

COS-PLAYING WITH GENDER: SUBVERSION AND REPRODUCTION OF  
GENDER NORMS WITHIN THE COSPLAY COMMUNITY

by

Sarah Aadahl  
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Committee:

_____	Co-Director
_____	Co-Director
_____	
_____	Department Chairperson
_____	Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Date: _____	Spring Semester 2019 George Mason University Fairfax, VA

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Cosplay Community

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

by

Sarah Aadahl  
Bachelor of Science  
Christopher Newport University, 2014

Co-Directors: Shannon N. Davis Professor  
Sociology  
Angela Hattery, Professor  
Women and Gender Studies

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George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
1.1 What is Cosplay?.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature review .....	6
2.1 Introduction .....	6
2.2 Role-Play .....	7
2.3 Subversion of Gender Norms .....	11
2.4 Inclusion .....	13
2.5 Authenticity and Subcultural Capital .....	15
2.6 Reproduction of Gender Norms .....	21
Chapter 3: Methods.....	26
3.1 Observations .....	26
3.2 Interviews .....	30
3.3 Sample .....	32
3.3.1 K-Con .....	32
3.3.2 O-Con .....	33
3.3.3 USAnime .....	33
3.3.4 InuCon .....	33
3.3.5 The Participants .....	34
Chapter 4: Findings.....	36
4.1 Cosplay and Performance.....	36
4.2 Crossplay and Gender-bends.....	38
4.3 Cosplay, Conventions, and Stigma .....	43
4.4 Boundary Maintenance and Authenticity .....	47
4.5 Anime Conventions as Queer and Nonconforming Spaces .....	56
4.6 Boundary Maintenance as Definitions of “Nerd” Change .....	60

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	63
5.1 Future Research.....	69
References.....	70

## **ABSTRACT**

### **COS-PLAYING WITH GENDER: SUBVERSION AND REPRODUCTION OF GENDER NORMS WITHIN THE COSPLAY COMMUNITY**

Sarah Aadahl, M.A.

George Mason University, 2019

Thesis Co-Directors: Dr. Shannon N. Davis, Dr. Angela Hattery

This thesis examines how gender norms are both subverted and reproduced in cosplay through subcultural boundaries and character displays and performance. The cosplay community is examined to understand how cosplay is a location of gender dramatization and inversion marked by boundaries that determine who fits in and who does not. Literature on subcultures such as gothic lolitas, gamers, and nerds focuses on how spaces are created and maintained by both members and gatekeepers. This thesis draws on Erving Goffman's conceptualization of stigma and its role in boundary maintenance to understand the contradictory dynamics of cosplay spaces. This study utilizes ethnographic methods, including participant observation of four East Coast Japanese media conventions and ten semi-structured interviews. Special attention is paid to how authenticity of members is judged by cosplayers, convention attendees, and cosplay fans. Findings indicate that cosplay spaces are dichotomous ones "free of

judgment” and full of gender flexibility and subversion through creating and maintaining boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, ideas of belonging and authenticity. Paradoxically, the ways in which members of this community judged and emphasized authenticity reproduced the very stigma cosplayers, convention attendees, and cosplay fans sought to escape, often in gendered ways regarding the particularly harsh judgment of female cosplayers.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“Ah! You’re a girl!” a cosplayer in short hair exclaims to me while I am cosplaying as a male character from a popular television show. “I am!” I laugh back, to which she responds “Same here!” “You know”, she continues, “there really aren’t that many of us crossplayers anymore. It’s all about the sexy stuff, no one wants to be a dude anymore! There needs to be more of us.” I laugh and agree that crossplay has faded from the forefront of the community. She gives me a high five, compliments my stubble, and we go our separate ways.*

### 1.1 What is Cosplay?

Cosplayers, or those who create or buy reproductions of the costumes of fictional characters, exist in a space where interactions such as the one above are common. The convention where the costumes, called cosplays, are worn is a location in which gender norms are played with. The cosplay subculture frequently consists of cosplayers who choose to portray themselves as a gender with which they do not identify. These cosplayers who push gender boundaries are not merely tolerated – they are accepted and encouraged. In creating a space where cosplayers may feel safe and accepted while experimenting with gender, however, subcultural boundaries are often drawn in ways which reinforce gender norms.

Cosplay as a subculture has existed since the 1970s but has increased in popularity over the past decade. What was once relatively unheard of now has its own TV shows, as well as a name for itself within pop culture. The word “cosplay” is short for “costume play”, with the name’s exact origins debated, but generally credited to a journalist: Nobuyuki Takahashi who referred to “*kosupure*” (Americanized to “cosplay”) in a 1983 article (Rahman et al, 2012). Cosplayers create or buy costumes which they wear, often to conventions celebrating a specific form of media, to portray themselves as a fictional character from anime, manga, video games, movies, television shows, even Broadway musicals. While some credit Science Fiction conventions in the US for the beginnings of the hobby, others claim that it began in manga market places in Japan in the 1970s (Rahman et al, 2012). In more recent history, cosplay has come to refer to a number of different interpretations, most revolving around the same concept explained above: cosplayers create or buy costumes from different forms of media which interest them, which they wear to events such as conventions.

While cosplay often refers to the act of dressing up as a fictional character, the term itself has evolved to also refer to the act of “playing pretend”. I will here refer to cosplay in the former sense of the term, and not the latter, as well as specifically discussing cosplay which takes place only at certain locations, such as anime or comic conventions or at meet-ups or other gatherings. While cosplayers may wear their cosplays elsewhere, the creation and maintenance of conventions as safe spaces is a major component of this research.

Cosplayers, I suspect, feel free to partake in this nerdy and oft-ridiculed hobby due to the boundaries that they have created around cosplay spaces. Within convention and cosplay spaces, cosplayers and convention attendees surround themselves with like-minded (and like-stigmatized) people, like many subcultures. This allows them the freedom to express themselves in certain ways which might not be understood by those outside of the community. Yet, also like other subcultures, they fall into the trap of deeming certain cosplayers more authentic than others. If a cosplayer does not fit other cosplayers conceptualizations of what a “cosplayer” or what a “nerd” is, they risk being marginalized by the cosplay community. These conceptualizations often rely not only on reproducing gender stereotypes, but they also reproduce the negative stereotypes of the “nerd” that self-identifying nerds attempt to avoid.

Cosplay spaces, such as conventions, are spaces in which lines between socially accepted behavior and unacceptable behavior are sometimes blurred, especially in reference to gender norms. Cosplayers create and maintain these spaces in ways to protect themselves from the stigma placed on them by outsiders, though it is hardly free of judgment and stigma from within. Cosplay has remained practically untouched as an empirical field site, despite its similarities to more popular field sites in terms of gender norm subversion and reproduction, such as drag spaces. Yet it is a site full of fascinating insights and contradictions. How do cosplayers create and maintain these spaces in which they may both subvert and reproduce gender norms and expectations?

Cosplayers on the one hand have a space in which they often feel safe to express themselves in ways which perhaps are not societally accepted. The subculture itself offers

cosplayers a space where cosplayers can experiment with or try on personas that they may not feel safe to express elsewhere. Gender expression is part of these personas and cosplayers are in a space of fluid gender; someone cosplaying a certain character may be male or female or gender-nonconforming, regardless of the character's gender. Crossplay (where cosplayers present themselves as accurate representations of a character with whom their gender identity does not match) and gender-bends (cosplays where the design of a cosplay is altered, most often to fit the cosplayer's gender identity) are common within the cosplay community. Crossplayers are not only not judged for this fluidity, but are even praised or revered for it (Okabe 2012). Cosplayers, in defining these safe spaces, also define the boundaries to the group as well. It is in how cosplayers and convention attendees define these boundaries that we may find insight into how gender norms may be reproduced and reinforced in subcultural spaces, even if the space itself may be considered to often subvert gender norms.

This thesis examines how cosplayers create and maintain spaces in which they feel free to express themselves and play with gender norms. Special attention is paid to how this boundary maintenance occurs in ways which reproduce gender norms, while cosplay itself frequently subverts gender norms and expectations. Chapter Two provides an examination of the literature relating to the questions of this thesis, with attention to a number of themes, including role-play, gender norm subversion, inclusion, judgments of authenticity, and gender norm reproduction. Chapter Three provides an overview of the methods, including sampling, interview protocol, details of the participant observations and an overview of the analytical strategies. Chapter Four presents the findings,

separating them into a number of themes: cosplay as performance, connections to gender performance, stigma, authenticity, and then finally, conventions as queer spaces. Within Chapter Five I discuss my conclusions, with notes about directions in which future research about this largely empirically ignored subculture may lead.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The cosplay hobby has existed since the 1970s, with the hobby of dressing up as fictional characters dating back to at least the 1930s (Pinchefsky 2018). Yet, for the decades that the hobby has existed, little empirical research has been done on cosplay. Much of the research, like this piece, is conducted for masters theses, dissertations, and newspaper articles. Within those articles strictly about cosplay that are peer-reviewed, many rely mostly on autoethnographic accounts of the cosplay community. The paltry amount of empirical research limits this literature review, but also identifies a significant gap in the literature.

In this literature review, I situate my own research within research related not always explicitly to cosplay but, instead, within research examining a number of subcultures such as the gaming culture, lolitas, and Japanese media fans. Additionally, I occasionally draw on several articles about cosplay which are widely cited within the limited literature on cosplay. Within this literature review I examine scholarship on how certain subcultures role-play, subvert gender norms, seek inclusion within safe spaces, judge authenticity of others to eliminate threats of judgment, and how this judgment of authenticity often reproduces gender stereotypes.

## **2.2 Role-Play**

Cosplayers are first and most obviously a literal representation of role-play. Within the very definition of cosplay, cosplayers are “playing” as someone else through their use of costumes. While some cosplayers may stay more in-character than others, all are inherently “playing” as one character or another. Cosplayers are hardly alone, especially within subcultures stigmatized as nerdy, in using role-play as a method of expression within their hobby. This can also be seen within the gaming subculture, as well as within attendees of masquerade balls and lolitas.

Role-playing is so inherently connected to gaming that many games are described as role-playing games. Although the most obvious representation of role-playing is in gaming’s literal notion of choosing characters, storylines, and online relationships, there is a more nuanced aspect to the choosing the role to play. Similar to cosplay, gamers do not always choose to represent themselves through a character who shares a similar gender identity. Heather Osborne (2012) found that, when gamers played as characters which were a different gender from themselves, survey and interview responses indicated increased empathy towards their character and their character’s identity. Similarly, when gamers in World of Warcraft played as characters with whose gender the gamer does not identify, interactions between gamers changed. Male players are referred to by female pronouns, matching the gender of the character, not the player (Schmeider 2009).

While conventions do have masquerades, costumed masquerades have existed long before cosplay. Within these masquerades, attendees do not always dress as fictional characters, making them distinct from cosplay. However, like cosplay, the element of

role-play is obvious. Attendees of these masquerades often cite a disdain for the “boring” outfits they must wear in their everyday life, noting that masquerades give them a chance to craft and play as a historical character, a king or a queen, a fairy, or any number of fantastical creatures (Lunning 2011). Lunning (2011) discusses how playing with these identities offered masquerade attendees a chance to reject the societal norms for which they had significant disdain: “Participants attested to a disgust and impatience with the banal sartorial culture of the dumpy middle-aged adolescent: The baggy T-shirt, frumpy jeans, and dirty flip-flops of the American public, who wear this dreadful uniform all over the world: to the theater, museums, restaurants, and even to church”. The attendees of the ball reject the “uniforms” in favor of more glamorous, yet culturally and temporally incompatible garb, if only for the evening. They may revel in trying on their new costumes and embrace an era where no one stands out for dressing outside of cultural norms of the modern era. They revel in this role-play which allows them to escape the “uniforms” they so detest without judgment.

This sort of masquerade ball holds similar implications for role-play as the cosplay masquerade, but through different means. Masquerades within conventions are often competitions amongst cosplayers, not masked or costumed dances. They are often a central event, where cosplayers perform more explicitly as their character on a stage in front of an audience (Winge 2011, Lamerichs 2011). In these spaces, both the audience and the performers consist of cosplayers. The cosplayers in the audience are still often simultaneously performing and consuming a performance (Lamerichs 2011). This



dichotomy is also seen outside of the masquerade setting, as cosplayers simultaneously perform and are audiences to the performances of others.

Cosplayers, in their role-play, find identities through the characters they choose to cosplay. Through performing as a character, cosplayers are offered an identity “which may allow for more confident and open interactions” (Winge 2011). While Winge suggests that cosplay spaces are ones in cosplayers are “not themselves”, I would argue that cosplay offers cosplayers an option to explore identities with which they connect on some level. While they may not be their “normal” selves, many cosplayers from my own experience refer to cosplay as a chance to portray an idealized self, and cosplay spaces are spaces in which they may actualize themselves in ways they may not be able to within “outside” society.

Cosplayers often cite their interest in cosplaying a character based on a preference for cosplaying as a type of character. Each participant has their own preference, some narrowed to a specific series, and some are much vaguer. It is not just the outfits which draws these participants, but the personalities which they seek to sometimes replicate in their own cosplay (Okabe 2012).

Lolitas are similarly connected to performance, though in contrasting ways. Lolitas do not dress as characters with identities, but, instead, the lolita identity itself is what they play at being. Through the use of gothic lolita lifestyle magazines, gothic lolitas dictate guidelines crucial to their performance (Gagné 2008). The lifestyle itself is the performance, and gothic lolitas identify with their lolita identity as their “true selves”,

regardless of how carefully and explicitly the identity is crafted to conform to specific guidelines determined by other lolitas.

Similar to the gaming world, spaces for lolitas offer them areas in which they may present their “true” selves with reduced fear of judgement. Lolitas, and gothic lolitas in particular share a resemblance with the attendees of the Dances of Vice events in Lunning’s (2011) research, where they shun the “uniforms” of regular society, opting instead for a more elegant, sometimes more glamorous appearance. Lolita perfect their performance through the guidelines their lifestyle books lay out: they pay close attention to how they walk, how they talk, which honorifics, katakana, phrases to use, how they sit, how they greet each other. It is all inherently part of the roles they play within their subculture.

Lolita is almost entirely dependent on the spaces in which their “lolita” identity is performed. As mentioned above, they take great care to manage how they present themselves to others, as well as how they interact with others. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are numerous rules and regulations, passed down in lifestyle magazines, about how lolitas should interact with each other. Gagné (2008) contends that the lolita-speech is also a form of interaction, in the very unified nature of the speech. One can tell the in-group from the out-group within the lolita community by their interactions and through the relationships they have. Lolitas practice these interactions with each other, performing the “regal” and “lady-like” motions which other lolitas come to expect. The lolita community thrives on seeing each other and being seen. The interactions are

dictated by how their roles are played and the identity they wish to give off to the lolitas around them.

Lolitas, despite an adherence to lolita as a lifestyle (indeed, usually “lolita” is used in reference to the “lolita lifestyle”), have much more in common with cosplayers than they may like to admit. Their performances, similar to the performances of cosplayers, are carefully crafted to display an image which should be obvious to the audience. Gothic lolitas perform in strict ways outlined within gothic lolita lifestyle magazines in order to indicate their in-group status to other gothic lolitas. Cosplayers similarly perform in ways expected of them: “good” cosplayers perform in certain ways which contrast from the performances of “bad” or “fake” cosplayers, a dichotomy I will examine later in this literature review. In summary, cosplayers, lolitas, gamers, each of these subcultures use performance not only to explore identities, but to play with norms and expectations in a variety of different ways. This play is not limited to simply dressing as different characters, but also refers to the way in which cosplayers play with gender.

### **2.3 Subversion of Gender Norms**

Crossplay, or when a cosplayer attempts to accurately portray themselves as a character of a different gender than themselves, is an extremely common occurrence amongst cosplayers. Research regarding male-to-female crossplayers often focuses on the ways in which male-to-female crossplayers (often shortened to mtf or m2f) separate their cosplay from crossdressing, or the ways in which they assert their heterosexuality when questioned about their crossplay (even if the question was not about sexuality) (Leng 2013). Male-to-female cosplay is less common than female-to-male cosplay, perhaps

because of the ways in which female masculinity is less stigmatized than male femininity (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010).

Perhaps supporting the fact that female masculinity is less stigmatized, Okabe (2012) notes that “cosplayers who look good as men are highly rated by the community”. Additionally, Okabe notes that “the masculinity mimicked by cosplayers is a copy without an original”, where the idealized masculinity has been created within the community. This “masculinity” refers to the “masculinity” seen within the shōjo genre, a genre that will be later explored within the section on gender norm reproduction. This masculinity, however, often features men of soft, slender features and build, with emotional, caring, and affectionate personalities. In a reversal of gender norms within media, they exist mostly, if not entirely, to serve as the romantic interest of the female lead.

Gaming presents a platform in which gender identities may be tested out, tried on, performed, and then discarded once the game is turned off. The notion is somewhat similar within the cosplay community, yet the cosplay community finds much more acceptance and even reverence for well-done crossplays, whereas within gaming, one must often “prove” their gender amidst accusations of favoritism, gift giving, etc. that female fans are accused of receiving (Osborne 2012).

How do cosplayers feel comfortable in these spaces in ways which allow them to play with gender norms in subversive ways? Similar to gamers and lolitas, the literature suggests that it is because they have crafted a space in which they are surrounded with like-minded and like-stigmatized people. In the creation of spaces away from judgment,

these places have encouraged feelings of inclusion. However, I argue later, the question remains: inclusion for who?

## **2.4 Inclusion**

At a glance, gamers, cosplayers, lolitas, trans and gender nonconforming communities may not seem to be inherently related. Yet each of these subcultures are identified and studied by researchers interested in structures that foster, at least on some level, spaces of inclusion. A common finding among each subculture was how their interactions with others fostered an inclusion and a safety that allowed them to “be themselves” around those with whom they shared a common interest, hobby, or other strong connection. This is most definitely related to cosplayers own creation and maintenance of spaces in which they are free to “be themselves,” even when role-playing as different characters.

The role-playing gamers mentioned in the previous section may not have felt as comfortable playing as different genders should they not feel a sense of inclusion and relative safety within their community. Gamers felt as though they were in an area where they were safe to explore “new” or “different” identities, or even identities that were just exaggerations or idealized versions of their own. Osborne (2012) makes clear that this is not just because of the “mask” online gaming gives, as some still chose to represent a certain gender for fear of shunning or a lack of interaction with their role-playing partners, so the anonymity is not a given. Instead, gamers felt as though they could “try on” identities in a safe space where they would not be judged or criticized.

The internet, though often discussed in fostering seeds of malignancy (Campbell 1999, Cohen-Almagor 2018), also often offers an area in which communities of inclusion, support, and encouragement may be formed. The same internet which offers gamers a place in which they may try on new identities also offers trans individuals the opportunity to express the identities which they may have had to hide for fear of judgment. Trans video bloggers (vloggers) are offered a place in which they may track their journeys by recording and displaying their transitions, marking moments of importance (certain months of hormone injections, a transmasculine person's first beard hair, someone's first binder or surgery). Raun (2014) notes the ways in which the notion of inclusion allows trans vloggers to express their identities openly and in ways which may not be accepted by society or by their family. This community offers members positive feedback for what an interviewee termed "healthy narcissism" (such as fixing themselves in the reflection on camera) in ways which foster confidence in an individual's looks and identity (Raun 2014). Crossdressers were similarly offered a place to find acceptance and inclusion through the use of the internet. Chat forums and websites offer communities places where they may find similar individuals, not only indicating that they are not alone, but also providing locations in which support, advice, and membership into a community may be offered (Hegland and Nelson 2002).

Gender nonheteronormative individuals are not the only ones who seek these places of inclusion, though the judgment they face may be some of the worst of any of the groups I examine within this work. The concept of the "nerd" is tied closely to the cosplay and convention community, with one convention even named after a Japanese

word with similar connotations: “otaku”. Though cosplayers and convention attendees may identify with the phrase “otaku”, the term itself is complicated and holds stigmatized connotations (Sone 2014), similar to the concept of the “nerd” or “geek”. In a Merriam-Webster entry, the changing connotations around “otaku” are noted to still use one main definition: an expert or enthusiast obsessed (harmlessly or otherwise) with anime, manga, or videogames. Regardless of what they are called (or what they call themselves), nerds, geeks, otaku are stigmatized through judgments placed upon them by what Goffman (1963) would refer to as the “normal”. Through this stigma, cosplayers (who fit snugly within whatever definition of “nerd” one wants to use) seek escape from this judgment, finding it often within a community of likewise-stigmatized individuals. In an attempt to maintain these safe spaces, subcultures seek to identify those who are like them, and therefore not a threat, and distance themselves from those whom they deem inauthentic.

## **2.5 Authenticity and Subcultural Capital**

“Subcultural Capital” (Thornton 1996) has been used to look at any number of subcultures and the ways members create and maintain their image. Subcultures and communities are created in an attempt to reject mainstream society and conformity yet create their own conformity in the process. The notion of “subcultural capital” has been used to understand cult movie followings (Jancovich 2002), the success of a rapper (Best et al. 2017), nerd fandoms (Peer and Lindemann 2014), punks (Patton 2018), goths (van Elferen 2011), and undoubtedly countless other subcultures. Attempting to highlight and discuss all forms of subcultural capital would be almost impossible, but I hope merely to situate the interactions of cosplayers within this concept.

Through subcultural capital, members of a subculture indicate an authenticity through differentiating themselves from mainstream society (Thornton 1996). This could be through following specific lifestyle guidelines of the gothic lolita (Gagné 2008), through expressing disdain for the normal “uniform” of society in preference of elaborate ballgowns and other costumes (Lunning and Saitō 2011), or, as frequently seen within the nerd subcultures, through the use of language. Indicating others as “normies” requires defining oneself as a non-“normie”, there are other ways in which self-identified nerds use language to indicate their status as someone outside of the mainstream.

The nerd girls Bucholtz (1999) studied used language to explicitly differentiate themselves from what society considers “cool”. Popular slang was avoided and, when one participant who often floated between the nerd group and more popular groups used popular slang, she was often playfully mocked. Instead, nerd girls within this research rejected not only this slang, but also femininity in their discussions. They focus on portraying an air of intelligence and sophistication, not unlike the lolitas, and Bucholtz indicates the ways in which they use speech to do so.

In *Kamikaze Girls* (*Shimotsuma Monogatari*, as it’s known in Japan), the characters Ryūgasaki Momoko and Shirayura Ichigo are two societal outsiders who form an “unlikely” friendship as a lolita and female motorcycle gang member, respectively. Momoko in particular revels in her obsession with lolita and lolita culture, traveling hours to shop at lolita brand stores. Momoko, the lolita character in *Kamikaze Girls*, carefully crafts her image around a performance: a performance of what is girly, what is innocent, what is higher class, as is a common theme with lolita. Her performance indicates a



rejection of societal norms, of the “uniform” most of society has adopted, the “uniform” that participants in Frenchy Lunning’s article so vehemently detest.

In the lolita community, similar to Kotani and LaMarre’s (2007) examination of Momoko, there is an implicit rejection of societal norms when lolitas decide to become part of the lolita lifestyle. The role of Momoko is, although perhaps not explicitly, rejecting the “uniform” of the “normal” Japanese citizens around her when she decides to wear lolita clothing. In *Urban Princesses* (2008), Gagné examines how lolitas differentiate themselves not only from society as a whole, but also from other subcultures. In sharing their space in Harajuku with cosplayers and gyarus, lolitas actively attempt to distance themselves from these genres. In addition, they attempt to distance themselves from the ever-present notion of lolita in the fetish/sexual sense of the term. They vehemently oppose comparisons to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, where a young girl is sexualized, by insisting that their lifestyles have nothing to do with the sexual attraction or fetish (lolicon, as it’s known in Japan). Instead they embrace the “purity” of the Victorian era their pseudo-Victorian garbs wish to attempt to recreate.

While building subcultural capital requires first rejecting mainstream society and its ideals, it also requires fitting in to the often-unwritten rules of the subculture. In Japan, cosplays that are popular with outsiders are therefore seen as inferior, in particular when these cosplays are popular on the basis of “mainstream standards of cuteness or feminine sexuality” (Okabe 2012). Although the cosplayers do not mention it explicitly (and even provide their own desires for “cute girls” to cosplay), they are reinforcing that cosplay is

meant to be an area that exists often for female fans, outside of the ever-societally-present male gaze.

Okabe (2012) focuses significantly on the way cosplayers are “supposed to” act, create, and how they are “supposed to” cosplay. These rules, unwritten and formed by cosplayers for policing their own group, are created in attempts to reduce stigma related to the hobby. Again it’s shown how language is used to distinguish between in-group members and out-group members, and this is where we begin to see where cosplayers are judged for being “fakes”. Participants refer to certain cosplayers disparagingly: the *Torareta* are cosplayers who often contribute to the stigma surrounding cosplay. The term itself comes from a Japanese term *toraretai* which means “I want to be photographed”. The *torareta* are often “cute girls” who use revealing outfits and are often popular with the “camera kids” and media in general. Other cosplayers refer to them as “losers” who contribute to cosplay’s “bad rep for being erotic” (Okabe 2012).

Cosplayers often rely on each other not only for advice and assistance, but also for approval. Rather than relying on outside sources, cosplayers are the source of the guidelines themselves; there is no organization or official group which makes the rules (apart from conventions in regard to spaces in which cosplays may or may not be worn). Cosplayers often either in person or online look to each other for assistance and guidance. Experience is seen positively, and the approval of more accomplished, famous, or experienced members is often sought by newer cosplayers. Members often dictate what is and is not appropriate, and police themselves (Okabe 2012).

Cosplayers may be judged for any number of faux pas, and are often highly perceptive to the judgment which surrounds them. Cosplayers are almost attentive to their own appearance (which Okabe [2012] puts in contrast with the stereotype of the female nerd as unattractive or unappealing), and the participants in Okabe's (2012) research were often incredibly self-reflexive on their own behavior, in an attempt to keep from contributing to the stigma surrounding cosplayers. What is "good" or "bad" within the cosplay community hardly reflects what is "good" or "bad" outside of the community, with the exception perhaps for construction. To understand the "rules", one must be an insider themselves, as these rules are meaningless if taken out of the context of the peer-review culture of the cosplay community (Okabe 2012).

Authenticity in cosplay takes various forms, from what makes a professional, to what makes a cosplay, itself. Particularly popular cosplayers are often labeled within the community as attention-seekers and those who cosplay from popular series, comics, and games in particular are challenged as being "fake fans", cosplaying from the series for attention or popularity, a sin to a community which prides itself on rejecting societal aspirations such as "popularity". This rejection of societal ideals is almost inherent to the very definition of subcultures as some define them (Gelder 2007).

While both the internet and the cosplay community have been thus far offered within this work as places in which feelings of community, acceptance, and inclusion were fostered, I here turn to the ways in which the community contradicts itself. The internet, while offering some places of community, also provides individuals with the ability to espouse judgmental rhetoric under the guise of anonymity. It is just this

phenomenon that Suzanne Scott examines in her 2015 research looking at fan reactions to the *Heroes of Cosplay* reality show, which were submitted anonymously to a Tumblr blog.

In “Cosplay is Serious Business” (Scott 2015), readers are offered a glimpse into the way cosplayers are judged and deemed inauthentic. The anonymous posters to the *Confessions* site often berate the cosplayers on the show for a number of things: the cosplayers’ use of hierarchical terms such as “pros”, “newbies”, and “royalty” among others, which is often in contrast with how the cosplay community actually labels themselves and others. Posters criticize the cosplayers’ focuses on winning money and prizes in masquerades and their desire to break into the world of “real costuming”, despite several of the show members already making a living off of their creations. As I examine later, they also often criticize the creation of costumes in gendered ways.

At the basis of the posters’ critiques lie one major theme: how cosplayers are portrayed to those outside of the community. The community-based nature of cosplay is at odds with these portrayals of cosplayers as fame and money-hungry individuals, who compete with each other and tear each other down. When the drive of the cosplayer isn’t love for the character, and the cosplays are not created by the wearer (as the *Confessions* page implies), the *Confessions* page often calls into question the very nature of the cosplayer: Are they a cosplayer, or simply someone wearing a costume? These cosplayers are no longer “real” cosplayers. They are “fakes”, seeking money and fame as opposed to creating cosplays out of love for a character, which puts them at odds with how “real” cosplayers are defined.

These judgments of authenticity, as we have already seen hardly exist in a vacuum and often revolve around the judgments of female cosplayers as the ones who are fake or inauthentic. Amidst all the general consensus within these subcultures as an area of inclusion and freedom of expression, Scott's commentary on *Heroes of Cosplay* and fan reactions (2015) exposes a truth to cosplay which is not as frequently discussed in the literature: instead of displaying a place of belonging and community, the show and fan reactions to the show create an atmosphere of tension, accusations, and competition. The cosplay community has easily picked up on these inaccurate portrayals and criticize the show for the sensationalism and inaccuracy, but in their deeming of cosplayers to be inauthentic, it cannot be ignored who is most often deemed inauthentic and how they are deemed as such.

## **2.6 Reproduction of Gender Norms**

The cosplay community, as I've described it so far, is a gathering of people who support and encourage people to play not only with characters and identity, but also with gender. At first glance, cosplay is a subculture of subversion. Yet, as I've begun to note, cosplay also features issues of judgments regarding authenticity, and most often judgments of authenticity in female cosplayers. However, it is not only in judgments of authenticity that gender norms are reproduced. These norms may be reproduced in the very performance, or even in the very characters cosplayers choose to cosplay.

Beginning before a cosplay is even constructed, a cosplayer must choose who to cosplay. Within anime and manga, there is the concept of the shōjo, mentioned above. In addition to representing a type of genre of anime or manga, the shōjo is also a character.

The term shōjo itself means “virgin” or “girl” in Japanese and represents a complex paradox within the world of anime, manga, and cosplay. The shōjo girl represents both virginity and purity, while also representing sexuality and maturity. She is a paradox Lunning (2011) compares to the contradictory clothing norms in the Victorian era. In this era virginity and asexuality was idealized, yet the clothing mimicked the bodies of mature women. Waists are corseted and tiny, accentuated the large, billowing cloth accentuating the hips and bottom. Breasts are accentuated by the tiny waist and covered in ruffles. So, too, does the shōjo girl dress.

Lolitas draw almost inherently upon notions of “idealized femininity”, with their pseudo-Victorian garb and their emphasis on “lady’s speech”. Similar to the shōjo, the gothic lolita wears outfits that accentuate the “feminine shape” - the waist is reduced, while the hips and chest are often emphasized in a way that is both prepubescent and also mature. In addition, the language within lolita is used to portray a feminine aspect. In Japanese, the language identifies one’s own gender identity, as well as how one wants to be viewed in terms of class and honorifics (Gagné 2008).

In Kotani and LaMarre’s (2007) examination of *Kamikaze Girls* and *Stepford Wives*, the authors refer to cosplay in a more nuanced sense of the word, which is hardly irrelevant within this paper. Within the cosplay community, itself, the term “cosplay” comes from “costume play” and refers to dressing up as a specific character from an anime, manga, video game, or other media. Kotani and LaMarre use the term “cosplay” as a sort of “performance” or “playing at [something]”. In these movies, the authors examine how the characters “perform” as an “idealized” woman or sometimes as an

idealized self. In *Stepford Wives*, Nicole Kidman's character begins to embody the "ideal woman of the 1950s", mimicking the era in her appearance and movements, putting on a performance. Kotani and LaMarre (2007) draw conclusions that Momoko, feeling as though she missed a part of "girliness" of her childhood, is drawn to lolita as a "copy without an original", where fantastical, exaggerated concepts as to what is "feminine" and "girly" dictate a childlike wardrobe, when modern children do not wear such dresses. Though the authors use "cosplay" in a way different from how most cosplayers would, they inadvertently hint at the connection between how cosplay is performed and how gender is performed.

Examining another way in which gender can be performed, the gaming subculture offers us yet another paradox into the world of gender norm subversion and reproduction. While gamers would often admit to playing as characters of different genders (something already examined), games such as *World of Warcraft* often rely on hyper-genderization of characters. *World of Warcraft* in particular features exaggerated sex characteristics in the two sexes featured for characters in the game. This occurred mostly, however, at the behest of beta-testers, who, when the characters were originally more androgynous, complained that the female races were "too ugly" (Schneider 2009).

The value judgments of cosplays often rely on gendered notions of what sorts of labor are done by what gender. Scott (2015) points out the ways in which the traditionally feminine labor such as the sewing, wig making, makeup application, etc. is undervalued within the show *Heroes of Cosplay*. The show instead chooses to focus on the more

“masculine” creations of cosplay: LEDs, props, etc. which are seen as more impressive than the intricacies of sewing or other needlework, or the complexities of wig making.

In addition, the women of the show are frequently criticized (both in the show and online) for simply having men experienced in media in their lives, such as cast member Chloe Dykstra, whose father was a visual effects artist for *Star Wars: A New Hope* and whose boyfriend was Chris Hardwick, popular comedian and TV show host within the nerd community. In addition, the labors of the female cast members are often assessed by male “professionals”, showing that, despite their own professionalism within the field, they still often fall short when it comes to “real professionals” (i.e. men) (Scott 2015).

Okabe (2012) examines terms judging (perhaps exclusively female) cosplayers specific to the Japanese cosplay community: *Torareta* and *Kameko* (camera kid). While the notions may exist in English, the terms are hardly the same, and usually more pejorative. While I cannot think of a term that would serve as a decent translation for *torareta*, the concept persists in the U.S. as well as Japan. The concept relies on disparaging revealingly dressed cosplayers who are assumed to have chosen their revealing or otherwise sexy costume for the attention of media or professional photographers at the conventions. While certain aspects of the cosplay community, such as the performance of crossplay, are welcomed, as Okabe mentions numerous times, there remains an ugly underbelly of cosplay where gendered societal norms are still strictly enforced.

Though the literature on cosplay is relatively limited, I draw here on other scholarship regarding similar subcultures. We clearly see the concepts of role-play within



the gaming and the lolita subcultures, as well as representations within the attendees of masquerade balls. This concept is inherent to the “play” piece of “cosplay”. Cosplayers and gamers are given a place in which they can play with gender in subversive ways, often because their communities foster a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Yet – as we see with a number of subcultures – proving oneself to be “authentic” can be tricky. Finally, subcultures such as cosplay often require a certain authenticity which rely on gender norms and stereotypes, regardless of whether the subculture, within itself, is free to play with gender norms.

The cosplay subculture features what seems like an array of paradoxes: it’s a world of inclusion, yet one of exclusion; it’s a world of acceptance, yet also of judgment; it’s a world of gender fluidity, yet also of strict, gendered judgments of authenticity. I argue that it is the process of creating a space in which cosplayers may “be themselves”, free of judgment, which eventually leads to the often gender-reproducing forms of boundary maintenance and exclusion.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

The nature of the research question lends itself to a quasi-ethnographic research design. Much of the limited literature discussing cosplay relies heavily on autoethnographic accounts of cosplayer-researchers. While I do not hide the fact that my own research interests began mostly from my experience as a cosplayer, I find that autoethnographic accounts do not fully encompass the cosplay experience. Because of this, my research focuses mostly on participant observation and interviews. Some findings are based on autoethnographic accounting of my experiences with cosplay and the cosplay community, but these are not the focus of this research.

### **3.1 Observations**

I conducted participant observations at popular anime and manga conventions on the east coast of the United States. While there are a wide range of media conventions throughout the U.S. and worldwide, I decided for this research to focus exclusively on anime and manga conventions. I decided to focus on one type of convention in order to account for differences between convention attendees and types of cosplays. Videogame conventions, for example, often have fewer cosplayers, and the cosplayers that do attend often (although not exclusively) cosplay from videogames. Videogame character designs often favor various types of armors and props. As Scott (2015) noted, prop creation is

often gendered as masculine work and, thusly, held in a different, higher esteem than the “feminine” creation of sewing prop-less costumes.

Additionally, different conventions, even within the same type of media, may have different, distinct “airs” about them. This can potentially contribute to differences not only in the types of cosplays which cosplayers wear to the convention, but also how cosplayers are seen. For example, one very popular east coast convention is hosted within a hotel and convention center well-known for its high ceilings, natural lighting from the floor-to-ceiling windows, marble floors, golden accents, and picturesque locations within and outside the hotel. Additionally, this convention once hosted the U.S. preliminaries to a worldwide cosplay competition. Over the years, this convention has become one well-known for attracting cosplayers famous within the community, who often bring extravagant and otherwise over-the-top cosplays.

Another consideration is that of timing of conventions. The aforementioned convention is in the middle of February and has, in previous years, been plagued with snow storms and other winter weather. The cosplays worn during a February convention would undoubtedly be different from another very popular convention which takes place in the middle of August. Bikinis, shorts, shirtless male cosplayers are expected at the August convention. If there are a significant number of cosplayers in revealing outfits, this could also skew the amount of comments regarding revealing cosplays from those who view them in scorn.

Additionally, with each convention there may be new trends in what anime or videogame or fantasy series is popular. The trend at one convention may involve

relatively genderless mecha (robot) type costumes, while the next trend may lead to a convention full of hyper-gendered, absurdly busty bikini-clad women and/or muscular, shirtless men filling the convention floor. As Lunning (2011) points out, anime and manga can very often rely heavily on exaggerated gender norms. Differences between two trends could easily lead to significant differences between views about gender in cosplay following and perhaps even directly before a convention.

I conducted participant observations by not only walking amongst cosplayers as a convention attendee, but I also decided cosplay to these conventions as well. This was used first in order to indicate status as a cosplayer and not as a “normie” who may stigmatize or judge the cosplayers with which I was interacting. Second, I hoped to observe reactions and, occasionally, autoethnographic accounting of what it felt like to get into cosplay or to be reacted to in cosplay.

The first convention at which I conducted observations was the aforementioned February convention. From previous experience, I knew that this convention drew a wide range of cosplayers not only within the U.S., but worldwide. This convention measured at just over 17,000 attendees in 2016, which is about half of the attendance of the aforementioned August convention in 2016. However, even this August convention pales in comparison to one west coast anime convention – which boasts of over 100,000 attendees. While undoubtedly rich in the amount and variety cosplayers, the very popularity of the convention which makes it an interesting field site would make it all but impossible for a single researcher to navigate on their own. The 17,000-30,000 of the

aforementioned convention attendees are much more manageable for a single researcher to undertake.

While cosplayers are not necessarily considered a vulnerable population by the IRB, there were several considerations which were taken when deciding to interview cosplayers. Originally, I had planned on interviewing cosplayers at the conventions at which I was doing the observations, yet the privacy of the cosplayers was a concern. While there are locations at conventions to interview cosplayers privately, convention attendees often pay close to \$100 for a pass to attend a convention for the weekend. This does not take into consideration the amount spent on hotels, transportation (sometimes internationally), booking photographers or photoshoots, and a number of other expenses. In addition, many cosplayers are at conventions to be seen, to take pictures, and have pictures taken of them. While conventions are often abuzz with boisterous conversations, attendees in cosplay usually only converse with each other for brief periods of time before parting ways to attend their next event, their next photoshoot, to change their cosplay, etc. Weighing IRB feedback, I decided to move the interviews from in-person at conventions to online interviews via the method of the cosplayer's choice. In keeping with IRB approval, participants were asked whether they'd be willing to participate in a short interview with a small number of questions about their cosplay experiences. They were then sent a consent form explaining the study, benefits and risks, as well as links to privacy policies of the different websites through which the interviews were to be conducted.

### **3.2 Interviews**

As noted in previous chapters, cosplayers and drag performers have almost direct parallels in reference to notions of acceptance and judgment. Jacob and Cerny (2005) asked drag performers about their experiences with drag and how it related to their concepts of self as a method to uncover how drag queen appearances are connected to identities and society's perception of gender. While I did not draw directly on these questions for the structure of my own interview guide, the similarity in research question undoubtedly contributed to the similarities in interview guides.

In recruiting participants, I chose to find cosplayers through social media websites. These cosplayers were required to have a follower count of over 1,000. This cut-off was used to exclude beginner cosplayers, as cosplayers with less than a year or otherwise limited experience would most likely find it difficult to amass such a follower count. This was one way to ensure that participants had at least some substantial experience. However, there was no upper-limit cut-off for follower amounts, allowing for cosplayers of (almost) any experience and length of time to participate.

The questions I asked often related to the participants experiences in cosplay. Through understanding how cosplayers first became interested in cosplay, I hoped to find understanding into how cosplayers first found entry into the cosplay community. Another question asked about a cosplayer's "biggest" cosplay – one they've spent the most time and resources on. In other questions about how cosplayers choose their cosplay, I hoped to see whether answers would reflect any sort of hierarchy, or whether gender would be taken into consideration at all. In asking what the most important factors are when

choosing a cosplay, I hoped cosplayers would indicate what was “important” when it came to their own cosplays. In this they would hopefully indicate what they may find important in judging others’ cosplays, or what they thought other cosplayers or convention attendees would judge about their own cosplays. In my final questions, I asked what cosplayers liked and disliked about the cosplay community. I hoped that these questions would indicate the dichotomy I suspected in terms of both the judgment and the freedom cosplayers both hated and loved, respectively.

Although there were fewer than ten questions (not counting follow up questions, or the occasional circumstance where participants’ answers would correspond to multiple questions), the video interviews often lasted between 30-60 minutes. After transcription, I coded for both references to, and absence of gender norms. When cosplayers spoke of how they chose cosplays, paying close attention to how cosplayers described the characters and whether gender, itself, was important to cosplayers, either in ignoring gender differences or in altering designs to match genders between the cosplayer and the character.

While interviews and observations at conventions may indicate how cosplayers feel about how and whom they cosplay, I must note that this may be vastly different from how cosplays are perceived by those outside of the cosplay and convention community. My suspicion is that, if I had chosen to additionally conduct a content analysis, the most popular pictures on social media would most likely reproduce gender norms and may not accurately reflect cosplayers opinions about such cosplays.

The hope was that their answers indicate a number of things about how cosplayers see themselves, as well as how they view cosplay itself, in addition to gender norms in cosplay. My thought is that gender-reinforcing cosplays will most likely be more popular on social media, but not necessarily at conventions. This could potentially indicate that, while gender norms may still be relatively rigid outside of the cosplay community, which is reached through social media, gender norms and identity are not as important within the community itself, where norm-challenging cosplays are accepted and sometimes even promoted.

### **3.3 Sample**

Observations took place at four East Coast anime and manga conventions: K-Con, O-Con, USAnime, and InuCon. Ten interviews were conducted via Skype or social media messaging. The main participants quoted in this research are Sandra, Kiki, Tate, Yuan, and Luke.

#### **3.3.1 *K-Con***

K-Con is the aforementioned February convention. This convention, as previous host of the U.S. preliminaries of a world-wide cosplay competition has maintained its attraction to well-known cosplayers across the globe. The convention takes place in a hotel well known to the cosplay community. This hotel, described above, features picturesque locations with marble and gold accents, a beautiful seascape, and a number of spots within walking distance where cosplayers may find a scenery which fits their character or their series.



### **3.3.2 O-Con**

O-Con is by far the largest anime convention attended for these observations. This is one of the largest conventions on the East Coast and boasts of close to 30,000 attendees.

Having recently outgrown its previous location and moving to a new location, I am unaware of popular photoshoot spots. However, the sheer size gives cosplayers a large audience, and extravagant costumes are hardly uncommon at this convention. Taking place during the middle of the summer, it is not unusual to see bikini or other swimsuit costumes.

### **3.3.3 USAnime**

USAnime takes place near Washington D.C., usually in October or November. This is a more family friendly con, and children are often spotted in Halloween costumes. This is usually due in part to its temporal closeness to Halloween. This is the smallest convention I attended, with the last attendance count at under 4,000. While I suspect that this number has increased and would place attendance at closer to twice that, I could not find any recent data on the attendance.

### **3.3.4 InuCon**

InuCon is a small con in Eastern Virginia which is growing in size but often hosts fewer than 10,000 attendees. This convention takes place in Hampton Roads and is somewhat lacking in photoshoot locations. I believe this may be one of the reasons it does not attract a large cosplay crowd. Many attendees wear cosplays, but it is rare to see any as elaborate or extravagant as cosplays at K-Con or O-Con.

### ***3.3.5 The Participants***

The interviewees featured most heavily here are Sandra, Kiki, Tate, Yuan, and Luke. Additionally, quotes and reactions are cited from Logan, Nancy, and Kaito within participant observation and autoethnographic findings.

Sandra is a cisgender female cosplayer who had taken some time away from cosplaying, though still enjoys attending cosplay events such as conventions, even when not participating. She most often cited concerns regarding judgment and critique as one reason why she no longer pursued the hobby as she once had. She had experience crossplaying and spoke fondly of cosplaying in a group setting.

Kiki is a cisgender female cosplayer who preferred to stay close to reference material for her cosplays. She noted that she did occasionally add “personal touches”, but that looking like a character is important in how she chooses her own cosplays.

Tate is a transman whose cosplays ranged from villains to superheroes, often featuring large props and realistic makeup techniques. Tate also often created costumes for his wife, often sewing and creating props for the both of them. Armored cosplays seemed to be a specialty. Tate often cosplays male characters.

Yuan is a transman who often cosplayed characters of any gender, as well as genderless robots. Yuan’s makeup skills were highly admirable, often utilizing special effects makeup techniques and advanced shading to give particular appearances. These skills were often utilized in the painting techniques on his props as well.

Luke is a cisgender man who often cosplays simpler costumes. He openly admitted to not frequently sewing his own costumes, instead relying on the simple

costumes which were easily bought so that he could participate within the cosplay community without sacrificing the time it takes to create a costume which could just as easily have been bought. Luke often cosplays characters from series which are particularly popular at the time.

Other participants who were interviewed through social media messaging platforms helped to inform the theory of this research, but specific quotes were not utilized. Due to the nature of online messaging, it is easier to ponder both questions and answers before answering. The messaging, regardless of the platform, often hindered the spontaneous answers and the natural flow of face-to-face conversations. In opposition to relying on tone, cadence, and expressions to indicate excitement, I was forced to rely on often pre-thought-out answers with an abundance of exclamation points, and often no punctuation at all. These interviews, while helpful in guiding parts of the findings, were not as spontaneous and authentic as those which took place in face-to-face interviews which are quoted here.

Relying on an analytical induction model, I coded the observations and interviews for themes as they emerged. I hand-coded these themes for both observations and interviews. I focused on how gender operated within cosplay settings and paid careful attention to the ways in which the cosplay community both encouraged and policed itself.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

Subcultures in general often feature dichotomies of acceptance and rejection. They define themselves often by rejecting societal norms and expectations, while accepting a freedom amongst its members. They also claim to be spaces in which people feel accepted, but to be able to accept their members, they must reject those who they feel to be a threat: those who stigmatize them – the “normals”. Members suspected of being inauthentic are scorned within the subculture, deemed fakes and wannabes.

How do cosplayers negotiate their own boundaries around spaces in which they desire both freedom and separation? Cosplayers seek a space in which they may be themselves, surrounded by like-minded people. Yet how do they create this space in which they are separated from the judgment and the stigma which is placed upon them by outsiders? How do cosplayers create a space in which gender norms may be played with? How do they exclude those who wish to stigmatize them? Who is most often deemed “fake”?

### **4.1 Cosplay and Performance**

As mentioned previous, the very notion of cosplay is inherently related to role-play. Within the cosplay community, cosplayers choose identities to play with, to “put on” and “take off” at will.

Cosplayers, in their frequent portrayal of different characters of varying genders, are one of the most obvious points of research when it comes to gender performance within the nerd community. Cosplayers choose cosplays for a variety of reasons but usually their choices revolve around two things: they like the character or they like the design. Cosplayers I interviewed expressed a number of reasons as to why they cosplayed the characters they chose, and often noted that gender rarely had an influence on whether or not they chose these characters.

“So I would choose it based off of...it was just a bunch of different factors. It's usually like, how the character is, how close I look to the character, and even like, how the costume looks too. [...] Mostly [the characters I cosplayed] were really tough and awkward or sometimes they were just shy like me. And sometimes they were just tough in general. [...] In terms of being in character, it's fun sometimes but it depends on the character. But, yeah, it's fun to embody a character so much that you're interested in dressing up as”. (Sandra)

Kiki notes:

“Typically I like to cosplay the really empowered badass female leads. Also I tend to cosplay the psychopaths or the leaders of the series [...] Usually when I pick a character to cosplay it has to be a character I have interest in. It's super hard for me to cosplay a character I have no relation to or I just can't understand. Also looking at least somewhat like the character plays a

big part in it...I tend not to cosplay too complex characters with the opposite gender but it is fun to do from time to time.”

While “performance” within this section refers directly to the literal performance and “play” of characters, the term “performance” within the field of sociology often refers to Goffman’s conceptualization of performance: how we present ourselves in ways which are judged by society. “Performance” also holds connotations for how sociologists conceptualize gender. It is through our “performances” that we are judged whether or not we conform to a gender category. Cosplayers, in their performance of characters, also are able to play with how gender is performed.

#### **4.2 Crossplay and Gender-bends**

Within the cosplay community, crossplayers and gender-bends are two types of cosplays which play with gender in two very different, and possibly contradictory ways. On the subversive side, the gender-bend relies entirely on the reimagination of one character as another gender – a creative take on the fluidity of gender. In contrast to the crossplay, where the goal is to stay as close to the canon as possible, the gender-bend plays with the idea of what it means for a character to be male or female when they were a different gender, genderless, or ambiguously gendered before. Yet considering how gender-bends may reproduce gender norms, the very essence of the gender-bend relies on recognizing not only the character, but that the gender has been switched. A gender is displayed in often stereotypical terms: pants on a male character become a skirt on a female reimagination. Long hair on a female character becomes short on a male

reimagination. A genderless Pokémon is imagined as having long eyelashes and emphasized curves. These gender-bends are seen as being sexualized as well, with bared chests and décolletage, which may be far from canon in an attempt to display that a character is “male” or “female”. These changes often rely almost exclusively on what it “means” to be male or female: gendered clothing and body parts.

The crossplay also occasionally relies on portraying itself as a joke. In the cosplay community, there are cosplayers who dress as characters different from their own, without altering their design to fit their own gender identity, but present themselves as the butt of an untold joke. These characters rely on gender stereotypes in a way that both subverts and reproduces them. These cosplayers often consist of men dressing up in skirts, dresses, and frilly outfits – often the more “feminine”, the better – while maintaining large beards, hairy legs and arms, and not only not attempting to “pass”, but actively avoiding “passing”. On the one hand, they exist in an arena where they may freely wear clothing gendered as female without fear of violence. Yet on the other hand, their desire in wearing “women’s” clothing is to serve as a joke – the joke being how “silly” it is for men to wear women’s clothing.

*Observation:* As we’re discussing the options, a group of four young men exit the elevator and walk past us to the entrance. Only one is in cosplay, and his cosplay is interesting: Sailor Moon, from the series of the same name. He has on a modified version of the “sailor scout” outfit, keeping the skirt and the tiara, but shrinking the leotard to just a crop top with exposes a large portion of his stomach. He has on no wig, no makeup, simply this

outfit. I'm not sure if he's dressed this way in an attempt to be silly, as some men do, or whether he's attempting to portray *his* version of Sailor Moon. I'm leaning towards the former. (Nov 3, 2018)

Characters such as this were popular in the early-mid 2000s. Cosplayers like "Sailor Bubba" and "Man-Faye" were well known, and still appear when googled. The "joke" relies heavily on gender and transphobic stereotypes: "bearded dudes in girly dresses look funny". One of my interviewees touches on the topic of how male-to-female crossplays are often taken less seriously, though her opinion was that the "funniness" of it wasn't mean-spirited, but out of wanting to be silly and seeking attention. Sandra noted:

"A lot of the times, you see male-to-female, most convention goers see it as humorous, like, in a funny way. Because that's typically, how they would go forth with it, while it's more serious for a female-to-male crossplayer [...] They do it in like a humorous way. Like or the really sexy pokemon gijinkas like making fun... [...] I think the thing with cosplay just in general is that people really like the attention. They like having the attention on them for just like that. And when you're dressing up in like a way to make fun or be a little more humorous, you're getting more attention."

When discussing crossplays, several of the attendees I observed noted that crossplay is not always as easily definable. With greater acceptance of gender and shifting definitions of what it means to be feminine or masculine, how do we now define crossplay? If you ask a cosplayer to define crossplay for the noncosplayer, they might



define it in this simple manner: “Crossplay is where a guy dresses like a girl character or vice versa”. But in assuming that a cosplayer is crossplaying, a person assumes that the gender identity of the cosplayer is not the same as the character they cosplay. Several of my interviewees and participants in my observations noted a deeper understanding of gender and gender identity in their discussions of crossplays.

“Honestly, I don’t even really know why “crossplay” is a thing. I feel like if...like if cosplay as a person of the opposite gender or whatnot, it’s still cosplay. I don’t understand why that one aspect has to change the name of it. Like you’re still cosplaying this one character and their gender doesn’t like doesn’t change things to...to that point. [...] I mean and when approaching that, most people are like ‘Oh, you’re a boy? Cool. You’re a girl? Cool. You’re neither? Cool’” (Yuan)

Tate argued:

“I wanted to portray how we were like a safe space and like an accepting community without using all the hot-button words, so, like, what I had was this picture with a bunch of different cosplays. Like there was “lady-beard”. It’s this super cis-male who has the whole beard and like he puts his hair in pigtails and wears like lolita dresses. He’s amazing.”

Tate also went on to directly connect the freedom of gender expression at conventions to the notions of acceptance that many cosplayers note.

“So when you go to a con, you can feel that acceptance, that happy energy. Everyone just gets to relax, like, be themselves. And that's just why I love cons so much. [Conventions are safe spaces] because people treat you based on their own experiences, right? So nerds are the people who usually don't have friends or aren't accepted or are treated as weirdos, so like the last thing they're going to do is treat someone as a weirdo.”

While conventions are mostly isolated from the outside world, the judgment and lack of understanding can often seep through to those who interact with cosplayers but are not part of the cosplay or convention community. Those outside of the convention community sometimes find themselves thrust into the atmosphere through their employment or through stumbling into the middle of the area surrounding the convention area, and they bring their own understandings (and, sometimes, lack thereof) of gender with them.

*Observation:* The front desk clerk laughs that he hopes I'm not cosplaying Sailor Moon, as he's "already seen two dudes dressed as her". (Nov 3, 2018)

Part of the reason that cosplayers and convention attendees sometimes find this freedom with how they may play with gender is the way conventions are seen as areas in which attendees may escape the judgment of the outside world. Nerds, being stigmatized, are drawn to these spaces in which they may "be themselves" with relative freedom from judgment from society outside of their own subculture. But, as I note within the next section, this is not always the case.

### **4.3 Cosplay, Conventions, and Stigma**

Cosplay is often described as being a space of belonging, of nonjudgment (at least in terms of gender and sexuality). Cosplay is where “nerds get together” in celebration of their favorite series and characters. Many cosplayers openly identify as “nerds” and note feelings of judgment from the world outside of the convention space based not only on the hobby of cosplay, but also in regard to their other interests in anime, manga, comics, videogames, etc. or their inability or unwillingness to “fit in”.

Cosplay and conventions are frequently noted as sort of an “escape” from the judgment which is placed on the nerd from the outside world. Cosplayers often acknowledge their membership of the “nerd” subculture, and often use this membership as a way to differentiate themselves from those who would judge them. Cosplayers and convention attendees frequently use the term “normies” to discuss those who are not part of the nerd community. The “normie” is almost a perfect representation of Goffman’s concept of the “normal”. The “normie” places stigma upon the nerd through judgment.

The stigma of the “nerd” is one which is hardly flattering. The “nerd” is portrayed in television and movies as the butt of jokes; they’re socially awkward, romantically unsuccessful, unattractive, unhygienic, bizarre, and entirely unpopular. Though some enjoy belonging to the “nerd” group, many still view those who do not belong as a threat; the “normals”, as Erving Goffman referred to them, are the ones who place the stigma upon the “nerd” groups. In order to indicate belonging to the cosplay group, a rejection of belonging to the “outside world” and simultaneously a rejection of “normal” status is required.

Conventions create a space in which these groups may feel relatively safe from judgment. This safety comes not only from surrounding themselves with others like them, but from excluding “normals” from entry. One way that cosplayers and convention attendees create these spaces is through the purchasing of badges offering entry to the convention space. Gawkers then must pay to enter at some conventions, though this does not entirely cut the cosplay/convention community off from the outside world. Usually being in large cities, crowds of cosplayers can be seen walking to hotels, restaurants, and photoshoot locations. In addition, hotel, restaurant, and convention center staff, as well as hotel guests and passers-by are all but unavoidable in these spaces and their reactions may sometimes serve as a reminder of the stigma placed on cosplayers. In these cases, even a look of genuine curiosity can be read as one of mockery or scorn to the cosplayers, who feel the stigma heavily. Yet the judgment is hardly unavoidable.

*Observation:* I apologize to the couple who steps into the elevator after me.

“I think I’ve hit every floor on the way to the garage. I’m pretty sure the last person in the elevator just pushed every button on the wall. Mature, right?”

I laugh rolling my eyes. The man lets out a half-exasperated, half-commiserative chuckle. “I bet it was one of those weirdos from that thing upstairs; one of those people in the costumes”. I give a partial laugh and shrug. “Yeah probably” I acknowledge, noting both my “normal” appearance at the moment, and the fact that he probably is right. (October 20, 2018)

Despite the attempt to create conventions as a safe space where nerds may limit interactions with the “normies” who judge them, sometimes it is the self-proclaimed nerds, themselves, who also judge those within the convention space. These judgments can revolve around a number of things, but often reproduce the stigma of the “nerd”. Often, those who make these judgments negotiate their own identities as “nerds” through differentiating themselves from this category of nerd. While they may accept their own nerd identity, they reject certain stigmas by insisting that it is other nerds who fit this stereotype, but not themselves.

Logan just shakes his head. “God, it smells in here already. It’s not even *Saturday* yet. How do you not even shower *before* a convention?” Logan expresses incredulously. (February 16, 2019)

I can’t tell if the girl in front of me is cosplaying or not. She’s particularly disheveled and I don’t recall any characters she’s resembling. Her purple hair is matted and looks greasy. The collar of her shirt droops loosely on one side and I’m not sure, but I think it’s not buttoned correctly. One half is tucked in and the other is not. If it’s not a cosplay, maybe, I think it’s a fashion statement? I find myself thinking that being fashion forward is hardly the strongest feature of the types of people that attend conventions. (February 15, 2019)

I asked Luke to tell me about what the cosplay/convention community needs to work on. He replied: “They can smell. And they don’t know how to act

in public. And despite being in an area that caters to cosplayers, you still are out in public. Like, taking pictures in crowded hallways [so no one can walk through]. And being loud and obnoxious in general. I went to this maid café and like, people were just weird and loud. The smell just speaks for itself. Like, self-awareness, I guess would be a better or like a nicer way of putting it.”

Conventions offer cosplayers and attendees places to escape the judgment of the outside world. With the countless media depictions of convention attendees and cosplayers being the “nerdiest of the nerds” (who are already stigmatized), there is no wonder that cosplayers and convention attendees would want to protect themselves from the stereotypes that surround them. Yet, paradoxically, cosplayers and convention attendees often reproduce the very stigma they attempt to avoid by judging those around them and attempting to separate or distance themselves from those who they deem to fit the stereotypes.

At the same time, there is an intentional distance placed between the participants and the outside world which is considered to be harsh and judgmental towards these members. This concept of distancing oneself from mainstream society is often seen in reference to any discussion of subcultural capital. Through their rejection of the mainstream, cosplayers and convention attendees indicate not only their belonging to the subculture, but they also indicate that they are not a threat to those around them.

#### **4.4 Boundary Maintenance and Authenticity**

Cosplayers on the one hand have a space in which they often feel safe to express themselves in ways which perhaps are not societally accepted. The subculture itself offers cosplayers a space where cosplayers can experiment with or try on personas that they may not feel safe to express elsewhere. Gender expression is part of these personas and cosplayers are in a space of fluid gender; someone cosplaying a certain character may be male or female or gender-nonconforming, regardless of the character's gender. Cosplayers are not only not judged for this fluidity, but are even praised or revered for it (Okabe 2012). Cosplayers, in defining these safe spaces, also define the boundaries to the group as well. It is in how cosplayers and convention attendees define these boundaries that we may find insight into how gender norms may be reproduced and reinforced in subcultural spaces, even if the space itself may be considered to often subvert gender norms.

While these are almost entirely unavoidable, cosplayers and convention goers may unintentionally try very hard to exclude "outsiders". The in-group/out-group dynamics are often seen quite clearly in the treatment of certain cosplayers, often manifesting in misogynistic ways. Many popular cosplayers, and almost exclusively popular female cosplayers, are subjected to regular abuse when deemed inauthentic to the cosplay/convention world. Female cosplayers, especially ones who are thought to exclusively cosplay as "sexy" characters (whether this is the case or not), are accused of seeking attention or of being "fake nerds". Here is one place where cosplayers confirm gender norms, often shaming female cosplayers they deem to be out-of-line. Often for the

sole “sin” of being attractive (“nerdiness” and “attractiveness” are mutually exclusive when it comes to the stigma of nerds), or wearing revealing cosplays, these accused cosplayers are seen as outsiders: “normals”, violating a space considered safe to those who feel marginalized by the “normals”.

“...it always happens in like. A lot of communities that you have people who take like pedestal positions. Like celebrity figures kinda things. So like they’re cosplay celebrities I guess. A lot of the thing that like, Jennifer Sashimi and like Tata-chan. WELL at least like Tata-chan like, doesn’t do it, like she just always cosplays busty babes. Jennifer Sashimi still does the whole like [posing dramatically] “sexy eeveelutions” you know what I mean [both laughing]. So you have the whole, the very like process thing there, the whole skill thing there the uhm the originality deriving you know from like original fan made work from like, it’s like remixing culture, you know? Here’s the thing like that you know, I’m going to take my own personal interpretation of. Or, you know, change to fit the human form, or this idea or this like role that I have in my head of all the eeveelutions being like warrior goddesses or whatever. So like, that’s cool but like, the boobs are still there. But like I kind of feel like I can spare her like because uh I I feel like the boobs thing is also kinda like an easy, quick way to get people’s attention, you know. And like you know now-a-days you know we like to talk about like attention-grabbing being you know a thing like [silly, dramatic voice] “Thing that people shouldn’t do! That’s bad! You want



attention? Who the frick do you think you are?” But I mean, like, a lot of the times, getting people’s initial attention is a way to generate interest and awareness in a bigger thing. Uhh, or something that isn’t a big thing. Like cosplay. Like cosplay, even in Japan is like a very very very niche thing and I know that in the United States, like, especially now I feel like a lot of the young people are in to like the [silly voice] Japanese animoos, we have this idea that like “Oh, that’s normal in Japan” when it’s like not. Right? So like yeah.” (Yuan)

Drawing from Okabe (2012), this judgment placed on “sexy” cosplayers may also come from an attempt to separate fans of cosplay, anime, and conventions from negative sexual connotations. Fans of anime and manga could easily point to any number of interactions with those outside of the anime and manga fandoms, usually following a pattern similar to this: A person is reading manga or watching anime, or discloses that they like anime or manga. A person who observes this asks something along the lines of “isn’t that, like, porn?” I vividly recall at least one student in middle or high school having a perfectly PG, non-pornographic manga confiscated for being “pornographic”. Similar Okabe’s findings that the *torareta* are seen in a negative light due to contributing to negative perceptions of cosplayers, one of my interviewees noted that those outside of the cosplay world judge it by those who are popular; and the ones who are popular are the ones most frequently criticized for being too sexual. As Yuan noted:

“I mean like, every community has corruption of some kind to some extent. So like. An interesting thing to think about in any community or any interest group or there’s like any amount of content that is so outside of like what normal people do so it becomes like noticeable to people who like aren’t in the community and it becomes a lot of people’s first impression of what the community is and so like becomes like this tip of the iceberg of everything that is like cosplay and so like a lot of the time people will like [air quotes] “iceberg people” will like...not to name names but like Jennifer Sashimi or Tata-chan; like, skinny waist big-boob cosplayers. Yeah and uhh a lot of the time brings people in to are like who are in to like [emphatically] GEEK SEX or like whatever [both laughing]. I meannnn like who are in to like cos-porn or like whatever that is. So of course like everything has like that side to it. That’s still like not the majority of like what it is.”

The issue of sexualization moves beyond who cosplayers choose to cosplay. Despite nerds being labeled as mostly asexual, convention spaces are rife with images of sexualized women.

*Observation:* There is a huge range of items that can be found here, from DVD sets to plush toys to figurines to the infamous body pillows depicting scantily clad (and often terrified and underage looking) characters in “compromising” positions. These have always been unsettling to me and they still turn my stomach. (November 3, 2018)

We wander the dealers room as I ponder things I could buy my four year old niece for Christmas. Nancy makes absurd suggestions. “Body pillow” she says, motioning to the creepy pillows at one booth. “Hentai” she says at another booth with a large black sign with white letters proclaiming “18+ ONLY” selling Japanese animated pornography. (November 3, 2018)

Despite the stigmatization of nerds as unattractive and undesirable, part of cosplay is often presenting oneself in flattering ways, often through makeup and fitted clothing. Cosplayers can often find themselves on the receiving end of the male gaze and sexual harassment. Cosplayers are so frequently targets of sexual harassment that “Cosplay≠Consent” became a popular hashtag in 2014, years before #MeToo went viral. It is not difficult at all to find any number of stories from cosplayers recounting anything from unwanted advances to full-on sexual assault. This also indicates the ways in which cosplayers are not immune to the objectification women often face outside of the cosplay community.

*Observation:* [The front desk clerk] politely asks questions about the convention and ourselves with both a genuine curiosity as well as a seeming understanding from having checked in other convention goers, perhaps for years. During the process, two cosplayers step in from outside, one hardly managing to bring her prop inside. Her ample bosom is overflowing past the intricate armor which barely covers it, and I notice the clerk looking from over the computer. He attempts to hide his second, and his third look,

which are all equally brief flashes over the monitor as the two guests make their way behind us and down the hallway. (Nov 3, 2018)

This sexual harassment is an indication of the way that gender norms are reproduced within convention centers and the cosplay community. Sexual harassment, the objectification of women, these are reproduced in the society outside of convention spaces, but also take place within. Despite these places often being considered “safe”, they are not free from the ways in which hegemonic masculinity manifests. Similar to conversations surrounding pornography and sexual assault, I have to wonder how much the explicit material featured within conventions is a piece of the complicated puzzle that is sexual harassment at conventions.

While disdain for and exclusion of “sexy” cosplays and cosplayers is in part a rejection of how the cosplay hobby is viewed by the outside world, another part is guided by misogyny. Additionally, I argue, much of the misogyny is internalized misogyny coming from female cosplayers. “Real cosplayers” don’t have to rely on their looks or their body to create cosplays which attract attention. Yet the exclusion of revealing cosplays from what “real cosplays” are stops with female cosplayers. Male cosplayers who cosplay almost exclusively shirtless or in revealing clothing are rarely subjected to the same level and amount of criticism as female cosplayers who are accused of doing similar things.

The ways in which the nerd is stigmatized are obvious in any number of television shows or movie. Although these depictions usually focus on male nerds, the stigma often carries over to female nerds as well: not just unattractive, but often repulsive,

unfashionable, and sexually incompetent or completely asexual. Though the nerd may feel stigmatized or offended by these stereotypes, they often reproduce the stereotype by deeming attractive and what they consider sexually desirable women, especially cosplayers, to be outsiders. By not fitting the stereotype of the nerd, these cosplayers are labeled as “fakes”, as attention-seekers, and, ultimately, as threats as intruders on the safe spaces the cosplayers and convention attendees have crafted. It is ironic that, through attempting to protect nerd spaces from those who may stigmatize them, the nerds, themselves, reproduce the stigma of which they are so afraid.

It is not simply “sexy” cosplays and cosplayers who are judged by members of the community. While the cosplayers I interviewed mostly noted feeling free from judgment within the community, when I asked them what they thought the cosplay community needed to improve upon, they frequently discussed cosplay elitism and other forms of judgment. Tate noted:

“Like I'm focusing on accuracy but you're never the wrong gender or race to cosplay any-thing, so don't get that in your head. Like I've heard people say "You're too fat to do that" or "You're the wrong race to do that" or "you're not tall enough" and so, uhh, I've heard that people say that. I haven't really witnessed anything bad firsthand. But like, I don't really know. But as for what I've experienced, the only time I've ever been disappointed was at Katsucon. The first time I went was this past Katsu. I don't like the cosplay elitist vibe; that needs to die. There is a cosplay elitist vibe there

and like, what that means to me is they just raised the bar so high it's almost like, you're not worth anything anymore.”

Sandra goes on to say:

“I mean, you know, at conventions you can make a lot of friends and, you know, you can learn and like share interests with people, but in the end, if you're cosplaying, people are looking at that, they're still judging. So it's just, you want to make sure that you don't look inaccurate or you're not the next person posted online. [...] Sometimes there's comments from other people that are just a little bit too unfriendly. Mean. Sometimes it's about inaccuracies like the wig color or styling. And then there's some that are just completely terrible like...if the person doesn't share the same skin tone as the character.”

And Yuan adds:

There's like this trying to make a community that's more open. There's been this problem that's like come up that's like, who's able to cosplay who and it's like, it's like led to a lot of like body-policing based on ethnicity and race and body type and like gender and like all of these like very modern like, personal identity type of issues that come up. Where like, I've seen it a lot in like Steven Universe for some reason. Where like if you know, you're not like, you're not fat you can't cosplay Rose Quartz. If you're not,

if you're not black you can't cosplay Garnet. And like I get that like, fat people, black people who have been like, historically like, all around, not been allowed to like be proud of who they are, these people are trying to empower them, like, I get like what they're doing. But by saying "You can't cosplay these people unless you're this one very specific category. Don't do that otherwise you're a racist bigot." Like, that doesn't seem like the way people should be going around trying to make like an open community.

Sandra, following her comments on judgment about cosplay accuracy made a connection between the types of judgment that cosplayers face from each other and what they face from the outside world, at least in terms of accuracy.

"There's con chairs and con staff that try to make it a safe environment for everyone. But I think just convention goes. Like, when you see, if someone came out as an Elsa cosplayer or was cosplaying as Elsa, but maybe their cape doesn't drape the way that it should, that Elsa does, or the colors are a little bit off, someone in the convention world will...might notice that or say something about that, whereas if that person goes outside in that cosplay, where there are "normies" [air quotes], they might be like "oh, this person is dressing up as so-and-so character that I recognize" and they may be more excited about that and not notice the inaccuracies. So it's all back to the accuracies."

Conventions have attempted to maintain themselves as safe spaces where cosplayers and attendees may “be themselves” or, commonly stated “let their freak flag fly”. While cosplayers may still experience judgments based on how they choose to cosplay, rarely are they judged on *who* they choose to cosplay. Cosplayers, as mentioned above, are free to play with gender in ways which subvert the expectations of what it means to be “male” or “female”. In these spaces, mostly hidden from the judgment regarding how clothing is gendered, it is not just cosplayers who openly play with and subvert heteronormative societal norms.

#### **4.5 Anime Conventions as Queer and Nonconforming Spaces**

Anime conventions and cosplay spaces are not spaces which are explicitly related to gender or sexuality. Yet within these spaces you’ll easily find an openness regarding LGBTQ+ identity. Cosplayers hang pride flags around their necks like capes. Artists in the artists’ alley sell pins with pronouns or declaring gender identity or sexual preference. The expressions of gender identity and sexual preference are displayed openly and often proudly – something which is not always the case in non-LGBTQ+ spaces.

*Observation:* A pair of cosplayers are walking by us and I notice that they’ve added a new accessory to their cosplay: a cape fashioned out of a trans pride flag. The pastel blue, pink, and white stand out against the character, whom I recognize but don’t recall as canonically trans. (August 10, 2018)



*Observation:* Wandering through the Artists Alley, I notice the same sorts of tables which have been increasing in popularity at recent cons. Rainbow flags hang from some, while fleece hats in various pride colors sit clipped to displays. One table has flower crowns in multiple pride flag colors. A few booths are covered in pins, many of which mainly feature anime characters, but reserve one large corner for pins with pride flags or pronouns or identities on them. I pass by a table I've seen before, selling shirts which feature the NASA logo, but where NASA would be reads "Space Gay". (October 19, 2018)

These are not explicitly LGBTQ+ spaces – they are not gay bars or LGBTQ+ clubs; anime and manga conventions do not specifically mention gender nor sexuality. Yet these are spaces in which expressions of gender and sexuality are often open, existing mostly without the scorn or derision that is much more prevalent within mainstream society. It is not just within the Artists' Alley that this openness exists. I stopped noticing gay and lesbian couples long ago due to their prevalence and openness at conventions. It is hardly uncommon to see couples holding hands, kissing, and being otherwise affectionate. Regardless of sexuality, it is not uncommon to see cosplayers being similarly affectionate with other cosplayers of the same gender, posing romantically for pictures.

*Observation:* The photoshoot director calls out the name of a popular ship (note: a "ship" is when two characters are not romantically involved in

cannon, but fans of the series support their romantic pairing). Even from the balcony, eight floors above the gazebo, I can hear the loud, high-pitched excited squeals of the shippers as cosplayers take the floor. Some bound in and move almost immediately into a pose while others look shyly around, pair off, and move into less romantic poses. One cosplayer dips their partner in a tango-esque style. Another pair kiss and the crowd absolutely loses it. The squeals and shouts bounce off the walls and are practically deafening, even in the large and now mostly empty convention floor. (February 16, 2019)

I'd like to note here that posing romantically for "fanservice" is hardly an indication of a person's sexual preference. Speaking to my own experience, I've posed in similar romantic fashion with women friends who are not attracted to women. Friends and I have "proposed" to each other, held each other's faces, and stared into each other's eyes while both being women who are not attracted to other women, while both being dressed as men. I doubt my own experience is unique, though I do not have the empirical support outside of my own autoethnographic accounting.

While cosplayers are the clearest examples of individuals playing with gender norms, they are hardly the only convention attendees who play with more fluid interpretations of gender. It is not uncommon to see individuals who are not in cosplay, but are wearing over-the-top accessories and wigs.

*Observation:* I ask one of the artists selling pins with pronouns, pride flags, and gender identity what her most popular items are. She (I note the pin saying “she/her”) pauses and scrunches up her face in thought. “It’s close, but definitely ace (asexual) stuff. But I think that’s because you don’t see a lot of it anywhere else, you know? After that, I’d say pan[sexual]. In terms of pins, definitely they/them pronouns, but some people buy two. My kid’s transmasculine and a lot of people like him like to wear they/them and he/him. I think that just makes it easier.” (August 11, 2018)

It is not LGBTQ+ identities which are openly expressed and celebrated within these spaces. In addition to the shirts noted above reading “Space Gay” or similar phrases (“Pan-Tastic” and “Queer AF” are other convention favorites), other shirts read “Thicc Bitch” or “Chub Rub Club”. Art within the Artists’ Alley occasionally feature Rubenesque women in flower crowns, proudly gazing at their rotund bellies or thighs, standing or sitting above similar phrases praising bodies which differ from those most often featured as “ideal” within Western media. Additionally, growing in popularity are “cosplay burlesque” events, where there are no body restrictions and bodies of all shapes, sizes, and genders are seen and celebrated.

*Observation:* The crowd hoots and hollers as the performers remove more and more clothing. Sometimes the skits are funny, sometimes they’re serious. You can tell who has practiced more than others, or who has watched more burlesque. (February 17, 2019)

*Observation:* At one point the MC announces that the next performer is Yaoi-Con's nominated "Bishie" (short for bishounen, meaning something along the lines of "beautiful boy"). The performer, who the MC referred to using male pronouns, is cosplaying as a popular teacher character from a very popular series about ninjas, with one of his "pupils" sitting excitedly in front of him, catching his various garbs as he disrobes. As he continues to disrobe, a strappy, bondage-esque bralette peeks out under his clothing. Held in place by the straps is a breast pad, which is visibly fake, even from our seats a good twenty rows back from the stage. The same cosplayer has a second act as the finale, where he appears as a nonanime character from a parody movie series about a British Spy. (February 17, 2019)

Cosplayers who cosplay as men within the shōjo genre often choose male characters who contradict Western physical ideals of masculinity. Slender in build, often with largely-drawn eyes and the occasional set of eyelashes, without beards or muscles, they often represent more of an oversized prepubescent boy than the fully-grown man they are said to represent. Female crossplayers may often choose to cosplay these characters due to this softness or this pseudo-adolescence which may allow them to pass more easily as a male character.

#### **4.6 Boundary Maintenance as Definitions of "Nerd" Change**

I would also briefly suggest that one reason that boundary maintenance and defining who is a nerd and, therefore, belongs in these events is because the nerd stigma

is not what it used to be. With the prevalence of comic book movies and tv shows, along with the popularity of fantasy and sci-fi series, the defining features of the “nerd” have changed. “Nerd” used to be synonymous with someone who enjoyed comic books and fantasy or sci-fi novels, yet these categories have become more mainstream. The actual stigma of the nerd has changed, though the perceived stigma remains, and the very identity of nerd is no longer one to be outright rejected.

The concept of the “cool nerd” has gained popularity in the last two decades. Gone are the days where being a “nerd” meant being a social loser who is unhygienic and sexually and romantically unsuccessful. With music stars, actors and actresses, and countless other celebrities discussing their affinity for anime, manga, and all things considered nerdy, the nerd identity need not be synonymous with outsider, or with someone who fails to fit in. Yet “normies” are still rejected and excluded, partially, I believe, out of fear of the judgment and scorn with which the “normies” have treated the nerds in the past.

*Observation:* I notice that there are multiple booths selling various, but similar fitted hats. I recall a time in which these would have been described as “douche-y”, popular with the popular kids who mocked the loser nerds. By the end of the convention, I notice a number of signs reading “Sold out!” I ask one of the vendors about their most popular items. “‘Fuckboy’ sold out really fast” she says after contemplating for a moment, “‘Loli’ too. Hmmmmmm. ‘Send Nudes’ is almost sold out. That one’s been popular”. “Interesting” I respond, thanking her. Kaito has his own thoughts on the

hats. He rolls his eyes “They’re like...’Oh, I want to be a nerd but I’m not like a *nerd* nerd’ you know? Like ‘Oh, I’m a cool nerd I wear fitteds.’”  
(August 12, 2018)

This changing definition of who is or is not a nerd may be where some of the contradictions of judgment lay. For a subculture whose entire definition revolves around being an outsider, trouble begins when the hobbies and interests become mainstream. How does a nerd now identify as a nerd if anyone can identify as a nerd? As mentioned before, many self-identified nerds revel in being different, in being a nerd or an outsider. But as nerdiness becomes more mainstream, the nerd subculture has difficulty determining who’s an insider and who’s an outsider. With outsiders/normals still being considered threats, I suggest that this is where some notions of judgment arise. The boundaries become less distinct, and the judgment becomes harsher in a misguided attempt to protect the subculture and those within it.

As I’ve noted several times, conventions seem to be spaces of paradox. Yet, I believe, the real paradox lies in exactly how cosplayers and convention attendees deem as “authentic” – who belongs and who doesn’t, or, I suggest, who may be a threat and who is not. The contradictions of judgment and inclusion are not quite as paradoxical when considering that, to allow for inclusion free from the threat of “normals”, cosplayers often feel the need to judge who does or does not belong. Not surprisingly, women often bear the brunt of this judgment, and are most often the ones deemed “fake” or “attention seeking”. Additionally, these judgments are often based on assumptions of how “good” women should dress, behave, or participate within a subculture.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Cosplayers may not be familiar with Erving Goffman, but their behavior is consistent with his theories on the performance of self and the structure of everyday social interaction. Through their portrayal of themselves as characters to whom they are drawn, cosplayers often find themselves presenting an idealized self. They represent performance in a practically literal way. They discuss stigma in ways which almost exactly mirror his concept, especially when referring to “normies”.

Cosplayers perform through the characters they choose, and in choosing certain characters, often perform gender in unique ways. They do not perform as “a man” or “a woman”, but rather as a character, who happens to be a man or a woman. Cosplayers may perform gender in exaggerated and reifying ways, especially when it comes to cosplays which rely on being recognized as bending the gender of a character. But they also play with the notion of what it means to be male or female through their decisions to portray themselves as a character with whom their assigned gender or gender identity does not align.

What is interesting in particular is the way in which gender does and does not play a part in the characters cosplayers choose to cosplay. In many of the interviews, participants, especially those identifying as female, noted that gender did not often play a part in the decisions they made regarding who to cosplay. If cosplayers did not want to

cosplay as another gender, they often noted their concern lying within how they would look as a different gender, not in discomfort in portraying themselves as a different gender.

Cosplayers, like other subcultures, often find cosplay to be a space of inclusion and acceptance. It is somewhere away from the world which judges and negatively stereotypes them. Within the realm of cosplay, cosplayers interact with each other, providing positive feedback and acceptance to those who may not find it otherwise, unless they hide their cosplayer identity (something, I must note, which is very easy to do whenever one is not actually in cosplay).

Some cosplayers wear these labels of nerd, outcast, or otaku almost as a badge, indicating their unconcern with fitting in with the “outside world” – though this nerd identity may often be concealed once back outside the convention space. Through this, cosplayers identify themselves to others as fitting in with their fellow nerds. They indicate that they are not a “normie” (a common phrase used within the nerd and convention community which is almost an exact parallel to Goffman’s concept of the “normal”, and, therefore, are not threats to the safe space cosplayers have created and maintained to escape judgment.

A number of subcultures (especially “nerdy” subcultures - a identity members often self-ascribe with pride) talk about their own identities as “being someone else”, almost in a contradictory way to how they also describe their performances as “a chance to be who they really are”. Many of the subcultures discussed within the literature review are judged and stigmatized by those outside of their community. Yet within their



community, a sense of inclusion is fostered through being surrounded by similarly judged people. Yet the boundaries around these spaces are tenuous. Non-cosplayers are not forcibly removed from conventions. Additionally, anyone can purchase a pass to find entry into these conventions. Social media forces interaction between cosplayers and non-cosplayers. There are no tests nor skills needed to enter into these spaces. Thus, non-cosplayers may intrude into the scene, threatening the notion of a space safe from judgment. This threat of intruders sometimes intimidates cosplayers into judging who may be a “normie”, a threat to their identity and their safe space. Cosplayers are not the only ones who judge each other’s authenticity; judgments of members as authentic or inauthentic happens across a number of subcultures.

Cosplayers often refer to the outside world as judgmental, especially towards “nerds”. While conventions are mostly isolated from a society which deems cosplayers and nerds as unattractive, unhygienic, socially awkward, and romantically and sexually unsuccessful, there are always threats of judgment within convention centers and via social media. Cosplayers are keen to protect themselves from this stigmatization, both by distancing themselves from the “stereotypical nerds” (who don’t shower or know how to behave in public) while also indicating significant subcultural capital by distancing themselves from “normies”.

In order to create a space in which they may feel free to perform as whichever character, or, even “self” they prefer, they must define the boundaries around the spaces. Since the stigma comes from the “normies” – another Goffman parallel – these are the individuals who are excluded from the community. Cosplayers who are thought to

depend upon or cater to the “normies” via choice of cosplay or though social media often find themselves labeled as inauthentic – especially if the cosplayer is female.

While much of the cosplay community encourages gender expression and fluidity thereof, many within the community paradoxically fall back on sexist criticisms of cosplayers they dislike. Popular female cosplayers are often slut-shamed and accused of “pandering” with costumes which often emphasize breasts and bare midriff, or the “lewd” (a popular description) photoshoots of characters which are sold to fund future cosplays.

Similar to other subcultures, the notions of authenticity are present, with cosplayers deeming who is or is not a “real” cosplayer, and who is simply pretending, for attention or for profit. These “inauthentic” cosplayers are seen not only as a representation of the threat of infiltration by a “normie” which may judge and stigmatize the “real” cosplayers, but they also represent a fear of misrepresentation in the media of cosplayers as hypersexualized or sexual deviants.

As a researcher who considers herself part of the cosplay subculture, I must carefully weigh both sides of my own cosplay identity when conducting research. My cosplay past provides me a unique insider status to a group which is careful to try to protect itself from outsiders. Yet I cannot deny that my years of experience within the cosplay subculture may have impacted my own positionality on the matter. I would argue, however, that without a knowledge of cosplay built from experience from being immersed within the subculture, many of the themes discussed in this paper would go unnoticed. Without an understanding of crossplays and gender-bends, the concepts

themselves may be difficult to understand, and the meanings behind them and the implications for cosplay and conventions spaces being safe for more than just cosplayers and anime and manga fans would be all but lost.

By relying on both interviews and observations, I find that the internal validity of the findings is relatively strong, with the interviews supporting the claims based on observations. In addition, having a personal history as a cosplayer assists me immeasurably in knowing what to look for, what stands out, as well as grants me access to cosplayers in a way different from non-cosplayers. While generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, the external validity is perhaps one concern preventing a wider-spread interest in research about cosplayers. How does one generalize findings about a group of people whose hobby includes dressing up as fictional characters to a larger public who, at best, may do this once a year, for Halloween? This is something with which I struggle.

However, previous literature suggests that areas that consist of like-minded individuals provide safe spaces for individuals to express themselves in ways that may not be entirely socially acceptable. This can be seen within the lolita subculture (Gagné 2008), nerd subculture (Bucholtz 1999), and online gaming subculture (Schmieder 2009, Osborne 2012). Perhaps cosplay, too, is one of those spaces of acceptance where societal norms and gender norms in particular may be pushed and even broken, without nearly as much fear of rejection. However, I do not think such assumptions can be made based on the small number of articles regarding cosplay. More research must be done on the matter

before asserting that these are the mechanisms through which gender norms are challenged within the community.

Cosplayers are no exception to the subcultures which find themselves struggling with deeming members authentic or fake. Cosplayers, in attempting to create spaces in which members may play with identities and gender norms, often end up marginalizing others they deem fakes in an attempt to exclude those who may judge and stigmatize them. Yet in deciding who “does not belong”, cosplayers often resort to reproducing the very stigma of the nerd they wish to avoid: the “fakes” are conventionally attractive, they are open to risqué clothing choices and own their sexuality. All may be welcome, but some are more welcome than others.

Cosplayers exist in a world of contradictions. They describe the community as accepting, yet judgmental. It rejects society yet conforms to many of its rules. It considers itself a safe space from the stigma of the outside world, yet through deciding who the “real nerds” are, they reproduce the very stigma they attempt to avoid. Cosplay and conventions are not alone as a subculture with dueling identities. Yet cosplay has been almost entirely ignored in its implications for gender performance and boundary maintenance. It also holds numerous insights regarding sexual harassment and identity, which were only briefly touched upon in this thesis. My hope is that, as cosplay grows as a hobby, the interest in the subject as an empirical field site will grow as well, uncovering the answers which lie within.

## **5.1 Future Research**

For further research, I would suggest content analysis of comments on the social media accounts of popular cosplayers. I would suspect, from personal experience, that men commenting on these posts would often be not simply encouraging but would often feature flirtatious or even sexually explicit comments. I believe that the negative comments would mostly be confined to women's comments on these posts. A potential source of future research would be observing how respectability politics plays out within the cosplay community, especially in reference to the Cosplay≠Consent movement.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Sarah Aadahl graduated from Brentsville District High School, Nokesville, Virginia, in 2010. She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a minor in sociology from Christopher Newport University in 2014. While working on her Master of Arts at George Mason University she continued to work full time as a Mental Health Technician at Novant Health UVA Health Systems Prince William Medical Center in the Behavioral Health Inpatient Program.