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# "This Isn't for You, This Is for Me": Women in Cosplay and Their Experiences Combatting Harassment and Stigma

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**“THIS ISN’T FOR YOU, THIS IS FOR ME”: WOMEN IN COSPLAY AND THEIR  
EXPERIENCES COMBATTING HARASSMENT AND STIGMA**

A thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
Sociology  
by

Christopher M. Lucas

Approved by

Kristi Fondren, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson

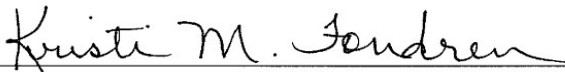
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Marshall University  
May 2018

## APPROVAL OF THESIS

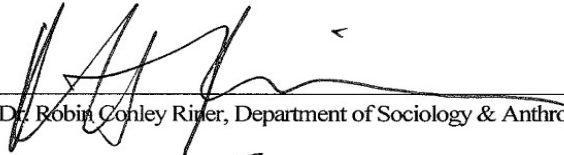
We, the faculty supervising the work of Christopher M. Lucas, affirm that the thesis, "*This Isn't for You, This Is for Me*": *Women in Cosplay and Their Experiences Combatting Harassment and Stigma*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the College of Liberal Arts. This work also conforms to the editorial standards of our discipline and the Graduate College of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.



Dr. Kristi Fondren, Department of Sociology & Anthropology Committee Chairperson

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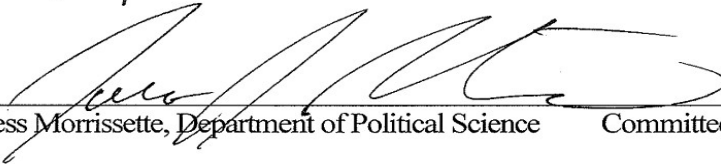
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval of Thesis.....	ii
Copyright .....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
List of Tables .....	x
Abstract .....	xi
Chapter I: Introduction & Background.....	1
Trajectory of the Text .....	5
Chapter II: Review of Relevant Literature.....	7
The Convention Space: A World in Four Days .....	7
Cosplay and Gender Performance .....	8
Motivations to Cosplay.....	11
Rape Culture .....	12
Communities of Study in Rape Culture .....	13
Rape Culture, Gender Norms, and Technology.....	14
Sexual Harassment.....	16
Varying Definitions of Sexual Harassment .....	17
Women’s Experiences with Harassment .....	18
Sexual Harassment and Social Discourse .....	18
Consent Customs .....	20
The Cosplay Community as a Microcosm of Society .....	21
Chapter III: Theoretical Framework.....	23
Presentation of Self: Dramaturgy and Impression Management .....	23

Stigma .....	26
Gender Performativity .....	28
Resisting Gender .....	30
Concluding Thoughts: Goffman, Butler, and the Women who Cosplay .....	33
Chapter IV: Methodology .....	34
Participant-Observation .....	34
Selection of Locations.....	35
Perspective in Participant-Observation.....	37
Recording Observations.....	39
In-Depth Interviews .....	41
Selection of Participants .....	43
Sample Characteristics.....	44
Data Analysis Procedures .....	46
Chapter V: Findings.....	48
“I Look to Her for Strength”: Choosing the Character to Cosplay.....	48
Personal Connection to the Character.....	48
Appealing Character Design.....	51
Similar Physical Appearance .....	52
“Creating a Totem”: Crafting and Exhibiting the Cosplay.....	53
A Medium of Creative Expression .....	53
Pride in the Creation .....	54
Pursuing a Niche in the Community.....	57
“‘It Depends on the Character’”: Gender and Variations in Cosplay Choice .....	58



Whether to Choose a Revealing Cosplay.....	59
Whether to Make or Commission the Cosplay.....	62
Whether to Consider the Threat of Harassment.....	63
“Their True Selves”: Life at the Convention .....	66
A Safe Space for Non-Conforming Gender Identities.....	68
Cosplay as an Expression of Common Interests.....	71
“It’s Like High School with Wigs”: Forms of Stigma on the Convention Circuit.....	74
Accusations of Insincere Attention-Seeking.....	74
Verbal Vilification and Exclusion .....	77
Connecting Sartorial Autonomy to Sexual Harassment .....	79
Unwelcome Attention and Physical Contact .....	84
Stigma Coping Mechanisms and Perceived Benefits of “Cosplay is Not Consent”.....	91
Exuding Strength and Self-Confidence .....	92
Creating a Community to Support the Anti-Harassment Cause .....	94
Creating Social Discourse around Harassment.....	97
“I Find the Entire Thing Hilarious”: Evidence of Acceptance and Gender Equality .....	99
Acceptance from Fellow Convention Attendees .....	99
An Equal Convention Environment in Terms of Gender .....	101
Summary.....	106
Chapter VI: Discussion & Conclusion.....	108
Towards a Theory of Performing the Self: Transcending the Act of Cosplay .....	108
The Paradox of Stigma.....	110
So, Is It Actually a Boys’ Club? .....	113

Limitations .....	115
Directions for Future Research .....	117
Conclusion and Implications.....	119
References.....	121
Appendix A: Office of Research Integrity Approval Letter .....	130
Appendix B: Office of Research Integrity Amendment Approval Letter.....	131
Appendix C: Informed Consent .....	132
Appendix D: Interview Guide.....	135
Appendix E: Curriculum Vitae .....	137

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.....	45
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## ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, cosplay, or “costume play,” has become increasingly popular among fans of anime, manga, and video games. Despite the community’s nature of embracing social difference, problems persist with regard to gender discrimination and breaching of consent boundaries. Discussion in the extant literature on cosplay has yet to address the views of women in the community, specifically the idea of cosplay and popular culture conventions being a “boys’ club.” The principle research questions of this study are: (1) What are the lived experiences of women cosplayers at anime conventions? (2) To what degree have they had to endure stigmatization, unwelcome attention, and sexual harassment from fellow convention attendees? (3) What coping mechanisms have they developed to help them navigate this male-dominated space? Using a theoretical framework combining Goffman’s dramaturgy and stigma theories with Butler’s gender performance theories, I address these questions through two qualitative methods: participant-observation and in-depth interviews. Traveling to three anime conventions in West Virginia, Virginia, and Ohio, I observed events at all three conventions and interviewed 30 women cosplayers about their convention and cosplay experiences. Findings suggest that women find deep personal connection to the character and to themselves through the performance of cosplay, that women cope with stigma through community attachments, and that subjugation by men is a rare and often unnoticed phenomenon.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

“Stop watching anime and BE it. Dress up as your favorite character for fun or profit” (Macias & Machiyama, 2004, p. 109). This is a native’s description of the hobby known as “cosplay.” A relatively recent phenomenon in anime culture, the term is a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “play” (Gn, 2011; Hale, 2014). Originally credited to Japanese businessman Nobuyuki Takashi (Ito & Crutcher, 2014; Plunkett, 2014), he himself describes cosplay as “[...] a fan's expression of his or her love for a favourite [sic] character” (Plunkett, 2014). Takahashi goes on to describe that cosplay is its own art form: “Drawing a piece of artwork, writing a story, animating a movie and showing this to others is a manifestation of [love for a character]. And cosplay is one of those expressions in which fans use their entire bodies” (Plunkett, 2014).

The dictionary entry for cosplay (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2017) yields the following definition: “The practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga and anime” (Cosplay). Current theory on cosplay suggests that this definition, while not entirely inaccurate, is incomplete. One scholarly definition of cosplay describes it as “a performance art in which the participant masquerades as a character from a selected film, television series, video game, or comic book” (Gn, 2011, p. 583). Rahman, Liu, and Cheung (2012) argue that cosplay is “a process of converting the two-dimensional (2D) image/fantasy from a page of *manga*, a screen of *anime*, or any 2D character to a three-dimensional (3D) living character in real time” (p. 321), so the process of “performing” a character is intact as a significant component of the hobby. Yet another definition characterizes cosplay as “a performative action in which one dons a costume and/or accessories and

manipulates his or her posture, gesture, and language in order to generate meaningful correspondences and contrasts between a given body and a set of texts from which it is modeled and made to relate” (Hale, 2014, p. 8). For this purpose, the cosplayer articulates his or her body as the medium for expression, the location of and means for performance (Ferrari Nunes, 2014). Each of these descriptions indexes the performance aspect of dressing as a character as what differentiates cosplay from simply dressing in a costume.

Most academic debate surrounding cosplay coalesces into a definition that encompasses performance as part of its inherent nature, and this idea of cosplay as a performance is also reflected in emic descriptions of cosplay. Molly McIsaac of ifanboy.com describes cosplay as “the practice of portraying a fictional character – at times completely identifying as that character while in costume (and thus acting as if the individual was that character to add to the authenticity of the experience)” (2012). While a degree of performance may seem implicit in this depiction, McIsaac specifies her stance with a disclaimer: “[i]t is of my own opinion that cosplay is not merely costuming, but a very unique form of performance art.” Not only do scholars argue that cosplayers are performers; cosplayers indeed view themselves as performers for specific audiences. Tseng, who also defines cosplay as “the intricate art of costuming and performing as a character” (2012), offers the following contrast between the art of cosplay and the act of donning a costume:

The distinction should be made that cosplaying isn't like Halloween. Cosplays are generally handmade, imbued with blood, sweat and tears. Cosplayers do what they do out of intense love, and spend weeks, months even dedicated to researching a character's background, making sure to get every detail and stitch as accurate to their beloved character as possible. They find great courage and put on their cosplays, all the while worrying, “what if my cosplay isn't accurate enough? What if other fans hate me?” (Tseng, 2012)

In this sense, cosplayers are not performing only for themselves or for their audience, but in a way, they are also performing for each other. Mavridou (2015) states: “the successful performer is not only tasked with replicating the aesthetic, but with inhabiting the mental and physical space of the character. Pure craftsmanship is valued very highly, but cultural capital amongst cosplayers is primarily derived from notions of *authenticity*—the ability to bring a character to life.” Cosplayers critique one another and their ability to achieve such authenticity. They motivate one another. They encourage one another. Indeed, they judge one another. Craftsmanship, accuracy, and knowledge of the character are all seen as important when determining if a cosplayer is “legitimate.”

Cosplay is most commonly seen being embodied and practiced at popular culture conventions. “Conventions” is a broad term used to describe formal gatherings of people with common interests. Sometimes these interests can be as broad as popular culture, while others can be esoteric to science fiction, anime, video games, or even specific media such as “Star Trek” or “Game of Thrones.” The popularity of popular culture conventions has increased exponentially in the past 20 years: in 2014, New York Comic-Con, with around 151,000 attendees, was the most attended convention in the United States and the fifth most attended in the world (Matsuo, 2015). San Diego Comic-Con saw around 130,000 attendees, Otakon in Baltimore, MD had about 109,000, and Anime Expo in Los Angeles, CA had approximately 80,000 people in attendance (Matsuo, 2015). Anime Expo was the most attended anime convention of 2016, with attendance increasing 25 percent from 80,000 in 2014 to over 100,000 two years later (Delahanty, 2017). The top eleven most attended anime conventions in the United States in 2016 held a total of 374,936 attendees (Delahanty, 2017).

The widespread popularity of cosplay and popular culture conventions has been given various explanations, chiefly the opportunity they allow for enacting fantasy, acting as a means for the performer to escape from the mundaneness of real life and into a fantasy world (Napier, 2007; Peirson-Smith, 2013) as well as fulfilling social and psychological needs not met by other means (Kulagina & Ovchinnikova, 2014; Peirson-Smith, 2013). Despite the sense of freedom and expression afforded to those who cosplay and attend popular culture conventions, there are numerous debates within the community, such as the appropriateness of cosplaying a character of a different racial identification (Tseng, 2012), the intention of women who cosplay as sexually suggestive or skin-revealing characters (Kerzner, 2015), and the function of gender roles in the community and the stigma that male cosplayers also face (Kerzner, 2016). Significant among these issues is the gender divide that persists in the cosplay community. Despite the fact that convention attendance is almost exactly a half-and-half split between men and women—with 2014 descriptive statistics yielding 49 percent men, 49 percent women, and 2 percent non-binary/other (Salkowitz, 2015)—extant literature suggests that conventions are still highly male-dominated experiences: the products and events are generally catered towards men’s interests,<sup>1</sup> and men have a high tendency to direct negative behavior such as jeering, sexual harassment, and other forms of unwelcome attention towards women in order to assert power over the space (Rodriguez, 2015).

The increasing frequency of these conventions alone is not enough to account for the relevance of this study to the field of sociology and other social sciences. While the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> While many of the products at anime conventions may seem like they are targeted toward women, with many “cute” and childish products, interest in such commodities among anime fans is fairly genderless, with men consuming such goods at rates similar to women among the fandoms (Kinsella, 1995). Kinsella’s work pertains specifically to Japanese culture, but the interest in cosplay has arguably led to a replication of this universality of interest in cute products stateside, given the almost equal gender distribution seen in convention attendance.



hundreds of thousands of popular culture fans attend conventions every year and the fact that this number is steadily growing are significant, the point here is that the cosplay community is an organic microcosm of gender differentiation in society. Specifically, in spite of the narrative of conventions as open and accepting perpetuated by attendees (Napier, 2007), women experience significant “othering” in the community. For example, women face conflicting pressures to choose sexy cosplays but also to not welcome male attention through such cosplays, demands practically impossible to accomplish simultaneously (Kerzner, 2015). Problems of intentional attempts to exclude and alienate women from convention life are also documented (Rodriguez, 2015). As of yet, however, women cosplayers’ voices are missing from this dialogue.

### **Trajectory of the Text**

This project intends to fill the current gap in research about gender in the popular culture convention community by posing three principle research questions: what are the lived experiences of women cosplayers at anime conventions? To what degree have they had to endure stigmatization, unwelcome attention, and sexual harassment from fellow convention attendees? What coping mechanisms have they developed to help them navigate this male-dominated space? To answer these questions, I first review the current literature in Chapter II, not only about cosplay and convention life but also about rape culture, sexual harassment, and consent customs in the greater American society. After that, in Chapter III, I construct a theoretical framework to inform the perspective for this study, centered on Erving Goffman’s theories of dramaturgy and stigma, and Judith Butler’s theories of gender performance and gender undoing. Chapter IV outlines the qualitative methods that will be used for this study: observations conducted on-site at three anime conventions, and in-depth semi-structured interviews done with female cosplayers to gain their insights on the inner workings of the community. Chapter V

contains the results of data analysis, with field note and interview data analyzed in terms of emerging themes. Chapter VI provides a discussion of the significance of the data collected from this work and poses a theory of cosplay as a performance of the self, unpacks the paradoxical ways in which women in the community experience stigma, and argues that women do not acknowledge the stigma they experience due to the strong community ties they have fostered among other women who cosplay.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Chapter two presents an overview of the literature relevant to cosplay, consent rape culture, sexual harassment, and consent. Beginning with an overview of popular culture convention life and culture, gender and gender performance in cosplay are discussed in detail. Substantiated by the gender differentiation that results from community interaction, I discuss rape culture and consent customs as they apply to the greater society. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts on how rape culture and consent boundaries and breakages could manifest in the gendered environment of the convention.

#### **The Convention Space: A World in Four Days**

People who are fans of Japanese culture—*anime*, *manga*, and Japanese video games and toys—and who attend Japanese popular culture conventions often identify as *otaku* (Kinsella, 1998). Cosplay is a common hobby by which people express their interest in and passion for Japanese culture, and cosplayers frequently congregate at popular culture conventions (Kelts, 2006; Napier, 2007; Yamada, 2009). Numerous events and activities take place at conventions, often abbreviated to “cons”: opportunities for shopping, communal tabletop gaming, communal arcade and electronic gaming, panels and talks given by industry figures as well as fellow fans, and screenings of popular television shows and films (Napier, 2007).

Academic literature specifically about conventions remains sparse. In describing convention life, Napier (2007) offers the following scholarly contribution:

For a brief few days, the world of the con is a world in itself. Part spectacle, part learning experience, part social gathering, fan conventions can be all consuming to the participants, many of whom stay for the entire two or three days, putting up at the convention hotel and wandering from activity to activity in an increasingly sleep-deprived haze. In a sense, anime cons [...] partake in two traditions. One of them is the world’s fairs and expositions that [...] played such an important role in introducing

Japanese culture to the west. [...] The other tradition that cons partake in is that of the professional conference. (Napier, 2007, pp. 151-152).

Conventions are sites not only for entertaining but also for informing, since people use cons as a means not only to meet people with similar interests but also to find and cultivate new interests in a like-minded community. In this sense, cons can also act as networking opportunities. More specifically, imitating the format of professional conferences, artists, game designers, and merchants use cons as events to sell their merchandise and seek further employment.

In identifying the layman con-goer's perspective on what cons are and why they exist, Napier offers the following excerpt from a fan interview:

[The con atmosphere] is one of unconditional acceptance and support—people feel like they have found a real family that doesn't reject them for being “geeky” or into weird things... spending a weekend with people living, sleeping, eating in the same space with them (and going through the same sleep deprivation) and partying and watching lots of anime creates that “instant family” feeling. (Napier, 2007, p. 151)

While the motivations to engage in cosplay are covered in a later section, this justification for attending cons is important in understanding the feeling of “other” that *otaku* and general convention attendees feel in greater society.

Despite this perceived level of acceptance for different personalities and interests experienced at cons, numerous problems of gender differentiation still persist among people in the cosplay community and at conventions (Kerzner, 2015; Kerzner, 2016; Lamerichs, 2011; Rodriguez, 2015; Scott, 2015). Before examining issues of suppression of women at conventions, however, I will first discuss theories of gender performance as they have been applied to cosplay and social interaction.

### **Cosplay and Gender Performance**

As the study of cosplay has trickled from the convention centers into academia, scholars have unpacked the experience of cosplay, suggesting that rather than merely dressing like

characters, participants become them. Hale (2014) describes cosplay as “a somatic, material, and textual practice” that “generates meaningful correspondences” (p. 8). The relationship between the cosplayer and the onlooker is part of the experience of cosplay. In other words, wearing the costume alone is not enough: to incorporate the “play” aspect of cosplay, one needs to meaningfully engage the character and communicate that engagement to their audience. Hale poses the example of a Batman cosplayer, who may affect a deep voice, say famous quotes, and even display playful hostility toward someone cosplaying as Joker (Hale, 2014). This interaction between the Batman cosplayer and the Joker cosplayer is a performance, the “play” part of cosplay, for themselves and for their audience consisting of fellow convention attendees. This interaction is typical behavior at cosplay conventions (Hale, 2014). The entire conception of cosplay as a performance and the con as a stage for said performance is a uniquely American invention. In Japan, cosplay is typically only done by people hired by the convention and by professionals sent by their parent companies; the United States has co-opted cosplay and formed it into a much more public, layman-accessible activity (Kelts, 2006).

Gn (2011) describes cosplay as “a performance art in which the participant masquerades as a character from a selected film, television series, video game, or comic book” (p. 583). Aware of the reductive nature of this conceptualization of cosplay and of the cosplayer, Gn further elaborates on the layers within the art of cosplay, particularly the performance aspect: “[t]hrough the use of the body as a visual spectacle, cosplay becomes an enactment of the on-screen image which provokes a revision of the meanings and gratifications of the human body” (2011, p. 591). In this sense, cosplay is not merely a defiance of social norms or indeed a defiance of the gender binary; it is a performance of the fluid self, the self that is neither the layperson nor the character but rather both at the same time, adding complexity to the

dramaturgical interpretation (Gn, 2011). This fluidity of gender is common in the performance of cosplay, as Ito and Crutcher (2014) argue in their example of maid cafes. In this setting, both women and men dress up in maid costumes and serve customers, embodying stereotypically feminine traits such as meekness, obedience, and shyness. While these interactions are in the context of Japanese rather than American culture, the idea that cosplaying against gender norms is, from a phenomenological perspective, not being intentionally deviant but rather expressing a different aspect of the self is common to both cultures (Ito & Crutcher, 2014).

Despite the current literature that implies a lack of conscious defiance of binary gender performance, Scott (2015) suggests that complex gendered relationships arise when women cosplay as a profession due to the enactment of gender roles that occurs. Specifically, he implies that, while female cosplayers often possess the seamstress and craftsman skills required for cosplay construction, men often end up assuming control in these situations because, in line with gender roles, “men are always already best equipped to perform” these tasks (Scott, 2015, p. 149). Often, Scott argues, these relationships involve the woman dictating the medium of expression—they want a cosplay made, and they commission a male friend, often without compensation, to make the costume. In many such instances, the man finds the woman attractive, which Scott asserts can create a social setting conducive to the female cosplayer’s vilification of and control over the man. Upon first glance, the power in this situation seems to rest with the woman cosplayer because she is issuing commands to the man, but Scott actually argues that the current media coverage of cosplay creation portrays women as conceptually ambitious but unable to complete a cosplay by themselves: in other words, they need male assistance. The fact that the man hopes for, and even in some cases expects, romantic reciprocation from the cosplayer for whom he is making the cosplay further cements the traditional roles in this

gendered relationship. Despite outward appearances, Scott asserts the power is still in the hands of the man. This research implies that, despite the relative lack of cognizance of gender in the social realities of the cosplay community, gender roles still manifest in the preparation of the performance.

### **Motivations to Cosplay**

In attempting to understand why people cosplay, researchers have tended to focus on the psychological benefits gained with the assumption that cosplayers are a deviant community. Attending conventions and interacting with fellow cosplayers gives people who feel marginalized a common ground on which to relate, giving them a community, a sense of agency within said community, and positive affirmation on the worth of their hobby and of themselves (Yamato, 2016). This sense of being ostracized from mainstream American culture is important in better comprehending the culture that forms around cosplay: cosplayers still feel fairly “othered” in society because of the overall perceived lack of willingness to condone the hobby, so they see conventions and cosplaying as a chance to have friendly interactions with like-minded people (Kulagina & Ovchinnikova, 2014). Convention environments are often formed with the tacit understanding that society sees interest in cosplay and Japanese animation as childish, so convention venues often act as “safe spaces” for fans to express themselves (Napier, 2007). Yamato (2016) corroborates this finding, arguing that the cosplay community not only instills cosplayers with senses of autonomy and community, but the repeated affirmations across numerous years of consistent con attendance have positive effects on one’s mental health.

Continuing this theme of indexing the cosplay community as deviant, another factor that influences people to cosplay is the opportunity to relive the innocence of childhood and find a reprieve from a reality in which they do not feel free to fully express authentic identities

(Peirson-Smith, 2013). Formation of identity in convention life often blurs the lines between identity in reality and identity in fantasy, with the latter often being particularly latent when not attending a convention, with individuality expressed either through the character's visual design or through personality traits with which the cosplayer identifies or idealizes (Lamerichs, 2011). Kuo, Lutz, and Hiler (2016) identify the phenomenon of "active escapism" (p. 499) whereby a fan will retreat into the latent character identity they have formed when they feel the social acceptance of their unusual hobby is threatened. Oftentimes, this latent aspect of identity deviates from the gender norm, manifesting as agendered, gender ambivalent, or gender ambiguous. Sometimes, participants perform a gender with which they do not identify, also known as "cross-play" (Peirson-Smith, 2013). This disenfranchisement from conventional gender roles and the acceptance of performance of a character as part of the cosplayer's sense of self contribute to the understanding of why people elect to cosplay.

While the cosplay community can fulfill basic sociological and psychological needs of which these people may otherwise be deprived, there are still social problems that manifest within the community—namely, the marginalization and vilification of women. Before that can be discussed, it is important to first contextualize the nature of this oppression in greater society so it can be better applied to this microcosm. It is on this note that I turn to my discussion of rape culture and social settings conducive to its sustenance.

### **Rape Culture**

While the precise definition of rape culture may vary slightly from scholar to scholar, there is general agreement that rape culture is essentially a social setting in which rape and violence against women are normalized due to pervasive attitudes regarding sex and gender that reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Herman, 1984). The stipulations of this definition are not



universally accepted, however, as many scholars argue that rape culture is much more complex than male-on-female violence (Aronowitz, 2014) and often includes normalized violence against men who do not conform to hegemonic male ideals (Belkin, 2008). Regardless, the normalization of sexual violence is consistent in the current literature.

As the definition of rape culture tends to involve hegemonic masculine men as the aggressive force, numerous studies have linked rape culture to masculinity. Studies on the psychology of masculinity and the toxic side effects therein have linked high occurrences of conventional masculinity to elevated levels of mental instability (Boysen, Ebersole, Casner, & Coston, 2014). Other studies have linked neurosis to increased likelihood of sexual coercion (Daspe, Sabourin, Godbout, Lussier, & Hébert, 2016). The current psychology literature does not directly correlate masculinity with sexual coercion, but this is the dominant idea perpetuated within rape culture. Indeed, traits of classic masculinity have been used as defenses in cases of rape (Warner, 2000).

### **Communities of Study in Rape Culture**

The most commonly studied setting for rape culture commentaries has been college campuses. Jackson Katz has studied rape culture as it has manifested among male college athletes. Specifically, Katz (1995) argues that male violence against women originates not from the individual but from the sociocultural definitions that define “manhood” as inherently violent and socialize men into believing that violent behavior is a part of being masculine; these toxic norms, Katz elaborates, can be assuaged through active acknowledgement and resistance of these norms. Boswell and Spade (1996) apply theories of rape culture to college fraternities, arguing that women actively avoid attending fraternity houses that they deem “high risk”—houses that manifest evidence of a present rape culture, such as sexual harassment of and inappropriate

joking toward women, intentional isolation of particular women, and gender ratios favoring men. Bretz comments on the problematic nature of speaking to demographically divided audiences about rape culture on college campuses because, while statistically 1 in 4 women will experience rape or sexual assault, “up to 60 percent of the male students would commit actions that meet the legal definition of sexual assault if they were certain that they wouldn’t get caught” (2014, p. 19). As a consequence, creating and instilling a cohesive message that people can process and internalize is problematic.

While college campuses have been the most common medium for rape culture studies, popular culture has also been thoroughly examined in this context. Studies of rape jokes by popular comedians have yielded results suggesting that the media framing of them as harmless humor reinforces and legitimates real world instances of misogynistic humor (Pérez & Greene, 2016). A content analysis of George R. R. Martin’s popular *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series suggests that fan interpretations and narratives of graphic rape scenes in popular media simultaneously recreate rape culture discourse while also creating social and linguistic space to have meaningful discussions about sexual assault and rape (Ferreday, 2015). A perspective incorporating intersectionality examines both gender and race as they play into perpetuating rape culture: while popular music may tend to sexualize women in a predatory way, black musicians have been disproportionately targeted with this criticism (Khan, 2017). Popular culture has been a common vehicle for examining and critiquing instances of rape culture, but popular culture conventions and cosplay communities have yet to be scrutinized with this lens.

### **Rape Culture, Gender Norms, and Technology**

Those who argue that rape culture does indeed exist and poses a problem to society tend to assert that the dissolution of gender norms may mitigate the continuing issues rape culture

perpetuates. The logic for this idea is based in the idea that conversations around rape tend to focus more on how women invite sexual attention and fail to enact preventative measures, rather than on the men actually perpetrating the rape (George & Martinez, 2002). This collective attitude is indicative of existing gender norms suggesting that women are “asking for rape” (Campo-Engelstein, 2009, p. 41) and that men who are raped simply are not living up to standards of hegemonic masculinity (Belkin, 2008). Fraser (2015) agrees that dissolving gender norms, even the ones that are “beneficial” to women such as the concept of chivalry, can help to assuage the negative impact of rape culture. Agreement on dissolution of gender norms as a solution is not unanimous in the current literature, however, as there are those who argue that dissolving these gender norms may inadvertently subvert minority groups who have a history of experiencing oppression when white women accuse them of rape (Gruber, 2016).

Aside from unpacking gender norms and their connotations, another proposed method of alleviating the impact of rape culture is by using the Internet as a critical communication tool. With the widespread reach of the Internet and the communities capable of being built via online interaction, the urgency of addressing rape culture is intensified on a more national and potentially global level (Horeck, 2014). While the Internet does create a potentially toxic platform from which people can perform, perpetuate, and exacerbate rape culture, online communication is also a means by which people can build a complex social network on which they can discuss examples of rape culture, educate one another on what exactly rape culture is, and form specific strategies to combat rape culture in a proactive manner (Sills, Pickens, Beach, Jones, Calder-Dawe, Benton-Greig, & Gavey, 2016).

While the specific definition of and solutions for rape culture are still under contention in academia, agreement exists that rape culture is an observable, existing phenomenon. To fully

develop the conversation, it is important to discuss one of the fundamental concepts in rape culture: sexual harassment.

## **Sexual Harassment**

Definitions of sexual harassment have varied throughout time, across definitions, and cross-culturally. In most legal contexts, sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances’ and behavior that can ‘create a hostile or intimidating work environment’” (Gutek, 1995, p. 460). The field of psychology later expanded this definition, considering it to be “a subjective phenomenon regarded as a set of sexual, physical, verbal and nonverbal behaviours [sic] which are undesired by the person receiving them, who perceives them as offensive or threatening and is not sure how to deal with them” (Ferrer-Pérez & Bosch-Fiol, 2014, p. 2). The perspective of sexual harassment as subjective experience has come into prominence but not without controversy. Because women experience the majority of sexual harassment, their particular experiences could be downplayed as invalid or biased; at the same time, total objectivity in defining harassment is problematic because this would diminish the points of view of those who claim sexual harassment under a potentially different definition (Carstensen, 2016). For example, Powell found that, in a definition of harassment that includes such acts as “staring, flirting, suggestive gestures, [and] sexual remarks” (1983, p. 114), as much as 87 percent of women have experienced harassment in the workplace. Some definitions of harassment, however, may not account for these phenomena. One common theme that emerges across different definitions of sexual harassment is that a situation is considered sexual harassment if there is an element of violence, coercion, or threat to the encounter (Charlesworth, McDonald, & Cerise, 2011; Sev’er, 1999; Tang & Yik, 1995; Tang & Yik, 1996; Tinkler, 2008).

## **Varying Definitions of Sexual Harassment**

While many organizations and disciplines use similar designations for what constitutes sexual harassment, the definition is not universally agreed upon, which makes ascertaining subjective experience of sexual harassment difficult. Evidence exists suggesting that men and women define sexual harassment in different ways. Because women experience sexual harassment more frequently than men, women tend to identify more with victims of sexual harassment; by contrast, because men are sexually harassed far less frequently than women and because most sexual harassers are male, men are more likely to identify with the alleged perpetrators than with the victims (Gutek, 1995). Another contributing factor to such attitudes is what Lonsway, Cortina, and Magley refer to as sexual harassment mythology, which are “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual harassment of women” (2008, p. 600). Sexual harassment myths cause men to be more likely to accept that women may exaggerate instances of sexual harassment in effort to gain attention (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). In many situations, women will not index or indicate a potentially threatening interaction as sexual harassment for a variety of reasons, such as narrow definitions of sexual harassment (Charlesworth, McDonald, & Cerise, 2011), wishing not to be perceived as “weak” (Hanrahan, 1997; Saunders & Easteal, 2013), or being socialized into the idea that sexual harassment when one is a woman is simply “part of the job” (Brunner & Dever, 2014). These factors combined cause sexual harassment to remain vastly underreported, particularly in the workplace, contributing to the myth that sexual harassment is infrequent and exaggerated (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Saunders & Easteal, 2013).

## **Women's Experiences with Harassment**

In these terms, understanding sexual harassment means understanding women's individual experiences with sexual harassment, with the vast majority of scholarly research in the topic area having been conducted in the context of the workplace (Blackstone, Houle, & Uggen, 2014; Brunner & Dever, 2014; Charlesworth, McDonald, & Cerise, 2011; Hanrahan, 1997; Latcheva, 2017; Maypole & Skaine, 1983; Saunders & Easteal, 2013). Women's definitions of sexual harassment tend to vary based on personal experience. Women of color have been found to experience disproportionate levels of sexual harassment, exacerbated by their invisibility within the literature; in particular, they face harassment on the basis of racial stereotypes or features based on race (Mecca & Rubin, 1999). Women in workplaces deemed more "masculine"—such as industry or agriculture jobs—experience not only higher levels of one-on-one harassment but also instances of "pack-on-one" harassment in which groups of men will collectively and simultaneously harass a lone woman (Saunders & Easteal, 2013). Younger women in professional fields also face inordinately high frequencies of sexual harassment, and harassment has come to be more common online than in-person (Latcheva, 2017).

## **Sexual Harassment and Social Discourse**

As subjective experiences with sexual harassment have come to be more visible in public perception, discussions of sexual harassment and its definitions have become more nuanced. When anti-harassment training initiatives are incorporated into workplaces and other formal settings, definitions of harassment tend to become more layered, awareness raises, and people are more likely to report harassment as it occurs (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Tinkler, 2008). The term "sexual harassment" has even come to include offers for sexual encounters. Rocha offers insight into how this can meaningfully be interpreted as harassment:

In the sexual harassment coercive offer, the supervisor makes an offer that references a set of his employee's standards that we can reasonably assume she wouldn't want referenced in the workplace. The employee's preferable option is to keep the two spheres of her autonomy standards (sexuality and career) separate. By making an offer that brings those two spheres together, the supervisor eliminates the preferable option where she continues unabated in her non-sexualized career; thus, he disrespects her autonomy in a way that appears to be inherently coercive. (2011, p. 213)

While a sexual offer could be perceived as "harmless" by some, such an interaction in fact forces the recipient into a position of having to accept or reject an inappropriate offer, transforming her—or him—into a sexual being within an ideally non-sexual context, creating a power dynamic with which one should arguably not be forced to contend. This threat of harassment even in seemingly innocuous forms has even caused women to change their workplace conduct and attire in many instances. Brunner and Dever (2014) comment on the informal workplace pressure from male coworkers that often causes women to avoid clothing or behavior that may come across as sexualized or even feminine. In response to inappropriate behavior or commentary from male coworkers, the authors claim that "women must struggle to reduce the impact and visibility of their bodies without compromising the requisite performance of heterosexual femininity" (p. 469).

Harassment remains a problem not only in the workplace but also in other social settings and recreational communities such as women who cosplay. Thakur & Paul (2017) argue that, while procedures exist within workplace bureaucracy and legal methods that address individual cases of sexual harassment, the problem is not merely individual but institutional; combating the severity of sexual harassment will require effort on the part of whole communities expressing that sexual harassment includes a variety of acts and is socially unacceptable. One discussion that is often important in social discourse around harassment—and indeed in the discussion of women cosplayers who are harassed—is the idea of consent or lack thereof.

## **Consent Customs**

Because of the recent discussions about rape culture becoming more prevalent, a reassessment of customs and norms surrounding consent has become necessary. The question of how exactly one should obtain and communicate consent has a patchy history, with some scholars in the past rejecting the norm of “active consent,” also called “expressed consent”—an explicit “yes” or “no” to the direct question of whether or not one would like to engage in a sexual act—because it allegedly makes the line between sex and rape uncomfortably well-defined (Orton, 1994; Jozkowski, 2015). An alternative to obtaining verbal consent in more recent literature is through body language—implying consent with physical cues. This reliance on body language is problematic, however, because, according to a study with heterosexual college undergraduates, even though men are more likely to interpret consent through body language, women are generally more comfortable with using verbal language to communicate consent (Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanders, Dennis, & Reece, 2014). Furthermore, current research suggests that body language is not a reliable indicator of consent due to varying indicators and interpretations of tacit consent (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016).

While numerous recommendations have been offered as to how to deal with this problem of consent—how it should be communicated, initiated, and maintained—the most common one is the institution of active or “affirmative” consent. Despite Orton’s (1994) objection that research of the time was flawed due to its nature of “agenda-setting” (p. 149), a criticism that can also be applied to current research, there is a growing body of literature recommending a social standard for what constitutes affirmative consent: that there should be a clear “yes” verbalized and that all parties involved should be of sound mind by definition of the law (Croskery-Hewitt, 2015; Hilgert, 2016; Shaw, 2016); and, if both parties are intoxicated, then consent is nullified



(Aronowitz, 2014). While this consent paradigm does potentially raise the question of which party is actually responsible for obtaining consent (Brewis, 2014; Hilgert, 2016), public health officials are firm in the position that it is chiefly the responsibility of whoever initiates the sex act, assuaging this ambiguity (Larcombe, Fileborn, Powell, Hanley, & Henry, 2016). Deviant communities such as practitioners of Bondage, Domination, and Sadomasochism, or “BDSM,” tend to have more focused conversations and customs surrounding affirmative consent, implementing these customs constructively and consistently (Beres & MacDonald, 2015); but, because of the stigma many of these communities face, the conversation has been largely prevented from diffusing into common knowledge (Tripodi, 2017).

In terms of how these recommendations have been addressed in current custom and law, the current impact is minimal. Some states have signed policy into law informed by the idea of active consent in order to curb the rates of sexual assault (Lovett, 2014); as it stands, current norms and laws on obtaining and giving consent remain scattered and outdated (Shaw, 2016).

### **The Cosplay Community as a Microcosm of Society**

While it may seem a stretch to apply literature surrounding rape and consent to a recreational setting such as public cosplay conventions, current research suggests that consent customs need not apply only to overtly sexual situations but also to implied sexuality and institutions (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), such as the sexualization experienced by cosplayers. In studying the sexual socialization and politics that take place at cosplay conventions, Rodriguez (2015) argues that cosplay conventions tend to be controlled by hegemonic masculine males who resist incorporating women and femininity into the convention space. Men often alienate women through means of performing hegemonic, aggressive masculinity, such as through outward prejudice, verbal jeering, sexual harassment, and generally unwelcome attention and advances

(Rodriguez, 2015). Because Rodriguez elected to study men in this setting, there is a clearer view of men's general perspectives on cosplay and the convention setting; currently, women's voices are missing from this discussion, and this is the gap I aim to fill with this investigation. Before delving into the methods by which I will explore this phenomenon of female oppression in cosplay, I will spend the next chapter establishing the theoretical framework for this study: Goffman's dramaturgy and stigma, and Butler's gender performance and gender undoing.

## CHAPTER III

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter III outlines the two principle theorists whose work will be used to build context and framework for the project: Erving Goffman and Judith Butler. Beginning with a description of Goffman's theories of dramaturgy, self-presentation, and social stigma, I lead into a discussion of Butler's theories surrounding gender performativity. Each section contains references to the appropriateness of each theory to the cosplay community and to this study. The chapter concludes with remarks relating these theories to the academic study of the cosplay community.

#### **Presentation of Self: Dramaturgy and Impression Management**

In depicting how actions and impressions dictate the realities of social interaction, Erving Goffman employs the metaphor of an actor performing on stage for an audience to give meaning to the “performances” people affect in everyday life. Using a hospital environment as an example, he refers to it as an “elaborate scientific stage” (Goffman, 1959, p. 23), with doctors, nurses, and patients being the performers and the lab coats, uniforms, and medical equipment acting as the props. Every social situation, Goffman asserts, has these different characters, props, accoutrements, and backdrops, and this assumption is the crux for the theory of dramaturgy—that people constantly perform parts for one another.

To further elaborate on this analogy of life as theater, Goffman describes the “front stage” self as the part of the individual that they intentionally perform, that the world sees (Goffman, 1959). This assumption of the “front stage” and the “back stage” is important in understanding Goffman's argument about how the social self is formed:

In analyzing the self then we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something

of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments. There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character's self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements. (Goffman, 1959, p. 253)

This passage outlines perhaps the most important component of Goffman's theory of dramaturgy: the legitimacy of the performance rests not only on the performer's ability to create a character but also the audience's willingness to believe the character presented to them. The consent of the audience to believe in the character is perhaps more important than the performance of the character.

Goffman defines the difference between the "performer" and the "character" in everyday life. Specifically, he states that the performer is "a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance," while the character is "a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke" (Goffman, 1959, p. 252). The "character" and the "performer" are both aspects of the self, but they are divorced from one another: the desirable qualities of the character are what the performer wishes the world to see, so this is the impression she or he maintains. While maintaining this impression of an immaculately conceived character is mentally taxing and can lead to social strain, and while the character can sometimes slip to expose the performer behind, it is still possible and indeed profitable for people to maintain their character/performer dichotomies (Goffman, 1963). Provided they are able to maintain this impression of an immaculate character over an imperfect performer, "the performance will come off and the firm self accorded each performed character will appear to emanate intrinsically from its performer" (Goffman, 1959, p. 253).

Making an important distinction in terms of moral intent, Goffman is careful to point out that the performer is not overly concerned with making the character her or his true self. Indeed, his choice of language indicating that the character will “appear” (Goffman, 1963, p. 253) to be inherent to the performer is telling. People are continuously consumed with managing the impression they intend to give off, living up to the standards for the character they create set forth both by themselves and by society; these “individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized” (Goffman, 1959, p. 251). Goffman is careful to express that the performer is concerned not with actually becoming the character she or he has created but with making others believe in the character’s authenticity. If we think of it in terms of the character being a mask and the performer being a face, the performer is not concerned with the mask becoming her or his face; the goal is to make sure the people for whom she or he performs *perceive* the mask as being the performer’s authentic face.

Applying Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis to the community under examination, cosplayers dress in costumes, perform parts, and manage different aspects of themselves in a more literal sense than Goffman necessarily means. Notwithstanding, the exaggerated performative nature of the cosplay community can be better contextualized through Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy: while cosplayers intentionally forge costumes, choose props, and develop character impressions, the formation of the “character” versus the “performer” is perhaps less conscious and less intentional than the creation of the costume. In other words, the context of cosplay highlights the distinction between the character and the performer because of the greater consciousness and intention behind the conceptualization of the costumes and the performance of the character. While this binary between the performer and the character partially explains how

cosplayers perceive and socialize with one another, it does not illuminate why and how they convene chiefly at popular culture conventions. On that note, I turn to a discussion of Goffman's theory of stigmatized sects of society.

## **Stigma**

The concept of impression management is not exclusive to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, as he also incorporates impression management into his discussion of social stigma. Goffman defines stigma as a social process by which people with undesirable traits are actively shunned and rejected by people in mainstream society (Goffman, 1963). These undesirable traits can manifest in one of three forms: physical deformities or disabilities; deviant life decisions such as criminal activity or alcoholism; or prejudices against people based on race, ethnicity, or other traits that deviate from the hegemonic norms of the surrounding society (Goffman, 1963). Some of the mechanisms that stigmatized people utilize to cope with their social stigma are hiding the traits that would cause society to index them as deviant, intentionally avoiding interaction with the society that imposes the stigma, and finding communities of people enduring the same stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman dedicates an entire chapter of *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) to the identity management tactic of finding and forming similar-situated communities. Contrary to the dominant society's views that people with stigma are "less than human," people in the stigmatized in-group are encouraged by one another to see themselves "as fully human" (Goffman, 1963, p. 115). While this sense of community can foster good esteem for one's self and for others afflicted with the same stigma, contradictory language and behavior can often cause discord with regard to how one is expected to behave, resulting in ambivalent behavior. Specifically, Goffman explains: "[t]he stigmatized person is almost always warned

against trying to pass completely [as normal]. [...] Too, he is generally warned against fully accepting as his own the negative attitudes of others toward him” (Goffman, 1963, p. 109). Stigmatized people also warn each other against “[...] [acting] out before normals the full dance of bad qualities imputed to his kind, thereby consolidating a life situation into a clownish role” (Goffman, 1963, p. 110). While they encourage one another not to hide or suppress the trait for which society assigns this stigma, neither should they caricaturize this peculiarity, for it could lead to further stigmatization and stereotyping of people with the same affliction, causing the whole community to suffer and become further dehumanized in the eyes of the public (Goffman, 1963). The contradictions such as these that stigmatized people face in everyday life cause them to seek solace with one another. This sense of in-group belonging promotes a sense of camaraderie and authenticity (Goffman, 1963; Goffman, 2004).

While the current project can be well contextualized within the frame of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective alone, I add his commentary on stigmatized individuals to lend further perspective to the environment of the con that may otherwise be lacking. What is important to note here is that evidence of an actual stigma against cosplayers in the current literature is sparse, but the *perceived* stigma on the part of the community members is still significant. Cosplayers as well as con attendees and *otaku* in general report feelings of ostracism by the greater society (Kinsella, 1998; Kinsella, 2006; Napier, 2007), causing them to form the stigmatized in-group Goffman describes. Within this community, women report feeling stigmatized by fellow members of the “other” in this in-group—the men (Lamerichs, 2011; Rodriguez, 2015; Yodovich, 2016). Thus, in this process, the women themselves become “othered” among the others. The issue of why cosplayers form in-groups on the convention circuit can be well understood within the framework of Goffman’s stigma. The question remains, however: what

happens when sects within the in-group—the women in the cosplay community—experience stigma *within* the stigmatized community with which they identify? Because of the inherently gendered nature of this social cleavage, it becomes important not only to ascertain how people perform characters but also how people create and recreate gender in these performances. It is with this idea of gender disparity in mind that I now turn to discuss Butler’s theory of gender performativity.

### **Gender Performativity**

Before her 1990 seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler offered a primer in her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” for her theory that gender, rather than being what one *is*, is what one *does*: it is an action rather than a predetermined existence (Butler, 1988). Specifically, she states that gender is “not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly” (Butler, 1988, p. 531). She further defines gender as “a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler, 1990, p. 190). In describing gender as “performative,” Butler specifically indexes gender as an action taken under great social strain. There is a massive amount of social pressure to conform to gender roles, causing people to perform these roles in often ostentatious ways so as to maintain the impression of gender role conformity (Butler, 1990).

The similarities between Goffman’s dramaturgy and Butler’s perspective on gender performance may already be apparent and perhaps make the latter seem superfluous in this analysis. Indeed, Butler echoes Goffman in her assertion that gender is “the appearance of



substance,” as well as “a constructed identity [and] a performative accomplishment” executed in front of a “mundane audience” (Butler, 1990, p. 192). The presence and feedback of an audience are important here, as well, and the performer/character dichotomy is still apparent, even if Butler uses different language to distinguish the two.

In spite of these similarities, two aspects of gender performativity distinguish it from dramaturgy. First, Butler accentuates the importance of repetition in creating this reality of gender. She argues that gender should not be interpreted “as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1990, p. 191). In other words, the performativity of gender is not only dependent on flaccid framework, but the performance must be consistently iterated in order to be sustained, ritualistically repeated and recreated numerous times. She expands upon this necessity of repetition in her later work, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), stating that “performativity cannot be understood outside the process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (p. 95).

The second distinguishing aspect of Butler’s theory is her argument that people come to truly believe in the roles they are playing. While Goffman argues that people separate their performer selves from their character selves via the front stage and the back stage, Butler argues that gender is “a performative accomplishment” with “the appearance of substance” that “the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1990, p. 192). To be clear, Goffman and Butler are in agreement that the performer can never manifest the performance as part of their true identity: Goffman argues that “[the] attributes of a performer and the attributes of a character are of a different order” (1959, p. 252), and Butler states in no uncertain terms that gender is “[...] a norm that can never be fully

internalized; the ‘internal’ is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (Butler, 1990, p. 192). Butler’s assertion stands, however, that while gender roles are abstract and never fully realized, people nonetheless perceive their fulfillment of these roles as parts of their authentic selves.

The central thesis of gender performativity is, very succinctly, that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (Butler, 1990, p. 192). Because of the gendered nature of the schism in the cosplay community in this study, it is appropriate to ask not only how cosplayers perform characters for one another but also how they perform gender for one another. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this community is well-known for resisting gender norms (Gn, 2011; Kerzner, 2016; Kinsella, 2006; Peirson-Smith, 2013). To incorporate this tendency of the community to resist gender into the analysis, I turn now to discuss Butler’s later views on how gender is undone.

### **Resisting Gender**

Fourteen years after publishing *Gender Trouble*, Butler published what was in many ways a follow up in *Undoing Gender* (2004) in which one of the main topics under discussion is the resistance of conventional gender norms. She anticipates her later position on gender deconstruction towards the end of *Gender Trouble*:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a “ground” will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time. The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *discontinuity*, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this “ground.” (Butler, 1990, p. 192)

This passage essentially acts as foreshadowing of her later, more developed assertion explored in *Undoing Gender*: that gender and the norms around it are entirely arbitrary, thus it can be resisted and even undone.

Such a claim rests upon the assumption that gender is “a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing,” and is thus not “automatic or mechanical” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). This understanding that gender is unconscious but intentional substantiates her claim in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender roles can never be fully internalized, and she offers further reasoning for that assertion. Gender, she claims, instead of being unconscious, “is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Again, gender is a performance of which people are always at least partially cognizant, a result of the society that normalizes the necessity for assuming these roles.

In discussing how these roles are rejected, Butler discusses at great length how autonomy plays into this dynamic. She makes reference to this idea of agency in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) with the claim that the performance of gender is a “ritualized production” performed “under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo” (p. 95). Gender roles are predetermined and informally enforced, and failure to comply with these decided-upon norms has social consequences. As gender performance is a social act, social conditions dictate that “[...] what is one’s own is always from the start dependent upon what is not one’s own, the social conditions by which autonomy is, strangely, dispossessed and undone” (Butler, 2004, p. 100). What Butler means by “one’s own” here is the freedom to choose one’s behavior: while technically “free,” behavior and identity are always subject to criticism based on gendered

expectations. Because deviation from gender roles is met with ostracism and in some cases direct control, the “freedom” of choice is highly limited (Butler, 2004). In suggesting how to overcome these impositions on human agency, she claims that:

[W]e must be undone in order to do ourselves: we must be part of a larger social fabric of existence in order to create who we are. This is surely the paradox of autonomy, a paradox that is heightened when gender regulations work to paralyze the gendered agency at various levels. Until these social conditions are radically changed, freedom will require unfreedom, and autonomy is implicated in subjection. (Butler, 2004, pp. 100-101)

Because gender norms are not completely automatic or unconscious, they can be resisted and even undone, but this resistance will be met with social tensions. Unraveling these norms is possible, but one who resists these norms should, ironically, be prepared for a deprivation of agency: the social exclusion that will result is inevitable in this case. Still, she maintains that “[i]t may be that what is ‘right’ and what is ‘good’ consist in staying open to the tensions that beset the fundamental categories we require, to know unknowingness at the core of what we know” (Butler, 2004, p. 227). Unbecoming is possible, but it inherently requires discomfort.

This idea of deconstructing and un-performing gender is important in understanding one phenomena gaining prominence in the cosplay community, known as “cross-play.” Originating in Japan among Japanese men who dressed as Lolita characters (Kinsella, 2006), “cross-play” describes a situation in which one cosplays as a character with whom their gender identification does not align (Peirson-Smith, 2013). The often genderless nature of cosplay is important to understand because female cosplayers are not always going to cosplay female characters. Indeed, male characters and even agendered characters are commonly seen, as well. The fact that cosplayers assume these visages in the context of the “safe space” of a convention is telling of the “unfreedom” Butler describes that prefaces the “freedom” of being liberated from the strains of socially constructed gender roles. In other words, individuals are implicated in the gendered

social context within which they are resisting gender, which is the “unfreedom” Butler articulates, and until this social hegemony is changed—a hegemony that includes convention spaces—“unfreedom” will remain the norm.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Goffman, Butler, and the Women who Cosplay**

The intermingling of these four theories establish the framework by which this investigation was conducted. Dramaturgy illuminates the performative aspects of the community: the costuming, the character/performer dichotomy, and identity management are all exaggerated in the cosplay community from what Goffman theorizes, but they are all there. The incorporation of stigma elucidates how and why cosplayers end up at popular culture cons. The gendered oppression that women experience at cons also necessitates a gendered theoretical approach, and while Goffman does not entirely leave gender unexplored—indeed suggesting that gender is “ritualized” (Goffman, 1979, p. 84)—Butler’s theory of gender performativity illuminates the social constraints of gender and the pressure to perform gender and gender roles for one another. Furthermore, her commentary on how gender is undone suggests that these roles can indeed be resisted, but it will lead to social strain and perhaps alienation—the same kind of alienation discussed in Goffman’s theory on stigma (1963).

The character performance aspect of dramaturgy and the gender construction aspect of gender performativity together form the framework around which the research questions in this study will be addressed: women’s experiences at conventions, the social stigma and “othering” they experience, and the coping and resistance mechanisms they develop as a result. On that note, I turn now to the discussion of the methods by which I will explore these questions.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project is to investigate the lived experiences of women at cosplay conventions, the extent to which they experience unwelcome attention and deprivation of agency, and what coping mechanisms they have developed to manage the oppression and stigma they may face. This chapter outlines the methods of participant-observation and in-depth interviews that were utilized to answer these questions. To analyze the data, I applied a grounded theory approach to allow the coding designations for the data to develop from the collected data themselves.

#### **Participant-Observation**

Despite my use of the term “ethnographic research,” I hesitate to call the methodology for this project “ethnography.” The precise definition of ethnography varies depending on the researcher, and the amount of time that constitutes a “true” ethnography varies even more widely:

The ethnographic research process involves longer term, face-to-face interaction with people in the research community [...] Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnographers lived in a community for up to 2 or 3 years, learning about as many aspects of community life as possible. Nowadays, ethnographers work for shorter periods of time in communities of varying size and complexity, and in institutions that may be local, regional, national or global. (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, pp. 4-5)

No precise, universal definition exists that specifically binds ethnography to a minimum amount of time spent in the field site. Furthermore, while early ethnographers typically spent years in their field sites, contemporary changes have brought about a more flexible definition of ethnography, with many researchers electing to spend months or even weeks in their field sites as opposed to years (Hesse-Biber, 2017; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Van Maanen, 1989).

Despite the malleability modernity has brought to how researchers conceptualize ethnography, the main reason for my discomfort with the term as it relates to this project stems from the transient nature of the cosplay and convention-attending communities. Because conventions typically last no longer than three to five days at a time, the community is constantly moving from location to location, only to convene for short periods of time, and experience continuous change in membership make up. In other words, different people attend different conventions: while some attend numerous conventions per year, others will only go to one every couple of years. This concept of a constantly changing, evolving field location has been well examined in anthropological literature, with Gupta and Ferguson suggesting that “[...] the idea of locality in anthropology is not well thought out. Clearly geographical contiguity and boundedness are insufficient to define a ‘local community’” (1997, p. 15). As the world has been subject to increasing globalization and interconnectedness, communities have been less socially and even geopolitically bound to a particular space, so anthropologists have had to reconceptualize how they view and study the concept of “the field” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). The cosplay community serves as an example of such a community, with members spending a majority of their time outside of “the con”—what might be understood as the field site (Napier, 2007). Thus, establishing a solid, consistent community with which to form a rapport, find informants, and look for patterns over a period of years is certainly not impossible. It is, however, beyond the scope of this project, so, rather than firmly labeling it “ethnography,” I describe this project as a qualitative study utilizing ethnographic methods.

### **Selection of Locations**

The following conventions constituted my data collection sites: ColossalCon, an annual, four-day anime, gaming, and Japanese culture convention held June 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> at the Kalahari Resort

and Conference Center in Sandusky, OH; Anime Mid-Atlantic, a three-day, annual Japanese animation and culture convention held June 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott Hotel in Chesapeake, VA; and Tsubasacon, a three-day, annual anime, gaming, and cosplay convention held October 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena in Huntington, WV.

The conventions that served as locations for data collection were based on a seemingly contradictory desire for homogeneity and a desire for variety. The homogeneity emerges from the fact that all three conventions are generally in the same region of the country. To be clear, I could find no standard of regional differentiation that places these specific parts of Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia in the same geographic category—for example, the Census Bureau places Ohio in Division 3 of the Midwest, and Virginia and West Virginia in Division 5 of the South (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013). While parts of all three of these states exist in the Appalachian region, Sandusky, OH and Chesapeake, VA do not fall within this region. Despite this disparity, Ohio borders West Virginia to the north and Virginia borders West Virginia to the southeast, so while these states are not institutionally recognized as being regionally connected, they each exist in the same general area. Furthermore, each of the specific conventions takes place in a relatively rural area, and rural conventions are relatively understudied in cosplay literature (Clark, Manifold, & Zimmerman, 2007).

Another aspect adding theoretical cohesion to the site is the fact that, rather than simply being popular culture conventions, each of them are specifically anime conventions. My choice to do this was intentional: if I had chosen, for instance, to attend an anime convention, a comic book convention, and a video game convention, this could yield data without consistency or continuity. Much of the literature on conventions discusses “popular culture conventions” as a holistic entity, indistinguishable from one another, so this study presents an opportunity to



investigate if different types of conventions are theoretically distinct from one another, even if only in the aspect of how women navigate convention spaces. Because cosplay originated from Japanese culture and because anime conventions are the most directly connected to Japanese culture by their very nature, theoretically isolating this study to anime conventions allows an opportunity to see if different types of popular culture conventions are substantively distinctive from one another regarding women's positions in the respective communities.

### **Perspective in Participant-Observation**

Hale (2014) argues that the cosplay community is a legitimate medium for academic study, and more phenomenological, interpretive methods should be employed in future studies on the community. It is with this in mind that I chose participant-observation to be one of the methods for this study. Participant-observation is far and away the most common method used in ethnographic research (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The purpose of participant observation is to investigate the lived experiences of a specific community being researched (Prus, 1996). As described by prolific anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the goal of participant-observation fieldwork is:

To figure out from what the native says and does, what the devil he thinks he's up to, the result being an interpretation of the way a people live that is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft written by the witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinct tonalities of their existence, the ethnography of witchcraft written by the geometer. (1974, p. 30)

Through the metaphor of the witch and the geometer, Geertz describes the problem of having only one perspective represented in the research process. To address this problem, participant-observation as a method grants the researcher direct access to the culture, allowing the perspectives of both the researcher and of the community to be incorporated into the interpretive process (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Van Maanen, 1989).

For my observations, I assumed the role of participant as observer, which is described as a setting in which the researcher “[...] participates fully in the ongoing activities of the research setting, and members of the setting know the identity of the researcher” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 195). Participant as observer is as opposed to the observer as participant role, in which the researcher experiences limited interactions with participants (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As the research questions for this project inquire about the lived experiences of community members, gaining full perspective necessitated extended interaction with women cosplayers; furthermore, recruiting interviewees meant existing in the same physical space as them to assess their appropriateness for this project—areas such as the convention floor, the vendor’s hall, and photo shoot locations provided important areas of access for contacts to interview.

My observations were also as focused toward the experience of female cosplayers as possible. While my senses remained open to any and all observations I could make, my attention was specifically targeted toward interactions and events about and surrounding female cosplayers. This method is informed by the modern ethnographic approach described by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) who suggest that, while classical ethnography seeks to gain a holistic understanding of a given community, modern ethnography tends to be more problem-oriented, targeting a specific aspect of the community under study (pp. 4-5). Because numerous phenomenological and ethnographic studies have been conducted on various convention-going cosplay communities (Gn, 2011; Hale, 2014; Kulagina & Ovchinnikova, 2014; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Rodriguez, 2015), a focused approach on female cosplayers will contribute a novel perspective to the existing research. Informed by this approach, the majority of my time at the conventions I attended were spent at places in which female cosplayers were most likely to congregate: photo shoots, cosplay competitions, and lobbies and hallways in which attendees

request pictures and hugs. Women are most commonly the central figures at photo shoots and cosplay competitions, and they tend to be more likely to be asked for pictures on the convention floor (Napier, 2007; Scott, 2015). Because the convention attendance gender distribution is fairly even between men and women (Salkowitz, 2015) and in order to gain a broader overall perspective of cosplay events, I also conducted participant observation in areas such as vendor rooms, convention site restaurants, and hotel parties.

### **Recording Observations**

The main method of communicating the results of my observations was via recorded field notes. Field notes were recorded using two methods. First, throughout the day at the convention, I used the Memo application on my iPhone to record what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw refer to as “jottings”—“a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases” (1995, p. 29). The jottings were as objective as possible, offering description rather than interpretation. At the beginning and end of each convention day, I used a recording device to audio record “full notes” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), a more detailed account of what I saw and experienced throughout the day, using the jottings as a guide for chronology and specificity. Rather than recording the actions as they occurred, I spoke into the recorder after the field observations took place and recorded my thoughts and reflections. Both the jottings and the transcriptions of the full notes were coded and utilized in the final write-up.

To give the most honest and ethical analysis possible, I feel it is important to identify my relationship with the convention-going community. I have been attending popular culture conventions since 2010 and thus identify strongly with the community. Because of my involvement, there may be a compelling argument that my perspective is not scientific enough to investigate this community. While I have been attending conventions for my entire adult life, I

maintain that I am removed enough from the community's inner workings to give a reasonably objective investigation and interpretation of the community: I have never been in a position of authority, I have never been in charge of events or scheduling, I have never planned or hosted a panel, and I have never even worked as a volunteer. My role in convention life has been overwhelmingly as an observer. Even if my identity as a convention attendee was problematic, my degree of separation from the cosplay community should act as a buffer. Indeed, I myself have never cosplayed. As such, the conflict arising from bias will be reasonably minimal. Furthermore, scientific research conducted from a "native" point of view can often be more revelatory than a total outsider's approach (Laubach, 2002). In this sense, my prior involvement may actually have been a boon to the amount of data to be gained, as convention attendees and interviewees seemed to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and their experiences with me during in-depth interviews (Chang, 2008). Monahan and Fisher argue that "[a]ll knowledge is contingent on the interests of the scientists creating it," (2010, p. 359), a fact of which the community I studied was well aware. As such, my existing identity as a member of the convention-attending community more than likely made them feel as though they did not have to "perform" insofar as they were being observed by a student researcher, also making them feel more comfortable giving me more authentic accounts of their convention experiences. This previous experience arguably allowed me to gather richer, more naturalistic ethnographic data than I may have otherwise been able to collect (Monahan & Fisher, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the advantages my status in the community afforded me, I did meet some ethical challenges during data collection. How was I to act, for instance, when a man approached me at

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Ariane Moore for this insight on how researcher bias can be beneficial to qualitative data collection.

one convention, informed me that his girlfriend was being followed, and asked me to cause a distraction while he and his girlfriend escaped? What course of action should I take when I noticed a male convention attendee inappropriately, as I perceived it, grabbing a female cosplayer who had agreed to take a picture with him? While these dilemmas were by no means constant, they did occur, and I was forced to grapple with my identity as a researcher, my identity as a person, and how these two identities must co-exist during data collection. This sense of oscillating identities is discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

To gain the perspective necessary for the purposes of this project, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 female cosplayers throughout the three conventions I attended during the summer of 2017, making use of a pre-determined interview guide (Appendix C). The interview instrument was designed with two specific goals in mind. The first goal was to seek partial answers to the research questions at hand. To that end, themes of convention experiences, cosplay selection, character performance, unwelcome attention, and perceived acceptance in convention life were all intentionally incorporated. The importance of the interviewee's role in the interpretive process is equally important, however (Heyl, 2001), which leads to the second goal informing the structure and creation of the interview guide: creating space in the interview for the community member to be able not only to answer the general questions but also to present new material not pre-conceived by the study (Briggs, 2007). To address this, each question is open-ended, and the final question probed the interviewee's further thoughts about anything relevant to the conversation not covered during the interview (Fondren, 2009).

Context was important during each interview, as the interview guide was in no way binding. In other words, depending on the direction of the conversation, questions were covered out of order, some questions were discussed in more depth than others, some questions were skipped entirely if their content was covered earlier in that particular interview, and topics not covered in the interview script but germane to the community—such as minority inclusivity and professional cosplayers—were also discussed at length. Ideally, all interviews would have been conducted on the convention sites, but because of the short timeframe afforded to each convention, off site interviews quickly became necessary (Appendix B). Interviews were conducted at a variety of locales, including interviewees' homes, via Skype, a bench at a public park, a coffee shop, an Indian restaurant, the back of a van filled with costumes and props, a warehouse while the interviewee was working on armor for a cosplay, and even a hotel swimming pool. Interview conditions, while mostly conducive to a well-developed conversation, were at times amusing, at times memorable, and at times chaotic. One interview in a crowded hotel hallway saw my interviewee become frustrated with several boisterous young men nearby, walking away from the recorder mid-interview to chastise them for their noise—all of this while cosplaying a medieval noblewoman. During another interview, the cosplayer with whom I was talking opened her blouse and began breastfeeding her newborn, assuring me that it would not cause her to be distracted, with me in turn assuring her that I was fine with her nourishing her child. Interview length was in no way consistent; while the shortest interview was 23 minutes and 14 seconds, the longest interview lasted two hours, 42 minutes, and 53 seconds. Despite the variation, most interviews tended to last somewhere between 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed; the transcriptions were coded and utilized in the final write-up, and the audio recordings were destroyed after transcription, per IRB Protocol (Heyl, 2001).

Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym prior to the interview to maintain subject anonymity. In many cases, I invited interviewees to choose their own pseudonyms, but in the interest of anonymity, I instructed them not to use their “cosplay names,” as this could result in them being traceable on social media. Unlike the long-distance hikers examined by Fondren (2009), cosplayers’ names are usually self-chosen and not based on some aspect of their identity important to this specific study, so proper pseudonyms were chosen thusly.

### **Selection of Participants**

As for how I obtained my sample of interviewees, I employed the snowball method, which is the practice of identifying potential participants from an already familiar network and utilizing their participation in a study (Goodman, 1961). I utilized this method specifically by a combination of reliance on a pre-established professional network and looking out for potential interviewees during observations in the field. While often subject to criticism due to potential sampling bias from its non-random nature, snowballing is an effective technique for dealing with populations difficult to reach with randomized selection methods (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 57). While obtaining a random sample could theoretically be possible from a list of convention attendees, this technique is not typically used in ethnographic research, as part of the idea behind ethnography is establishment of a network within the community (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Van Maanen, 1989).

I identified potential participants in the study based on observations conducted on site at each of the conventions I attended. Initial interviewees were assessed based on the following attributes: volume of interaction with fellow participants, degree of perceived proficiency with

cosplay craftsmanship,<sup>3</sup> and presence and centrality at formal and informal photo shoots. The theoretical basis for these criteria stems from other scholars' descriptions of not only what constitutes cosplay but what makes a cosplayer a cosplayer. Hale's description of cosplay as a relationship between the cosplayer and their on-looking audience forms a critical part of the framework for these standards, as he specifically states: "[a] cosplayer's embodied citational acts are both engendered and circumscribed by a specific character or text, its history, and the audience that recognizes that form as a conventionalized, repeatable configuration of signs" (2014, p. 8). Cosplay's inherent nature of performance guided the interviewee-gathering process, as the most performative cosplayers were the ones not only the most appropriate to the study but also the easiest ones to spot. Further interviewees were gained chiefly from the snowballing technique described earlier: I asked initial interviewees at each convention to suggest other cosplayers they knew whom I could interview, and then I tracked those cosplayers down, interviewed them, repeating the process until theoretical convergence within the sample was reached.

### **Sample Characteristics**

While all the participants I interviewed were women, I added a question to the interview guide allowing them to indicate their gender identities: twenty-eight identify as female, one identifies as gender fluid, and one identifies as non-binary. The respondents' ages range from early twenties to early thirties. Of the respondents, twenty-seven were white, two were East Asian, and one was African American. Their levels of education ranged more significantly, with

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<sup>3</sup> Degree of proficiency with cosplay craftsmanship will be assessed based on observation of a cosplay's complexity, specifically use of compound sewing materials and techniques, electric appendages, wig styling, make-up, and other results of time-consuming craft methods. Other aspects of the cosplay such as props, moving parts, and body language will also be considered.



twelve respondents having at least a bachelor’s degree, eight having a high school diploma or equivalent, six having an associate’s degree or equivalent, three having a master’s degree, and one who did not indicate her highest degree received. There is significant heterogeneity with regard to occupation, with the most common response being in the field of education.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics**

Name	Age	Race	Gender ID	Years of Education	Highest Degree	Occupation	Years Since First Cosplay	Years Since First Convention
Amalia	27	White	Female	16	Associate’s	Homemaker	3	3
Angelique	29	White	Female	21	B. A.	Teacher	6	6
Ashlynn	21	White	Female	13	H. S.	Unemployed	7	7
Blanche	31	White	Female	19	B. A.	Homemaker	16	16
Chelsea	25	White	Female	13	H. S.	Manager	9	9
Claire	31	White	Female	19	M. A.	CSA	13	13
Dolores	23	White	Female	15	H. S.	Bank Teller	4	3
Eleanor	23	White	Female	18	B. A.	Barista	11	11
Elizabeth	24	White	Female	17	B. A.	Teacher	6	6
Farrah	31	White	Female	13	G. E. D.	Homemaker	13	13
Helen	24	White	Female	19	M. A.	Grad Assist.	8	8
Janet	26	White	Female	19	B. A.	Cashier	8	8
Jay	31	White	Gender Fluid	15	H. S.	Healthcare	5	11
Jeanette	23	White	Female	17	B. S.	Engineer	10	11
Jennifer	29	White	Female	17	B. A.	Banker	16	16
Jillian	27	White	Female	18	B. A.	Teacher	13	13
Julia	29	East Asian	Female	16	H. S.	Business Owner	11	15
Karen	32	White	Female	16	H. S.	Education	6	14
Laney	26	White	Female	19	B. A.	Teacher	7	7
Lavina	30	White	Female	19	Associate’s	Paralegal	10	7
Maria	27	White	Female	15	Associate’s	Cook	8	9
Melanie	31	White	Female	19	B. A.	Accountant	15	9
Michelle	27	White	Female	17	B. A.	Archaeologist	6	8
Mira	26	African American	Female	17	B. A.	Baker	5	5
Monica	32	White	Female	23	M. S.	Teacher	8	8
Nora	21	East Asian	Female	13	High School	Retail	5	6
Roxy	21	White	Non-binary	16	N/A	Unemployed	5	5
Sidney	28	White	Female	17	L.P.N.	LPN	8	8
Stevie	29	White	Female	18	Associate’s	Homemaker	18	18
Suzanne	28	White	Female	15	Associate’s	Flight Attendant	11	11

One aspect of the study I found important was to ascertain how many years each participant had been in the cosplay community, both by cosplaying per se as well as convention attending, both of which were treated as two different questions. Forty percent of the respondents have been cosplaying for at least ten years, 36.67 percent have been cosplaying between six and nine years, and 23.33 percent have been cosplaying for five years or fewer. The time spent attending conventions is similar: forty percent have attended conventions for at least ten years, 43.33 percent have attended conventions between six and nine years, and 16.67 percent have attended conventions for five years or fewer. While I did not intentionally select participants based on how long they had been in the cosplay and convention-attending community, the majority of the women I interviewed have been in the community for a significant amount of time.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Once data were gathered, they were coded and analyzed based on a grounded theory approach to identifying emergent themes within the field notes and interview transcripts. Specifically, grounded theory is a research method that allows researchers to build theoretical framework for coding designations based on the data once it has emerged, allowing a practical way to close the gap between extant theory and field application (Charmaz, 2006). While criticisms of this method tend to indicate its unfocused nature and its assumption of theory being divorced from reality (Prus, 1996), an analytical approach from a grounded theory perspective allows for the data to speak for themselves, allowing the codes for the data to emerge relatively free from the preconceived notions of the researcher while also taking into account sensitizing concepts provided by content from the literature review and the theoretical framework. Sensitizing concepts were informed by content relevant to the topical literature and the

theoretical framework, such as cosplay as performance, sexual harassment, and issue of gender; this provided a loose outline from which to begin initial coding (Blumer, 1954). Beyond sensitizing concepts, I also employed a series of questions recommended in grounded theory research, including but not limited to: what do the data suggest? What key words emerge? What is prominent or not prominent among the data? What perspectives are represented or left out? What significant actions and processes take place (Charmaz, 2006)? These questions along with the sensitizing concepts informed the creation of the coding categories in which data were inserted and analyzed, which will be further elucidated in the next chapter.

The methodology heretofore discussed allowed me to gain rich insight into the community of women cosplayers in this region of the country. In-depth interviews with women cosplayers helped me understand their experiences in their own words, and observations of the convention sites let me see for myself how convention life is created and re-created across different geographical locations. The next chapter enumerates the results of data collection.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS

Chapter V answers the three questions that guided this research. To do this, I present various pertinent quotes from in-depth interviews as well as observations from recorded field notes. Seven major themes emerged from data analysis. First, I explore factors related to the specific characters women choose to cosplay. Second, I enumerate the process by which women create or manifest cosplay costumes. Third, I examine factors related to gender that influence cosplay decisions. Fourth, I provide a brief look at convention life and how people express identity and find community. Fifth, I outline the specific ways in which the convention community stigmatizes women. Sixth, I present the mechanisms women have developed to cope with stigma on the convention circuit. Seventh and finally, I include women's narratives of experiencing acceptance and gender equality at conventions.

#### **“I Look to Her for Strength”: Choosing the Character to Cosplay**

An aspect of cosplay that emerged from many women's narratives is that life at the convention begins long before one ever arrives at the convention site. Choosing a character, conceptualizing the costume, and creating the piece is a process that can begin often months before the convention weekend. One topic explored in numerous interviews I conducted was the different reasons women have for choosing the character they wish to cosplay.

##### **Personal Connection to the Character**

The most common reason interviewees indicated for choosing a particular character to cosplay was a personal connection to the character. By this, I mean that a specific character either has some kind of personality trait with which the cosplayer identifies or the character has a characteristic the cosplayer idealizes, one unrelated to the character's physical appearance. One

respondent immediately made it clear that “having a general love for a character is the main focus for doing a cosplay. The character has to really stand out to me.” Another cosplayer specifically mentioned that she usually chooses “characters that are close to me in personality because I’m pretty bubbly, so it’s not hard for me to act like them at a con.” Jillian, a 27-year-old dance teacher who has cosplayed for thirteen years, described in detail her motivation for choosing to cosplay the character Diana from the popular online game “League of Legends”:

Usually, the characters are strong female characters, usually in your face, kind of sassy, those are usually the kinds of characters that attract me to cosplay because that’s the kind of person that I am either a little bit or a lot. A lot of people, when they first meet me, are intimidated by my loud mouth or my opinions or whatever, and then they get to talking to me and realize I’m not really that scary, but that’s why with Diana, I was like, “I’m going to be this amazing, powerful bitch and I’m going to rock ColossalCon!”<sup>4</sup> Like, those are the kinds of characters that attract me [laughs] and the kind of cosplays I like to do because usually those cosplays are really interesting. I love doing characters that have no chill. That’s just, like, my default mode, is intense, no chill, so I do characters that are intense, no chill [laughs], usually, because that fits my personality.

Numerous cosplayers echoed this sentiment of wishing to cosplay characters with similar personalities. Mira, a 26-year old African American who works in baking, recounted the emotional experience of finding a Disney princess with whom she identified and taking the opportunity to cosplay her:

I absolutely love Disney princesses, but when I saw the movie “The Princess and the Frog,” I saw myself. I finally saw myself in character that I loved, and when I was invited to do a Disney princess group, it was a dream come true. Personality is important because I tend to cosplay characters that are like me because I’m kind of, my first cosplay was a Disney princess, so I’m used to being in character for her, so I pick characters that I can be in character for, whether it’s for a photo shoot or whether a small child comes up to me while I’m cosplaying a Disney princess and wants to meet her favorite princess.

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<sup>4</sup> An underline in data excerpts will indicate that the volume of the speaker’s voice is raised, per the format used by Conley (2016).

Similar personality traits were a common reason why the women I interviewed chose their cosplays, but often it was also related to character traits these women venerated. Melanie, a 31-year-old accountant, detailed why she loves to cosplay Wonder Woman:

I've overcome a lot of things in my life. I've overcome obesity, parental, relationship, physical, mental, and sexual abuse, and in times where I feel weak, I look up and admire characters like Wonder Woman to make me feel stronger, and this probably sounds silly, but it helps me even now that I feel like I'm a strong individual and I've overcome so much. I still look to characters like Wonder Woman for strength and confidence in times where I need it, be my own hero kind of thing. [...] Wonder Woman is a strong female character, you feel like she could overcome anything.

Another cosplayer expressed a sentiment mentioning both traits with which she identified and traits she wished to emulate. Julia, a 29-year-old East Asian business owner, told me:

What intrigues me to cosplay certain characters can depend on how I'm feeling, it can also kind of depend on having similar personality traits that I can resonate with, but one thing I have started doing recently is taking a look outside of what I normally do, something that's apart from myself. There are some characters that I'll take a look at, and, initially I'll be thinking, "no, that's definitely not me," but then, the more I get to learn about their character, a little more about their backstory and have an idea of what each of these characters are going through, how they relate to the character that I really like, it kind of gives a different perspective, and I'm just kind of thinking to myself, "you know, I've never thought about it this way before, but I'm willing to open my mind and my heart to try this avenue," and a lot of times, it opens my eyes, not just with the relationships of these characters, but also with how I relate to others in real life. So, I try to use cosplay not just as an expressive outlet but also as a way to open myself up to new ideas, new experiences.

Julia's perspective blends together the ideas not only of identifying with a character based on common traits between the cosplayer and the character but also on the new points of view to which one may be exposed by choosing a character different in personality from the cosplayer.

While similar and desirable character traits were the most common reason the women I interviewed indicated for choosing to cosplay a character, many interviewees also indicated character design as a significant motivator in choosing a cosplay.

## Appealing Character Design

When I discuss character design, I refer specifically to the physical appearance, particularly their clothing, hairstyle, and makeup, since cosplay is a costume-focused hobby. Numerous interviewees indicated character design as a significant factor in choosing a cosplay. For example, Jeanette, a 23-year-old engineer who has cosplayed for ten years, told me, when pressed on the issue, if she had to choose between a great personality and great design, “I would go for an awesome character design just because the flashiness and talking to people about how awesome the costume is, that’s really what I like to experience when I go to a con.” Angelique, a 29-year-old who has cosplayed for six years, expressed the same feeling, stating that, on top of liking the character’s personality, “the outfit needs to be something that I would enjoy wearing, because I don’t want to spend a lot of money buying something for a character or a series that I don’t even like.” Michelle, a 27-year-old archaeologist who has cosplayed for six years and attended conventions for eight, related the following about the significance of character design to her:

Sometimes I decide that I want to cosplay a character because I think that their costume or their outfit or their overall appearance is super, like, really cool or interesting. Like, I realize that I’m talking about video games and anime or whatever, so they’re not real, but their appearance of different fabric textures and types of fabric and colors, like, sometimes I’ll pick a character based on how much I like that, sometimes more so than how much I like the character. I’ve cosplayed multiple characters that I don’t really have necessarily an emotional connection to them. I just decide, “well, their costume looks pretty cool, this event is oriented toward this theme,” so I just kind of choose based on that sometimes.

While not everyone in the community emphasizes design over personality in the same way as Michelle, design is almost always a contributing factor to the choice in cosplay. Stevie, who has been cosplaying for eighteen years—longer than anyone else I interviewed—shared her process of prioritizing costume over character:

For me, since the hobby involves money, I have to like how they look. That's a big thing for me, because I get a lot of my friends being like, "hey, you should cosplay this character," but if I don't like how they look, I don't want to do it because I want to feel good in what I'm wearing, to me, that's really important. Sometimes, it's like a connection to the character if you really love a series, but for the most part, it really is just feeling good in what I'm wearing.

While some cosplayers may prioritize character personality, others will veer towards interesting visual designs. Before turning to the process of materializing the cosplay, however, I will first discuss one more prominent factor in cosplay choice: physical appearance.

### **Similar Physical Appearance**

While character design is more focused on the clothing and hair for sewing and wig purposes, physical appearance refers more to factors such as hair color, body type, and facial structure. Numerous cosplayers with whom I spoke indicated that, while it is not a unilateral way to make a decision, a character with a similar physical appearance can be an appealing choice. Farrah, who has cosplayed for thirteen years said, "I go for a lot of characters with black hair, I guess where I'm a brunette." Dolores, a 23-year-old bank teller with four years of cosplay experience, echoed a similar idea, telling me, "My typical cosplay would be blondes [laughs]. I know it's silly but I'm drawn to blonde characters first, since I have blonde hair." Lavina, a 30-year-old paralegal who has cosplayed for ten years, noted accuracy as a reason to choose a cosplay based on body type:

I always cosplay characters I can physically pull off. I take into consideration my body type, my facial features, coloring, my overall look, and, of course they have to be characters I already like as well, but part of what makes a good cosplay is being convincing. I love being told that I look like a real life version of a character, it's the ultimate compliment. [...] It's more important to me that I'm as spot on as possible.

Accuracy is important to most cosplayers who make their costumes themselves, and for some cosplayers, physical appearance independent of the costume can contribute to this goal. Jeanette,



who also indicated character design as an important part of the decision-making process, later added:

This is interesting because, for me, I think it's different than for most people. I feel like a lot of people cosplay characters that they make a personal connection to, but whenever I'm choosing people that I want to cosplay, I like that to be a factor in it, but a lot of the time, I will choose a character to cosplay if I think that I look like that character already because I want to be accurate, even though it's okay to cosplay and not be accurate, obviously, but I like to be accurate and I want to look like the character as much as possible, so, if I see a character that looks like me already, then that usually bumps them up on my list in some way [laughs].

To be clear, physical appearance was not as common of a reason among the women I interviewed to choose as cosplay as the aforementioned motivators of personality and design. That said, this issue did arise often enough to warrant discussion, as it contributes partially to how women choose their cosplays. Once the character to cosplay has been chosen, the next step is of course to somehow acquire or create the costume, and it is on that note that I turn now to discussing this process.

### **“Creating a Totem”: Crafting and Exhibiting the Cosplay**

Of the women I interviewed, about two-thirds of them said they only wear handmade cosplays, 20 percent said they were more comfortable in a store-bought costume, and 16.7 percent of them said it does not matter either way. When I pressed respondents about why they tend to prefer handmade cosplays, three themes emerged in this regard: cosplay is a medium of creative expression, they take pride in the work, and they find a talent or a niche in the community.

#### **A Medium of Creative Expression**

A significant number of women with whom I spoke stated that cosplay is a means by which to express themselves creatively. Jennifer, a 29-year-old banker who has cosplayed for 16 years, said “It [cosplay] is a nice creative outlet for me, especially right now since my job is very

much based on numbers, and this is a way for me to kind of get away from that. I can come home and sew and make something.” Nora, a 21-year-old retail worker, also told me, “cosplay helps me as being my creative outlet, it’s a good way to express myself.” Janet, a 26-year-old cashier with eight years of experience in cosplay, said, “I don’t feel comfortable in store-bought costumes. I really don’t. I make all of my stuff myself. I just like to make things. I, it’s a nice release for me. A lot of it is an emotional sort of release.”

This emotional aspect of cosplay and the part of the self-expression involved in making a cosplay was a theme present throughout a significant amount of the data. Jillian speaks to this aspect of cosplay creation in her description of her own creative process:

It is slightly religious, like, a reverence, almost. Like, the act of making the costume is almost, like, a ritual of creating a totem or something. That’s perfect, actually, that’s exactly what I’m feeling when I’m making a cosplay. Like, I’m in a zone, dude. That is what I feel like when I’m making my cosplay. In the process of creation, you put all this energy into it... It literally is like you’re making this object magical. You put that shit on, it’s like magic comes over you and you are now that person. So, I don’t want to wear someone else’s weird-ass magic on my body when I’m being a character because I don’t know if they cared when they made it. I know I care when I make it. I care a lot when I make it. I think that’s what makes my shit look good. I don’t want someone else’s energy all over my shit.

While not all the respondents were this vivid in their description of the creative process, many of them did refer to the process of creation as an emotional release, one that is deprived when a cosplayer makes the decision to buy her cosplay from a store. While the creative expressiveness of cosplay is significant, also significant is the affirmation one takes in witnessing the costumes they made themselves.

### **Pride in the Creation**

Beyond expressing themselves creatively, women in cosplay also take pride in knowing that the cosplay they wear and perform is one they made with their own hands. Amalia, a 27-year-old homemaker, said, “I love to do crafts and love the challenge of figuring out how I can

replicate the look of a certain character while taking pride in the hard work I put into it.” Farrah also mentions pride as a factor, stating, “it’s a lot about pride in the construction process. I don’t know if I could actually trust another person to make a costume that would fit me properly.”

Elizabeth, a 24-year-old teacher with six years of cosplay experience, offered the following insight into this feeling of pride when creating a cosplay:

I started out with making my own costumes with cosplay, and I felt a lot of accomplishment being able to do that. It was a lot of fun putting together the parts for a cosplay or figuring out how to make a certain detail or prop for a character. I loved going to a convention and having people shout out the name of the character I was portraying or asking for a picture. It felt good working hard on something you cared about and then being able to interact with people through that work. I would say the most fun I have is still putting everything together and seeing the finished product.

Another aspect of this feeling of pride is the opportunity to participate in cosplay competitions. During my time collecting data at the conventions I attended, I witnessed several cosplay competitions referred to as “cosplay masquerades,” in which participants were judged on their ability to construct professional-looking cosplays. During the event, people gather in a large hall or auditorium and watch as cosplayers walk on stage, display their costume, and strike poses appropriate to the character they are performing. After all of the cosplayers have taken the stage, three to five judges—also in cosplay themselves, usually—will indicate and praise specific cosplays for technical skill, complexity, and other factors discussed in a later section. While I have been in the convention-attending community for almost a decade, I have never identified strongly with the cosplay community, so much of the language used during the competitions was unfamiliar to me. For example, at ColossalCon, the winners of the cosplay competition were praised for how “clean” their costume looked, how “fluid” the seams were, and other such compliments. Several of the women I interviewed had previously judged in cosplay

competitions, so when given the opportunity, I probed them about their judging process. Claire, a 31-year-old CSA with thirteen years of cosplay experience, offered the following insight:

Chris: Since you tend to judge at cosplay competitions, I'm curious about what's important to you when judging a cosplay. What are the qualities you look for when determining how good a cosplay is?

Claire: In craftsmanship competitions, it's based on many factors, like difficulty level, materials used, creativity, and execution of the craft, like how clean and how uniform it is.

Chris: Do you mean, like, variety of materials used, or difficulty of materials? Like, okay, I remember at the ColossalCon cosplay competition, there was a lot of compliments given to clean craftsmanship. What exactly does clean mean [laughs]?

Claire: Difficulty of materials. Like, clean craftsmanship means, how well it is executed? Are the edges straight? Are the seams even? Does it have thread hanging or frayed edges? The cosplay needs to look as clean and as professionally done as possible to be eligible for a major award.

This knowledge as well as the knowledge provided by other judges turned out to be helpful for future conventions, as I had a better understanding of what was meant by the terminology used. At the cosplay masquerades at the latter two conventions, I witnessed similar language directed toward the winners of those competitions and had a clearer idea of what was meant by the judges' compliments.

Numerous interviewees mentioned competitions as a reason for making cosplays by hand—since most competitions require cosplays to be handmade—which in turn increased their pride in the creation. Claire informed me, “I made my first cosplay, Kairi from ‘Kingdom Hearts,’ to compete at TsubasaCon.” Jillian said about a cosplay she made from “World of Warcraft:” “That was the first time that I had, like, done a cosplay, and my motivation that time was I was specifically wanting to win an award for a cosplay.” In one interview I did with Sidney, a 28-year-old nurse who had eight years of cosplay experience, the following conversation developed about the relationships between competition and pride:

Sidney: Um, I mostly make my own stuff, but I will buy bits and pieces of an outfit. It doesn't bother me. It depends, though, if I'm actually doing it for a competition or if I'm doing it just for fun.

Chris: So, are competitions the main reason why you tend to hand make your stuff?

Sidney: Yeah, because, you know, I'm not going to enter a competition if it's store bought because, where's the fun in that? I want to see how well I'm doing. Sometimes, they'll let you enter with store bought stuff, depending on the competition, but again, where's the fun in that? [laughs] But yeah, some of them do, some of them don't.

Chris: So, these handmade cosplays, do you commission someone to make them for you or do you make them yourself?

Sidney: I make them myself. I mean, they may as well be store-bought if someone else is making them for me. It's important to me to make them because, again, if it's a competition, you get more reward out of it.

Chris: Like, personal reward?

Sidney: Yeah, it's very gratifying to know that the thing you made won a competition. It's not the same if you bought it or if someone made it for you.

Taking pride in the cosplay and using the creative process as an expressive outlet are significant reasons for hand-making a cosplay, but one final factor emerged as significant: using cosplay as an opportunity to develop a specific talent or skill.

### **Pursuing a Niche in the Community**

Many of the women with whom I spoke and expressed that they prefer to make their own cosplays also indicated cosplay as an opportunity to expand their skillsets or further develop talents they had already cultivated. Michelle stated, "Because I started cosplay, I've learned how to sew, and I mean actually sewing, not just throw a bunch of stitches in a thing and it's done. My crafting skill set is way better than it used to be." Maria, a 27-year-old cook with eight years of cosplay experience, also mentioned this as a contributing factor: "I really enjoy sewing, and I really enjoy, like, the craftsmanship part of putting together a cosplay, and so it's kind of just become, like, a honing my skill kind of endeavor. I tend to choose cosplays that have a lot intricate sewing to go with them." Blanche, a 31-year-old homemaker with sixteen years of cosplay experience, details how cosplay introduced her to sewing:

When I was like fifteen, first getting into cosplay, my mom showed me how to work a sewing machine and read a sewing pattern but beyond that I had to figure everything out on my own, which is annoying because now there's so many resources online—there's videos on YouTube, there's online classes, there's so many books, when I was learning to sew, there wasn't jack shit. I had a book from 1972 and that was it.

While some women I interviewed such as Maria had already developed a hobby of sewing before entering the cosplay community, others such as Blanche pursued sewing as a way to create their cosplays. While most of the women I spoke to indicate sewing as a talent that has developed, other facets of crafting also came up. Melanie told me:

There are so many different aspects that you can get into—crafting, painting, sewing, and then even further, there's people who get into electronics and programming, there's super high end—one of the most amazing things I've seen is an Iron Man costume that opens up. Like, there are so many possibilities for so many different outlets of creativity that you could ever want.

This theme of developing a particular skill, such as sewing, prop-making, and wig-styling arose frequently as I conducted interviews. Thus, the community fulfills not only recreational needs but also many practical ones. The opportunity for expanding one's skillset, the gratification experienced by seeing one's own work admired, and the creative outlet provided by cosplay crafting all constitute reasons for creating one's cosplay.

The preparation for the convention, particularly the choosing and crafting of the cosplay, constitutes a facet of the convention experience despite its taking place away from the convention site. Before transitioning to experiences at the convention site, however, I will first turn to issues of gender related to preparation for attending the conventions.

### **“It Depends on the Character”: Gender and Variations in Cosplay Choice**

There were several themes that arose during data collection relevant to the study's focus on gender difference. While women's choices of characters to cosplay and perform were related to seemingly dozens of outside factors, three choices consistently came up in interviews: whether

to choose a revealing cosplay, whether to make the cosplay, and whether or not to consider the potential of a cosplay to draw harassment from fellow convention attendees.

### **Whether to Choose a Revealing Cosplay**

When selecting a character to portray at a convention, women cosplayers often wrestle with whether they should choose a character that reveals a significant amount of skin. One common assumption in the greater convention-attending community is that women will intentionally choose more revealing cosplays to gain male attention (Ito & Crutcher, 2014; Scott, 2015). When I asked participants how likely they were to choose a sexy cosplay, only two in total indicated that they may have intentionally chosen a cosplay they defined as sexy, citing the confidence boost afforded as a motivation. Slightly more than one-fourth of the participants said they were actually likely to avoid sexy cosplays. Elizabeth said on the matter: “I'm not very interested in doing more revealing designed cosplay, as that's just not very comfortable for me and doesn't really represent me.” Amalia expressed a similar feeling, stating, “I don't mind wearing things that are form-fitting or show some leg, but I normally draw the line when a character is one sneeze away from exposing a breast or having a completely exposed stomach.” Laney's answer to the question was multi-faceted:

It depends on the character. As far as body imaging goes, if it's super revealing, I'm probably not going to be comfortable doing it because I don't feel comfortable showing off my body that way. Not that other people can't do that; if they want to do that, go for it, I'm not going to judge you for it because if you love that character, you should be able to do it no matter what. [...] If it makes me too revealing, I may add something of my own to cover up something if I love the character enough to want to do that. It may not necessarily be accurate, but I want to feel comfortable as well as showing off the character.

Many participants in the study indicated body consciousness as a reason to avoid more revealing cosplays.

While a significant number of interviewees said the revealing nature of a cosplay is a factor in the decision-making process, 70 percent of the women with whom I spoke expressed that the sexiness—or lack thereof, as the case may be—of a character’s outfit does not influence the decision one way or another. Roxy, who has five years of experience in cosplay, said that the amount of skin revealed is “[...] not really even a factor. I mean, like, if I like the character, I’m going to go for it. The sexiness is really not that much of a factor.” Jay, who has cosplayed for five years and works in home healthcare, said: “it [sexiness] doesn’t matter to me. Today, you can do anything and turn it into a sexy version, and also you can take something sexy and just make it kind of chill, and it’s really up to you to decide how you’re going to play that.”

Some cosplayers with whom I spoke noted their attitudes towards sexy cosplays have changed throughout the years. Monica, a teacher with eight years of cosplay experience, said, “Right now, I would probably be more likely to than in the beginning when I started. I love the idea of taking your image and your sexuality and just owning it.” Michelle also noted a change in her perspective since she began cosplay:

I don’t usually think about it. The sexy scale, for the most part, that’s not usually a factor for me. There is a point where a character just gets a little too sexy [laughs], and I’m like, “I’m going to go over here and do this other character.” It’s not usually a big factor. At first, it was. At first, if a character was even remotely sexy, I’d be like, “I can’t do this.” Especially, I’m not saying because of cosplay, but since about 2009, I have become a lot more comfortable with myself and a lot more confident with how I look, so that’s a thing.

Most of the women with whom I spoke indicated some limit regarding how much skin they were comfortable exposing, but the vast majority of women with whom I spoke said that it is a tertiary factor at best.

Many of the preceding paragraphs focused on events that take place before the convention and thus field observations are not applicable. In this instance, across the twelve total days I spent attending conventions during that summer, I had the opportunity to see the sundry



cosplays women would choose. From what I could discern, there did not seem to be an inordinate number of cosplays that revealed a significant amount of skin. The exception to this is ColossalCon, which saw a significant number of bikini and bathing suit cosplays. I attribute this not only to the fact that the weather was particularly hot but also to the fact that the Kalahari Resort, which hosts ColossalCon, is also famously home to the largest indoor water park in the United States. Even in this instance, however, I did not get the sense that the women were performing for the male gaze as indicated by current theory (Scott, 2015). A scene from my field notes helps to further explicate this idea:

When I walked outside, there were approximately fifteen to twenty cosplayers by the waterfalls in the outside portion of the water park. Photographers were coming and going as photo shoots were starting and wrapping. There were a few female photographers but most of them were men; all of the cosplayers being photographed were female. One thing I noticed was that the photographers seemed to be giving little or sometimes no direction to the female photo subjects. Largely, the women seemed to be choosing the locations, angles, and poses of their photographs, which is not usually the case with professional modeling photo shoots as far as I am aware. I noticed several instances of the cosplay models directing the photographers to move to a different space, shoot from a different angle, or give them direction on how to look, rather than the other way around.

ColossalCon was the convention out of the three I attended that, from what I could discern, had the highest number of photo shoots occurring. Even though many of the women were wearing bikini-themed cosplays or were dressed in material that exposed ample skin, the appearance was that they had a high degree of autonomy in terms of their poses and what photos were taken. This appearance of agency alone does not eliminate the possibility that the women were performing for the male gaze, as they could have been posing in ways they thought men would appreciate. Interview data, however, does not support this postulate but rather imply that women participate in cosplay for their own fulfillment.

## Whether to Make or Commission the Cosplay

Another assumption in current literature on cosplay is that women require male assistance to complete their cosplays, as they lack the proper skillsets necessary to sew costumes and construct props; as a result, they end up paying a male acquaintance to complete part or all of the costume in their stead, using their sexuality as leverage (Scott, 2015). Curious about women's perspectives on this matter, I included a question about commissions in the interview guide (Appendix C). Just under half of the respondents indicated that they were open to commissioning someone else to create a cosplay for them. Of these fourteen respondents, six of them said they were equally likely to ask a man as they were a woman to make a cosplay for them while eight respondents said they were actually more likely to commission a cosplay from a woman; zero of the respondents indicated they were more likely to commission a cosplay from a man. I had the pleasure of the following conversation with Suzanne, a 28-year-old flight attendant who has cosplayed for eleven years, about gender in cosplay commissioning:

Suzanne: I usually commission. I don't trust myself [laughs].

Chris: [laughs] I see. Um, so, like, if you had to put it to a guess, are you more likely to commission a piece from a man or a woman?

Suzanne: Either or. Like, sometimes you don't know because maybe they use some sort of pen name. I'm really not prejudiced on who makes it, to be honest. All I know is that these people are really talented and their reviews are fabulous, so whether they identify as men or women or helicopters [laughs], doesn't really matter.

Most of the women with whom I spoke had no preference with regard to gender as to who should make their cosplays, as long as the person they commission is reasonably priced and talented.

Jennifer said, "most of [the people I commission] are women. I don't base it off of who they are; I base it off the quality they are putting out." Ashlynn, a 21-year-old with eight years of cosplay experience, related the following on her commission experience:

I have two people who are the only two people I trust to do it, a male and a female, so it really depends on who I trust and who can give a good price. Gender doesn't factor into

what I choose. My female friend usually does the sewing, and my male friend usually makes my props if I can't make them myself, but I trust my body with a male more than I would a female. I know that sounds horrible [laughs], but past experiences [laughs].

This theme of women being more appropriate for sewing arose several times through the interviews I conducted. Stevie, whose costuming hobbies extend beyond cosplay, told me: "It depends, because I also do historical reenactment, and I'll tell you, with that, they're usually female seamstresses. It's almost always women." Several interviewees indicated a greater level of comfort commissioning from women than from men as a means of building local camaraderie, especially when the commission involves sewing. Mira defended this line of thinking, stating, "As cosplayers, we have to support each other, we network with each other, and it's money that's circulating back into the people and the community that you love, and that even goes for photographers, too. Like, go local. It's like, eat local, farm to table, it's that same concept."

Again, while most of the women with whom I spoke stated a preference for making their own cosplays, just under half of them indicated that they had commissioned a piece at one time or another, denoting further variation in how women create or obtain their cosplays. Based on current theory on cosplay, one more question of variation necessitates acknowledgement: whether women will consider the potential for a particular cosplay to increase instances of harassment.

### **Whether to Consider the Threat of Harassment**

One of the most common rape culture myths is that women invite rape and sexual harassment when they wear more revealing clothing (Canto, Perles, & Martín, 2014; Gurnham, 2016; Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). To gain a full picture of the motivations behind choosing a cosplay, I wanted to learn if the potential threat of harassment was on women's minds

when conceptualizing a costume. In other words, are women afraid that choosing a more revealing cosplay may invite more instances of harassment?

Among the women I interviewed, only 10 percent of them indicated any reluctance to choose a cosplay based on the likelihood of harassment. Amalia expressed hesitation toward a certain cosplay based on a past event at a convention:

With my first cosplay that I did I was in a corset, tutu, and leggings. The outfit showed a good bit of cleavage, but I was still decently covered. While at the convention, I came across one guy that kept watching me whenever we came across each other. It made me really uncomfortable every time I passed him. Most of the convention I tried to ignore him, but it still made me uneasy. Since that convention, I haven't worn that specific cosplay again. [...] I wish I could say that I wasn't affected by the incident, but it has definitely made me put a little extra thought into the cosplays that I do.

While a couple of other women with whom I spoke expressed that past convention events had caused them to shy away from more revealing cosplays, an overwhelming majority of respondents—specifically 90 percent—articulated that the threat of a potential harasser did not deter them from cosplaying the characters they loved. Farrah said that the factor of harassment “[...] doesn’t really factor in. I don’t have a lot of history with creepers. I don’t know if it’s how I carry myself or whatever, but I just don’t deal with them very often, so they don’t really factor into my decisions.” Angelique felt the same way, saying, “It [harassment] doesn’t really cross my mind. Fortunately, I haven’t had many bad experiences with creepy people.”

To be clear, regarding most of the women I interviewed, the potential for harassment was usually a factor of which they were cognizant. They refused, nevertheless, to allow this to be part of the decision-making process for a cosplay. Chelsea, a 25-year-old manager with nine years of cosplay experience, said about the potential for harassment, “I might keep it in mind, but it definitely wouldn't let it stop me from choosing a cosplay. I know that there are rules in place at conventions and if I ever feel threatened, there are people I could go to if I needed.” Jillian also

mentioned about harassment: “Like, it’s something that I’ll prep thinking of before going in, just being aware that it might happen and what I’ll do if that does happen. I would never change costume because of that.” Michelle also said, on the threat of harassment: “It doesn’t really cross my mind. While I’m at the convention, sometimes I’ll think about it for a second, but it doesn’t really affect my costume choices.”

Helen said that, while she does worry about harassment, it does not stop her from cosplaying her favorite characters:

It’s always kind of on my mind, being a 24-year-old woman in the cosplay world, because you have to, like, watch your back wherever you go as a woman anyway, so I try to pick characters I like, but I always.... I try and wear them anyway because I can’t let someone else dictate what I’m going to do. I just try to be hyper-vigilant about who is taking my picture and who is touching me, like, who is around because you can’t not be.

Most of the women I interviewed acknowledged that, while ideally an outfit should be chosen based on factors other than their potential for drawing sexual harassment, harassment is usually an issue regardless of sartorial preference. Stevie explained:

You know, no matter what you wear, you’re always going to get someone weird. Like, I mean, I didn’t have too many at this con this year, but I went outside to use my vape, and I dealt with someone acting like they’ve never seen a woman before attending the con, and that’s a big thing I think a lot of cosplayers deal with. Just, weird guys. I wear Lolita a lot nowadays, and last year was the first time I went the whole weekend wearing Lolita, and the year before that, I wore Lolita, too. That year, my husband wasn’t at the con, so I was wandering around the con by myself trying to find my friends because all of my other friends were in a Lolita panel. This guy came out with a phone, and he just, like, had his mouth open, acting like he had never seen a woman before in his life. Now, I’m completely covered, Lolita is a very conservative fashion, meanwhile there’s girls doing these video game characters in bikini cosplays, but he decided he was going to follow me around the convention center, and that’s what I mainly get: guys acting weird, following me, snide remarks even when you are fully-clothed, but I don’t really keep that in mind, I just want to dress for myself, that’s why I do it, that’s why I wear cosplay, it’s for me and not anyone else.

Numerous women echoed this sentiment through the interviews I conducted. Overall, the potential for harassment based on the revealing nature of the cosplay is a tangential concern, if at

all. The aforementioned factors, such as the connection to the character, the appeal of the visual design, and the characters' body types were much more important to them than how revealing the cosplay was and how people may respond.

A significant amount of text has been devoted thus far to preparations for the convention rather than life at the convention site. These preparatory steps are imperative in gaining a richer understanding of the community of women cosplayers, as their mental and social processes in choosing which characters to cosplay and how to create or obtain the costume constitute an aspect of their convention experiences, as the preparations last longer than the conventions in most cases. With these concepts covered in more detail, I turn now to discuss events and interactions experienced once women cosplayers arrive at the convention sites.

### **“Their True Selves”: Life at the Convention**

One aspect of convention life that quickly became clear as I interviewed the study participants is that, perhaps not surprisingly, cosplay is the most salient feature of the convention experience. Descriptions of convention life almost always focused sharpest on cosplay. Maria emphasizes cosplay in her description of the convention weekend:

I usually have one costume that I wear throughout the day as long as I can, and that has a lot to do with what I wear, like if it's comfortable enough, that's a big factor in what I choose to wear that day. And then, get to the con—I like to go to a lot of panels, so, I usually, I'm a panel person. And then, when I'm not doing that, I just kind of wander the halls. It sounds really vain, but I want people to see my costume [laughs], so I want to be, like, out there, with people.

Maria's sentiment of wishing to have her cosplay seen by other people is a sentiment echoed by most women I interviewed. Dolores told me that her typical convention day consists of “a lot of my morning spent on getting ready for the con and the rest of my day walking around enjoying other cosplays and meeting new people. It depends on my cosplay how much or little I get asked for a picture, but it's very flattering every time someone asks.” The experience of cosplay does

not only consist of showing off one's costume but also seeing others' cosplay creations. Laney, a 26-year-old teacher, mentioned that the convention is:

Always very energetic, always super hyped. I usually start off by going to the vendor's hall first so people can see my cosplay and so I can buy the goods, and then you get to see everybody else's outfit, take pictures with people, browse the vendors, then I make my way to the panels if there are any that interest me. And then, I'll check out the game room, since I'm into gaming, play some video games, and then I'll end the day by checking out the big cosplay masquerade where everybody gets on stage and shows off their outfits and people can see the effort that they put into their costumes.

The masquerade Laney mentioned, covered earlier in this chapter, is a significant aspect of the convention experience, even for those who do not compete. Karen, a 32-year-old who has cosplayed for six years and who has also judged numerous cosplay competitions, highlights the competition as a significant aspect of her convention:

Typically, when I get to a convention, the first night is mostly just setting up the room and making everything happy with all of my wig supplies out, my costumes ironed out, everything ready to go. Friday is usually just running around, maybe going to some panels, stuff like that. Saturday is always my busy day, it's always so crazy because I'll usually have a photo shoot for the big costume I made. I'll have the competition with the judging, and that might take between an hour to two hours, even though the judging window is five minutes. After my judging time, I'll quickly eat some lunch, and then the whole evening is pretty much dedicated to the masquerade. After that, I'll pretty much chill after the masquerade because, after a day of walking around in full cosplay, my newer cosplays tend to be big, they tend to have a lot of layers.

Displaying one's cosplay and taking the opportunity to gaze at others' cosplays is a significant aspect of convention life for women cosplayers, a theme well-explored in the literature on cosplay. In terms of the performative aspect of cosplay, this was a situation I not only witnessed but also became part of on numerous occasions. At Anime Mid-Atlantic, I was in line to attend the cosplay masquerade by myself, and a group of African American cosplayers "adopted" me, as they put it. As we stood in line having conversation, I noticed two cosplayers within this group dressed as Joker and Poison Ivy from the "Batman" franchise and heard the following exchange in reference to a nearby Harley Quinn cosplayer:

Joker: Leave my Harley alone, home wrecker!  
Ivy: I am not a home wrecker. Do you even have a home, Joker?  
Joker: The world is my oyster, Ivy.  
Ivy: How unfortunate for the world.

Even whenever I engaged the group in conversation, they remained in character while their cosplay was still on. I had the following exchange with someone I recognized dressed as Wonder Woman:

Chris: I really love your Wonder Woman cosplay! I haven't seen the movie yet, though.  
Wonder Woman: How dare you! You must come out and support me!  
Chris: I am so sorry, Miss Diana Prince! I will do my best!  
Wonder Woman: That's right, bow down! I demand respect!

In numerous situations—more than I could count, truthfully—I became a participant in the performance displayed by various cosplayers despite not being in cosplay myself. Thus, in my own convention experience, I can report having also witnessed performance in cosplay.

Beyond the motivations to cosplay covered in Chapter II—namely, social affirmation, creation of a community, and reliving one's childhood—my research revealed other reasons to cosplay, including the establishment of a space for the expression of authentic gender identity and a way to relate common interests among attendees.

### **A Safe Space for Non-Conforming Gender Identities**

One theme that came up numerous times in my interviews and in my field notes was the idea of the convention site as a space in which people who do not conform to the idea of the gender binary can safely dress as whichever character they wish, regardless of gender, and not face judgment from fellow convention attendees. Jennifer told me that “conventions are a place where people can experiment with how they want the world to see them without being judged, and I really, really appreciate that about the community.” Suzanne specifically brought up trans folk during our interview, saying, “I've been seeing that a lot of transgenders have been coming



out, and there are a lot of transgenders that are girls, and I like that, you know, being comfortable for what they are. They're coming out and they're cosplaying these characters, and that's how they're able to bring about their true selves." Laney also conveyed support for this idea:

"Cosplay whoever you want. If you're a girl, cosplay a guy if you want to cosplay a guy, it doesn't matter. Cosplay who you want no matter what the character looks like or what your body looks like, it should be open to everybody." Michelle expressed excitement at the idea of more diversity in cosplay:

I feel like there is a lot of acceptance in the cosplay community, so I feel like there is a fairly wide variety of people who cosplay, so I think that's good, that's helpful, so, like, something that is a thing is, like, women dressing as male characters or men dressing as female characters and not necessarily making that character's clothing fit their gender but just straight up wearing that character's clothes. I feel like I've been seeing more of that within the last couple of years. I think it's really awesome because there's even more things to look at, and it's cool.

I had the opportunity not only to speak with women who were supportive of gender norm-resistant cosplays but also with a couple of women who themselves had cross-played. Suzanne, who mostly cosplays male characters, related the following as to how cosplay allows her to find acceptance for her gender identity:

I really love cosplaying because I love to find a character I relate to and literally become them, whether they be male or female. In a way, the character I'm cosplaying right now, Naoto Shirogane from "Persona 4," kind of describes me, except for the fact that I'm not going to be a detective, which is a professional key to this character, but she sees herself more as a man than she does as a woman, but I don't see myself as a man, but I really do love the character because she's, like, one of those strong-based characters who's just like myself, so I like doing the characters that I cosplay, that I love. I love seeing myself in a character and then literally being able to become them. That's what's so empowering about cosplay. Like, it's a really good creative outlet, but it's also a very good expressive outlet. You get to express different facets of yourself through these characters that you become. I definitely identify as non-binary, like, I have a half-shaved head and I work out a lot, so I have big-ass arms [laughs], I look very masculine, and cons are really safe spaces where I can wear a boy's outfit with a hat and pants one day and then wear a cute, fluffy outfit the next day, and it's just all good. No one cares.

Suzanne is not alone in her preference for cosplaying male characters. Jay also noted that she prefers to dress as male characters when she cosplays:

I like cross-playing because sometimes the guys just get better characters, like Gaston from “Beauty and the Beast” is one of my favorite Disney villains. He’s hilarious because he’s big and broodish and dumb, and getting to be him is just one of those, especially since I have so many friends who cosplay Disney princesses, it’s easier for me to make remarks, knowing that they know who I am. [...] We’re in a community that, if you’re a male, you can cosplay a female and no one’s going to blink an eye. If you’re gender fluid, genderqueer, it’s the same. No one is going to question. And some people, especially the trans community, they find it as a way to, “if I’m in a costume, no one’s going to say anything,” and they can get more comfortable in their own skin to be able to come out to the world. It’s become, instead of a hobby, it’s more of a lifeline to find out who you are, and it keeps me anchored to know who I am.

For cosplayers like Suzanne and Jay, cosplay is a way to express their authentic gender identity<sup>5</sup> in a space that they feel will not perceive them as “other” or different in some significant or negative way.

While Suzanne and Jay were the only two cosplayers with whom I spoke who choose to cross-play fairly frequently, I can point to numerous examples in my field notes of instances in which people who were cross-playing received positive attention from fellow convention-goers. For example, one convention saw a female cosplayer in a three-piece suit perform a skit during the masquerade in which she did a striptease, with the audience responding with clapping and cheering. Another instance that stands out to me is when I noticed someone cosplaying a female character I recognized, and I said to the individual, “I really like your cosplay!” Upon them turning around, I was faced with who I identified to be a cisgender male, based on the relatively flat chest, five o’clock shadow, and a deep voice that responded with, “Thank you!” Later that

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<sup>5</sup> This differentiates from the idea of cosplay as an expression of authentic identity covered in Chapter II because, in that instance, identity is mostly discussed in terms of interests in “nerd-related” media, while in this case it is an expression of a non-conforming gender identity.

same evening, during that convention's cosplay masquerade, this individual won an award for that particular cosplay. I recorded the scene in my field notes:

The cosplayer walked up on stage and approached the judges, both of his hands covering his face. Either he was crying or he was trying not to cry. In any event, I noticed that all three of the judges were smiling at him, and one of them even affectionately rubbed his arm. They applauded him for apparently having put the cosplay together just a couple of days prior to the convention, complimenting him on the "intricate sewing." He was shy but clearly ecstatic, and people in the room applauded.

Many instances such as this permeated my convention experiences in the summer of 2017. I saw several men at ColossalCon wearing bikini tops—and, in some cases, bikini bottoms—in the public pool area. I witnessed a photo shoot at another convention of nothing but women cross-playing as male characters from a series I didn't recognize. While only two of the women I interviewed cross-play frequently, people at anime conventions cosplaying as characters opposite the gender that aligns with their biological sex is a common occurrence, one that is generally accepted by the greater convention-attending community.

### **Cosplay as an Expression of Common Interests**

As previously discussed, cosplay is a means for many people to gain affirmation and establish communities. It is important to note, however, that while these people all share a common interest in popular culture—specifically Japanese popular culture at anime conventions—differences in taste soon become apparent upon further observation. As I navigated the various convention halls, I was overwhelmed by how many choices there were in products to consume, easily numbering in the hundreds. Even though I have attended conventions for the entirety of my adult life, I only recognized about ten percent of the products I observed. In this kind of environment, many sub-communities will come into being, so finding people with common interests can be difficult if not daunting. It is in this aspect that cosplay acts as a social facilitator, indicating common interests over which people can bond.

Angelique indicated this as a direct reason to cosplay: “Your outfit reminds them of your favorite show or movie or whatever, then you can expand on your interests and share interests together, and it’s super easy to make friends. I make friends every time I got to convention.” Chelsea also mentioned this as a benefit to cosplaying, saying, “There are times if I’m in cosplay that people may stop and ask if they can have a picture and then we might talk for a bit regarding our interest in the series. I’ve made a lot of new friends that way.” Maria echoed this idea, saying, on cosplay, “It’s like, it’s a really good conversation starter because you already know you have something in common with that person.” Jeanette expressed the social aspect of cosplay as the reason she began the hobby:

I kept doing it because it’s a really fun hobby, especially whenever you get people that are so excited about your character and they’re excited to see you emulating somebody that they care about and emulating a character that they care about and they come up to you and talk to you about that character, and usually when you cosplay a character, you’re passionate about that character, too, so it’s a good way to make connections in the community with people who share your interests, and I continued doing it because I just really like to socialize with people, and it’s a really easy way to socialize, it’s a good conversation starter.

Cosplay as a way to create social connections was far and away one of the most prominent themes in the data I collected. Stevie noted that cosplay was a way to help her overcome her awkward nature:

I think it was being able to show things that I liked and that I was into. I’m a pretty socially awkward person, and cosplay was a really good way to kind of meet different people with the same interests. Like, I’ve always had a pretty hard time talking to people, and, like, when you’re in cosplay, people come up and they talk to you and they ask you about your costume and how you made it and, “oh, what do you think of this character?” It’s a really good social lubricant [laughs].

This theme of social awkwardness and cosplay as a way to overcome the social barriers presented by this awkwardness was prevalent throughout the data. Jillian indicated that, while

she does not feel socially awkward herself, others have overcome their potentially awkward personality traits through observing her cosplaying as a character familiar to them:

The first time I did it [cosplay], I just did it because it was fun and it was a conversation starter, and it let everyone clearly know my interests. [...] That's what I like to do at conventions is talk to people and whatever, and that's why you do cosplay in the first place because it gives something to talk about because sometimes people are really fucking awkward, and if you're wearing normal clothes, people aren't just going to be like, "[breathes] Hey, do you like 'Trigun?'" Probably not [laughs], they're just going to stay away from you, but if you're representing a fandom, then yeah, there's an opening for conversation, which is a lot of what I do at conventions, is talk.

It is not enough to have in common with everyone else at a convention the interests of anime, video games, or some other form of entertainment. Even at esoteric conventions such as anime conventions where most people have a vested interest in Japanese culture, many people will cosplay characters from video games, comic books, and elements of American culture or other cultures, so conventions are not self-contained, making socialization potentially challenging. Cosplaying specific characters is a visual indicator of interest in a particular media artifact, creating an environment more conducive to meeting new people and making new friends.

Indeed, I witnessed this happening at one of the conventions I attended, as described in my field notes:

I was standing in the main floor of the vendor's hall and I noticed somebody in a cosplay I recognized that's not commonly done. While complimenting her on her wings, another woman also cosplaying from the same show came up and began talking to us. After talking for a minute, they realized they even knew the same person and went from talking shop about the show to talking about this mutual friend of theirs and even telling funny stories. As I walked away, I heard one of them say, "This is why I love cosplay. It brings people together in the funniest ways." Later in the convention, I saw them walking together in the hallway, still talking and laughing with one another. I think I just had the privilege of seeing a friendship form!

Events such as this are not uncommon at conventions. I noticed many such interactions take place, with this one standing out to me because I was directly involved. Cosplaying at anime conventions is perceived by this community to be a means to facilitate interaction and form

social connections, on top of acting as a way to navigate one's gender identity if that is an issue with which a particular individual struggles. Despite the numerous benefits cosplay offers to those interested in the hobby, however, there are common experiences on the convention circuit that can hamper people's enjoyment of the cosplay experience.

### **“It's Like High School with Wigs”: Forms of Stigma on the Convention Circuit**

Goffman defines stigmatization as the process by which people with undesirable traits experience prejudice from the surrounding society (1963). Women in the cosplay community are stigmatized and shunned in a variety of forms that hamper their convention experiences at least partially. While I must be clear that the women I interviewed do not index stigma as a primary characteristic of their convention experiences, they experience prejudice often enough to make them realize that they experience the convention environment differently than most men. Specifically, this stigmatization manifests in three ways: fellow con-goers accusing women cosplayers of seeking attention artificially, verbal vilification, and connecting instances of harassment to decisions in clothing.

#### **Accusations of Insincere Attention-Seeking**

One of the most common stigmas the women I interviewed indicated was the accusation of being a “fake nerd”—the perception that women only cosplay and engage with what is considered nerd media to gain male attention. Dolores, for example, indicated her feeling that women have to “prove themselves” to be taken seriously in the community, saying, “I feel like there is a higher expectation for female cosplayers. Not only do you have the normal judgment women face on a daily basis with people feeling like women aren't quote ‘real nerds,’ you have all the criticism of the cosplay community on top.” Jeanette also expressed frustration with this, telling me, “I have definitely been told before that I am just cosplaying for attention, even by

people important to me in my life, but I know that I'm not doing it just for attention, I know in my mind that I'm doing it for the right reasons, so I just kind of got over it, but that kind of sucked, dealing with that." Helen directly connected this occurrence with gender, asserting:

I think it might be just a facet of being female, that you kind of have to deal with people who are going to ask you, like, the blood type and the birthday and the favorite color of the character that you're cosplaying or something crazy like that and try and 'out-nerd' you and prove that you're a fake gamer girl or fake nerd or something.

Helen's example of having to know such obscure facts about a character such as their blood type and favorite color is one way in which women cosplayers will be taken to task regarding whether they are a "true" nerd. In many instances, men will question the accuracy of a woman's cosplay to the original character design. Ashlynn related, on her cosplay of "Harley Quinn from the "Batman" franchise: "I've even had guys come up to me, look at my metal baseball bat, and go, 'um, her bat's wooden. You would know that if you were a real fan.'"

Women are often taken to task in this regard, with Julia relating one story along similar lines:

There was one time I was wearing a cosplay with these two giant guns I commissioned my friend to make, and he did a really good job on them and I was so proud and so excited to wear them and show them off, and my friends and I were just walking down the convention hallway in our cosplays, and we spotted a couple of people in the game room playing the game we were cosplaying from, and we thought it'd be funny to pop up behind them and see if we can kind of surprise them, so we did, and they were very surprised, it put a smile on their face, but a couple of other con-goers happened to spot me and notice I was holding my guns. They came up behind me, picked up the guns away from my hands, and I turned around thinking, "Okay, this better be a friend, that's fine," but I did not know these people at all, they were just examining my guns and all that jazz, and they said, "Oh, I don't like all these things on here, it's not even accurate," and somebody actually held up their phone with a picture of the game's guns, and I was like, "Excuse me? Hello? Give that back. My friend worked really hard on those so give them back, please," and they said, "Well, you should tell your friend he needs to do a better job," and I was like, "No, no you can't. I don't even know you, but no."

Women cosplayers do not only face stigma in terms of the perceived accuracy of their costumes but also in whether they have engaged with the medium from which they are

cosplaying in the first place. Jennifer, who has attended conventions for sixteen years, related the following anecdote:

I actually had somebody accuse me of being a “fake gamer girl” recently. I did a “Final Fantasy XIV” costume, and I had somebody come up to me, like, grilling me about, like, “What server do you play on? What free company are you in?” I’m like, “So you’re saying I don’t play this?” I mean, I don’t play it as much as some people do because I don’t have a lot of free time, but I was like, “really? You’re going to do that?”

Not only are women in cosplay sometimes expected to pass “pop quizzes” set by male convention attendees, but they are even accused of cosplaying merely as a means to display their physiques. Jillian told me her perspective on how many male convention-goers perceive women who cosplay:

When it comes to the characters you cosplay, people have all of these assumptions, like, whenever I cosplayed Janna from League of Legends, people were just, like, “do you even play League of Legends, or do you just want to show off your body?” You know, that kind of thought process, which is probably the most common one I’ve seen. There was this one girl I saw who cosplayed Supergirl, and so many people went up to her and said, “Do you even know what character you are?” Just assuming they’re in a costume and they’re just doing it to get attention and not a love for the character.

Accusations of seeking attention superficially have also been directed at professional cosplayers—women who cosplay in some sort of context that nets payment, such as an endorsement or a photo shoot. Eleanor, a 23-year-old barista with 11 years of experience cosplaying, gives her opinion on the issue:

I would say especially for the “professional” cosplayers that, on the whole they’re accepted, but there are definitely stigmas, like I said, especially for the professional cosplayers. They’re often known for the size of their breasts or the skin they show. Oftentimes, the photos that they put on their social media are geared toward showing off skin, things that would be in preference to, probably, the male gaze, I would say, and that’s a shame.

Professional cosplayers seem to face stigma in the convention community specifically because they are being paid to cosplay, contributing to the perception that women are cosplaying for reasons other than love of the character or the medium, which are perceived to be the “better”



reasons for cosplaying. It is not uncommon for women cosplayers to face verbal retaliation accusing them of seeking attention in a disingenuous way. Aside from that, women cosplayers also face stigma in the form of verbal denigration from other people attending the convention in more direct forms closely connected to verbal abuse.

### **Verbal Vilification and Exclusion**

In addition to being accused of seeking attention insincerely, women cosplayers experience other kinds of verbal disparagement. More specifically, they report having encountered convention attendees verbally trying to segment the community into elite cliques, attempting to discourage certain cosplayers from participating in cosplay-related convention events, and exclude them in other ways. Maria said, “I think there are people who do that who, um, who say, like, you should only cosplay if you look a certain way or that you should only cosplay a character that looks like you, things like that, and that can be hard when there aren’t that many characters that look like you.” Stevie shared an anecdote of an older male telling her, about her cosplay: “‘You should go kill yourself because she’s a stupid character.’ That was my first time I was harassed, and somebody was like, ‘Why are you saying that to her? She’s a kid!’ And he was like, ‘Well, I’m sick of not seeing good cosplays.’” Jillian noted personal observations of verbal mistreatment of cosplayers:

They’re [convention attendees] like, “well, that’s dumb, you shouldn’t even wear that out here because it’s not good enough.” Even if you made it yourself now, you’re not good enough [...] Usually [...] they don’t have a lot of money, might not have a lot of time, it could be they’re working a million different jobs or going to school, who knows what people have got going on in their lives, and they put their heart and soul into this costume, even if it’s “bad” [in air quotes], they worked on it for who knows how long, spent how much money on it, and they go to a convention, and people just take pictures of them and post them on their Facebook or their Instagram, and they’re like, “look at this shitty bitch, [laughs],” and make fun of them.

Often, this kind of stigma will come from fellow women in the cosplay community. Jay told me, “There have been females in the con circuit who are rude that say I’m too fat to cosplay or I’m not pretty or whatever. One calls me a land whale, frequently.” Dolores mentioned being critiqued for her appearance, saying “I get a lot of body shaming comments. I’m very skinny and I have, like, no boobs, so I get a lot of comments regarding that. Those comments come from both men and women.” Helen told me that she will sometimes shy away from certain cosplays because, “There’s, like, this notion that you should only cosplay people of your body type or skin tone or whatever, and so when you’ve got someone like me, who is a size fourteen and takes on, like, a bikini cosplay or, like, my Poison Ivy which is a really short skirt and a corset, there’s that moment of, like, people who are not going to be accepting of your size.” Women are, of course, not the only group who stigmatize women cosplayers in this way. Mira recounted to me one instance she witnessed of a man verbally persecuting a woman cosplayer:

One of my friends, my boyfriend at the time said something really nasty about her cosplay, he had the nerve to turn to me and say, “you know, some people just shouldn’t cosplay.” And, I felt the color drain from my face, and I was so angry and so embarrassed that he would say something like that. I broke up with him twenty-four hours later [laughs], by the way. [...] She heard it, and it hurt her feelings, and I haven’t seen her wear that cosplay since, and that bothers me that somebody would say something to the point where somebody would stop cosplaying, and it happens all the time, and I wish that I could tell these people that it is okay to pick yourself up, to keep going, but words hurt. Words hurt a lot, and they can really destroy somebody, and it frustrates me that we still have people in our community that want to tear each other down.

Mira’s use of the word “bullying” is an effective description of the specific type of verbal vilification women in cosplay may expect to face at anime conventions. This type of stigma does not always resemble bullying, however, but can take on different forms, such as exclusion. Early in my interview with Blanche, a sixteen-year convention circuit veteran, she discussed conventions as a temporal society, one with its own customs, norms, and language. She later commented on her observations of the community becoming segmented:

That temporal society that I loved so much started to change and became catty and splintered and what appealed to me slowly faded away. It was no longer about people with similar interests coming together. Like, there are some people who go to conventions and that's their goal, but for, you know, when I first started, people that didn't cosplay outnumbered the people that did. The only people who cosplayed were, like, really, really diehard fans. But now it's, you're the odd person out if you're not cosplaying, but it's not being a diehard fan, it's about having fans. And it's not an escape because conventions in the cosplay community are now too much like everyday life: it has cliques, it has bullying, it has the popular people, it has the people that aren't. It's like high school with wigs.

In Blanche's perception, the needs that cosplay had previously fulfilled were dissipating. The convention environment, which was previously for people marginalized by society, was becoming more like that of the greater society in which the convention and cosplay environments existed. Thus, this kind of stigmatization can take on numerous forms but still connects to using verbal cues to mistreat and exclude women cosplayers.

### **Connecting Sartorial Autonomy to Sexual Harassment**

One unique way that women are stigmatized and one discussion in which I shall be especially careful to couch my language is the idea of connecting sartorial autonomy to instances of harassment. By this, I mean that there is a perceived connection between what women cosplayers wear and how frequently and to what degree they experience harassment while in cosplay.<sup>6</sup> To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the women I interviewed or the convention attendees I observed were victim-blaming women who had been harassed. Rather, there is a perception that men are more likely to view a revealing cosplay as an invitation for inappropriate attention when this is not the case, but this misperception has affected how women view and navigate the hobby of cosplay. Chelsea said to me, "I personally know people who have been harassed at conventions simply because they were in a revealing costume. People who generally

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<sup>6</sup> Thank you to Heather Sprouse for an illuminating discussion on how this connection can manifest even and especially among women.

might not grope someone in public is suddenly emboldened by the fact a cosplayer is bringing to life a fictional character and they don't think beyond that.” Dolores repeated this sentiment of clothing being connected to unwanted attention, stating, “I tend not to do sexier cosplays from a combination of not feeling comfortable showing that much skin and not wanting to deal with the comments. I feel like you get a lot more comments when you show more skin, and I just don’t want to deal with that.”

Several women with whom I spoke said the amount of skin one reveals can affect the kind of attention—appropriate or inappropriate—one can garner. Stevie mentioned noticing a trend with revealing cosplays: “I like looking cute. That’s my main thing, because, like, at cons, I also don’t like the kind of attention that comes with doing sexy cosplays.” Julia repeated this sentiment, reflecting on how she chooses cosplays: “The comfort factor as well as wearability as well as how you feel on the inside are what’s important. I also have to feel comfortable with the kind of attention I’m getting. Like, I don’t want the wrong kind of attention for what I’m wearing.” Again, to be clear, the women I spoke to did not indicate that they were blaming women’s clothing choices on men’s misbehaviors. Jeanette explained her position, sharing with me, “I think that you are more likely to be harassed if you are wearing a more revealing cosplay, probably for the same reason that you’re more likely to be cat-called while wearing a skirt and you’re just walking down the street: because men are inappropriate [laughs], just in general.” In this instance, Jeanette is placing responsibility for the harassing behavior on the male harasser and not on the woman cosplayer exposing her body, a sentiment with which most of the women I interviewed agreed.

This attitude towards harassment was not always consistent, however. Ashlynn expressed an understanding of societal expectations for women who dress in sexy costumes, telling me,

“I’ve had experiences where people have gotten too handsy. I understand why it would be hard for some people, to see why that would be a thing, like, if you’re in a costume and you’re flaunting it, what do you expect?” While it may seem she is in agreement with society’s standards regarding rape culture, she later retorts this rhetorical question, asserting, “I mean, like, I expect respect [laughs]. It is such a big deal because I don’t know why people do this,” confirming her disagreement with the idea that sexual harassment is the woman cosplayer’s responsibility. Mira also shared her opinion on the matter, claiming, “I think anybody who’s doing any kind of cosplay where you are somewhat exposed, you need to have the courage to tell people ‘no’ and that cosplay is not consent.” While this quote may imply that she is placing responsibility partially on the part of the woman wearing the cosplay, later in our interview, Mira became impassioned on exactly the opposite point later in our interview:

“Cosplay is Not Consent” should be a no-brainer. I just, I don’t understand why people don’t understand that concept that, if you see someone in a cosplay who may be scantily clad, or, say, for example, there was a young woman cosplaying Cammy from “Street Fighter,” she has a green leotard, and I saw somebody walk up to her and I watched him graze his hand across her behind, and she turned around and she punched him in the face, which is totally self-defense. I get really fired up about this because, sexual harassment, I have zero tolerance for harassment of any kind, and whether or not you are in a ball gown, if you are in a leotard, if you are in your bra and panties, if you are in your boxers, if you have your chest hanging out, nobody should just be able to go up to you and touch you without your permission. It is the same thing with street harassment when you are in cosplay, and it is the same thing as being catcalled when you are in cosplay. Cosplay is not consent, and it never has been.

These inconsistencies within women cosplayers’ philosophies regarding consent and sexual harassment reveal a complex relationship between the philosophy of greater American society and views towards women on the convention circuit, inconsistencies which I shall unpack and explicate further later in this paper.

The women I interviewed were not entirely homogenous on this issue. Blanche expressed that, due to the nature of cosplay as a visual art, she felt that looking excessively at cosplays should be considered acceptable:

I have never really worn cosplays that are overly revealing. Like, I know they say “Don’t blame the victim,” but, like, you put something on display, people are going to look and comment on it. That’s just how it is. I put lawn flamingos in my yard, people are going to comment on them. I put titties up on a shelf of a corset, people are going to look at them [laughs], and I’ve had people look at them, and I have no problem with that because I know, “Hey, I wore a low-cut costume” or “I wore a push-up bra with this costume.” I’m not naïve. I’m an adult. I know people like breasts and are going to look at them, and if I were uncomfortable or didn’t want that to happen, I would completely cover them up, so it could be part of, like, expectation versus reality. Like, I know people are going to look, and that doesn’t bother me. It’s a visual hobby, so people are going to assume you’re wanting them to look, and you can’t fault them for that. If you think that you can wear basically a bra and panties to an event where people go to see costumes and think that no one’s going to look and no one’s going to say anything, you’re delusional.

Some of the women I interviewed expressed a sentiment similar to Blanche’s—that they were okay with being looked at, even to excess, tending not to define it as harassment since they were wearing a costume—unless such looks “lingered” for a great geographical distance, as Laney worded it to me.

One of the most striking observations I made while attending conventions was at ColossalCon in which I heard a conversation between two convention attendees, a male and a female. I scribed their conversation as it took place:

Man: I love that girl’s cosplay!

Woman: Well, get a picture!

Man: Well, I want to ask her first.

Woman: Why?

Man: Because that’s creepy! I don’t want to get her picture without her permission!

Woman: Yeah, but she’s in cosplay, so they expect pictures to be taken. Pictures are being taken everywhere.

Man: Yeah, but still, that just seems rude.

The gender norms taking place in this conversation are noteworthy because the female convention attendee is encouraging the male to engage in behavior that could be construed as

harassment—taking a photograph without awareness or permission. The woman in this instance reached the conclusion that, because this particular attendee was in a costume, this implied tacit consent to being photographed at any time. Most of the interviewees did not agree with this sentiment, however, with Michelle relating a story of harassment centered on an unwanted photograph:

I have never had anyone touch me inappropriately, haven't had anyone, like, I don't know, people get kind of weird about photos. I don't mind photos at all. I would personally prefer to have people come up to me and be like, "hey, can I get your photo?" so that I can pose in a way that I think is flattering for me and the character, but, for me, having photos taken of me is kind of an expected thing. The craziest thing I had happen to me was actually at Comic Con this last weekend. I'm standing in the exhibitor hall, holding some stuff, and this guy just stares at me. Like, no emotion, stares at me, takes his camera, and by the way, I watched him do this, was watching him staring, I looked directly at him, and he slowly brought the camera up, snapped a photo, and brought it back down. I watched him do this, so I posed [laughs], and really threw him off. And I was like, "Dude, you fucking made eye contact with me!" He was staring at me, like, that was really weird. And he was only three or four feet away from me, too, so I don't know how he could have missed that. That was the most bizarre experience I've had.

In this instance, Michelle indexes a photograph taken without permission as harassment. While this did not come up as an issue in most interviews I conducted, the women I spoke to indicated that obtaining consent for any activity is always preferred regardless of sartorial decisions.

While the women I interviewed expressed a collective opinion that a more revealing cosplay might signal to men that they are seeking sexual attention, they disagreed that it is indeed an invitation for inappropriate remarks and touching. This acknowledgement of the connection between instances of harassment and sartorial autonomy indicates that, while the women do not blame themselves or each other for harassment, they do note that some people at the convention and many people in American society at large are likely to make this connection.

## **Unwelcome Attention and Physical Contact**

Harassment is an indicator of stigma, as it is a way of expressing negativity and prejudice towards a population considered other—or undesirable in Goffman’s (1963) terminology. If a population is continually and consistently experiencing harassment, then the degree to which they are stigmatized within their community should be assessed. Of the women I spoke to, 80 percent of them had experienced harassment in some form while attending a convention. One way that this harassment can manifest is by being followed or stalked. Eleanor told one such story: “I’ve had one incident with a friend where we did contact security, and the basic premise of that story was that she was followed by a person who had interest in her and was basically following us around—not interacting, just following—and we did contact security, we told them to keep an eye on the person, and they did, and he eventually left.” Elizabeth shared a similar anecdote of being followed to excess at a convention:

One time I was looking at a large map pasted up for the convention and a man in his mid-thirties or older approached me. He started quoting the game the character I was cosplaying was from. He asked where I was going and offered to escort me to whatever room I needed to go to. He didn't have a badge or anything, so he wasn't staff. I had actually just figured out where I was going and told him I was fine and thanked him for the offer. It would've been a pleasant enough, short conversation despite the awkward start, but he continued to follow me around for a little bit until I rounded the corner and went into a bathroom.

Another interviewee with whom I spoke, Sidney, confided in me that she has been dealing with a situation of a man stalking her for several years, with the stalking beginning at a convention while she was in cosplay:

I just got something in the mail saying I have to go to court next month, because this guy who is on the con circuit and has been stalking me for over two years managed to weasel himself out of court last time. Basically, you know, I invited him to join us for, like, movies and stuff, you know, just basically trying to be a friend, and he just went bat shit insane when I wouldn't go out with him. I was kind of hoping he would quit aggravating me because he would constantly give me phone calls, have other people contact me. He



faked suicide, like, twenty times, and I—I'll let you listen to some of the stuff, if you want [laughs]!

While not all instances of following reach the level of excess or severity as the case with Sidney, the women I interviewed made it clear to me that they defined prolonged following in certain instances as harassment, with Laney, again, stating that following fits the harassment criteria “if it lingers for longer than necessary.”

Another way harassment manifests on the convention circuit is through verbal harassment. Again, I differentiate this from the previously indicated verbal vilification because, while verbal vilification usually involves degrading or excluding a person with verbal cues, I coded a situation as verbal harassment if it was aggressive and involved some kind of perceived threat to the person's safety or mental well-being.<sup>7</sup> Farrah shared one story about a man sexualizing her in a way that made her and her husband uncomfortable:

There was a time my husband and I were in an elevator, and I was wearing a Sailor Scout uniform, and he was joking about how he kept a flask, and I was like, “I don't have anywhere to keep one!” And this guy looked at my skirt and was like, “you've got a place right there,” you know, like, implying that I'd been some places, and my husband looked like he was about to punch somebody.

Stories like this of verbal harassment at conventions are not uncommon. Jay shared one experience she witnessed:

I went to a convention a couple of years ago with a friend, and there was a Disney princess there, and she was dressed as Ariel from “The Little Mermaid” in a series of corsets, and this guy made a comment about using a swordfish to take off her corsets and tried to grab her, and when she tried to slap him and tell him to stop, he said, “you should thank me for the attention.” I may or may not have jabbed him in the nuts with my elbow.

Many of the women I interviewed indicated that they had been verbally harassed at least once during their time attending conventions. Many more still indicated that they had been

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<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the defining line between these two phenomena is thin, and there were numerous instances in which I coded dialogue as both verbal vilification and verbal harassment.

forcibly grabbed by a stranger or by an otherwise unwanted party at some point. Chelsea shared one instance she witnessed: “A friend of mine was asked to have their picture taken with a guy and she agreed. When she posed for the shot, the guy put his hand very low on her waist, basically going down to grab her butt.” Claire also shared a story of being grabbed, recounting to me, “I had a bad experience with a guy saying he wanted a hug and a picture of me as Asuna from ‘Sword Art Online’ in her swimsuit at ColossalCon several years ago. He ran his hand down my back and grabbed my waist. I was so uncomfortable from it I went and changed.” In my interview with Jillian, she indicated early on that she had never been harassed, but once I introduced the issue of unwelcome attention, she recalled one such instance of being grabbed:

You know, I just remembered this. My first TsubasaCon, I went with fucking [name redacted] and her stupid Draco Malfoy-looking-ass boyfriend and his other friend who wasn’t as much of an asshole. We were down in the Charleston arena and we had left the convention, we were sitting downstairs where all the columns are, and they just started grabbing Felicia’s boobs, and then she’d smack them and they thought it was funny, like they were playing a game. Then, they started doing it to me, so I started trying to punch them because, I was like, “I’m not doing this.” They thought I was joking. The fact that I was angry, like, I was clearly not having fun, she was clearly not having fun, they didn’t see it. I chased after them and they took off, and I ended up throwing a purse full of shit at them and hit one of them directly in the skull, and they actually saw that I was like mad, and I was like, “don’t fucking touch me!” [laughs] “I had to throw my fucking purse at you, you asked for it. If you didn’t want to get my purse thrown at you, you shouldn’t have touched me.”

Another intense recounting by Stevie combines the elements of being followed, being verbally propositioned, and being grabbed all in one anecdote:

When I was at a con a few years ago, I was cosplaying Orihime from “Bleach,” and it was maybe ten o’clock in the morning, none of my friends are there and I’m waiting for somebody, I’m sitting there texting on my phone, and I just heard somebody go, “Orihime! Are you Orihime?” Puts their arms around me, gives me a bear hug from the back, and I turn around and push this kid off of me. I am twenty-two, he is seventeen, and I look at him and he’s just like, “I love Orihime! I cosplay Sosuke from ‘Bleach!’ Come back with me to my hotel room!” And I’m like, I was just kind of like, “um, oh, would you look at that? I’ve got to go!” [laughs] And he spent the rest of the day looking for me. To make matters worse, I had changed later that day into Haruhi Suzumiya, and after leaving, my friend runs into a voice actor she knows and she’s talking to him, we’re

getting ready to leave and I'm walking up, and I hear a voice from behind go, "Haruhi Suzumiya! I love Haruhi Suzumiya!" Just comes up behind me, and my friend and this voice actor are just staring at me, I push him off me, and he mentions how he had Orihime in his grasp, but she left, but he really loves Haruhi Suzumiya, and I'm like, "What are the fucking odds? What are the odds [laughs]? Twice in a day, same kid!" [laughs] So, I finally get away, I'm talking to my friend and she's looking over my shoulder at this guy, and she's like, "What the hell is wrong with you?" And, as we're leaving, he tries to hug me again, and I'm like, "Get the fuck off of me" [laughs], and I slammed the door in his face.

The laughter and light-hearted tone throughout Jillian's and Stevie's stories indicate they were not traumatized by their experiences, and while these stories had me responding with laughter myself, many stories related by the women I interviewed were much more horrifying.

One more very important way that harassment can manifest actually happens most commonly online. While I did not include a specific question in the interview instrument, online harassment came up in almost every conversation I had. When I asked her about her experiences with harassment, Janet told me, "I haven't heard of a case of being harassed at a con in a long while, but at the same time, I feel like the attention drawn to it might make people take it to the internet, where they can't be policed as hard. I've had a lot more harassment online than at a convention." Maria felt the same way, stating: "I think the struggle for acceptance is going to happen more online, especially more for people who have anonymity, because people aren't as mean face to face." Mira shared her experience being harassed online: "I have definitely experienced stigma on the Internet. I've been made fun of for being big and being black. I ended up on 'Terrible Cosplays' on Reddit, I ended up on 4Chan, I was called all kinds of things outside of my name. I was called the 'n' word, I was called a planet." Reddit and 4Chan are two public websites where people can freely post content and are sometimes used to anonymously degrade people. Blanche included the role of the Internet in her discussion of how women cosplayers denigrate one another, also citing 4Chan as a frequently used website for harassment:

Oh, yeah, females stigmatize each other all the time, cosplay or not. There's so much cattiness in it. I think the prime base of 4Chan CGL being the bitch central for cosplay was around, like, 2006 to 2008 or so, maybe 2009, and it used to be that people went on there and did nothing but shit talk about other cosplayers, and you knew it was females, because they would be bitching and making fun of make up or hair, and that's something that a guy would not do. They're not really going to be making a point of trying to find unflattering photos of other cosplayers and talking about, "oh, look, she looks fat here," or "look at her cellulite," or "her tits are too small," or "look at this, flat, flatty, flat, flat," or, "oh, she has no ass," "oh, she's a ho." It's like, you can be stigmatized for being too slutty, you can be stigmatized for not being slutty enough. This isn't a thing that guys generally are participating in.

4Chan CGL is known as the cosplay sect of that particular website and for containing frequent instances of harassment (Beck, 2012). Other interviewees such as Suzanne also noted the prominence of people on this particular website in online harassment:

In the online community, people are brutal. One of my good friends keeps getting posted on CGL. CGL on 4chan is notorious, they talk about drama, J-fashion, cosplay, but people will get their pictures posted there, and it's all anonymous, and people just talk shit. It's crazy, maybe the reason we don't see harassment as much at cons anymore is because at conventions you can get in trouble for it, whereas online, it's all anonymous and you can get away with it on Reddit and 4chan, which is really messed up.

Numerous other women I interviewed also noted online harassment becoming more common.

For example, Melanie mentioned:

I've seen a lot of women shame each other, I feel like a lot of women do more of the body-shaming and fat-shaming than men. They say, "You're too fat to be wearing that," or, "you're not the right color, so you shouldn't be wearing that." It's always too fat, too white, too black. It's not in person, though, most of the time. Usually when I see these things it's on the Internet.

While harassment at anime conventions is decreasing according to the perceptions of the women I interviewed, online harassment is still prominent within the cosplay community towards one another as well as from onlookers outside the cosplay community.

While I did not frequently encounter sexual harassment in the field for this project, I witnessed two events that I would personally index as harassment, based on the stories and the varying definitions of harassment on the convention circuit provided to me by the women I

interviewed. The first instance happened at a summer convention. I noticed a woman in a cosplay with blonde pigtails, a red latex suit, a mask, and a prop whip. I recognized the cosplay as Ann Takamaki from the popular video game “Persona 5” (Atlus, 2017) and watched as onlookers took pictures of her and complimented her on the costume. One man walked over to her and asked her for a picture with him. Once she consented, he handed his camera to someone nearby and put his arm around her waist for the picture pose. From what I could discern from her facial expression—wide-eyed with a boxy smile—she was uncomfortable with this gesture but completed the picture anyway. After the picture, he asked her for a hug, reaching his arms out preemptively. I heard her say, “oh, I don’t really do hugs,” but before she finished, he already has his arms around her. After he walked away and after the pictures were finished, I decided to approach her and shared the following conversation with her, indicating myself in my notes as “Chris” and her as “Ann:”

Chris: Hey, I really like your cosplay!

Ann: Oh, thank you!

Chris: Um, so, I noticed that that guy was getting kind of weird with you.

Ann: Mmm. Yeah, a little [laughs].

Chris: Are you okay?

Ann: Oh, yeah, I’m fine, that kind of stuff happens all the time.

Chris: Yeah, but, like, are you okay with what happened?

Ann: I mean, not really, but what can you do? It’s really not a big deal, I just kind of go with it.

I revealed myself to her as a researcher, and she expressed interest in my framework of women in cosplay experiencing stigma. When I requested to interview her, she gently declined but thanked me for expressing concern for how the convention attendee disrespected her personal space.

The second instance happened later in my data collection activities and acted as a much more difficult test of my ability to manage my researcher identity and my convention attendee

identity. Again, while I do not identify as a cosplayer, I have been attending conventions since 2010 and am aware especially since interviewing the 30 women cosplayers I met for this study that convention-goers tend to watch out for one another. While I was standing outside the convention center, a man whom I had never met before approached me, and we had the following exchange:

Man: Hey, um, can you help me with something?

Chris: Sure, what's up?

Man: You see that guy over there? He has been following my girlfriend around the convention center for hours now and he will not leave her alone. Can you do something?

This was fairly shocking to me because, again, I had never met this man in my life. In this situation, I had no idea what to do. Grappling with my identity as a researcher, I was afraid to involve myself, since I was to be the “objective” observer. I felt it may be unethical to try and intervene in the natives’ affairs. After pondering for a minute, however, I realized it would be hypocritical of me to purport to study sexual harassment and then do nothing about it when I witnessed it happening. In any event, I am not the kind of person who rejects another human being in need of help, so I decided to proceed.

I drew on my own knowledge base to help me in this situation. Having attended conventions for many years, I was aware of a trend in which people would walk around with signs that say “free hugs” as a way to socialize. I quickly dug into my backpack and scratched “free hugs” on an errant scrap of paper. Sign in hand, I approached the convention attendee to whom the man pointed, standing near him and his girlfriend, and presented my crudely made sign. “Free hugs?” I asked. He shook his head in decline, but I persisted with another utterance of “free hugs?” He finally gave in, and while we were hugging, I made eye contact with the man who asked for my help, waved my hand toward the door, and mouthed the word, “go!” He grabbed his girlfriend by the hand and they both waved to me as they disappeared into the

convention center, not to be seen again. In this instance, I became a part of the community narrative: rather than experiencing harassment myself, I witnessed harassment—or was informed it was happening—and unintentionally became part of the cause to stop it.

Numerous efforts have been made to mitigate harassment at conventions throughout the years, and while harassment still occurs, the women with whom I spoke made it clear that they have developed their own unique coping mechanisms to fight harassment before it occurs and while it is occurring.

### **Stigma Coping Mechanisms and Perceived Benefits of “Cosplay is Not Consent”**

In discussing the issue of sexual harassment in the cosplay community, it is imperative to address the “Cosplay is Not Consent” movement of the past few years, which is an initiative within the community of cosplayers asserting that one is not consenting to sexual harassment or advances purely by dressing in a costume (Linde, 2014). As I was analyzing the data I had collected across the three conventions I had attended, I realized that the movement is not only still strongly felt at conventions but it has had tremendous impacts on convention life. As such, many of the ways the women I spoke to cope with stigma are influenced by the idea of “Cosplay is Not Consent.” To be clear, it is beyond the scope of this research to provide an objective evaluation of the effectiveness of this movement. It became clear to me throughout the various conversations I had with women cosplayers, however, that this movement is intricately linked with the research question of how women in cosplay combat stigma within the convention-going community. Indeed, many of these mechanisms either led to the creation of the movement or they are resultant of the movement itself, and thus I will discuss them as one entity.

## **Exuding Strength and Self-Confidence**

One way the women I interviewed indicated that they cope with harassment and stigma is by portraying self-confidence and strength to the best of their abilities, as they collectively feel this will deter attempts to stigmatize and exclude them from community activities. Farrah said, “I don’t have a lot of history with creepers. I don’t know if it’s how I carry myself or whatever, but I just don’t deal with them very often. No one has ever dared touch me.” Jay also noted, “I’m pretty scary most of the time, and nobody messes with me, so there’s that [laughs].” Mira was more specific in intentionally shaping how she carries herself: “Now that I am a little older and I carry myself a little bit better, unfortunately, I can be a little intimidating, and so people usually leave me alone. I tend to have resting bitch face, and people are like, ‘okay, I’m not going to talk to her’ [laughs].” Jennifer also mentioned assuming a potentially unpleasant-seeming face, saying, “I got more of it [harassment] when I was younger and didn’t know how to handle it as much. These days, I’m really good at putting on a resting bitch face [laughs], so I think that can kind of keep people away.” Blanche, in reflecting on the potential reasons why she has not experienced elevated levels of harassment at conventions despite her time on the circuit, shared the following thoughts:

Another one [reason] might be how I carry myself. I’m not an overly friendly person [laughs], I get told a lot that I look really mean and intimidating, so maybe that’s part of it. I don’t seem welcoming, I’m not overly friendly with a lot of these males, and I notice a lot of the girls trying to get popular selling their photo prints, they are overly friendly with the males who come up to them or come up to their booth, and I’m not making the justification for it, but there are a lot of guys that think that means a girl genuinely is interested in them, whether that’s because of inexperience or just socially awkward, which you have people of both of those types making up a lot of convention attendees.

Blanche and many other women cosplayers in this sample connected a persona that is confident or uninviting to their particular situations of either not experiencing harassment at conventions or experiencing it infrequently.



In numerous cases, the women I spoke to connected the characters they chose to cosplay with people choosing not to approach or antagonize them. Janet said to me, “I was cosplaying a wrestler one time, and she’s kind of a bitch, so people, like, you know, were making snide remarks at me, and I used it as a license to just be like, ‘no’ [laughs].” This means of channeling a character to deal with an awkward or uncomfortable social situation even outside of harassment happens with fair frequency. Jillian shared with me one anecdote about her first time cosplaying Diana from the popular video game “League of Legends:”

I felt like Diana when I did that cosplay, it was like, “I am Diana!” When I was at the con, there were a couple of dudes, and I heard them scream down the hallway, “Oh, my God! It’s Diana!” And they came running up and they were like, kind of afraid of me I guess because the aesthetic of Diana is kind of intimidating and scary-looking, which is probably why I like her [laughs]. I was trying to stay in character, in case people wanted pictures, I could just be in that zone. I ran into them later that night when I was doing a half-Diana, half-rave cosplay, and they were even more freaked out because my costume was slightly more risqué, I was showing my belly and stuff, but there was, like, a strange reverence they had the first time they talked to me because I was this character, then the second time they saw me, it was like, it’s still Diana, but Diana is basically—like, imagine, like, if you saw, I don’t know, this scary bitch at a bar and she’s been drinking a little bit. It’s still, like, that reverence is still there because it’s, like, still Diana, but now she’s having fun and we can talk.

While Jillian did not indicate any perceived risk of harassment or fear from the interaction, her impression is that commitment to the performance of this particular character facilitated an interaction with these two convention attendees characterized by respect for personal boundaries. Helen is another interviewee who discussed this kind of interaction, indicating how a character’s strength of personality can influence her to choose them as a cosplay:

I try to be my most dominant self. I like to portray characters who are dominant, like Poison Ivy and Rose Quartz, women who are strong and dominant and loud and not afraid to take up the space that they take up. It’s really influenced the characters that I cosplay, trying to combat this dominance issue. When I first started cosplaying, I was cosplaying shy characters, and I was like, “I’ll just play to the character and let these things go,” but as I’ve grown as a person and as a cosplayer, I’ve kind of grown into stronger characters who can see things happening and be like, “enough is enough,” or just flat out “no.”

In this instance, Helen's commitment to the performance of the character actually changed her behavior and how she deals with harassment. In essence, Helen and women like her will channel certain characters' personality traits as a means to combat negative behavior or conduct that they judge to be unacceptable or antagonistic. Sometimes self-confidence alone will not suffice in coping with the stigma one may experience as a woman cosplayer, leading them to intentionally form communities for the purpose of supporting one another.

### **Creating a Community to Support the Anti-Harassment Cause**

The convention-attending community is seen as an important network for women cosplayers to pursue personal connections, display their costumes, and create business relationships. Some sects of this community, however, work to stigmatize these women through the various means previously discussed. This stigma has led women cosplayers to form a community within a community to support one another and speak up for one another when they witness or hear of harassment or bullying occurring. Eleanor told me, "I know for my community in my hometown, there is a group of women who come together specifically to share their interests in a women-centric group, to meet other women in the community, to combat stereotypes, and to prove that we belong in this place, and we're going to make it a safe space." Melanie repeated this idea, stating, "The good thing is that, at least me, we've built a community of friends that are all good at something different, and we can all help each other and make the community stronger and make each other stronger and better as a result."

Multiple women I interviewed mentioned instances wherein they intervened when they witnessed harassment happening. Ashlynn recounted one such story:

I recall one time I was at a con, and I didn't know who this girl was at all, you don't need to know somebody to help them, and that's what I try to tell people, you may be embarrassed or scared but do it because it's the right thing to do, and I remember this guy

was bothering her, and he was pulling on her costume, and you could tell she was really uncomfortable. She kept saying, "I have to go," but he'd stop her, and I just walked up to her and said, "Okay, we need to go, our mom is waiting for us, we have to go, so she'll talk to you later," and I said to her, "Just go along with it," so we went to artist's alley where there were people, and she was like, "Thanks so much, I'm sorry," and I was like, "No, it's cool." It's sad that in every situation it's the victim that is apologizing.

Numerous women shared instances such as this where they would diffuse a situation by pretending to know the harassment victim and removing them from the situation clandestinely.

Melanie shared a similar story of extracting a harassment victim from an uncomfortable situation:

There was one incident where this person had a guy speaking to them and was obviously very uncomfortable, and I walked up to this person and I said, "oh my gosh! I've been looking for you! Let's go do this thing!" I grabbed them by the hand and pulled them away, and at first they seemed very confused because obviously this strange girl walked up to them and pulled them by the hand, and I said, "I could tell that you were really uncomfortable around this person and I could not take watching the discomfort on your poor face," and they were actually really grateful that I had done that because they were painfully, painfully uncomfortable around this person.

Many times, situations will play out in this manner because the woman cosplayer being harassed is shy and feels uncomfortable articulating social boundaries. Michelle mentioned this as one contributing factor to her experiences with harassment, telling me, "The friend rescuing thing has happened a lot [laughs], which I'm truly grateful for any friend coming to my rescue from annoying people. Sometimes I'm really bad at just telling them, 'I don't want to talk to you, go away,'" Not all situations unfold this way, however, with Karen recounting one instance in which she directly confronted an offender:

I was in the vendors' room at one convention, and I saw a guy with his phone, like, there was a girl standing at a thing, and I saw him taking his phone and going up underneath her skirt to take a picture of it, and I called him out on it. I told her exactly what he did, and he immediately walked off. I got so mad. This happened at ColossalCon, and their vendor room is so busy that it's easy to not see any of that stuff because you're just trying to get through, and there are so many people. Like, I find that the more packed it is, the more reason that people think they can get away with that kind of stuff, and like I said, I totally called him out on it. If I see somebody else in need like that, I am going to be right

there to stop whatever's happening and help them. The girl thanked me profusely afterwards. I caught him right when he was about to take the picture, because it was front-facing, so he could see when to click, and he hasn't clicked yet. It was pretty crazy.

This trend of speaking out against harassment as it happens has been attributed partially to the “Cosplay is Not Consent” movement. Jennifer noted, as a result of the movement:

Personally, I see people more willing to speak up when it's happening, instead of just trying to be like, “oh, that's creepy” and move on. Like, “hey, stop that.” I think it's empowering observers, as well, because, like, when you're put in that situation and you're not expecting it, you might not necessarily know how to react, so I don't think people should feel ashamed if they're not yelling at somebody who's harassing them because you don't really know how you're going to react until you're put in that situation, but I think it's empowering people, like, if you see something, say something.

Other women noted a change in how people cope with harassment, with Farrah articulating, as a result of “Cosplay is Not Consent,” “I don't know if harassers are modifying their behavior, but when you publicly point out, ‘No, you can't grab my butt,’ like, it makes them—like, it's less about changing their behavior and more about making it less socially acceptable for them to behave that way, and I think that will improve things.” Helen also connected the movement to a marked creation of a community within a community, stating:

It [“Cosplay is Not Consent”] creates community, so within the cosplay community, there's like a sub-community of cosplayers watching each other's backs to make sure that, if someone is acting creepy, someone else can come in and maybe not diffuse the situation but maybe hang out with them for a minute so they're not alone with the creeper, or if they're a quieter cosplayer, someone can come in and intervene, and be like, “hey, you can't treat her that way,” or “you can't treat him that way.” Like, don't be a creeper. Don't be that way. There's more people sticking up for each other and defending each other. It's people protecting each other.

This creation of a community of women supporting and defending each other in the wake of stigmatization and harassment is another coping mechanism women cosplayers use to navigate the community more enjoyably and effectively. An additional tactic women cosplayers use is the creation of a public discussion about harassment and consent.

## **Creating Social Discourse around Harassment**

Another perceived benefit of the “Cosplay is Not Consent” movement and resulting stigma coping mechanism is the creation of a greater public conversation about harassment at conventions—and sexual harassment in general—taking place. Many people both in and out of the convention-attending communities cling to the rape myths described by Canto, Perles, and Martín (2014) that assign blame for inappropriate behavior to the victim experiencing it. Because of “Cosplay is Not Consent,” many of the women I interviewed expressed their impression that people felt freer to discuss harassment as a greater social issue and raise awareness of it.

Elizabeth noted that the movement “certainly hasn't rid itself of the problem entirely, [...] but it has started a conversation, and that is better than silence.” Karen also mentioned this as a benefit to the movement, stating, “I know that, ever since ‘Cosplay is Not Consent’ was brought out, I’ve seen more people talk about it.” Dolores shared a similar viewpoint on the movement:

“Harassment will unfortunately be everywhere and that is not the cosplay community’s fault.

That is a deeper issue with our society, but it has become a regular issue at cons, but I do believe it is necessary because it sheds light on the subject and it gives people a voice.” Eleanor noted her perception that, as a direct result of the movement, harassment at conventions had decreased:

I did notice a, like, there wasn’t as much assault or any unwarranted conduct after that was implemented. Like, once it started happening and I saw people taking photos with whiteboards saying, “#cosplayisnotconsent,” and that whole advent, I personally didn’t see, hear, witness anything as much of that type of behavior. However, it could still be happening, and that’s partially just me not being at the right place to see it happening. I’m sure it’s still happening. However, I personally noticed a change.

Numerous women I interviewed felt that the movement has had the positive effect of diminishing the number of instances of harassment at anime conventions. During my observations, again, I noticed only two instances of harassment across three conventions, both of which saw me intervening in each situation. To be clear, whether harassment has actually decreased and

whether or not it is connected to the advent of “Cosplay is Not Consent” is not within the scope of this project; accurately expressing the viewpoints of my interviewees is the priority of this project.

One aspect of the movement many of the women I spoke with indicated is that, beyond discouraging intentionally harassing behavior, “Cosplay is Not Consent” also has educated well-intentioned people on what harassment is and is not, according to the women I interviewed. Jennifer told me, on the movement, “I think the fact that it’s bringing awareness to just generally respecting people is very important. I don’t like it to just be reduced to a catchphrase. Like, people need to really understand what it is. Just because you’re dressed like that is not an open invite for people to yell shit at you or take pictures of your butt.” Ashlynn expressed a similar viewpoint, relating to me:

I think it [“Cosplay is Not Consent”] has helped change a lot for people who want to change their mind and be educated, like, “oh, that’s wrong,” or, “maybe I’ve done something that I didn’t quite see was wrong, but I see now that I shouldn’t do that anymore.” That works. And I’ve seen people that I’ve noticed, and I’ve even talked to people like this who have admitted it, and I don’t think they hear what they’re saying. Like, “oh, I stopped doing it because everybody told me to stop doing it,” but, like, it’s wrong. [laughs] You should know [laughs].

The women I spoke to expressed a collective awareness that, while harassment is objectively wrong, there are people who perpetuate harassment unintentionally, and they feel “Cosplay is Not Consent” has helped to inform people on the intricacies of how harassment can happen and be perceived. Maria offered the following insight on the movement to that effect:

I feel like it’s created a conversation that needed to take place, but I feel like it wasn’t even something that people thought about. For instance, I had a friend of mine who was in a photo shoot—and I was actually thinking about this recently—and he went up and hugged the person who was cosplaying next to him, and she was very upset by that, and he didn’t think anything of it, it just was, like, a hug. It was just him being friendly, but that’s a conversation that needs to take place. Like, you can’t just do that, you don’t know that person. So, even people with good intentions need to have this, you know, this idea.

This formation of a social discourse around sexual harassment and stigma is an important coping mechanism because it allows the women who experience them to share their stories, vent their frustrations, and understand that there are communities of people experiencing similar stigmas and that an effort is being made to change minds on the matter. Knowing that social change is imminent, that efforts are being made to correct the problem, and that they can actively and vocally participate in these efforts helps women cosplayers cope with the stigmas they face at many conventions.

The stigmas with which women cosplayers have had to cope throughout the years have manifested in numerous ways and have forced them to develop sundry coping mechanisms to endure these hardships. The women cosplayers with whom I spoke wished to clearly communicate, however, that these stigmas are miniscule aspects of their convention experiences and that their conventions are characterized by overwhelming acceptance from fellow convention-goers.

### **“I Find the Entire Thing Hilarious”: Evidence of Acceptance and Gender Equality**

While stigma is an unfortunate reality of the convention experience for many women, the cosplayers with whom I spoke expressed that, overwhelmingly, they feel accepted in the convention environment. Despite suggestions from the extant scholarly literature on the topic that men intentionally try to exclude women from the convention environment, women whom I interviewed feel they navigate this space on a playing field equal to the men who co-inhabit it.

#### **Acceptance from Fellow Convention Attendees**

When I directly asked the women I interviewed whether stigma or acceptance was the most appropriate descriptor of their convention experiences, 83 percent of them said they felt mostly accepted and 17 percent said they either felt mostly stigmatized or some combination of

stigmatized and accepted. Angelique said, “I think you’re going to find the most acceptance at any nerd convention, because we’re all nerds, we all wanted to be accepted before, and now we finally found a pod of each other to accept one another and enjoy what we enjoy.” This feeling of acceptance for the “nerd” aspects of one’s self was shared by many of the women in this sample, such as Amalia: “Personally, I feel more accepted. I feel that it's becoming more normal to go to cons dressed in cosplay than to be dressed in normal clothes. I see the cons as being a place to let your inner weirdo out and to be able to fully be yourself.” Eleanor eagerly shared with me her positive convention experiences:

I definitely feel accepted. I personally have never, I can almost say with a hundred percent certainty, never felt stigmatized by my fellow female cosplayers. I’ve never been given any slanderous words about any cosplay that I’m wearing, even when I’m in half of my cosplay and not wearing the full thing, I still get compliments from fellow female cosplayers who don’t even know me will be like, “Oh, you wear that cosplay so well, you look so great! I love that show, we should talk about it!” I’ve only ever felt support from other female cosplayers, and I can say that about male cosplayers, too. I think everybody in the cosplay community, for the most part, knows that we’re all in the same boat, that we’re all trying to be these characters that we really love, and we’re doing our hardest to be the best characters we can be.

My own observations indicated this same trend. Having been to three conventions across three states, I noticed more interactions than I could count of men complimenting women on their cosplays, women complimenting women on cosplays, convention attendees hugging one another, convention attendees asking one another for pictures and posing together, and even supporting one another in uncomfortable situations. I witnessed the following conversation on the elevator at one convention, presumably regarding another attendee:

Woman A: Her mom was saying horrible things to her.

Woman B: Like what?

Woman A: Just that she was worthless and needed to lose weight.

Woman B: Wow, that’s awful.

Woman A: Yeah, I took her and we walked around the con for a bit to cheer her up. Someone complimented her on her cosplay, so I think that made her feel better.

Woman B: That’s good. She needs it right now.



Several women confided in me similar stories of their own about how the convention and cosplay community has given them a release from hardships faced in American society at large.

Jay offered the following feedback:

I feel accepted, without question. Growing up, I was ostracized not just for being a plus sized person but being poor and having a father with a reputation. I found the cosplay community, and my life would not be the same without them. It gave me a family I needed and never thought I could have. And I think women are definitely accepted in the community. The men are glad that we are here. It's like, "Hey, there's women that understand us and we can get along."

This theme of women feeling accepted by male convention attendees despite the stigmas they may face was common to most respondents. Helen mentioned her observation of change over time in this regard:

As a female cosplayer and gamer and part of the nerd community in general, there's been a lot of steps taken to include women, and there's a lot more women at conventions now than there was even back in 2009 when I first started going, and there's just a lot more inclusivity of, like, a lot of games and places that people pull their cosplay ideas from are women now, and they're stronger, like, very overt characters, and they're not—you're no longer just the sexy maid girl in the background of the anime or video game or whatever, and you have dynamic leads to pick from.

If the subject of relations between men and women came up in an interview, it was usually characterized by positivity and favorable comments. The majority of the women I spoke with said they felt accepted by all fellow convention attendees and that stigma, while difficult to handle, was not definitive of their convention experiences. On that note, I turn to discuss one more issue in convention life: gender relations.

### **An Equal Convention Environment in Terms of Gender**

Based on the extant literature on cosplay and popular culture conventions, I entered this study with the assumption that the convention space would be a relatively male-controlled environment, that the women I interviewed would be acutely aware of this control, and that this

would be a hegemonic space they would have to navigate in various ways. Not one woman I spoke to indicated male domination as a prominent aspect of the convention experience. When I asked Maria if she felt like the convention space was controlled by men, she responded, “I hadn’t really noticed that. It’s not really something I was looking for, I guess. [...] I haven’t really felt like the convention itself has not catered to me.” Michelle added to this, telling me, “I personally don’t feel subjugated or oppressed in the convention space. I don’t really feel like I’m being controlled or subjugated.” Dolores also responded in kind: “From the cons I’ve gone to, I have not really felt any subjugation. The panels and the topics tend to be more male dominated but other than that I can’t really pick out anything else specific.” The respondents I interviewed overwhelmingly agreed that conventions are not exclusively male-controlled and that they felt welcome as women in the convention environment.

When I posed the issue of male domination in the convention space, Roxy responded with amusement:

[Laughs] I don’t really notice any sort of “male dominance,” in finger quotes, and, I mean, in the dealers’ hall, there are also things that are more targeted at women, like the little alpaca plushies, so it’s sort of balanced, I think. I mean, like, anime and video games and such have, there certainly was a time when it was largely male-dominated, not in finger quotes this time [laughs]. But, I mean, for the most part, that’s pretty much over. There are just as many women who watch anime as men, if not more. [...] The only time that it’s really affected me has been the times that there’s been harassment, but, I mean, as far as asserting their masculinity, that just makes me laugh [laughs], just flat out makes me giggle. I find it hilarious, the fact that they feel the need to, because it means that they feel the women around them are overpowering them, and I just find the entire thing hilarious.

Some cosplayers noted that, while the convention environment is fairly gender-inclusive, cosplay is actually a woman-dominated hobby. Lavina offered her thoughts on this issue, saying, “I think there are more female cosplayers than male. I’ve noticed that it seems to be geared more towards women than men. I think generally speaking we enjoy dressing up and having our

picture taken more so than guys do.” Janet repeated this in my interview with her, telling me, “As far as the cosplay scene is involved, it's all mostly women.” Blanche told me, in her experience, “Panels that are about cosplaying itself are overwhelmingly women because it's mostly women who cosplay.” Farrah offered me her own observations:

As far as cosplayers go, I kind of notice women dominating. I mean, you'll get some really impressive male cosplayers, and I've seen them get overlooked because—actually, I don't know why, but I've seen them get overlooked in favor of female cosplayers. It's one of the few things that we are actually dominating, and because cosplay is becoming so prevalent today, that means we're kind of dominating the conventions. I mean, there's others that are probably considered more “boy like,” the ones targeted to gaming or whatever, but I've never felt like an outsider. [...] There used to be more of a dynamic where they were more male-dominated, and, you know, people who hate cosplayers, what they really hate is female cosplayers because it's taking the power away from them, really, and I, I guess I am seeing the power dynamic shift a lot because you'll see more female cosplay guests than you'll see male. I mean, especially with, I think that's what's factored into “Cosplay is Not Consent,” because it was women, it's like, it's us taking power back in a lot of ways, I think.

While not all of the women I interviewed brought up complex power dynamics in such a way as Farrah, there does seem to be a trend of women permeating cosplay. Throughout the conventions I attended, I did not note any photo shoots where a male cosplayer was the focus of that particular shoot. In photo shoots with male cosplayers, they were always in a role either secondary to or co-existing with a female cosplayer or cosplayers.

Not all the women unconditionally agreed on the point of gender acceptance. Eleanor, while she does not feel subjugated, offered a caveat to her response:

I feel like nerd culture as a whole still feels like a “boys' club” in a lot of ways, and more often than not a lot of convention culture has been brought up around appealing to men. For example, there were “booth babes” where women were played to cosplay in a sexy manner to sell goods to the majority male attendance. In some cases that continues to persist. While I'm in the con space I tend to focus on my own enjoyment and doing what I want to do, and nobody has come up to me and put me down for being a woman at a convention. So while I haven't felt marginalized as a woman at a con I've attended, I definitely would say that marginalization is real outside of my experience.

Many women included similar caveats in their responses to the question of male-permeated conventions. Several women indicated that, while the overall convention tends not to be male-dominated, certain spaces within the convention do have more male control. Sidney offers the game room as an example: “I’ve never really noticed a problem with how women are treated. Maybe in some of the game rooms, like when they’re playing D&D and stuff like that, I’ll just kind of like watch and stuff, but I think I make them slightly uncomfortable.” Melanie also indicated the game room as a deviation from the norm, saying, “When it comes to convention as a whole, it’s pretty equal between men and women. I feel like more men probably visit the game room, but I would say everywhere else, it’s probably equal.” Laney, who regularly competes in game tournaments at conventions, shared the following insight on her experiences with gender:

I’ve been to many gaming tournaments, and the first time I went, people kind of shrugged me off, but then I was just that persistent little pin prick that just kept coming back and kept poking all the guys in their asses, saying, “Hey, bitch, I am here! I am going to smoke you!” [laughs]. So, I mean, there is a stereotype that females aren’t gamer types and just do it to be part of the community, but I really enjoy, I do it for myself, I don’t do it for attention. I’ve been to so many gaming tournaments, guys are just like, “This bitch is here!” [laughs]. I’ve actually had grown men drop out of tournaments because I am on the roster, so that’s, you know, that’s a little empowering. I’ve proven myself. I have noticed that men usually control the gaming room, and that’s what I usually go for. I don’t care if it’s run by men or women, but there’s usually very few women in the gaming room and in gaming tournaments at cons.

Beyond certain spaces in the convention being controlled, several respondents argued that certain kinds of conventions, such as comic book and video game conventions, tend to experience more male domination. Jennifer said, “At non-anime conventions, like, comic book cons are, I think, a lot more male-dominated, but anime conventions almost seem like there’s more girls.” Jillian shared this same impression: “I have especially heard horror stories from comic cons in particular. After every major comic con, there is just always a flood of stories coming out of different women and even sometimes dudes getting something happening to

them.” Mira seemed to index comic book conventions being more male-centered as a given, telling me, “I’ve been to gaming cons and comic cons, like, cons like that tend to be more male-dominated.” Janet agreed that “Video game and comic cons are definitely more male-dominated.”

Video game conventions were actually the most commonly noted kind of convention that sees greater degrees of male domination of women. Melanie said, “I haven’t noticed any male dominance in the convention space, but I will say that, especially at video game conventions, it is very male dominated. I play video games and stuff, which is predominantly male-dominated.” Jeanette offered her opinion that “The video gaming community is very oppressive to women, just participating in general, but I think that it’s a little different whenever men get to see women dressing up as their favorite characters.” I had the following conversation with Nora in regards to the different gendered experiences at anime conventions and video game conventions:

Nora: I feel like gaming conventions are more male dominated while anime cons are skewed more female oriented.

Chris: What makes you say that? Just general observations? Why do you think gaming cons are more male-oriented and anime cons are more female-oriented?

Nora: Um, just general observations really. It’s not a big difference, but I think it has to do with industry advertising. Video games tend to be advertised to males while anime have been more towards female, at least the more popular ones.

Because I limited data collection sites to anime conventions in order to maintain consistency, I did not have the opportunity to observe whether or not certain kinds of conventions experience greater degrees of male control and cannot reach any generalizations about kinds of conventions that are more or less male-controlled. I did, however, note that the gaming areas seemed to be composed of far more male attendees than other areas of the convention in most cases.

## Summary

This chapter has presented the major findings of this study. Specifically, it has enumerated the lived experiences of women cosplayers at anime conventions in terms of choosing and crafting their specific cosplays and how gender plays into this. Personal connection to the character, the character's visual design, and similarity of appearances were identified as the major factors affecting the choice to cosplay a specific character. The nature of being a medium for creativity, pride in one's work, and the opportunity to pursue a niche were identified as important factors in making the costume. Women were unlikely to consider how revealing a cosplay was or whether it could potentially draw harassment from ill-intentioned convention attendees, and they were more likely to make it themselves than to have someone else make it in their stead. Convention life is characterized by seeking positive affirmation, finding people with common interests, and using the convention environment as a safe space to express one's authentic gender identity.

Stigma is directed at women in numerous ways, including accusations of insincere attention-seeking, verbal vilification, and connecting instances of harassment to sartorial factors, even inwardly. Harassment manifests as its own form of stigma, most commonly in the forms of following, verbal harassment, grabbing, and online comments. The coping mechanisms women use to navigate the convention environment despite these stigmas are exuding strength of character, encouraging community unification, and creating social discourse around harassment. Stigma is not characteristic of the convention experience, however; women report feeling accepted and on a similar playing field as the men at anime conventions.

The next chapter contains a discussion of the major findings of this study and the resultant theoretical applications, with limitations and directions for future research also considered.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer the following questions: what are the lived experiences of women cosplayers at anime conventions? To what degree have they had to endure stigmatization, unwelcome attention, and sexual harassment from fellow convention attendees? What coping mechanisms have they developed to help them navigate this male-dominated space? This chapter discusses the implications of this study. The women cosplayers I interviewed indicated that they find themselves engaged in the process of cosplay in numerous ways, not the least among which is authentic expression of the self. In terms of their experiences with stigma, while they are plentiful particularly in terms of harassment, the women are frankly too busy enjoying cosplay and their communities of fellow cosplayers to notice the attempts at stigmatization. This lack of acknowledging stigma affects gender relations in the community, too: despite preconceived notions informed by current research, the women in this study do not register themselves as subject to male control, nor do they feel they are performing for men. Limitations of the study, implications of the results, and directions for future research are also considered.

#### **Towards a Theory of Performing the Self: Transcending the Act of Cosplay**

The quality of cosplay as a means to institute a performance are well-documented in social science literature. As I stated earlier, I witnessed more instances of performance than I could reasonably be expected to count. I feel compelled to argue, however, that the women I interviewed and that many of the cosplayers I observed do not limit cosplay to the word “performance.” The process of choosing a character to cosplay and creating the cosplay by hand is a pain-staking procedure that develops over the course of months, and there is a part of the self



that becomes emotionally invested in the process. This emotional investment connects the cosplayer not only to the character but to the experience of cosplay—donning the costume, walking around the convention, having one’s picture taken, and other aspects of the experience all serve to increase the emotional involvement in the experience.

For many in this community, cosplay is not merely performing the character but also expressing latent or hidden aspects of the self in a safe and accepting environment. My respondent Jay referred to cosplay as “a lifeline to find out who you are.” She also added, “It keeps me anchored to who I am.” For these women, cosplay is not simply the act of dressing up in a costume and pretending to be a character. In a sense, it can be said that these women are not only performing characters but also performing themselves, or, rather, aspects of themselves that they feel people outside the convention environment may not accept or that they do not feel comfortable expressing while performing themselves and thus choose to perform as someone else instead. Cross-play is a perfect example of this concept: women will dress up as men and men will dress up as women sometimes for general amusement. In many instances, nevertheless, cosplaying as a character of another gender identity offers a safe way to explore another mode of gender expression in a community in which many people do the same while also not committing to a permanent version of the self.

This performance of the self even affects how women will deal with stigma and harassment when they should arise. Tactics for handling uncomfortable social situations have even arisen from these performances of the self. Several women indicated that the strength they felt in the performance attached to a particular cosplay allowed them to tap into their inner strength and either defend themselves or someone else they saw being stigmatized or harassed. They also indicated in numerous instances that the essence of the character they were cosplaying

at the time—their strength, their persistence, or some other desirable quality appropriate to the situation—inspired a latent advocacy within their personalities.

To be clear, the escapist aspect of cosplay is still significant. The motivations to cosplay discussed in current literature on the topic are still valid and I do not contest them. I do postulate a new perspective for studying cosplay, though: cosplay can be a performance of normally hidden facets of the self instead of merely acting as an escape from the self. Indeed, escapism from reality and realization of latent aspects of the self may not necessarily be mutually exclusive phenomena. Escapism and self-realization could co-exist simultaneously as the same characteristic or even different characteristics, such as gender identity realization and a sense of strong womanhood previously discussed. This phenomenon could be seen as the merging of Goffman's (1959) "performer" and "character" aspects of the self: in cosplay, the two are often the same in that the performer channels the character as part of the front stage performance. In a sense, then, it can be said that the act of cosplay is a blend of escaping from the self momentarily as well as coming into the self the cosplayer wishes to reach, and this act of coming into one's most authentic self need not be thought of as separate from escaping from the self into another character; indeed, these phenomena often co-occur.

### **The Paradox of Stigma**

The issue of stigma in the cosplay community is one of the least cut-and-dry issues discussed in this study. While the findings of this study are directly in line with the findings yielded by Rodriguez (2015) in terms of men intentionally trying to craft a convention environment that excludes and maligns women, the women I interviewed do not seem to internalize these tactics. While they are aware that stigma and abuse exist, they continue to attend conventions, they continue to cosplay, and they continue to take photos with one another

in the dealer's halls of conventions, much to the chagrin of the men who intentionally tried to exclude them from the convention experience.

Explaining why the women interviewed for this study do not index stigma as a prominent convention experience really comes down to the sense of community shared among them. All of the women I spoke to indicate their membership in communities of fellow women—mostly informal but sometimes formal, as organizations for the purposes of creating a local community of women are known to come into existence (Gann, 2015)—as ways of coping with what stigma they do face. Because these women are surrounded more frequently by the positive influence and support of fellow women than by the tactics of othering described by Rodriguez (2015), they are less likely to internalize stigma as a typical part of convention experience. In this sense, forming communities of fellow women within the greater convention and cosplay communities is not only a tactic for coping with stigma but also simply a natural way of navigating convention culture. It is possible, then, that these networks of women are so strong and intentional, the women do not even notice that certain men within the community are trying to stigmatize them, and in order for stigma to happen, there must be some recognition on the part of the stigmatized (Goffman, 1963). Again, while the women recognize it happening, they do not internalize it as a definitive aspect of their convention experiences. Another possible explanation for this non-acknowledgement of stigma is the temporal element inherent in “Cosplay is Not Consent.” Because more awareness has been brought to the issue of harassment in recent years and because there is a perception of a decrease in harassment behavior, it is possible that women's memories of conventions before this movement are being affected by the more positive social setting of present day conventions, causing their memories of stigma in previous convention environments

to seem more distant or irrelevant to current life.<sup>8</sup> This idea is merely speculation and would require further testing in this specific setting, but evidence does point to the possibility that past negative experiences can be subject to current positive bias (Levine, Schmidt, Kang, & Tinti, 2012).

The coping mechanism of finding a community of people enduring the same stigma falls directly in line with Goffman's (1963) conceptualization of how the stigmatized typically cope with their plight, but one important divergence must be noted: rather than avoiding the society—in this case, the convention environment—that imposes stigma, the women in this study exist as part of the society and actively work against the definitions of stigma that are culturally enforced. This coping mechanism along with the formation of a social discourse contribute to the theme of female autonomy in the convention setting. Women cosplayers are reclaiming power and using their social capital to give a voice to people, themselves included, who feel stigmatized by bullying and harassment and create a more inclusive convention and community setting. Many men are also part of this anti-harassment initiative, myself included with my instance of deescalating a harassment situation at one convention, so the community of “Cosplay is Not Consent” is not exclusive only to women. Thus, women cosplayers are coping with stigma not by avoiding the stigmatizing environment but by increasing their integration and articulating that they no longer wish to tolerate the stigma.

One aspect of this discussion on stigma important to indicate is that findings were not consistent among the women I interviewed in terms of how women cosplayers stigmatize each other. In many interviews, the women I spoke to would indicate disgust at the notion that

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<sup>8</sup> I extend my gratitude to Danielle Mullins for this insight.

someone wearing a revealing cosplay is inviting harassment but at another point in that same interview would acknowledge a relationship between an individual's clothing and other people's behavior towards that individual. One example of this is Julia's articulation of her desire to avoid "the wrong kind of attention" for her cosplay but also vehemently asserting that no one deserves to experience harassment. This paradox suggests that, while women cosplayers have internalized rape culture norms towards women to a degree, they are intentionally exercising effort as a community to resist these ideas and mitigate stigma directed at them and at other women.

### **So, Is It Actually a Boys' Club?**

One of the most surprising findings of the study is the revelation that women do not perceive conventions to be male-controlled spaces. While there were discrepancies within the sample regarding ideas such as cosplay choice, priorities, and forms of stigma, my interviewees could not have made it clearer to me that they generally do not feel subjugated in the convention environment. Quite the opposite: the act of cosplay makes women feel empowered to acknowledge harassment and stigma and discredit the source of these acts and attitudes when they arise. Stigma and harassment, while unpleasant to encounter, are such miniscule aspects of the convention experience that women cosplayers tend not to make sense of these events in meaningful ways and tend simply not to notice stigma when it happens, no matter how intentional it is.

The argument could be made here that women cosplayers are performing for the male gaze, a theoretical framework that postulates women are often subject to the heterosexual male gaze and that political and cultural situations are often framed according to this perspective (Mulvey, 1975). From this perspective, female characters in popular culture are shaped by the male gaze and male preferences, which could be argued to affect women cosplayers, since this is

the culture from which they draw their characters. I insist, however, that the women I interviewed and the overall population of women who cosplay bear more autonomy than that: they all choose the characters based on personal connections rather than what they feel will garner male attention; they largely make these costumes themselves without male assistance; and they exhibit these cosplays with and for each other, themselves, and whomsoever wishes to see. I witnessed many photo shoots and interactions take place; and, while the photographers were mostly white men, it was the women subjects who were directing the photo shoots and pitching ideas. Simply put, these women assert that they are not subject to male control, and ethnographic observations support their claims.

This assertion of female agency is a direct contradiction to extant literature on convention gender relations claiming that men hold the majority of social capital in this setting (Lamerichs, 2011; Rodriguez, 2015; Scott, 2015). The factor that best explains this discrepancy is the particular conventions I chose to attend and gather my interviewee sample. I specifically limited the scope of this research to anime conventions instead of popular culture conventions in general because I wanted to test if different kinds of conventions—anime, comic book, and video game among them—had different norms governing gender politics. Because this is a qualitative, interview-driven project, I can speak for the impressions of the women I spoke to, but I cannot speak to a greater, institution-level trend. That said, it would be useful for future researchers to consider the possibility that different kinds of popular culture conventions are theoretically distinct from one another in terms of gender relations and other issues, and they should be treated as such in creating research design.

Women do not perform gender in consistent ways, as should be apparent throughout this study. Women's cosplays vary from revealing, sexy outfits to powerful, armored villainesses and

frightening monsters with wide wingspans. They do consistently seem to resist typical feminine gender norms by either not allowing men to subjugate them in the convention space or by not noticing when men attempt to do so. Butler would still argue that these women are performing gender, as we all do, under the same social strain where “autonomy is, strangely, dispossessed and undone” (Butler, 2004, p. 100), and this is true to the same extent that we are all subject to the gender norms pre-existing in society. The women cosplayers in this study both perform and resist gender in various ways; while fulfilling the stereotype that women enjoy wearing makeup and dressing up, they do not consider themselves subject to the male gaze or to being objects sexualized by men. My respondent Jillian worded her thoughts on the matter in the following way:

People don't like being told they can't be predators anymore or do whatever the fuck they want. Just because someone is in an outfit doesn't mean that they are there for your fucking gaze. Like, I am here because I wanted to do it and I wanted to be this bitch, so you can fuck off. This isn't for you, this is for me, this is me with my magical costume on, being magical for a weekend. Not for you, bud.

Jillian's utterance of “this isn't for you, this is for me” encapsulates the collective attitude of the women I interviewed and of the women I observed: cosplay is not done for male attention or for male approval but rather for self-expression, self-fulfillment, and in many cases, self-discovery.

### **Limitations**

One of the most significant limitations to this research is the constitution of the sample. While people of many demographics participate in cosplay, the vast majority of this sample are white, middle class women. Because the sampling technique used was the snowball method, this kind of sampling distribution makes sense, as similar types of people are more likely to form networks. This method of snowball sampling does hamper the results of the study, however; less

heterogeneity means fewer perspectives are represented, making this study difficult to generalize to the greater population of women cosplayers outside this study.

Another limitation lies in the issue of inter-coder reliability (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Because I executed this research by myself under the occasional supervision of my committee chairperson, I transcribed and coded all of the data myself. Another researcher may have coded the data differently than I, which could have affected the results of the study. Geography also constitutes a limitation to this study. While I intentionally made an effort to include rural conventions and cosplayers in the study, generalizing the results to settings such as urban conventions cannot reasonably be done. On the note of generalization, upon setting out to do this study, I made the active choice not to incorporate quantitative methods into the research design. I wished to focus on the individual experiences of women who cosplay rather than on generalizing the results to some other population, as generalization is often thought to be inherently connected to power politics (Oyěwùmí, 2014). This lack of generalization to other populations, regardless, does constitute a limitation.

One final limitation to this study lies within my identity as a researcher. Because I am a white male, my bias inherently affected the framework, execution, and write-up of this study.

Collins (1990) writes extensively on how identity is perceived to affect one's point of view:

Positivist approaches aim to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations. Because researchers have widely differing values, experiences, and emotions, genuine science is thought to be unattainable unless all human characteristics except rationality are eliminated from the research process. By following strict methodological rules, scientists aim to distance themselves from the values, vested interests, and emotions generated by their class, race, sex, or unique situation. By decontextualizing themselves, they allegedly become detached observers and manipulators of nature. (p. 255)

As I carried out this research, I became acutely aware that decontextualizing one's self from personal identity is an exercise in futility and a misrepresentation of perspective in science. As



such, one effect of my identity was that not everyone I approached was willing to talk to me. I met a group of African American cosplayers at the second convention I attended who were all friendly and inviting toward me. When I mentioned my study, they responded with interest and engagement; when I asked them if they would like to be interviewed, they politely but firmly declined. The sociologist in me understands the hesitation that people of racial minorities may have for allowing a white male to tell their stories, but it is difficult not to take such a thing personally. Even among the women who were giving of their time, it is possible that my gender could have caused them to hold back their experiences. I was, however, conscious of this and did my best to form an interview environment that made respondents feel as comfortable and safe as possible. This aspect of my identity could have, nevertheless, affected their responses and thus the results of the study. Beyond the potential guardedness of the respondents, my ability to act as a participant in the participant-observation aspect of the study was limited due to my gender identity, so gaining a deep understanding of women's lived experiences firsthand was inaccessible to me.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The community of women cosplayers and cosplayers in general is as of the time of this publication relatively untapped and understudied. As such, I recommend numerous courses of action in future inquiry. More effort should be made to include women of color in future interview samples; better yet, a study focusing specifically on the experiences of minority women in cosplay would be particularly illuminating. Beyond women who cosplay, many women at popular culture and anime conventions elect not to cosplay. This choice not to cosplay undoubtedly affects their convention experiences and whether they experience stigma, harassment, and suppression from men, so this community could contribute greatly to current

literature. Men who cosplay, while not as common or as visible as women who cosplay, constitute a sect of the convention attending community that would also be valuable to study, as their lived experiences and perspectives are likely particularly unique. While collecting data for this project, many women informed me that women who cosplay are not the only stigmatized community on the convention circuit. Men who engage in cosplay, people who are overweight, racial minorities, and disabled people also face great stigma according to my interviewees, so assessing their stigma coping mechanisms could contribute more to the literature on stigmatized populations.

My final recommendation for future research is methodological. Autoethnography is a burgeoning field in anthropology and in social science in which researchers report and analyze their own experiences and reactions to ethnographic phenomena (Chang, 2008). While autoethnography would have been my ideal research method for this study, I do not identify as female, so my experiences and interpretations would not have been appropriate for assessing women's lived experiences. An autoethnographic study of the community of women cosplayers could reveal a more intimate portrait of how women support one another through cosplay and through defending one another against sexual harassment. I could not have used this method, as I do not identify as female. Second, as I stated earlier, there are qualitative data suggesting that anime, comic book, and video game conventions are substantively distinct from one another, so future literature and scientific inquiry should focus more on the differences among these kinds of conventions and treat them as separate from one another. Finally, as the findings of this study are the result of in-depth interviews and are thus about personal perceptions of reality, enough theoretical data now exists to construct surveys inquiring about experiences with harassment and

how stigma is combatted. As such, a quantitative, longitudinal study could assess the substantive effectiveness of initiatives such as “Cosplay is Not Consent.”

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study began by asking the questions: what are the lived experiences of women cosplayers at anime conventions? To what extent have they had to endure stigmatization, unwelcome attention, and sexual harassment from fellow convention attendees, if at all? What coping mechanisms have they developed to help them navigate this hegemonic male-dominated space? I hope through the course of this paper I have at least partially answered these questions and given an idea of how women navigate the convention environment and find strength and community through cosplay.

This study contributes to the emerging body of literature on gender in the cosplay and convention-attending community by directly incorporating women’s voices into the narrative and allowing them to speak for themselves and for their experiences, rather than being spoken for. My research also increases the scholarly understanding of stigma, the communities towards which it can be directed, and how these communities cope with such challenges.

There are numerous implications of the results of this study. First, cosplay is appropriate not only for escaping from the self but for finding the self; instead of performing a character separate from the self to be released from the triteness or trauma of everyday life, cosplay can be a performance of the self, an outlet by which to express authentic identity beyond interests and hobbies. Second, women cosplayers’ experiences with stigma at anime conventions are minimal and usually dealt with through social solidarity with other women and by inhabiting the convention setting regardless of detractors. Finally, the perspective that the convention environment is crafted by and for male interests seems to contain caveats regarding women’s

autonomy: they have incorporated their voices and their perspectives into the convention setting regardless of attempts to exclude them.

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**APPENDIX A: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY APPROVAL LETTER**



**Office of Research Integrity**  
Institutional Review Board  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

April 27, 2017

Kristi Fondren, PhD  
Sociology Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 1038940-1  
At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Fondren:

**Protocol Title:** [1038940-1] Gender Performance in Cosplay  
**Expiration Date:** 4/27/18  
**Site Location:** MU  
**Submission Type:** New Project                      APPROVED  
**Review Type:** Exempt

In accordance with 45CFR46.101(b)(2), the above study and informed consent were granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee for the period of 12 months. The approval will expire 4/27/18 . A continuing review request for this study must be submitted no later than 30 days prior to the expiration date.

This study is for student Christopher Lucas.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

**APPENDIX B: OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY AMENDMENT APPROVAL**



**Office of Research Integrity**  
Institutional Review Board  
One John Marshall Drive  
Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205

IRB2 #00003206

June 7, 2017

Kristi Fondren, PhD  
Sociology Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 1038940-2

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Fondren:

**Protocol Title:** [1038940-2] Gender Performance in Cosplay

**Expiration Date:** April 27, 2018

**Site Location:** MU

**Submission Type:** Amendment/Modification APPROVED

**Review Type:** Exempt Review

The amendment to the above listed study was approved today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. This amendment is the addition of off-site locations and internet interviews.

This study is for student Christopher Lucas.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-896-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

# Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

## **Gender Performance in Cosplay**

Kristi M. Fondren, Ph.D., Principal Investigator

Christopher M. Lucas, B.A., Co-Investigator

### Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study. Research studies are designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study. There may also be risks associated with being part of research studies. If there are any risks involved in this study then they will be described in this consent. Your participation is voluntary. Please take your time to make your decision, and ask your research doctor or research staff to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

### Why Is This Study Being Done?

The overarching goal of this study is to explore and advance knowledge regarding a new cultural niche – the cosplay community. Specifically, this study aims to explore the experiences of female cosplayers at popular culture conventions.

### How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?

Anywhere from 30 to 45 people will take part in this study. There is no limit to the number of subjects who would be able to enter the study.

### What Is Involved In This Research Study?

We are speaking with individuals who are deeply immersed in the culture of the cosplay community. The interview will last approximately thirty minutes to one hour.

### How Long Will You Be In The Study?

You will be in the study for the duration of the interview. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop or interrupt this interview at any time.

### What Are The Risks Of The Study?

Being in this study involves no risk to you.

### Are There Benefits To Taking Part In The Study?



If you agree to take part in this study, there may or may not be direct benefit to you. We hope the information learned from this study will reveal more information about women cosplayers and how they experience popular culture conventions.

### *What Other Choices Are There?*

Again, your participation is completely voluntary.

### *What about Confidentiality?*

We will maintain your confidentiality to the best of our ability. Your name and any identifying characteristics will be removed from all written records and reports.

If we publish the information learned from this study, you will not be identified by name or in any other way.

### *What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?*

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

### *Will You Be Paid For Participating?*

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

### *What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?*

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time.

### *Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?*

This form is your record of your participation in the research project. If you have any questions, please feel free to address them to me at this time. If you have additional questions later, our principal investigator will be happy to answer them as well. You may contact her directly by calling Dr. Kristi Fondren's office (304.696.2795) or by email (fondren@marshall.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the Marshall University IRB#2 Chairman Dr. Christopher LeGrow or ORI at (304) 696-4303. You may also call this number if you have concerns or complaints about the research, the research staff cannot be reached, or you want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

Thank you for your time and participation.

***SIGNATURES***

You agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 21 years of age or older. You have had a chance to ask questions about being in this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled.

---

Subject Name (Printed)

---

Subject Signature

---

Date

---

Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

---

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Demographic Data

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_ Gender Identification \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Education \_\_\_\_\_ Highest Degree \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Years since First Cosplay \_\_\_\_\_ Years since First Convention \_\_\_\_\_

### Interview Questions

1/ To begin with, let's talk about your introduction to the community. When did you cosplay for the first time?

1A/ When did you first attend a convention? Was this the first time you cosplayed? How long was the time span between when you first attended a con and when you first cosplayed?

2/ Now let's talk about your interest in the community. Why did you first begin cosplaying?

2A/ Why do you continue to do so now?

3/ What are some of the factors that go into your decision to cosplay a specific character? In other words, what about a character makes you want to cosplay them? Can you give me a general idea of what your "typical" cosplay looks like?

3A/ Are you more or less likely to cosplay a character who is "sexy," or is that not a factor in your decision-making process?

3B/ How do you take the "creepy guy" factor into account when choosing a cosplay? How does this threat influence your likelihood of choosing a "sexy" cosplay?

4/ Once you choose a character, which are you more likely to wear: cosplays that are store-bought or ones that are hand-made?

4A/ Can you tell me why?

4B/ (If hand-made) Do you make these yourself, or do you contract someone to make them for you? Are they usually men or women?

5/ Can you tell me a little bit about what life is like at conventions? In other words, walk me through a typical day at a con.

6/ I'm sure by now you've heard of the "cosplay is not consent" policy being instituted at various cons. What are your thoughts on this? Is it necessary? Was this a problem in the first place?

6A/ From what you can tell, what is this policy doing for change? Are people paying attention to it? Are they modifying their behavior accordingly?

7/ Do you have any "horror stories" you'd like to share regarding your time at conventions?

Have you experienced any instances of people—specifically men, but maybe also other gender identifications—who initiated unwelcome contact with you?

7A/ How did you handle the situation? Did you address it yourself or report it to security?  
Other methods?

7B/ Did these situations happen before or after "cosplay is not consent" really took off?

8/ I'd like to know more about your experiences with acceptance and stigma at cons. Which do you feel is more characteristic of your general experience?

8A/ Why? PROBE, if necessary: body shaming, being called a "fake" nerd, sense of community, etc.

9/ There are some people who would suggest that cons are pretty male-dominated in terms of whose interests are taken into account. Can you give your opinion on this? Do you feel marginalized in the convention space, or do you not notice a difference?

9A/ How do you cope with this? How do you fight back against this idea of cons being a "boys' club?"

9B/ How does this affect your con experience?

10/ Before we wind things up, is there anything I did not ask that you would like to talk about? Any final thoughts you want to share?

## APPENDIX E: CURRICULUM VITAE

### Christopher Matthew Lucas

Curriculum Vitae

Department of Sociology & Anthropology  
527-B Smith Hall, Marshall University  
Huntington, WV 25755  
lucas207@live.marshall.edu

#### Education

- M. A. candidate, Marshall University (2018)
  - Major field: Sociology
  - Minor field: Anthropology
- B. A., Marshall University (2015)
  - Major fields: Japanese, International Affairs, and Political Science
  - Minor fields: Asian Studies and History

#### Teaching Experience

- Guest Instructor, SOC 345-201 – “Social Statistics I,” Marshall University (Spring 2018) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Richard Garnett)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200-204 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2018) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Richard Garnett)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200-202 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2018) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Richard Garnett)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200-205 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2018) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Kristi Fondren)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200-203 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2018) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Kristi Fondren)
- Primary Instructor, SOC 200-210 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Fall 2017)
- Class Facilitator, SOC 310-101 – “Individual and Society,” Marshall University (Fall 2017) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Kristi Fondren)
  - Unit on “Phenomenology and the Social Construction of Reality” (16 October 2017)
- Primary Instructor, SOC 200-206 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2017)
- Class Facilitator, SOC 455-101 – “Sociology of Sex & Gender,” Marshall University (Fall 2016) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Kristi Fondren)
  - Unit on “Campus Hook-Up Culture” (10 October, 2016)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200H-101 – “Intro Sociology Honors,” Marshall University (Fall 2016) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Maggie Stone)
  - Unit on “Groups” (06 October 2016)
  - Unit on “Social Class” (03 November 2016)
  - Unit on “Race & Ethnicity” (10 and 15 November, 2016)

- Guest Instructor, SOC 200H-202 – “Intro Sociology Honors,” Marshall University (Spring 2016) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Maggie Stone)
  - Unit on “Mass Media” (01 March, 2016)
  - Unit on “Race and Ethnic Inequality” (05 and 07 April, 2016)
- Guest Instructor, SOC 200-210 – “Introductory Sociology,” Marshall University (Spring 2016) (Primary Instructor: Dr. Maggie Stone)
  - Unit on “Mass Media” (01 March, 2016)
  - Unit on “Race and Ethnic Inequality” (05 and 07 April, 2016)

### Relevant Work Experience

- Peer Tutor, Tutoring Services, Marshall University (September 2013-December 2015)
  - Duties included tutoring students in introductory and advanced Japanese, introductory and advanced political science, and introductory history. I tutored students both individually and in groups of as many as four people.
  - Reference: Patricia Gallagher
    - Email: gallaghe@marshall.edu
    - Phone: (304)696-3464
- Peer Note-Taker, Office of Disability Services, Marshall University (January 2013-May 2013)
  - Duties included taking notes for students with various disabilities, such as visual impairment, auditory impairment, and Asperger’s Syndrome and accommodating student needs for either hand-written or typed notes.
  - Reference: Sandra Clements
    - Email: clements@marshall.edu
    - Phone: (304)696-2288

### Research Interests

Gender and Sexuality, Sociological Social Psychology, Sociology of Religion, Social Stratification, Popular Culture & the Media, Intersectionality, Globalization, and Qualitative Research Methods.

### Academic Appointments

- Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University (January 2018-present)
  - Supervisors: Dr. Richard Garnett and Dr. Donna Sullivan
- Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University (August 2017-December 2017)
  - Supervisors: Dr. Robin Conley Riner and Dr. Kristi Fondren
- Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University (January 2017-May 2017)
  - Supervisors: Dr. Robin Conley Riner and Dr. Donna Sullivan
- Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University (August 2016-December 2016)
  - Supervisors: Dr. Maggie Stone and Dr. Donna Sullivan

- Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University (January 2016-May 2016)
  - Supervisors: Dr. Maggie Stone and Dr. Donna Sullivan

#### Conference Presentations

- “Why Magicians and Gays Get along So Well: A Study of the American Midwestern Neopagan Community’s Views on LGBT People.” Presented at the North Central Sociological Association Annual Meeting, March 2017
- “Why Witches and Gays Get along So Well: A Study of the American Midwestern Neopagan Community’s Views on LGBT People.” Presented at the Works in Progress Series, Marshall University, October 2016
- “*Kawaii* Culture as Soft Power: Japan’s Challenges in the New Decade.” Presented at the College of Liberal Arts Annual Research & Creativity Conference, Marshall University, April 2015
- “The Transience of Totalitarianism: An Examination of the Downfall of Columbia in *BioShock Infinite*.” Presented at the College of Liberal Arts Annual Research & Creativity Conference, Marshall University, April 2014

#### Current Studies in Progress

- “Trends in American Neopaganism.” (2011-present)
  - Role: Co-investigator
  - Primary Investigator: Dr. Marty Laubach
  - Co-Investigators: Paul Blazer, Linda Greer, Daniel Hudson, Jordan Lambert, Christopher Lucas, Lisa Mathis, Zachary Montgomery, Maegdlyn Morris, Larisa Rodgers, David Sears, Heather Sprouse, and Jared Thomas
- “The Effects of Drug Addiction on the Families and Friends of Drug Addicts.”
  - Role: Co-investigator
  - Primary Investigator: Dr. Donna Sullivan
  - Co-investigators: Rebecca Ferrell, Donald Gray, Christopher Lucas, Danielle Mullins, and Jared Thomas
- “Drink Up (Witches)! An Examination of Women and the Craft Beer Drinking Culture.”
  - Role: Co-investigator
  - Primary Investigator: Dr. Kristi Fondren
- “Gender Performance in Cosplay”
  - Master’s thesis research
  - Role: Co-investigator
  - Primary Investigator: Dr. Kristi Fondren

#### Administrative Experience

- Graduate Service Assistant: College of Liberal Arts, Marshall University (August 2015-December 2015)
  - Duties included assisting in the management of student records, preparing student files for degree evaluations, and managing and updating the College of Liberal Arts website.

- Reference: Dr. Cheryl Brown
  - Email: brownca@marshall.edu
  - Phone: (304)696-2351

### Service Experience

- President – Japanese Sado Club (September 2014-May 2015)
- Vice President – Japan Club, Marshall University (September 2012-May 2013)

### Scholarships and Grants

- “Steve Winn Memorial Scholarship” – Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University
- “Matthew Anderson Reese Jr. Scholarship” – Department of Political Science, Marshall University
- “Lawrence E. Bruce Jr. Memorial Scholarship” – Department of Political Science, Marshall University
- “Simon Perry Scholarship in Political Science” – Department of Political Science, Marshall University
- “Harold E. Neely Scholarship in Political Science” – Department of Political Science, Marshall University
- “Robert C. ‘Chuck’ Chambers Scholarship” – Department of Political Science, Marshall University
- “West Virginia Higher Education Grant” – State of West Virginia
- “West Virginia Presidential Scholarship” – State of West Virginia
- “West Virginia PROMISE Scholarship” – State of West Virginia

### Awards

- “Outstanding Undergraduate in International Affairs:” Marshall University, Spring 2015
- “Outstanding Undergraduate in Japanese:” Marshall University, Spring 2014
- “Dean’s List Award:” Marshall University, Fall 2010-present
- “Advanced Placement Scholar Award:” Cabell Midland High School, December 2009
- “Journalism Award:” Cabell Midland High School, May 2009

### References

- Dr. Robin Conley Riner
  - Email: conleyr@marshall.edu
- Dr. Kristi Fondren
  - Email: fondren@marshall.edu
- Dr. Marty Laubach, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Marshall University
  - Email: laubach@marshall.edu
- Dr. Jess Morrissette, Department of Political Science, Marshall University
  - Email: morrissette@marshall.edu
  - Phone: (304)696-2760
- Dr. Jamie Warner, Department of Political Science, Marshall University
  - Email: warnerj@marshall.edu
  - Phone: (304)696-2761