization is considered acceptable to children, it is less accepted when adults take part outside of



Figure 19

The gender-bending Spartan warrior-humanoid Eevees with various evolutions from the Japanese anime TV show, Pokémon. This group would march around Katsucon 2017 and give a Spartan warrior yell, fall in formation, and march forward. Photo by Margaret Haynes.

Halloween. A negative aspect of cosplay are criticisms includes things that cannot be physically changed. In the end though, that aspect does not define cosplay and it is made clear to bullies that they are not welcome. When I cosplayed as Kayley at Anime-Mid Atlantic, I worried I would be body-shamed for my character, since I am overweight, not fit like the character, Kayley. Instead, I was surprised with compliments and questions about my costume and prop making process. While walking to the convention from a parking garage a block away, I was met with some confusion on the streets, since I was in costume, but with so many other cosplayers in public, it was more accepted than if I was by myself. As a safety measure, almost all attendees travel in groups when going outside the convention and onto the city streets.

Criticism of cosplay, if not because it is outright bullying, can be caused by others believing a cosplayer is are inappropriately appropriating Japanese characters. The flaw in this thinking is that many Japanese-based parent texts have Japanese characters. However, for criticism for cultural appropriation should not be directed toward the cosplayers, but instead toward the American entertainment industry. Cultural globalization has been a success for Japanese popular culture in the United States, due to the mediascape and technoscape working together. However, through these -scapes, cultural homogenization has started to appear (Appadurai 1990). It is no longer enough for online entertainment companies, Netflix for example, to translate and air anime and movies on their website. Now, Netflix has come out with Netflix Original anime TV series or movies. It starts with Netflix buying the rights to a Japanese manga series and make it into an anime with American ideals that are inserted into the plot, and character

personalities that were not originally there. This dilutes the Japanese culture that has become a popular Other to be viewed by non-Japanese countries. Netflix had begun to culturally appropriate what was originally Japanese parent sources. However, they have received backlash from Netflix subscribers due to this appropriation. While Netflix is failing to bring American and Japanese cultures together through their Netflix Original anime series and movies, cosplay conventions are thriving at being able to meld the two cultures together. Japanese and American cosplay and niche celebrities are featured at every convention and panels are specifically geared toward bridging the intellectual gap between the two cultures. Cultural workshops include Kimono making, Historical Japanese Pop Culture, Buddhism 101, Disney Across the Pond, In the Life of a Japanese Student, Japanese Indie Music, and multiple film festivals throughout the convention weekend. The cosplay culture is anthropologically unique, because while it is not a perfect egalitarian society, it does find a balance between Japanese and Western culture.

Social Cohesion

My research is backyard anthropology⁴ that sought to document the cosplay community as a cultural and social phenomenon. In this paper, I have posed and answered several questions. The first is if cosplay is solely an individual act and expression of themselves. As described in previous chapters, cosplay does not have to a solo adventure. Even if a cosplayer does not cosplay in a group, friends and family can

⁴ By backyard anthropology, I mean anthropology that takes place in my own community and/or geographical area, and not some exotic location.

assist in the creation of the costume/props and/or be used to bounce ideas off one another. Ideas include how to make the costumes/prop to posing ideas that best represent the character, and by extension, themselves. While the main pillar of this community are the cosplayers, friends and family are also a part of it since their own bonds are strengthened as they assist their cosplayer. The general attendees are also important, because while they do not cosplay, they still share common interests with the cosplayers. Through my research, I have demonstrated that cosplay is a new way to socialize by combining aspects of theater, costume and performance, and using them to make a hobby club. Socialization not only occurs with friends and family, but also with strangers that have the potential to become friends. Cosplay is a subculture to the mainstream culture, which has formed niche communities throughout the world.

Social cohesion works toward the well-being of *all* its members by fighting exclusion and marginalization through the promotion of a sense of belonging and trust. Through performativity, cosplayers can play out chosen gender and identity that they do not normally show. With gender and identity being fluid, the sense of belonging and trust can be formed between a cosplayer and the rest of the community. Cosplay promotes social cohesion through social trust and inclusiveness. My research was built upon Matt Hale's (2014) and Nicolle Lamerichs' (2004, 2011) discussions of how fan identity is linked to social performance and character representation. It also answered Daisuke Okabe's (2012) call for more research regarding the use of cosplay as a model for interest-driven communities and collaborative learning environments. The interest that drives this subculture is socialization through costume and performance, and thanks

to technology, collaboration over costume ideas can either be in-person or online. Putnam (2000) discussed how some social groups, such as bowling leagues and poker nights, have decreased due to advancing technology. My research has demonstrated that with cosplay, a balance is struck between socialization in-person and online to form a social network against the ever-growing social media platforms like Facebook, that can make individuals feel more isolated than those from previous generations. Instead of social media being the enemy against in-person socialization, cosplayers use social media to communicate and to maintain ties.

Cosplay is an all-inclusive group of people that differ in background. Unlike many social groups in America, an individual does not have to share the same beliefs, religion, ideology, or background to become a member. The key is this community is passionate towards something (a book, TV show, video game, board game, et cetera), the cosplay community gates will open wide. While bullies and their criticism are found in any culture and community, they are the minority in the cosplay community, and are not tolerated. The best part of the cosplay world is being able to dress up and act out as the fictional character that inspired creativity to recreate and imitate. Cosplayers come to conventions for freedom of expression beyond everyday societal norms of a community because cosplay is an example of a transnational cultural production, with roots in Japan but extending to Australia, the UK, the U.S., and elsewhere.

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BIOGRAPHY

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