

Clark University

Clark Digital Commons

Becker School of Design and Technology

Faculty Works by Department and/or School

2023

Wigs, Corsets, Cosmetics, and Instagram: The Prosthetics of Crossplay

Minka Stoyanova

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.clarku.edu/beckerfac>



Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Chapter Title: Wigs, Corsets, Cosmetics, and Instagram: The Prosthetics of Crossplay
Chapter Author(s): Minka Stoyanova

Book Title: Sartorial Fandom
Book Subtitle: Fashion, Beauty Culture, and Identity
Book Editor(s): Elizabeth Affuso, Suzanne Scott
Published by: University of Michigan Press. (2023)
Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12315327.19>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



University of Michigan Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sartorial Fandom*

Wigs, Corsets, Cosmetics, and Instagram

The Prosthetics of Crossplay

Minka Stoyanova

Cosplay refers to the fan practice of costuming and (often) playacting characters from media. Cosplays can be derived from a spectrum of fan-oriented media franchises including comics, live-action television, cartoons, and more. Matthew Hale (2014, 6) argues that cosplay is less represented in fan studies because cosplay's embodied and performative nature did not seem to lend itself to the postmodern, intertextual readings that characterized early fan studies. However, as outlined by Paul Mountfort, Anne Peirson-Smith, and Adam Geczy (2018, 24), "Cosplay's particular form of *détournement* is a 'recontextualization' of sources which aligns it with other mixing and mashing practices, such as fanfiction." Still, a strictly textual analysis of cosplay can neglect cosplay's performative and embodied realization. Responding to this, previous research has read cosplay through the lenses of queer theory and play theory (Mountfort, Peirson-Smith, and Geczy 2018; Bainbridge and Norris 2013; Gn 2011).

While each of these analyses recognizes the embodiment inherent to the practice, they do not effectively address our current condition of embodied technosociality as key to cosplay's political potency. Alternately, by understanding the individual as an embodied techno-organic hybrid, cyborg theory offers an approach to the cosplayer that can both address cosplay's citationality and show how that citation is realized through prosthetically extended living bodies. This ethnographic study of cosplayers primarily in the New Orleans area applies cyborg theory to trace how the body becomes an originating site for layered hybridizations ("remediation," Bolter and Grusin 1999) of a virtual media object (the character) and a body through the practice of cosplay. Moreover, this analysis outlines how that hybridization intersects with contemporary politics of race, gender, and body representation.

METHODOLOGY

Over the last half century, discourse has moved away from essentialist notions of what it means to be human. While theorists like Marshall McLuhan (1964) suggested that media can be understood as prosthetic extensions of the individual, cybernetics and its descendant philosophies have shown how the integration of media and technology into ourselves results in new hybrid beings—transforming both the individual and the media/society/technology being integrated (Maturana 2002; Stiegler and Rogoff 2010). We are fundamentally *entangled* and *extended*, with fluid identities that are both informed by media and distributed across and through them. Donna Haraway's 1985 text "A Cyborg Manifesto" recognized this hybrid construction as "cyborg" and as fundamentally destabilizing to patriarchal binaries like nature/technology or female/male (Haraway 1998). But, as many contemporary media theorists recognize, the cyborg construct is not simply about deconstructing binaries; it is also about understanding the embodied self as a central locus in a distributed network of representations and techno-media interactions (Brians 2011; Tufekci 2013; Jurgenson 2011; Deleuze 1992). Personal representation (or fashion) is a powerful component of this construction. Malcolm Barnard (2020, 253) draws on Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* to suggest that an individual's clothing functions as a "constitutive prosthetic," a prosthetic that is fundamental in the creation of the individual. Thus, cyborg theory, for the purposes of this discourse, refers to the cyborgian, mutually constructive (or constitutive) relationship that exists between individuals and their technological prostheses (including media).

Cyborg theory is particularly applicable to fan studies because it is able to capture the various modes of hybridity that fan activities encompass. Specific to cosplay, the act of interpreting a media object (character) through one's own body, as well as the documentary extensions of that inscription, can be understood as cyborg hybridizations. Here, I explore these hybrid identities by discussing the cosplayer's mediation of the fictional character through the body, through the photographic image, and finally through social media. At each stage, I consider how this new evolution of the character re-forms both the source material and the cosplayer.

This chapter is based on a series of informal interviews and participant observation conducted around the fandom convention MechaCon 2019. The convention was held in July 2019, and the interviews were all conducted between July and September of that year. I also bring to the analysis my experience as an intermittent attendee at New Orleans-area fan conventions for

more than twenty years, an avid costumer outside of fan conventions, and an active member of Krewe Du Moon, a Sailor Moon dance troupe. MechaCon was an independently produced annual convention held in New Orleans between 2005 and 2021. From 2015 to 2021 (save for 2020, when it was canceled due to COVID-19), it regularly drew between fourteen thousand and sixteen thousand attendees from the surrounding area (MechaCon.com, n.d.). MechaCon was selected for this study not only because of its large annual draw, but also because of its inclusivity, and its influence in the regional cosplay community. For instance, MechaCon annually included a crossplay panel that included both crossgender and cross-body-type cosplayers as invited speakers. This general culture of inclusivity meant that most of my interviewees felt comfortable speaking candidly about their own crossplay experiences. All interview subjects are referred to by their cosplay brand name or Instagram handle as well as by their preferred pronouns. While some interviewees prefer gendered pronouns (he/him and she/her), others prefer gender-inclusive pronouns (ze/hir and they). There is, therefore, an inconsistent application of pronouns throughout the text in order to best respect individual interviewees' wishes.

THE BODY

Characters replicated through cosplay should be understood as media objects, or “virtual objects capable of shifting between systems of representation” (Gn 2011, 585). However, there is a key tension in cosplay between verisimilitude and interpretation. While valued, memetic reinterpretation of characters cannot stray too far from the source material as any interpretation must also be recognizable by the fan community. Thus, even though many characters are fantastical, animated, or alien (and exact verisimilitude between the source material and the cosplayer is functionally impossible), and even though a variety of actors might portray specific characters over the life cycle of a franchise, many cosplayers prioritize verisimilitude by selecting characters they already physically resemble (Lamerichs 2011; Gn 2011, 585). As A. Luxx Mishou observes elsewhere in this collection, “cosplayers may face derision and harassment when their cosplays do not conform to gatekeepers' expectations of race, gender identity, body type, or ability,” and cosplayers therefore conduct “evaluations of risk” in their character selection process. In the American cosplay community this verisimilitude-focused practice is being challenged because it discounts the body as a site of *interpretation*,

wherein individual cosplayers' unique identities are projected through the act of costuming and where cosplayers can explore alternative identities for themselves and for the characters they represent.

Clothing is not simply a functional prosthetic, protecting the wearer from elemental conditions. It is also a media form that both outwardly signals identity and/or social position while, as Barnard (2020, 253) argues, acting as a "constitutive prosthetic," a prosthetic that "makes the thing possible in the first place." In cosplay, Nicolle Lamerichs (2011,) relates this phenomenon to Stuart Hall's notions of identity as constructed and Judith Butler's analysis of drag as a transfiguration of the body that affects identity. Even so, past readings of cosplays in which the cosplayer's physical appearance does not match the character tend to oversimplify the relationship between the cosplayer's body, costume, and identity. For instance, Hale's (2014, 22–23) suggestion that most male-to-female crossplay is done explicitly for humorous effect while most female-to-male crossplay is done to avoid sexual harassment ignores nonbinary crossplayers that experience a more nuanced relationship to the practice. And, Jason Bainbridge and Craig Norris's (2013) argument that *all* cosplay can be read as drag performance ignores potentially differing incentives behind the practices. By choosing characters that don't match their physical bodies, cosplayers can not only project their unique identities through the character, but also reinscribe the character in their alternative bodies. As physical characteristics like gender, race, and body type are largely immutable characteristics that influence one's sense of personal identity within and outside of cosplay communities, this reinscription of the source characters can be a particularly political fan act.

While the term *crossplay* has traditionally been used to refer to crossgender cosplay specifically, each mode of reinscribing source material—crossgender, cross-race, and cross-body-type—can be understood as crossplay. This more expansive definition of crossplay allows us to better identify the relationship between the body and the virtual media object (the character) by showing how—in all cases—the persistence of the body in the prosthetic appropriation of a media character results in a nuanced rewriting of the source character in the cosplayer's own image. As many of my interviewees recognize, cosplaying characters with differing bodies than the cosplayer, like authoring fan fiction, both expands the source universe and increases the visibility of people who are traditionally Other. Key to this process is the hybridization that occurs between the body of the cosplayer and the character through the act of costuming.

Gender is, by far, the least contentious form of crossplay. It is regularly

mentioned in academic discussions of cosplay, is common in most cosplay communities, and is widely accepted at conventions and in online forums internationally. Gender crossplay often occurs in one of two modes. Cosplayers can choose to play a character in the character's given gender (e.g., a female cosplayer might choose to dress as a male character and take on attributes of masculinity), or a cosplayer might "gender bend" a character, converting the character's canonical gender to the cosplayer's affirmed gender.

While all cosplay, as a sustained performance, can take a physical toll, the prosthetics used to transform the body for the first mode can be particularly physically taxing. For example, Star explained they follow the common practice of using binders to transform their "curvy" physique into something that cuts a more masculine visage. However, binders, corsets, tape, and other body shaping technologies can do long-term damage if used incorrectly. The *safe* use of these prosthetics is an annual topic in the MechaCon crossplay panel since, despite the discomfort, their continued use reflects that the transformations they afford are key to both achieving the desired verisimilitude and allowing a cosplayer to feel they have truly embodied a character with a different gender identity.

Often, these practices also intersect "real-life" fluid identities. For instance, Star, whose body presents challenges in and out of cosplay, "enjoy[s] crossplay because it allows [them] to present as masculine instead of being always feminine . . . [as a result of their natural physique.] . . . It's nice to feel comfortable." Star's assertion that crossplay is more comfortable reinforces that one's external presentation can stabilize an internal sense of identity. For Star, cosplay is not simply a chance to dress up as a character from a fictional world; it is a cyborgian process of using clothing, binders, and cosmetics to internalize an alternative identity.

Similarly, Ickabob was able to use hir original character, "the Mad Hatter's wife," to explore hir own gender fluidity. While Ickabob's character is technically an original character (the wife of the Mad Hatter), the character was conceived as a gender-bent incarnation of *Alice in Wonderland's* Mad Hatter. By inventing this female realization, Ickabob was safely and playfully able to explore alternative gender identities without having to worry about verisimilitude. "Technically, there is not really a character, so I was able to work with what little I knew about makeup or hair. . . . I still had not come out as agender, so I was also having to fight against that anxiety in myself." The freedom for personal exploration Ickabob felt can be attributed in part to the Mad Hatter's position as a fluid media object, having already been interpreted

in a variety of media. Notably, Ickabob's version draws heavily on the camp-forward realization of the character in Tim Burton's 2010 filmic adaptation.

While Ickabob's gender bend draws on an already fluid canon, NinjaYoYo's approach to gender bending reveals the practice as an overtly tactical reinscription of a source text. Instead of creating an original character or reinterpreting a character, NinjaYoYo cosplays male characters from within her female identity without making significant alterations to the canon costume. For NinjaYoYo, this gender bending of characters allows her to embody a media object while simultaneously suggesting an alternative (crossgender) canon for that character. This approach—and its inherent critique of fan material—can apply across gender and racial identity.

Racial crossplay, while increasing in visibility in the United States, is fraught in the global cosplay community particularly as it intersects with the impulse for verisimilitude, the lack of representation of Black and brown characters in the source material, and the minority position of Black and brown people in the global cosplay community. Addressing the lack of representation in the source material, many cosplayers I spoke to tactically reimagine canonically white or East Asian characters through their Black and brown bodies. NinjaYoYo cosplays the Japanese schoolgirl Sailor Neptune (from *Sailor Moon*) as “Sailor Neptune with an afro”—often dyeing her natural hair to match the iconic green of the source character. The hybridized result—like NinjaYoYo's gender bends—suggests an expansion of the source material.

While “race bending” a character through one's own raced body is a reinscription of the source character akin to gender bending, it is often less accepted by the cosplay community. Cosplayers of color like StardustMegu note that they are often identified not *just* as the character they are cosplaying but rather as the *Black* [insert character name] that they are playing or—more egregiously—as the as “n-word [insert character name].” Even outside of cosplay, the fan community has been slow to accept or even hostile to this type of expansion, as exemplified by the fan backlash against the sanctioned crossrace casting of Starfire from DC's *Titans* (Pulliam-Moore 2018), or Ariel from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (Nesaf 2019).

In online communities, it is often suggested that darker-skinned cosplayers should only cosplay characters who match their natural skin tone. Due to the lack of representation in source material, this is a wholly unsatisfying and exclusionary suggestion. It also reveals that race (and racism) in the cosplay community is more related to colorism, or the specific darkness of a person's skin, than to their racial *identity*. While Sledgehammer noted that his Hawaiian heritage allowed him more flexibility in his cosplay because he was often

misraced as Hispanic, StardustMegu noted that lighter-skinned cosplayers of color generally do not face the same biases as darker-skinned ones. This colorism results from the community's prioritization of verisimilitude over inclusion, regardless of actual identity (Kukkii-San 2019).

One example of this misplaced priority and the privilege it reveals is the use of blackface in the cosplay community. When cosplaying nonhuman characters with outlandish skin tones (such as green or blue), it is common practice to use body paint to recolor one's skin. Extending this logic, as most interviewees mentioned, light-skinned cosplayers have also used cosmetics (blackface) to portray darker-skinned human(oid) characters (Kukkii-San 2019). Understandably, this practice is offensive to cosplayers of color, who are reminded of the troubling history of blackface. As NinjaYoYo remarked, "there is a history there and it is still sensitive. Our parents lived through this." Beyond the offensive nature of blackface, the ability to (and therefore the expectation that one would) cosmetically change their skin tone to match a source character manifests another type of privilege granted to lighter-skinned cosplayers. Darker-skinned cosplayers often face difficulties effectively portraying nonnatural skin tones or replicating facial scarring in source characters.

Ultimately, as skin color intersects with racial identity, the prioritization of verisimilitude marginalizes darker-skinned players because it creates a community in which lighter-skinned cosplayers—regardless of racial identity—are more acceptable because of their ability to pass as a race other than their own. For lighter-skinned cosplayers of color, this colorism both undermines the political potency of remediating a character through a Black body and erases their racial *identity*. In response, the cosplay duo Wakanda Moon create new and hybrid characters that represent a uniquely *Black* identity. Paraphrasing the artist Marcus the Visual (Marcus Williams), Wakanda Moon noted, "Mainstream Hollywood is also trying to find any character to *turn Black* . . . and that's *diversity and inclusion* . . . like, no." Wakanda Moon are suggesting that Blackness is not simply about a specific skin color, but about an internalized racial identity; Blackness is a hybrid of *body* and *identity*. As such, representation cannot be achieved through simply hybridizing Black bodies with non-Black characters, or what Kristen J. Warner (2017) dubs "plastic representation." Instead, *characters* should evolve from their Black heritage and culture. Therefore, to imagine a more inclusive nerdverse, Wakanda Moon have created a mash-up brand that draws on the feminist parallels between the African warrior women the Dora Milaje (from *Black Panther*) and the Japanese schoolgirl warriors of Sailor Moon (figure 14.1).



Figure 14.1. Cosplay duo Wakanda Moon combine the aesthetics of the Dora Milaje from *Black Panther* with the classic “pretty sailor” suits from *Sailor Moon* to create a new, Black realization of the original “magical girls.” Image courtesy of Wakanda Moon.

Wakanda Moon’s original characters reimagine the Sailor Moon “pretty sailor soldiers” as Dora Milaje warriors by using traditional African prints, colors, and accessories to create Sailor Moon *fukus* (school uniform-inspired “pretty” battle gear). For the duo, this cosplay is powerful because it is “very authentically Black.”

Similar to the second mode of gender crossplay, this mode of racial crossplay more directly engages the lack of representation in the source

material. This is a fundamental aim for Wakanda Moon, who see themselves as supporting future generations by building a more diverse fandom. Responding to the positive feedback the duo received at Dragon Con 2019, one member noted, "I feel like it's not just them appreciating what we've done. Even more so, it's about their interests reflected back to them." When Wakanda Moon mirror others, they reinforce that the remediated character functions as a *new*, hybrid media object. In this case, Wakanda Moon's Black bodies become the locus in a network of (cyborg) hybridizations that facilitate a more inclusive mediaverse.

Body-type-related crossplay is, like racial crossplay, another highly contested form. As many interviewees noted, online commenters that are likely to accept an individual's gender crossplay will not hesitate to call out that same cosplayer for cosplaying across body type. This is particularly pernicious as body type often follows from biological sex or race, and, therefore, low body confidence often accompanies crossrace and crossgender cosplays. As StardustMegu observed, "It's harder for plus-sized and Black cosplayers to get recognition compared to thin and lighter-skinned cosplayers. . . . The only time a Black cosplayer will get praise is if they are lighter skinned or thin." Even veteran cosplayer Sledgehammer noted the slight hypocrisy in his own approach to body type and cosplay, stating that despite running positivity panels in which he tells cosplayers "not to let their cosplay dreams be dreams," he would "really like to cosplay some really cute anime character, but there's no way I'm going to look like them, so I don't even try." Thus, while Sledgehammer strongly supports people cosplaying whatever they want, his personal decision reflects the toxic undercurrent that accompanies imagining characters across body type. In many ways, though, as StardustMegu implies, it's those cosplayers who least resemble the characters they are cosplaying that have the greatest potential to change minds and expand the source material by stalwartly embodying any character they choose.

There are a number of technical ways that cross-body-type cosplayers attempt to balance the need for verisimilitude while embodying characters they don't naturally resemble. One such technique is to use the expected proportion between a character's props and their bodies to create the illusion of an appropriately sized body. Sledgehammer specializes in the creation of props and armor and notes that it's important to consider the size and bulk of the props being created in relation to the size of the cosplayer so that the proportional difference best matches the original media. For example, Sledgehammer relayed a story of a cosplayer who had not adjusted their props for their smaller stature: "I saw someone with a Buster Sword [from

Final Fantasy]. If you're a *six-foot-tall* person then the Buster Sword is supposed to be sixty-three inches long. . . . But this person, . . . a small person, had a sixty-three-inch sword. It just wasn't believable; it broke the whole illusion." Ky Hikari also noted that she often makes extremely large props to account for her over-six-foot height: "I'm doing Atalanta from *Fate/Apocrypha* and her bow is like a foot taller than her, so I'm making a seven-foot bow to walk around the con with." The illusion created by correct proportions between a prop and a cosplayer has the greatest effect in mediated contexts such as on stage or through photography—introducing another level of cyborg hybridization into the art of cosplay.

THE LENS

Photography (professional and amateur) is an important part of the cosplay experience as both a document and an extension of the cosplay into a wider media landscape. As Ella Briens (2011) observes, the distribution of images of ourselves across global communications networks constitutes an extension of the self—or, a distribution of the body through the network. Thus, an individual cosplayer's cyborg identity should be understood as being made up of a combination of professional and amateur images distributed through a variety of media. However, this section focuses primarily on professional photography as it best exemplifies the ways in which technics, the body, and the character are hybridized to create new cyborg entities.

As noted earlier, photography has the potential to smooth over inconsistencies between the cosplayer's body and the source character. It also has the ability to inject mood or atmosphere into the cosplay. Each of these functions results in the image becoming a new, qualitatively different, hybrid media object from the cosplayer in person. As one onlooker to my interview with Sledgehammer noted, "What you see in person is different from what you see in photos." These adjustments occur not only through the technical object (the camera) but also through the interpretive use of the camera and editing software by the photographer. Ky Hikari observed, "A really good costume will always photo well, but a really great photographer is what sets it over the edge."

If, following Briens (2011), we understand images to be cyborg distributions of the self, cosplay images as mediated through the photographer and lens are particularly interesting as they act both as extensions and as a validating practice. Ky Hikari and Star both noted that getting photographs back

is exciting because it makes the cosplay *feel* more real to them. In other words, Star and Ky Hikari are only able to *see* their cosplay once it has been mediated through the photographer's gaze, thereby removing them from the embodied experience of *being* the cosplay. The validation that arises from this phenomenon of externality, of seeing yourself as others might see you, drives many cosplayers to see photographic documentation as a fundamental part of their cosplay practice. But, it's equally important that these images align with one's own self-image—particularly since they double as an extension of the self into virtual space. For instance, Sledgehammer feels a certain ambivalence toward the photographic image because he sometimes finds the mediation jarring. He recalled a story of two photo shoots that happened in the same location, back-to-back. In one case the photos aligned with his image, but in the other they didn't. Knowing that both sets of photographs would be shared online and would then become part of *Sledgehammer's* online identity, Sledgehammer was conflicted over his desire to support the individual creativity of photographers and his desire for control over his distributed identity. While Sledgehammer's popularity in the cosplay community makes it hard for him to fully control how he is seen online, many cosplayers try to avoid this situation by investing large amounts of time and money, as well as emotional and cognitive capital, into negotiating their relationships with photographers. Conversely, the photographers deploy a number of techniques to guarantee ideal outcomes.

Most often working in conjunction with cosplay events like conventions, photographers scope locations in or near the event venue for backdrops that match the fantastic worlds of the source material. In addition, photographers often use special lenses and lighting equipment to overcome the banal backdrops and harsh lighting conditions of most hotel venues. Many photographers prize lenses that allow maximum control through variable focal lengths and a wide range of aperture settings. Through these techniques, photographers can effectively draw attention to the cosplay and away from anachronistic or unflattering settings. Perhaps surprisingly, though, most interviewees suggested that their best cosplay photoshoots were ones in which the photographer used minimal technical devices, but had a personal connection to the source material or the practice of cosplay and had actively researched sites in advance of the shoot.

Postediting is another technique used by photographers to add their own style to the images. However, as photographs manifest an extended identity closely tied to one's physical body, photographers must tread a fine line between creating a magical-looking photograph and making a cosplayer look

radically different from their “real-life” persona. Preferably, photographers should limit their bodily edits to removing stray hairs or visible undergarments and smoothing costume inconsistencies as most cosplayers want the final photographs to look and feel *authentic*. Ky Hikari said, “I like *some* special effects . . . to change the lighting to fit the mood. . . . [But,] none of them have ever tried to Photoshop *me*—like change my body shape—which I really appreciate because my brand is about being straightforward.” Similar to Ky Hikari, StardustMegu noted that editing a cosplayer’s body was “extreme,” and she was glad to have never worked with someone who did that.

To avoid the need for extensive postediting, cosplayers often consider the photographic medium early in their costuming process. Some costumes are even designed to present better through photographic mediation than in person. For instance, in addition to the consideration of proportions, for Star, a self-described “trash” (budget) cosplayer, makeup is vital. “You can have a really good costume, great wig, but if you don’t put on makeup, the pictures don’t pop. . . . Alternatively, you can have a low-budget, crappy cosplay, but do *all* the effects and crazy stuff on your face and like, that’s it. That’s your costume.” This consideration of the photographic lens early in the cosplay process constitutes another level of hybridity. By designing and executing costumes with the lens in mind, cosplayers are integrating the technology of the camera as well as the distribution of images into their cosplay from its inception. Agnès Rocamora (2020, 729) discusses similar trends in fashion broadly, where now “[fashion] shows are full of ‘made-for-Instagram’ moments” and designers “have discussed how their collection was conceived considering social media.”

Also reflecting trends in the fashion industry (Rocamora 2020, 732–33), the preconsideration of the lens in the construction of a cosplay applies to nonprofessional, spontaneous photography as well as professional photography; cosplayers should be *naturally* “camera ready” to be seen as *authentic*. StardustMegu and I discussed how improving her makeup skills freed her from using mobile applications to heavily edit her spontaneous photos, which lent greater authenticity to her online brand. And, while many other interviewees also confessed to using filtering applications, they also all warned against noticeable filtering because it detracts from the authenticity of their identity. This identity maintenance entails negotiating a delicate balance between portraying an authentic version of oneself and curating that self for both the platform and the community (Davis 2014; Nkulu 2017). This negotiation constitutes the third, and final, hybridization discussed in this chapter—the hybridization of the cosplayer and the platform.

THE PLATFORM

Social media, particularly Instagram, is foundational for the cosplay community because it allows cosplayers to distribute their identities across global communications infrastructures and to build (or maintain) communities beyond their immediate geographic surroundings. For some cosplayers, presence on online platforms is even a primary or secondary mode of income, and the work of maintaining their online persona is often a full-time job. In our interview, Star noted the intense levels of work that go into the process. “I saw my friend had a spreadsheet that was like, the photo they posted, the time of day, and the engagement. . . . I don’t think I could handle the pressure.” Instagram, as an image-based platform, lends itself well to the interconnected visual practices of cosplay and cosplay photography and is, therefore, the primary social platform for cosplayers at this time. Not all cosplayers monetize their practice, but platforms like Instagram provide professional-level tools for profile management based on the type of account and the account’s followership and engagement. Thus, even cosplayers that don’t intend to make a living or “get famous” from their accounts can be motivated by the platform to treat their cosplay identity as a professional brand. Therefore, like Rocamora (2020, 734) observes in contemporary fashion, “understanding practices of contemporary [cosplay] also means understanding practices of digital media.”

Instagram’s mobile-first design premise was intended to encourage spontaneous (real-time) image sharing. However, the increasing presence of corporate and curated accounts has elevated users’ expectations. For some, the finished images prove more viral than more “authentic” content like works in progress (WIPs), while for others (like Sledgehammer) who are well known for their technical skills, the WIPs can outperform the finished images. Ky Hikari and StardustMegu try to control this disconnect by creatively leveraging the structure of Instagram, using the “stories” portion of the profile to share less finished content and only sharing polished pictures in their feeds. Other cosplayers diversify their brand presence and use specific platforms for different aspects of their brand identity. While NinjaYoYo has profiles on all major social media sites specifically to maintain control of the brand, StardustMegu uses Twitter as a platform to speak frankly about diversity, but uses Instagram to share her cosplay photos.

The integration of social media into one’s distributed self is not only about the technical or algorithmic components of the platform; it is also about responding to the user community both on and off the platform. Accep-

tance on these platforms is based on large and small forms of social validation, including increased followership, likes, and positive comments. Online responses influence the modes and tactics used by crossplayers to diversify the landscape, but can also be harrowing. According to Wakanda Moon, “it’s super weird because it’s *basically inviting commentary*. You put your face, your body, out there for the world to digest and comment on.” And, as A. Luxx Mishou notes elsewhere in this volume: “cosplay is a hugely, and at times violently, policed site of performance and fandom.” Moreover, as StardustMegu and Sledgehammer noted, the more distributed one’s identity becomes, the more difficult it becomes to manage. Once other people (such as photographers) start sharing a cosplayer’s image, the cosplayer becomes more vulnerable to people outside of their immediate cosplay circle. They must rely on the accounts sharing their image to manage negative speech and protect their online identity. StardustMegu hopes that by sharing images from non-traditional cosplayers, calling out trolls, and calling out those accounts that allow negativity, open-minded cosplayers can reverse the social forces currently making it more difficult for crossplayers and that these diversifying practices can become normalized.

This analysis, across three levels of hybridization—the body, the photograph, and social media—reveals how an individual cosplayer uses prosthetics and other techniques to merge their physical body with a media character, how that merger is further hybridized with the technical apparatus of the camera and the creative identity of a photographer, and how the resulting images, shared through (and influenced by) online platforms, create a distributed brand identity. At each stage cosplay is revealed as a practice wherein individuals can use their marginalized bodies as a central locus in an extended and distributed (cyborg) network that citationally expands the fan canon, increases representation in fan communities, and tactically addresses intolerance within and outside of fandom.

REFERENCES

- Bainbridge, Jason, and Craig Norris. 2013. “Posthuman Drag: Understanding Cosplay as Social Networking in a Material Culture.” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 32. http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue32/bainbridge_norris.htm
- Barnard, Malcolm. 2020. “Fashion as Communication Revisited.” In *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, edited Malcom Barnard, 2nd ed., 237–58. New York: Routledge.

- Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Brians, Ella. 2011. "The 'Virtual' Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman." In *Deleuze and the Body*, edited by Laura Guillaume and Joe Hughes, 117–43. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Davis, Jenny. 2014. "Triangulating the Self: Identity Processes in a Connected Era." *Symbolic Interaction* 37 (4): 500–523.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59: 3–7.
- Gn, Joel. 2011. "Queer Simulation: The Practice, Performance and Pleasure of Cosplay." *Continuum* 25 (4): 583–93.
- Hale, Matthew. 2014. "Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic." *Western Folklore* 73 (1): 5–37.
- Haraway, Donna. 1998. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985). In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, by Donna Haraway, 149–81. London: Free Association.
- Jurgenson, Nathan. 2011. "Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality." *Cyborgology* (blog), February 24, 2011. <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality/>
- Kukkii-San. 2019. "All Black and White? Racism and Blackface in Cosplay." *Wigs 101* (blog), October 20, 2019. <https://wigs101.com/all-black-and-white-racism-and-blackface-in-cosplay>
- Lamerichs, Nicolle. 2011. "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 7. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0246>
- Maturana, Humberto. 2002. "Autopoiesis, Structural Coupling and Cognition: A History of These and Other Notions in the Biology of Cognition." *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 9 (3–4): 5–34.
- MechaCon.com. n.d. Accessed Aug 3, 2022. <http://www.mechacon.com/news/>
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Mountfort, Paul, Anne Peirson-Smith, and Adam Geczy. 2018. *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom*. Bristol, UK: Intellect.
- Nesaf, Li. 2019. "18 Responses People Had to the New Black Ariel." *Bored Panda*, July 2019. <https://www.boredpanda.com/people-reactions-disneys-black-ariel/>
- Nkulu, Rina. 2017. "Immaterial Girls." *Real Life*, September 5, 2017. <http://reallifemag.com/immaterial-girls/>
- Pulliam-Moore, Charles. 2018. "Sorry Racist Nerds, but Starfire Is a Black Woman." *Gizmodo*, July 25, 2018. <https://gizmodo.com/sorry-racist-nerds-but-starfire-is-a-black-woman-1827865298>
- Rocamora, Agnès. 2020. "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion." In *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, edited Malcom Barnard, 2nd ed., 725–37. New York: Routledge.

- Stiegler, Bernard, and Irit Rogoff. 2010. "Transindividuation." *e-flux* 14. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61314/transindividuation/>
- Tufekci, Zeynep. 2013. "We Were Always Human." In *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*, edited by Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Wesch, 33–47. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Warner, Kristen J. 2017. "In the Time of Plastic Representation." *Film Quarterly* 71 (2). <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/12/04/in-the-time-of-plastic-representation/>