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Geneisa B. Ragin  
*Georgia Southern University*

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**An Exploration of the Black Female Cosplay Experience**

Geneisa Ragin

Georgia Southern University

## **An Exploration of the Black Female Cosplay Experience**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
*School of Human Ecology.*

By

*Geneisa Ragin*

Under the mentorship of

*Dr. Addie Martindale*

### **ABSTRACT**

Cosplay is the practice of dressing up as a fictional character whether it's from a television show, video games, or even a book series. Many people participate in cosplay to show their dedication or admiration for their favorite character and sometimes cosplay a character that helps reflect their own character or personality. This thesis will mainly focus on the experience of being a Black female cosplayer in pop culture, social media, conventions, and other places where people can share and communicate. In this thesis's research, participants' answers about their experiences were centered around their inspiration to start cosplaying, their ways of alternating their cosplays to their liking, participation experience, memorable experiences, and what they would like others to know about being a Black female cosplayer. Overall, the participants express that they have a bond with their cosplays and others that enjoy it alongside despite the issues of exclusion.

**Thesis Mentor:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Introduction**

Cosplay, by definition in Merriam-Webster, is defined as “the activity or practice of dressing up as a character from a work of fiction (such as a comic book, video game, or television show).” It is such a popular pastime for people from many communities that the market for cosplay costumes globally is expected to reach \$23 billion by 2030 (Allied Market Research, 2019). In a survey conducted by Everbrite, 55% of respondents cosplay at events like conventions at least once, and these cosplayers are the most female with being reported at 64% (Rob Salkowitz, 2015).

This thesis will investigate cosplaying experience for Black people (BIPOC), primarily aimed at black female cosplayers. This investigation will include the awareness of the lack of scholarly research on the Black female cosplayer experience, looking for what is already out there in scholarly articles related to this topic, explaining what cosplay is, and an interview with three Black female cosplayers about their experiences. This thesis aims to bring awareness to this experience and report it as a scholarly review.

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview of Cosplay**

Cosplay can be seen as a subculture that is usually related to younger people (Abramova, Smirnova, and Tataurova, 2021). A subculture, by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is an “ethnic, regional, economic, or social group exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society.” Cosplayers are part of a community of sci-fi, fantasy, video games, and anime; they show their appreciation with their sense of dressing up, showing their traits to be a subculture (Hill, 2017).

Cosplay came to be in America with one of the first records of sources related to cosplay can be found in an American newspaper from 1908 (Mason-Bertrand, 2018). The article described a couple dressed up as characters from a comic strip called “Mr.Skygack,” a famous sci-fi comic strip at the time. In 1939, a science fiction convention, “WorldCon,” had members dress in a futuristic fashion and give themselves personas that matched it (Mason-Bertrand, 2018, p.27). More reports of cosplay continued to grow, usually related to sci-fi or its full name, science fiction.

How cosplayers’ costumes are self-made, bought from online shops, or commissioned by other designers that can specify costumes (Lamerichs, 2011). Other accessories, such as wigs and props, can be created, brought, or commissioned (Lamerichs, 2011). If creating one, cosplayers have to consider a multitude of things: how much time it will take to create, how much time they have before a specific deadline, and how much they are willing to budget or spend for materials (Hill,2017).

### **Research on Cosplay**

This section presents a review of research on various aspects of cosplay. These articles cover cosplay from a general aspect. Overall they include the data about cosplay or the people who are into it .

Mason-Bertrand's *Cosplay: An Ethnographic Study of Subculture and Escape* from 2018 is an ethnography of cosplay culture. Mason-Bertrand described the evolution of cosplay from 1908, the 1930s-1960s, and the 1990s to the current date. It mentions the recorded events of cosplay in America and its close relation to science fiction in the beginning. As cosplay technically started in America before the 1980s, its origins are still debated since other cosplay origins were also seen in other countries like Japan. It breaks

down cosplay's origins and provides significant records (newspapers and pictures) of these first happenings.

Abramova, Smirnova, and Tataurova's *Cosplay As a Youth Subculture: The Factors of Choice and Identity Formation from 2017* is a conference paper discussing the examination of cosplay as a subculture. Their study examined how cosplay dominates younger audiences and is a place for escapism for that subculture. They also explain that it is a leisure activity that can help younger people with recreational needs and interests find themselves in these communities. This article helps see the examination of cosplay as a subculture in detail.

Hill's *Embodying Cosplay: Fandom Communities in the USA from 2017* is an article that includes the experiences of being a cosplayer and the motivations of being one. (Hill,2017) This thesis details cosplays within fandoms (fandoms are fan-based communities (Hill,2017), the construction of cosplay, analyzing fan identities, and even racial identities in the cosplay community. This thesis helps receive insight from a true insider (meaning the researcher is part of the studied group (Lennon, Johnson, Rudd,2017) about the cosplay subculture and even includes the cosplay experience of Black cosplayers.

Rahman's "*Cosplay*": *Imaginative Self and Performing Identity* from 2012 is a thesis/study that included the researcher's participation, making them participant observers. In every respect, it reflects the goals of (Hill,2017), (Mason-Bertrand,2018), and (Abramova, Smirnova, and Tataurova, 2017) studies by wanting to research the experiences of cosplay and look at it as a subculture. However, it emphasizes the inner self of reasons people choose to cosplay, for example, the personal fulfillment of finding

one's confidence and even cosplaying a specific character. In addition, the thesis brings another helpful addition by showing cosplay from the perspective of Hong Kong and Japan.

### **The Black Experience and Cosplay**

The act of cosplay is an art heavily practiced in the United States, and many individuals from various cultures participate in it (Aniket K, 2021). This section presents a review of articles discussing the Black experience with cosplay which has been scholarly researched. This section is the most important since it closely touches the topic of this thesis.

Van Veen's: "Afrofutures of cosplay: Deviance and DIY in Black fantastic performance" from 2019 is a thesis that describes and identifies that black cosplay is a powerful force that can shift society and pop culture representation of black people socially and politically. Black Cosplayers should be treated as respectable art but still should not be seen as something "unreal" or "alien" (Van Veen,2019). They also include how blackness can affect someone's response to a performance of a black cosplayer.

Jenkin's: "Marginalization within Nerd Culture: Racism and Sexism within Cosplay" from 2020 describes cosplay but also discusses why Black cosplayers perform despite marginalization within the community. The study within the thesis goes through the frameworks of co-cultural theory. A co-cultural theory is used to investigate the communications between the marginalized groups in dominant society, but from their perspective (Orbe, "Continuing" 66; Orbe, "Laying" 159; Ramirez-Sanchez 90).

Richardson's Boundaries, Expression, and Positivity: Investigating Commentary



on Black Women Within Cosplay Fandom on TikTok from 2021 follows an examination of Black female cosplayers, their experiences, and presence while on the social media app, “Tik Tok”. Richardson is also a true insider, for they identify as a Black female cosplayer and have been involved with the witch cosplay community. They talk about their experiences and reasons for doing cosplay, as well as analyzing other Black female cosplayers. Richardson gives an in-depth explanation of Tik Tok. It has features that allow creators to film, record, or upload themselves, others, or anything with tools that help them edit and then post on the app. They concluded that despite racial, sexist, and competitive interactions from other individuals who choose to interact with Black cosplayers, these performers learned to draw boundaries, remembering that the core of cosplaying is performing as a character that can be for themselves and others and to have fun.

### **Research Question**

A literature review exposed a lack of research on the experiences of black female identifying cosplay participants. This revealed that there is still much to understand. Therefore the following research question was developed: what does the experience of Black female cosplayers entail?

### **Method**

The study sample was limited to three ethnically black (BIPOC) female-identifying participants who regularly participate in cosplay. Participants were recruited via the social media platform Instagram. Participants were contacted through Instagram’s direct message system for participation and having the interview through

Zoom. The participants were asked the following questions: A) Tell me about how you got into cosplay. B) Tell me where you participated in cosplay. C) Do you alter your cosplay to your personality? D) Tell me about your most memorable cosplay experience. E) What would you want people to know about what it's like to be a black female cosplayer? The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The student researcher and advisor reviewed the transcribed interviews. Analytic memos were taken after each interview to help establish themes in the responses (Saldana, 2016). Interview question answers were analyzed for themes within each question response (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Results**

Question one asked participants how they got into cosplay. Answers to this question revealed how the three participants started their cosplay participation, revealing one main theme of TikTok. TikTok influenced all participants to start their journeys into cosplay. The participants watched videos about other creators cosplaying, and the more exposure they saw, the more it encouraged them to try it out. One participant shared, regarding the influence of Tik Tok on her cosplay participation, "I was in Tik Tok at the time, so there was a lot of people that I would see on Tik Tok group cosplaying, and I was like, okay, this is cool." It is also important to note that two of the participants indicated time available during the pandemic, which also encouraged their participation.

Question two asked participants about where they participate in their cosplay. The responses to this question showed that every participant engaged in online cosplay with exposed engagement themes of social media and conventions. All of the participants noted that they posted their cosplays online, specifically on the social media app Tik Tok

with one participant sharing, “Like I made my own outfit, I made my props. So then I'm like, okay, so I can do this. So let me see if I can start making videos on Tik Tok”. Two participants shared that they participated in cosplay activities at conventions like Momocon, Winterfest, and Halmet. One participant expressed their feelings towards displaying their cosplays in person, “I think I definitely prefer cosplaying at events. And I've managed to make a lot of friends who go to events.” One participant mentioned attending a cosplay event in a video game nightclub; while not convention, it fits the topic of how most cosplay activities are done at social gatherings.

Question three asked the participants if they altered their cosplay designs to their preferences. All participants admitted that they altered their cosplays in some fashion. Two participants shared that they altered their facial features by drawing or using makeup for their cosplays. When asked why one of them shared, “To describe on like, how the character is like, I maybe have some kind of marks or beating marks if I know that the character fights a lot like on Attack on Titan”. The other participant shared, “I can do my own interpretation of it if I do a gender bend or if I'm doing, like, the actual gender of the person I'm playing. A guy drawing a beard if they have one, try to make my face more masculine”. Two out of the three participants shared another common element in their interviews was adding curly hair towards the cosplayers they did. One participant shared, “whenever I envision doing the cosplay, I usually envision them with some kind of curly hair or some kind of afro most of the time instead of straight hair to bring it closer to me.” Overall, makeup and curly hairstyles were mentioned for changes to the cosplayer's outfits.

Question four asked the participants about their most memorable cosplay experience. All participants had differing responses, yet all were related to public interactions. Participant one shared that going to a nightclub one night was their most memorable experience: “I met a lot of good friends there, lifelong friends that we just clicked really hard.” Participant two went to a convention in Atlanta. They shared, “I’m going to be one person here, but I actually found another cosplayer. Another Jack Frost from Rise of the Guardians. We were like, only two there. So that was really fun”. Participant three shared, “Probably the viral Princess Peach was a memorable one. That’s what kind of got me to cosplay on TikTok.”.

Question 5 asked the participants what was important for others to know about what it’s like to be a black female cosplayer. Participants’ answers varied but overall, revealed common themes. The first theme was race and gender, with participants expressing how others had invalidated their cosplays. Participant one shared, “We don’t have to only do those specific cosplayers because that person identifies as a black woman character”. Participant two shared, “That basically don’t listen to the critics. Like, you should only do, you should only do, like, the black cosplays. You should only do the female. Or you have to be exactly like that character to be good.” Lastly, Participant 3 shared, “But, you know, to be kind, like cosplay, they’re not real characters. Let’s be honest. They’re not real. We’re all here. It is the dress better phase and have fun”. The second theme was an encouragement to start cosplay or keep doing cosplay despite the obstacles. Participant one shared, “it will be harder, but when you actually do it, you will feel so much happier, especially I do, because I feel so much closer to the character even before.” Participant two shared, “Like you can do that and don’t, like, try to worry about,

like, if nobody is going to like it because somebody is going to like it. You're always going to be somebody's favorite character." Participant three shared, "There's more of us than you think. I mean, on TikTok, I'm always seeing someone that I have ever seen before cosplay, and they're eating it up as per usual" ("Eating it up" in this sense means to do well or look nice).

### **Discussion**

This thesis analyzed Black female cosplayers' experiences in the cosplaying community. The results provide insight on their experiences and the aim of this thesis, which was to inform. In this section, the findings will be compared and contrasted with previous research outcomes. One point that can be recognized is the involvement of Black female cosplayers on social media, particularly Tik Tok. Making friends, finding inspiration, and other social connections were topics frequently discussed by the participants by using Tik Tok in the study. These findings are aligned with previous research that found a connection between black cosplayers and Tik Tok (Richardson, 2021).

As previously indicated earlier in this thesis, participants interviewed in this study also modified their cosplays in order to make the character they are portraying more like them or themselves more like the character. It is believed that Black female cosplayers will make alterations to their character to make it more reflective of their identity as a Black person. As revealed in the findings they may select a wig or haircut that is more similar to them than the character they are playing if they have curlier hair textures than the fictional equivalent. The use of makeup to add features to one's face that can help their cosplay character stand out from the crowd was also mentioned. For example, one

could draw battle scars on a character who is in a war setting or add masculine features to a male character's otherwise more conventionally feminine face. This is also indicated in previous research by Richardson in 2021 that mentions a cosplayer who alternates between wearing wigs and her natural hair to represent her characters closer to herself and makes extensive use of her makeup to express the character more.

The findings for the experiences of Black female cosplayers also imply that they face criticism for dressing up as non-black characters and are pressured to dress up as Black women characters or just people who identify as Black, which is the third point. Findings show that criticism Black Female cosplayers receive, particularly on social media, includes discrimination and even colorism. To clarify, colorism is the preference for lighter skin tone over darker skin tones. Any racial or ethnic group might exhibit a preference for lighter skin (Grant, 2020). One of the participants expressed their witness to it in the cosplay community. Lighter skinned Black cosplayers would receive better treatment within their interactions in the community than darker skinned Black cosplayers.

For many who make these criticisms, the cosplays are not as "genuine" or "realistic" to the original as they claim. This relates to Richardson's thesis in 2021 where they mention the racist interactions a Black female cosplayer faced when they cosplay an asian character, Sakura from Naruto that was followed with comments like "Sakura isn't black", "horse", "black horse", "Sakura I told you not to put in the sun". Jenkins' 2020 thesis is also consistent with this point with how one of his participants, Nia, encountered both racism and sexism at the same time after being informed by Mortica Adams from

the Addams Family cosplay that she wasn't seductive enough and it didn't work since she was Black.

Finally, yet importantly, one aspect that stood out was the satisfaction Black female cosplayers feel about themselves and their peers. Findings suggest that cosplaying often creates a sense of belonging with others like themselves who enjoy their craft, despite any difficulty whether financial or social. According to interviewees, sharing cosplay with friends and family was their most memorable cosplay moment. That this validates Richardson's 2021 thesis by discussing how social media promotes it. Jenkins' 2020 essay also touches on how simple it is to make friends and how wonderful it feels to meet someone who enjoys the same characters or embroidery designs as you do. Findings imply that Black female cosplayers might experiment with themselves to see what they enjoy or what kind of person they can be. This confirms Van Veen's 2019 thesis by "It should come as no surprise, then, that cosplayers deviate from norms of racial and gendered identity (p.80)". It indicates that Black cosplayers deconstruct how they are traditionally seen because of their race and gender, so it gives them the chance to be perceived as more than just a monolith of a race or ethnicity.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Only three participants could be interviewed and analyzed thoroughly in a timely manner. Definitely as a future direction is to have way more participants ranging from new cosplayers to veteran cosplayers. For future direction, there will need to be a goal to investigate why cosplaying helps with representation as a Black female cosplayer.

## Reflection

As an emic researcher, meaning I was an Insider for the fact that I'm also a Black female cosplayer definitely played a role in this whole project. I could relate to all of the interviewees and understand what they were implying when they said certain phrases or they didn't have to clarify what they meant at some points. However, for the sake of this thesis I had to ask them specifically what they were talking about or what they were implying. For the sake of the audience who reads this thesis and may not have an understanding of the implications that the interviewees say.

This thesis project was a roller coaster of emotional and physical changes for myself to go through for this project's sake of completion. During the span of three semesters I had to juggle classes, leadership of clubs, personal issues, and while putting this project together. I would say what got me through it was the help of my first and second mentor and definitely my honors teacher. Dr. Trent Maurer, helped with drafting this thesis since the beginning with assignments that helped piece together this thesis.

My RSD Framework (Researcher Skills Development) levels were all at level 4 during the first semester, except my level 3 skill of evaluating and reflecting, which in my opinion, was one of the hardest to work on. There were many sources I came across during my research, however, they all needed to be specifically related to my subject and to be a scholarly article. Another was managing and organizing data, and I had to learn how to look for patterns in my results. I had to maintain my focus to identify patterns that were connected to the questions I posed to the study's participants. Overall, by improving my research skills, I managed to end on level 5 for all of my sections on the RSD chart.



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