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# EMBODYING COSPLAY: FANDOM COMMUNITIES IN THE USA

NATASHA L. HILL  
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# EMBODYING COSPLAY: FANDOM COMMUNITIES IN THE USA

by

NATASHA LOREN HILL

Under the Direction of Emanuela Guano

## ABSTRACT

Cosplay is a portmanteau of costume and play, referring specifically to role-play. Cosplay consists of various costumed role-playing, such as anime, manga, video games, science-fiction, fantasy, horror, mythology, etc. In the 1990s, cosplay emerged as a popular street fashion subculture in Japan that has become a worldwide phenomenon. Cosplay was already present in North American popular culture in association with comic and science-fiction conventions. These events at the time were considered masquerades, not cosplay. Cosplay communities rely primarily on maintaining social relationships via internet communication and word of mouth. The standards for what constitutes cosplay are upheld by individuals, the community, and organizations. These organizations are made of security personnel, cosplay contest judges, local police, and convention staff. Through this ethnography on cosplayers, I will identify the hidden

power structures, agency, and resistance or replication of hegemony in the community; by using a combination of interviews, participant observation, and auto-ethnography.

INDEX WORDS: Subculture, Community, Cosplay, Fandom, Identity, Gender, Race, Visual  
Culture

EMBODYING COSPLAY: FANDOM COMMUNITIES IN THE USA

by

NATASHA LOREN HILL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

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2017

EMBODYING COSPLAY: FANDOM COMMUNITIES IN THE USA

by

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May 2017

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Tracie and Bruce Hill, and my grandparents, Ruth and William Davenport, who supported me throughout all my academic endeavors. I dedicate this to them for believing in my ability to succeed even when I did not have faith in myself. Special thanks to my mom for giving me a much-needed hug during my most stressful moments. I will never forget how you took me to my first anime convention and stayed up those long nights helping me with last minute cosplay projects. For my grandfather who continues to watch over me, I hope I have made you proud. Lastly, my grandmother who provided me with financial support and a listening ear when no one understood writing an academic paper of this magnitude. I am forever grateful for everything you all have done to help me reach this point.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

I could not stand still. Every few minutes I felt like I had to use the bathroom or get water or fix my costume. My palms started to get sweaty as the line slowly started moving. I was nervous. I do not like being in the spotlight. “Ok, everyone listens up! When you walk on stage, you have about ten seconds to get to the first marker. At each mark, strike a pose and hold it for about three seconds each, then walk off the opposite side of the stage,” yelled a MomoCon volunteer staff member. Panic begins to set in as I realize I did not consider what poses I would do on stage. Several of my friends are standing near me asking if I am ok. I told them I did not test run any poses. “Just look something up on your phone real quick,” said one of them.

After frantically looking for three poses that would show off the best aspects of my cosplay,<sup>1</sup> I calmed down, at least until the line started to move again. I thought that after teaching a college freshman course I had gotten over my stage fright, but I was wrong. What if I trip? What if I fall off the stage? What if everyone laughs at me? Or even worse. What if people boo me? Although I have been cosplaying for years, I had never entered a cosplay contest. I never felt my costumes were good enough, or I allowed my anxiety to deter me at the last moment. I was not going to let that happen this time. Even if I wanted to quit, my boyfriend would be upset, because we had missed going to the con<sup>2</sup> yesterday to complete my Raven cosplay. Since 2005, I have cosplayed at almost every convention I have attended. Whenever I did not cosplay, I regretted it; this caused me to rush home to make a costume quickly. I did not create this cosplay overnight. I had put in over 25 hours of work into this cosplay. I had to rush out to the store just

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<sup>1</sup> The practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, video game, Japanese manga and anime.

<sup>2</sup> An abbreviation for “convention” usually used about popular media fan-based conventions.

to buy more fabric to replicate Raven's boot covers because the first two sets did not look right or did not feel right.

Finally, the line steadily began to move toward the stage. My boyfriend was acting as my handler, an assistant, and aid to a cosplayer, by holding onto my personal belongings when I walked across the stage. Then the announcer called me, "Raven from DC Comics' Teen Titans." The crowd cheered. I could hear people yelling "great job" or "I love your cosplay." In a few seconds, which seemed longer at the time, it was all over. All the time, money, and energy, regardless of placing in the competition was worth it.



*Figure 1 The author pictured cosplaying as Raven from DC Comics' Teen Titans. This picture was taken by an official MomoCon photographer and released to the author.*

The growing popularity of traditionally "nerdy" and "geeky" cultural products is on the rise. Many characters and series that have been known by comic book and science fiction fans for a long time are now huge summer blockbuster successes that appeal to mainstream audiences. Movies such as *The Avengers* (2012), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) and the reboot of the *Star Wars* (1999) franchise have grossed billions



of dollars. This is thanks to their solid fan base and new audiences. The shows *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon* (1992), *Dragon Ball Z* (1996), and *Pokemon* (1997) caused a surge in the popularity of Japanese anime and manga in the 1990s (Allison 2006), increasing the interest in Japanese culture in the following years. *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) and *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (1994) created a new wave of comic book fans and launched the career of voice actor Kevin Conroy (Batman) and a second career for Mark Hamill (The Joker). Both have gone on to star in several future television and video game adaptations.

The surge in superhero movies over the past decade has increased awareness of fan-based communities (referred to as “fandoms”) and popular culture conventions. The popularity of these shows and movies has changed the way people view concepts like “geek-chic” or “cool nerd” and has greatly influenced society, mass media, and consumption. Fandoms have been used in marketing strategies and have become an ordinary aspect of life in the industrialized world (Jones 2003). Before the mass merchandising campaigns for movies and television shows, it was easier for nerds to identify each other through nerd semiotics. Nowadays it is common for people to wear Captain America, Batman, and Iron Man memorabilia. Comic book, specialty, and online stores used to be some of the few places to obtain such memorabilia. Community members could recognize each other during daily activities, for example, someone wearing a Wonder Woman shirt on the train could be assumed to be a comic book fan. However, now people wear memorabilia to be trendy.

This thesis is an exploration of the lifestyles of cosplayers and the community surrounding them. In the past decade cosplay as an art form has gained increased media attention. Through my ethnography, I argue that cosplayers, to some degree, have agency within the fandom to potentially influence media consumption and the creation of new products. By

understanding cosplayers' point of view and how they engage media text, I explore whether this subculture resists or perpetuates hegemonic values. I also argue that conventions play a significant role in facilitating the cosplay community, fostering a face to face relationship between fans and producers. Meanwhile, social media provides an outlet for fans to interact with the community daily.

### **1.1 Cosplay within Fandom**

Movies and television programming have always generated an influx of people into “nerd”<sup>3</sup> fandom and attendance at popular culture conventions. The original subculture model characterized “subculture” as a cohesive group that possessed a shared history, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in society (Hebdige 1979). This is not the case for cosplayers or many popular culture fandom communities. Cosplayers are part of a larger community of science fiction, fantasy, video game, and Japanimation fans. “Japanimation” is an all-encompassing term for Japanese animation, manga, and video games. For conciseness throughout this thesis, I refer to the community of science fiction, fantasy, video game, and Japanimation fans as nerd fandom. While the traditional definition of the word “nerd” may have a negative connotation, I explain in chapter 6 how fans in the USA use “nerd,” “geek,” and “otaku” in a positive manner contrary to its traditional usage.

“Nerd fandom” is an all-encompassing term that includes several fan groups who are interested in science fiction, fantasy, comic books, video games, tabletop games, anime, and manga. These groups have established themselves at pop culture conventions across the globe. Nerd fandom members are interested in multiple mediums and genres that frequently overlap and share a similar structure and place within mainstream American society. Nerd fandom is one of

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<sup>3</sup>According to Lori Kendall (1999), a Nerd (noun) is a person who behaves awkwardly around other people and usually has unstylish clothes, hair, etc.; a person who is very interested in technical subjects, computers, etc.

many ways in which individuals can handle the stressors of their daily lives and societal pressures. It allows them to escape into an idealized world and persona, at times creating a safe space for its members via online communities and conventions despite geographic dispersal. Nerd fandom and cosplay have some resemblance to resistant subcultures against hegemonic ideology in an interconnected world via popular culture mediascapes. This is in contrast with high cultural products, like displays in museums and classical music. In this thesis, I explore the extent to which cosplay, and to an extent nerd fandom, are about resistance, consumption, identity, and self-expression. Cosplayers have given different definitions for “cosplay” and different reasons for appreciating it. Cosplay as a hobby can be either an individual or a group activity that has different levels of involvement. Even though many people are casual cosplayers, others have made a living as costume designers and models.

## **1.2 History of Cosplay**

The act of dressing up as a character is several millennia old dating back to some of the earliest civilizations in recorded human history. During the 17th and 18th centuries, masquerades became popular throughout Europe. Masquerades were considered an elaborate costume party for nobles has now become the main events at pop culture conventions. Over time, cosplay has evolved into an art form. Pierre Pettinger, the chief archivist of the International Costumers’ Guild, credits Myrtle Douglas and Forrest Ackerman as the first to cosplay at a popular culture convention (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:8-9). Myrtle Douglas was a leading figure in the rise of fanzines<sup>4</sup> in her later life, while Forrest Ackerman became a founding father of modern science fiction writing, and credited with coining the term “sci-fi” (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:8- 9). They attended the first World Science Fiction Convention (WorldCon) held in New York in

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<sup>4</sup> Fanzine – a magazine, usually produced by amateurs, for fans of a performer, group or form of entertainment.

1939 wearing "futuristic costumes"; this is the first recorded instance of people wearing costumes at a popular culture convention (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:9). Douglas designed and constructed both costumes (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:9). In the following years, more and more attendees wore costumes to WorldCon, sparking some of the first impromptu masquerades (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:9).

Eventually, these masquerades became a mainstay with formal competition rules (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:9). In 1984, Takahashi Nobuyuki, founder of Studio Hard, an anime publishing company, was impressed by the costumed fans and masquerade event at WorldCon in Los Angeles (Bruno 2002; Hlozek 2004; Winge 2006:66). He encouraged his readers in Japan to integrate the concept into anime and manga conventions (Bruno 2002; Hlozek 2004; Winge 2006:67). He was unable to translate the word "masquerade" into Japanese to describe the events at WorldCon because, in Japanese, it literally means an "aristocratic costume party." Thus, he created the phrase "costume play." Eventually, the phrase was shortened to "kosupure," or "cosplay" (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006: 67).



*Figure 2 Myrtle Douglas and Forrest Ackerman in her original creations at the first Worldcon in New York 1939. Image courtesy of Costume.org (Ashcraft and Plunkett 2014:8).*

During the 1980s, along with the rise in popularity of anime, manga, and Japanese video games, Japanimation fans increasingly attended sci-fi and fantasy conventions (Hlozek 2004; Winge 2006: 67; Poitras 2001). In time, Japanimation fans established their own conventions (Winge 2006: 67). Now, American and Japanese cosplayers have several commonalities. Cosplayers from around the world have different experiences and opinions in the community. Thus, the culture of the cosplay community is different when accounting for global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture (Bucholtz 2002: 525). Outside of the United States, one of the most avid communities of cosplayers are in Japan. Japanese cosplayers are well known for their attention to detail and replications of costumes, coming as close to the source material as

possible (Eng 2012). Japanese cosplayers typically focus on characters from anime and manga (Eng 2012).

### 1.3 Chapter Overview

Cosplay has been studied most notably by Susan Napier, a cultural studies scholar, and Anne Allison, an anthropologist, from the perspective of Japan's economic influence in the American market (Napier 2006; Allison 2006). There is a significant global exchange among cosplayers that is not exclusive to Japanimation. The research on fan practices and fan conventions specifically look at science fiction audiences (Jenkins & Tulloch 1995). They situate fans as an elite group with extensive knowledge of titles and an enjoyment of discussing their perspectives with others. Conventions are sites of consumption, identity, and group formation that bridge a wide array of people. While female fans engage in participatory culture, actively reworking text to their own taste (Jenkins 1992), they have become dominant figures in the cosplay community. The consumption practices of fandom communities are relevant to my research from an economic perspective; however, my focus here is on the social structure of the cosplay community within nerd fandom in the USA.

The appeal of conventions like San Diego Comic Con, New York Comic Con, and DragonCon has risen in the last seven years. This is partly due to the representation of industry leaders and professionals that attend these events. Convention attendees often have the chance to meet their favorite actors, actresses, artists, and other cultural icons. The elaborate and ornate costumes designed by fans at conventions have contributed to more press coverage of cosplay, for better or worse. While some have critiqued cosplay as a wasteful youth practice, media coverage of conventions tends to focus on the spectacle and deviance of devoted fans (Haenfler 2010; Hebdige 1979; Jasper 2004).

In my research, I highlight how individuals in the cosplay and nerd fandom subculture define what it means to be a cosplayer, the rules of cosplay, and how these individuals express their sense of fandom. This first chapter gives a brief history of conventions and fandom practices in the United States and how the concept arrived in Japan. The following chapter is an in-depth literature review of relevant theory on my subject matter. Throughout it I discuss theoretical concepts in subculture, post-subculture, the media and popular culture, fan studies, and impression management has shaped my analysis of the cosplay community.

My third chapter provides a layout the research methods I used throughout this project. I also discuss my personal motivation and introduction into the cosplay community. By assessing my positionality as a researcher and cosplayer, I analyzed how I was limited by my identity and accessibility to some cosplayers. My identity was essential in giving me an insider's perspective into the community. I also explain the settings in which I conducted my interviews, participant observations, and engaged the cosplay community online.

The following chapters include ethnographic perspectives gathered at several conventions. In chapter 4, I explain the cosplay process from choosing a character and selecting materials to the exchange of knowledge. I discuss the different types of cosplays and cosplayers and the role of competitions. I also address the importance of photography and online posts in the impression management strategies of cosplayers Chapter 5 covers conventions and other places people gather to cosplay. The community is sustained by online message boards, social media groups, local bars, and fan- or convention sponsored events. There are several events outside of conventions sponsored by individual fans or conventions. In chapter 6, I examine how the community has been represented by mainstream media, focusing on the agency of the community against issues prevalent in American society, such as race and gender. I conclude this

chapter by exploring what cosplayers gain from their participation in cosplay, and the overall appeal of nerd fandom.



## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Subculture

A subculture is a social group that has distinguishable beliefs, interests, and values from mainstream culture. In the early twentieth century, sociological branches of criminology and delinquency studies served as the foundation of youth culture studies (Bucholtz 2002:525-526, 536). These studies focused particularly on the deviant actions in which youth often engaged. Seeking to explain delinquent youth behavior and the environment in which subcultures emerge was the Chicago School of Cultural and Anthropological Studies (Cohen 1955). Theorists from the Chicago School argued that subcultures emerged in response to the difficulties of urban life among marginalized people who want to belong to a society that has rejected them (Park 1925; Cohen 1955; Becker 1963; Haenfler 2010). Places with the highest degree of political instability, social change, and financial insecurity were considered “zones of transition,” that often created delinquent subcultures (McKay & Shaw 1942). The behavior of members of subcultures coupled with mass communication threatened the traditions of working class life and deviated from dominant culture’s symbolic meanings (Bucholtz 2002:536; Gelder 2007:85-87).

Members of subcultures were from marginalized and underserved populations, they often had few legal opportunities and faced discrimination in larger society (Cohen 1995; Haenfler 2010). Therefore, the prevailing theory from the Chicago School on subcultures was based on strain theory, in which society pressures individuals to achieve a socially acceptable goal (Merton 1957). However, subculturalist may lack the means to achieve these goals causing a strain on an individuals’ economic opportunity, thus increasing the appeal to commit crimes (Cohen 1955; Merton 1957). Subcultures attempt to bring balance and cohesion back to society,

even though participation in delinquent subcultures is undesirable by larger society (Haenfler 2010).

The Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham produced some of the predominant studies on subculture theory. Some notable associates of the CCCS were Dick Hebdige (1979), focusing on the subversive meanings in subcultural styles and its contextualization in social class; Paul Willis (1977), who conducted ethnographic studies on working class youth; and Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1976), who explained how youth subcultures would symbolically and ritualistically attempt to resist hegemony.<sup>5</sup> Hall and Jefferson (1976), focused on the resistance exhibited by members of youth subcultures grounded in Marxist cultural theory further emphasizing class relations. According to these scholars, subculture was a mode of resistance for disadvantaged youth to resolve class limitations in dominant society (Cohen [1972] 1993; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Mungham & Pearson 1976; Hebdige 1979).

The CCCS also claimed that youth subcultures challenged adult society in their attempt to correct class-based contradictions in the working-class communities as it merged into a “classless realm of consumer culture and mass communication” (Cohen [1972] 1993; Hall and Jefferson 1976). This created generational conflicts that reinforced social class divisions, as working class youth did not pursue mobility outside of their neighborhood (Clarke 1993:189; Cohen [1972] 1993; Gelder and Thornton 1997:87). Subculture explicitly resisted dominant culture by claiming public spaces and reworking commodities in nuanced ways, thus giving them symbolically new meaning (Hebdige 1979). A critique of CCCS and Chicago School theory

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<sup>5</sup> Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony addresses how the dominant class can maintain its status, using coercion, and unknowingly through the consent of subordinate groups (Hall 1986). This allows those in power to exert their cultural, ideological, and economic influence over others (Hall 1986).

highlighted the disregard for women and ethnic minorities because theorists focused predominantly on white working class men and assumed the stagnation of subcultural groups. Eventually, Stuart Hall brought a stronger focus on ethnicity and race (Gelder 2007:91-96).

## **2.2 Post-Subculture**

Over time, a postmodernist approach emerged regarding subculture studies. Post-subcultural theorists distanced themselves from the CCCS, rejecting some of their concepts. Post-subcultural theorists revised the conceptualization of subcultures as stable, exclusive, homogenized and actively deviant groups. Subcultures, much like culture, are very fluid, constantly changing, and building upon previous cultures. The CCCS concentrated on class and race division among youth, glossing over individual experiences, thus highlighting their differences from members of the dominant culture (Haenfler 2010:8; Storey 2003:138-139). Post-subcultural theorists instead, focused on the experience of women as active participants in subculture, fluidity, and the daily and individual experience of members of subcultures (Haenfler 2010; McRobbie & Garber 1976; McRobbie 2000).

During the mid-1990s, French sociologist Michel Maffesoli observed that subculture groups were more fluid than previously thought. This consideration led him to develop the concept of the “neo-tribe” or modern tribe that emerges in opposition to large-scale society creating smaller social networks (Maffesoli 1996 in Blackman 2005:11-12). With the formation of internet communities and globalized production, subcultures continue to change and overlap in their representation and membership (Haenfler 2010). David Muggleton promoted the idea of individuality within consumer culture through the ability to self-expression and promoted diversity (Muggleton 2000). Consequently, the focus shifted from class distinctions to consumption practices to craft a unique individualized identity; this concept is appealing to

middle and upper-class youth, with some variation per region (Gelder 2007:100-106; Muggleton 2000). However, overemphasis on individualism within subcultures can render it indiscernible from the dominant culture or other subcultures (Gelder 2007:106).

### **2.3 Mass Media and Popular Culture Studies**

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, advancements in technology have influenced community formations and self-awareness. Contemporary subculture, such as fandom, enable individuals to contextualize and conceptualize their identity in the world through consumption and performance (Polhemus 1998). The internet has reshaped the forms of identity people use to construct themselves. Furthermore, it has enabled individuals to connect with communities that are beyond their physical geographical location, greatly expanding the scope and capabilities of individuals to connect to other cultural perspectives and create diverse group formations, such as fandom communities. The global accessibility of the internet and mass media has led to people taking a more vested interest in media consumption for identification, whether it is popular to a large or small audience.

Mass media was considered a threat to the resistance patterns of youth cultures by early subcultural theorists because it can transmit dominant ideology to a large and diverse audience (Bucholtz 2002:541). In the 1970s, as screen theory began to dominate film studies, scholars in this discipline argued that mass media transmitted the ideologies of a Western patriarchal and capitalist culture to viewers (Traube 1996:134). Screen theory regarded the audience as a “textual subject” that is only capable of receiving the ideological message encoded within the text (Hall 1973; Jenkins & Tulloch 1995:67). However, Gadamer (1979) promoted the concept of reception theory, arguing that a cultural text is always understood from the perspective of the person viewing it. Gadamer (1979) describes reception theory as a “hermeneutic circle,” during

which both the text and the reader contribute to the experience: the reader asks questions of the text and remains open to the answers to achieve an acceptable understanding. Although the author may have an ideological message encoded within the text, that message is not inherent because the viewer may not be able to recognize it due to a different cultural and social framework of ideology (Storey 2003:41). When people refuse the ideological message, they are engaging in the form of popular resistance to dominant culture; hence the audience is no longer a passive observer (Hall 1986; Traube 1996:135). While the audience is still receiving a cultural text, its reception is actively negotiated whereby an understanding is achieved through personal experience (Hall 1986; Traube 1996:134-135). For example, many Black girls believed Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter* was Black because she is described as having bushy curly hair, which is a similar characteristic to some Black women's hair.

The study of popular culture is juxtaposed to screen theory and reception theory. Media consumption can be a form of resistance by the way it is extracted and interpreted from the dominant culture and is then appropriated and redefined according to the consumer (Fiske 1989, 1993). Popular culture is a blend of production and reception, blurring the lines between media's manipulation of ideological messages and the individualistic expression of its consumers (Fiske 1989, 1993; Traube 1996:136-142). According to Michel De Certeau (1984), poaching is the way in which people construct their lives by appropriating the property of others; it is a form of secondary production for consumers using products for personal reasons. The act of textual poaching is done by active readers who do not passively receive messages conveyed within media texts but develop a personal and subjective reading of the material (De Certeau 1984; Storey 2003:139-142). Drawing on the notion of textual poaching, Henry Jenkins emphasized fans' usage and interpretation of the media and their ability to artistically reflect and create new

material (Jenkins 1992). Consumerism in fan cultures becomes complicated as fans turn into amateur producers with fan-made media (Sandvoss 2005). Fandoms will continue to appropriate and reinvent these products, at times redefining them and becoming amateur producers.

The cosplay community is based on a shared interest in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, comics, anime, and manga fandom. Rhiannon Bury (2005) theorizes that fandoms are a way for people to socialize with other people who view a text similarly. The process of cultural jamming is when a subculture appropriates recognizable products from the dominant culture and rework them to convey an ulterior meaning (Gelder 2007:142-152). In nerd fandom, characters are often appropriated based on a personal reading of a text becoming amateur producers through their cosplay activities. At times, they draw inspiration from popular characters but redesign them in their image, for example when a Muslim woman uses different colored fabrics to imitate hair in her hijab.

## **2.4 Impression Management**

In 1959, Erving Goffman coined the term “impression management,” which is the conscious or unconscious attempt to skew the perception of an individual to enhance one’s image in the eyes of other people (Dillard et al. 2000:404-405; Sinha 2009:104). The term has become popular in sociology, cultural studies, and business management. People can use defensive or assertive strategies to manipulate their persona (Goffman 1959:210; Leary, Allen, and Terry 2011:419). This is common in the hospitality industry where everyone must maintain a pleasant demeanor regardless of their personal feelings to achieve customer service.

Impression management is primarily concerned with the expressions individuals give off and how people perceive each other (Goffman 1959:3-4). Cosplayers are not only playing an actual character. They are also putting on a performance of an outer self, like acting as a

character in play. The backstage persona often depicts the inner self, with glimpses of domestic life, or unflattering characteristics that are usually kept private from outsiders (Goffman 1959:11). In contrast, the front stage persona shows all the activity of an individual who is actively managing their impression (Goffman 1959:22). Cosplayers monitor themselves in similar ways, for example, many have a public Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram page that is separate from their private life. The outer self is generally relaxed when the performer is around people with whom they are comfortable, such as family and close friends (Gatlin 2014). However, performers carefully maintain their front stage persona when encountering new, influential, or powerful individuals (Goffman 1959:222). Also, the audience plays a key role in encouraging the behavior of the actor (Goffman 1959:234).

When people call cosplayers by the name of the character they are portraying, this emboldens the cosplayers, by reinforcing their confidence and efforts. These individuals' intention is to please their audience by constructing a pleasurable image for display and in the process, positively influence their position to gain or maintain their status in society, or gain social capital (Schlenker and Weigold 1990: 820-824). Social media has drastically changed the strategies peoples use to manage their impression. People can easily control what other people see about them at the touch of a finger. Users will frequently monitor their self-image carefully deciding what to post, privacy settings, and refraining from postings unflattering photos of themselves. People, especially cosplayers, fear the negative and harsh criticism from unfavorable posts, they have begun to internalize the gaze of society and discipline themselves to constantly be on guard (Bentham 1995:5; Mulvey 1975). The concept of the panopticon<sup>6</sup> and synopticon<sup>7</sup> is

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<sup>6</sup> Panopticon is the social theory from Michel Foucault's 1995 book *Discipline and Punish*. In theory people's behavior is modified to what is culturally acceptable, when they are aware others are watching them.

<sup>7</sup> Synopticon is the concept of surveillance from Thomas Mathiesen (1997) by which the few observe the many.

useful in analyzing how cosplayers negotiate their status in the community and react to anonymous policing online (Foucault 1995; Mathiesen 1997). However, if impression management fails and the individual is proven to be a fraud, their status in the community can be jeopardized (Ferrante 2008:131; Norris 2011:1). This has increased policing by which cosplayers give credit to the photographer, wig maker, and stylist, prop fabricator and costume designer.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Subcultural studies have gone through several waves of thought in the various humanity fields, especially the field of anthropology, which has focused on rites of passage and adolescence (Turner 1982). Sociology emphasized the various forms of resistance and socially deviant actions of youth (Hall 1990; Hebdige 1979). At first, neither of these fields fully comprehended the cultural experience of youth with globalization, transnationalism, and local culture (Bucholtz 2002:525). As I discussed in the previous section, early theories heavily focused on class inequalities disregarding popular culture and the agentive powers of youth groups, who formed complex micro-societies within a dominant society. Early subculture theories emphasized the concept of resistance, either through actions or consumption practices, taking a holistic view of subcultural groups rather than individual behaviors that made various groups unique. Post-subcultural studies, instead, took a postmodernist approach to the study of subculture, thus allowing for different theories to arise forming an intersection critiquing the cultural framework of mass media, subculture groups, hegemony and individualism (Maffesoli 1996; McRobbie 2000; Muggleton 2000).

Since the 1970s, theories on youth subcultural practices have evolved to encompass popular culture and fan culture. Building on the concept of resistance through consumption, theorists began to include popular culture, media, and individual activities (Muggleton 2000).



However, this undercuts the distinguishing features that separated subculturalist from mainstream society. Scholars considered fans unorthodox consumers of popular culture and media products (Jenkins 1992; Sandross 2005; Jenkins & Tulloch 1995). Fan culture or fandom theories integrates youth practices, subculture, mass media, popular culture, globalization, trans-culturalism, and group or individual experiences (Fiske 1989, 1993); creating more comprehensive theories on youth practices. Cosplayers broke out of mainstream society's expectation of what is appropriate to wear, making cosplay subversive to a degree. Although many cosplayers are college students and young adults, the community does not exclude older individuals, negating a generational gap or conflict among cosplayers, but the level of fandom interest does vary.

### 3 METHODS

#### 3.1 Purpose

I chose to study cosplayers and conventions because the community over the past few years has begun to grow, and thus there is increasing media attention on it. This subculture is expanding, and with this growth come many issues stemming from harassment, racism, and sexism. While these issues are not new in the context of American society, or even to nerd fandom media, it has only now come to the media's attention. In my research, I aim to understand nerd fandom from the point of view of cosplayers because they more actively engage the original texts of their focal points. In this way, cosplayers take "textual poaching" to a new level, often by morphing works of fiction that lack a live action equivalent into a physical interpretation (Jenkins 1992; Hall 1973; de Certeau 1984).

I have been into nerdy media since I was young. Growing up watching *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* (1993), *Sailor Moon* (1992) and *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) constitutes some of my favorite and earliest memories. My early introduction to these series influenced my desire to absorb all animation, fantasy, science fiction, and Japanese culture. My father was a Trekker (a Star Trek fan) and had many classic Super Nintendo games. We also frequently watched old Godzilla movies together. My godmother loved comic books and Star Wars. She purchased my first pack of Pokemon cards for me in the mid-1990s. Everyone in my family seemed to foster my desire and love for fantasy and science fiction, as well as my creativity. Growing up in this environment as an only child deepened my journey into fantasy. Over the years, I have made many friends who enjoy similar series and video games. These programs

were a gateway into fandom for many people like me, and they are significant in the community as a form of cultural capital.<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 3 A cosplayers dressed as Dark Wargreymon for the original run of the popular children's anime Digimon (1999). This photo is published with permission from the cosplayers.*

Cultural capital plays an important role in fandom when addressing the complexity of fandom in the framework of fan habitus and how it is conceptualized in the social hierarchies of subcultures (Allison 2006; Bourdieu 1986; Napier 2007; Sandvoss 2005:34). People that grew up watching these shows would eventually become fans, cosplayers, con-goers,<sup>9</sup> and convention organizers. The media they grew up watching has had a lasting effect in the way producers market to this demographic. While this generation was not the first to attend conventions or

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<sup>8</sup> Cultural capital, is the social relations and symbolic material that is required to maintain and promote social mobility (Bourdieu 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Con-goers or convention goers are convention attendees.

cosplay, generation Y (a.k.a. millennials) did become the most recognizable demographic to widely and openly cosplay.

In 2005, I received a monthly copy of the *Newtype USA*, a magazine covering Japanimation, featured an article about Anime Weekend Atlanta (AWA) at the Cobb Galleria. Luckily my mother was aware of my love for animation and video games, so asking her to attend an anime convention was not an outlandish request for her 16-year-old daughter. However, she did have many concerns about the danger of possible predators at this event. There is a cultural stigma against adult fans who enjoy media perceived to be for children or animation. My mother was not the only individual with this concern; the possibility of predators at conventions was a deterrent for several of my informants as well. Many postponed their first convention experience until they were adults or able to find their own transportation because of their parents' concerns. Until I attended my first convention, I was unaware of how many people shared my interest beyond a handful of people at my high school. Many of my male friends were teased because we did not have similar interests to most people.

Through my personal involvement in nerd fandom and the cosplay community, I have navigated some aspect of the social hierarchies in the community. My prior knowledge about the community allows me to bypass some of the more obvious questions about its formation and origins, getting more directly to individual engagement from my respondents. The notion of cosplay and fandom is already generally understood in the mainstream lexicon. However, the way that individuals in the subculture define what it means to be a cosplayer varies along with the rules of cosplay and how these members of the fandom express themselves.

### 3.2 Methodology

This study of the cosplay community along the east coast of the USA was conducted from May 2015 to January 2017. I did some preliminary observations prior to this study to form a base upon which to structure my research, and I participated in conventions for years before they became the focus of my research interest. To conduct my research, I used a combination of traditional ethnographic methods, auto-ethnography, interviews, netnography and participant observation (Bowler 2010:1270). During this research, I attended several conventions and events along the East Coast of the United States to understand the cosplay community beyond the city of Atlanta. I observed the formation, maintenance, and events that target cosplayers and nerd fandom into these communities. At Momo-Con and DragonCon (2015), two Atlanta conventions, I had a general attendee badge, and I cosplayed during the whole convention. At Anime Weekend Atlanta (AWA), I volunteered in the official cosplay department, assisting with several cosplay events including the cosplay contest. For Anime USA in Washington, DC, I was invited to host a panel on my research and discuss issues in the cosplay community. Through these interactions and my participant observation at other events, I met several people who were interested in discussing various topics related to my research.

Informants in my research were active members of the North American Cosplay community. All the participants interested in participating in this study were from at least one of several events in the Atlanta area and along the East Coast of the United States (New York, Florida, New Jersey, Washington D.C., Alabama, and North Carolina). Many of these events were organized at conventions. All participants were over the age of 18, ranging from 20 to 60 years old. This allowed for a wide range of experience in my participants. My interview subjects were predominantly white women and ethnic minorities, except for two individuals. I utilized

participant-driven and word of mouth recruitment strategies for my study. I also obtained participants from my network of friends, and from connections through friends of previous interview participants. For my research, I interviewed approximately sixteen members of the American east coast cosplay community. These interviews were between forty-five and ninety minutes each. In addition to interviews, I have interacted with hundreds of conventions participants during my field research.

Participants chose the location of the interviews at their discretion, although about half of my interviews happened via Skype because it was more convenient and comfortable for those participants, as opposed to finding the halfway point to meet in-person or off-site during a convention. Most of these individuals lived in another state or outside of the Metro-Atlanta area. Others that lived within a short radius of my residence or college were willing to meet in person at local coffee shops. Only one interview took place at a convention. The amount of noise at conventions limited opportunities to record on-site, and attendees often had busy schedules throughout the weekend, further limiting my chance to conduct thorough interviews there. Interviews, in general, were semi-structured to allow for a casual dialog between my informants and me, facilitating opportunities to expand the scope from my initial questions. This enabled me to gain additional knowledge from informants through questions I did not think of asking and for my informant to discuss topics they found important.

The cosplay community is one of the most visible aspects of convention culture; I utilize photography as a tool to enhance my research. Cosplay is an art form and a visual expression of fandom associations. Cosplayers often use photographs to increase their online presence and become recognizable in the community, or as a form of validation for their efforts. I obtained verbal permission from all individuals to take pictures at events. In some cases, I asked

informants to send me a picture in a costume from a photo shoot, for which I obtained written permission on a consent form. I also observed the photographing of cosplayers at events that I attended, taking note of their interactions with the photographers, each other, posing styles, and how photo shoots were organized. Additionally, I examined how these photographs were perceived by online communities.

### **3.3 Positionality**

My identity as an African-American, heterosexual cis woman who is also a nerd and a cosplayer plays an important role in my research. I would be remiss to think my identity did not shape my perception of important issues in the community like racism and sexual harassment, not to mention how my informants interact with me. Most of my informants are women or minority individuals. As a member of the community, I can bring up controversies and events in the community that outsiders are not readily knowledgeable about. During my recruitment attempts at conventions, I was participating in cosplay myself. By doing this, I had the status of a genuine fan and not an outside researcher. This allowed greater access to individuals and insight on how members of the community feel about different events and topics.

Through my ethnography of the cosplay community, I set out to examine some of the hidden power structures, agency, and resistance or replication of hegemony in the community. To accomplish this goal, I participated and engaged the community as both a fan and an academic. As a native anthropologist, my prior involvement in the community at times made it challenging to maintain objectivity (Lal 1996; Narayan 1993:678). My subject position may come with inherent bias of which I am unaware. Donna Haraway advocates not forming a completely objective all-knowing truth, but a critical interpretation of knowledge based on positionality and the perspectives of the researcher (Haraway 1988: 580-590). Being mindful of

my subject position and constructed identity, I faced a different degree of access to the cosplay community than a white heterosexual man.

### **3.4 Setting**

Over the past 10 years, I have attended several conventions. I have used these opportunities to explore the community from multiple angles to gain a full picture of how conventions function. At DragonCon, I was a regular attendee, and as such I could observe a friend who volunteered to help in the technology department of the convention. At Momo-Con, I was a general attendee during the convention's first time off Georgia Tech's campus, at The Georgia World Congress Center. After contacting Anime USA about conducting research at their event, I was invited to host a panel, and I also competed in their cosplay contest. At Anime Weekend Atlanta, I volunteered to help in the cosplay department. This granted me access to competing cosplayers, volunteer staff and allowed me to assist with the cosplay contest. I have also attended several local events hosted by a local bar and restaurant in Sandy Springs called Battle and Brew. Once a month, they have a cosplay theme night, though they encourage cosplay all the time at their location.

The internet has greatly transformed the scope and scale of interaction between many groups. Among all media-revolving groups, Japanese anime and manga fans have developed a particularly well-connected community. This stems from the communities' formation and growth in the 1990s and 2000s in the United States. My online social network contains several fandom community pages and cosplayers that keep me engaged daily. My range of online community involvement, however, is limited by the scope of sources I can consistently check, as well as web cookies targeting my geographic location plus a variety of filters and social media algorithms of which I may be unaware of. Hence, I do not solely ground my research in the online aspect of



these communities. To gauge a more accurate response from individuals and to see the physical engagement of fans and cosplayers, I interact with them face-to-face (Bonilla & Rosa 2015).

### **3.5 Limitations**

Throughout this research, I faced many challenges; therefore, my research is not a fully comprehensive analysis of the cosplay community or convention culture in the United States, nor along the East Coast. Attending out-of-state conventions proved to be a huge financial challenge; tickets to the convention, transportation, hotel accommodations and food expenses can make a three or four-day weekend very costly, very quickly. The financial cost of attending out-of-state conventions was also a concern for several of my informants excluding those who were invited to events as special guests, panel hosts, or judges.

Networking with cosplayers was easy, as many people are willing to talk or meet new people at conventions or in online spaces. Scheduling interviews, especially in person, however, was more difficult. I contacted many cosplayers via their contact information on social media accounts or web pages with limited or delayed responses. Cosplayers with whom I had previously interacted prior to the onset of this study, and those I met in person, were the most reliable respondents. This made recruiting a diverse and accurate sample of the cosplay community difficult. Many of my respondents connected me with their friends or other cosplayers they thought would be beneficial to my study. Although many of these contacts linked me with more cosplayers, it also limited the scope of possible experiences based on group affiliation. My identity has also challenged my access to informants— this explains why many of the people willing to be interviewed were women. I was taken aback by the negative responses and lack of interest from male cosplayers. These dynamics may suggest the existence of gender

and racial stereotypes being upheld in the nerd fandom and cosplay community towards Black women.

Obtaining permission to conduct research at some conventions proved to be difficult. This was mainly due to the structure of conventions. Smaller conventions like Anime USA, AWA, and MomoCon are run solely by volunteers with several non-paid directors on staff. While these conventions routinely host guest voice actors and industry personnel, their attendance is still on the smaller end of the spectrum in comparison to DragonCon and NYCC, which draws a larger crowd, hosting high-profile industry professionals, like well-known actors/actresses, directors, publishers, editors, artists, and more. Conventions with higher volumes of clientele typically have more issues with security and maintaining professional appearances due to the number of attendees and the mainstream media attention at these events. This could be the reason why I was offered free admission tickets and invited to host panels at smaller conventions, but had to apply for a media/press pass for DragonCon and NYCC. My application for both conventions was denied on the grounds of a limited media presence to qualify as press personnel, so I was not allowed to interview special industry guests. I was, however, still allowed to talk to general attendees, who were my target interview subjects for this study.

#### 4 THE CONSTRUCTION OF COSPLAY

So, what is cosplay? Cosplayers do not have a standardize definition for cosplay. The simple definition of cosplay is a portmanteau of the words “costume” and “role-play.” For Gerry, a 26-year-old cosplayer who identifies as a Black bisexual man has been going to conventions since high school. I took him to his first convention in 2007. “Cosplay is a culture that likes to toy with identity.” He views cosplay as a way gender fluidity and cultural norms are subverted. Crystal sees cosplay as an artistic expression and a creative outlet for individuals. "It is a social activity and a way to express your devotion to a character." Crystal is a closet cosplayer who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology and is in her late twenties. Mike is a White male in his mid-twenties; he works as a television commercial producer for a local firm in Atlanta and is part of a Disney/Marvel cosplay group for private and charity events. Coming from a film and acting background, Mike focuses on the role-playing aspect of cosplay and how it is distinguishable from costuming events, like Halloween. “Cosplay is the engagement in becoming someone else for a day. It’s different from dressing up for Halloween. To me what sets it apart is having a connection with the character. Like with pictures you aren’t just going to stand there...you are going to strike a pose like that character. I stay in character all day.” Having a connection to the character is important for the cosplayer to replicate their mannerisms and poses.

Many people discover cosplay after attending their first convention. Although you can see pictures of cosplay online, usually their first experience is with conventions or other cosplay related events, excluding some Halloween events. Cosplayers are captivating in their ability to display their passion and imitation of characters outwardly. The range of characters and genres represented at conventions or cosplay-themed events varies depending on the context. Some cosplayers simply want to look like a specific character and having a remote association with the

source material is sufficient. While others dedicate a considerable amount of time to the construction and perfection of details, each of these elements contributes to a cosplayer's impression in the cosplay community.

Members of the cosplay community connect in their shared interest of appearing like a character represented in media. This mutual interest in cosplay fashion has created a community dedicated to the creative and artistic process involved in the construction of cosplay outfits. In this chapter, I argue that cosplayers choose specific materials and techniques to create and manage their impression at cosplay themed events. I examine the various materials and techniques cosplayers chose to construction their cosplay outfits, and I explain how a pseudo-hierarchy has developed in the community in association with cosplay contests. I also discuss the process of purchasing materials, commissioning aspects of a cosplay outfit (such as garment, weapons, wig, and accessories), and the various sites used during this process. I then show how the utilization of different techniques and knowledge can increase the social capital of a cosplayer, thus constructing a pseudo-hierarchy that has become monetized in some instances. Additionally, this chapter illustrates the organization of a Cosplay Contest and its importance or lack thereof in the cosplay community.

#### **4.1 The Planning Process**

Before cosplayers can begin to construct an outfit, they should first consider how much time do you have until the event, how much time are you willing and able to put into your cosplay, and your budget. These factors can greatly determine what character you can or cannot cosplay. Budgeting your cost is crucial because cosplaying can be a costly activity. Cosplayers (myself included) can spend several hundred dollars for supplies and tools. It is always best to

start on a project early, preferably a month or two before your deadline which is usually a convention. Then you should gather reference images; the best reference pictures are orthographic drawings. These are easily found online via sites like Google or Yahoo Images. Screenshots from the television show or movie and concept art from video games sometimes have the best quality.

With a good understanding of the character and ingenuity, almost anything can be used to construct cosplay. Worbla's Finest Art is a thermoplastic that is considered one of the greatest materials in cosplay. There are several products in the worbla line each with varying degrees of properties. Worbla is non-toxic, easy to mold with a heat gun, steam or hot water, self-adhesive, and solvent-free. Black Art is smoother, can make small details, sturdier, and is slightly less adhesive than Worbla. TranspArt is a clear thermoplastic; even though it is less adhesive than traditional Worbla, it can be dyed and vacuumed-formed into a shape. Meshed Art is the sturdiest in the worbla line, and can be used as a base for other worbla projects. Wonderflex is a thermoplastic that can be shaped when heated with air or dipped in hot water. As it cools it retains its shape, adheres to itself, and it can be reheated and shaped, but the texture becomes rougher over time.

Friendly plastic, are polyester plastic pellets that can be molded by dropping them into hot water. It can be worked like clay being reusable and remolded. These items are available at some craft stores and online. PVC pipe, polyvinyl chloride, is commonly used in plumbing. It is durable and can be cut with a saw as well as formed with a heat gun and is water resistant. Available at hardware stores. Sintra is a lightweight flat board of PVC material. It has similar properties as PVC pipe. Available from online stores or signage making shops when the material is available for individual purchase. EVA, ethylene vinyl acetate is a rubber like material that

comes in the form of 1 mm to 10 mm thick sheets. EVA foam is often used for children floor puzzles, gym flooring, and yoga mats. It can be shaped with heat, is UV resistant, and sealed to be waterproof. Other materials include styrene, magnets, expanding foam, wooden dowels and much more.

Rachel, who considers herself a veteran cosplayer teaches a panel titled “Cosplay 101” at conventions. She is in her early thirties, works in corporate America and has been cosplaying for a little over 10 years. So, I asked her what materials have she used for past projects. She replied:

“I have probably used all of them. For fabric, I have used every crappy fabric in Joann. Every type of paint. Random things. My Samus cosplay armor backpack used pringles tubes wrapped in foam, and I used a Folger's coffee lid for the cannon gun. Also, I used mini orange golf cones to taper in the canon. I tend to walk through Joann and Hobby Lobby looking around for things to possibly use.”



*Figure 4 Rachel in her Samus cosplay. It was constructed with a variety of items that can be found at local hardware and craft stores. This picture was taken by Double Stomp Productions and published with the owner's permission from cosplayer and photographer.*

Since a wide array of materials can be used to construct cosplay, almost every store has potential supplies. Home Depot and other hardware stores keep PVC, armature wire, installation foam and electrical supplies well-stocked. Craft stores like Michael's have a large selection of essential materials and tools. A hot glue gun, for example, is a must-have for any project. These shops often cater to hobbyists and do-it-yourselfers of all types, and fabric stores have a range of fabrics available in-store, though some have better options online. Depending on the retailer, shipping for online orders, especially items from China, can take several weeks. You can find anything online from materials and tools to full costumes. The Engineer Guy, a store located near Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, and Cosplay Supplies website are the only places where the worbla line of thermoplastics and special effects make-up are available to Atlanta cosplayers outside of the movie industry.

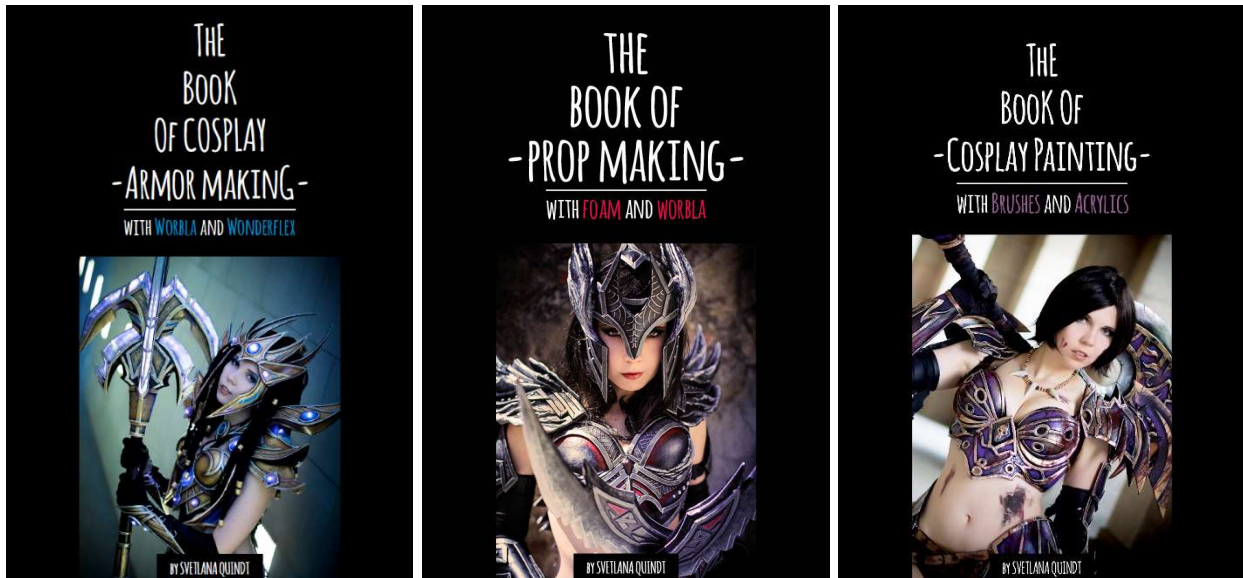
Thrift stores are also a common place to find cheap materials. "I'll use thrift stores for the base of my shoes, then make the rest," says Rachel. Mike likes to consider himself a forager. He finds the best materials that he can and puts them together. He tries to make it work because he does not know how to sew. Whatever he cannot find will be commissioned. This is also true for Crystal who cannot sew, either: "The best thing about being a closet cosplayer is things will end up in my closet, and I'll wear them with everyday clothes, but nobody will know that it was part of cosplay. And it's a way to justify buying stuff."

Some items are beyond the average cosplayers ability to make from scratch or inside their home. Shoes, wigs, and some props are purchased, but online retailers usually have a wider range of products. Arda and EpicCosplay are two leading brands in the cosplay wig industry. Both retailers had fully stocked booths in the Dealer's Room at every convention I attended. They offer a variety of colors and styles, other retailers like eBay and Amazon sell wigs pre-

styled specifically for a character. Among these opinions is to have another cosplayer or costume designer custom make a cosplay outfit. The price to commission a custom cosplay varies on many factors discussed at the beginning of this section. Sarah, regularly post pictures of commission work to her social media accounts. However, she explained that commissioning is hard work and she often does not have time to make new cosplays for herself.

Cosplay is an organic hobby, meaning it emerged on its own into a flourishing and thriving community perceiving the development of specialty materials and tutorial books specifically for constructing cosplay. Some of the individuals in the community have been professionally trained as seamstresses, special effects makeup and prosthetic artists, sculptors, and carpenters. While few have academically trained to be costume designers, many of the skills were self-taught. Early cosplayers used hobbyist books, videos, and took classes at craft stores; nowadays cosplay "how to..." books, online guides, tutorials, and several workshops or panels at cons on a range of topics. Like Rachel's "Cosplay 101" covers the different types of fabrics and foams for the construction of clothing, props, and armor. For the most part, information is free and widely available. Tutorials are available on YouTube from an artist with varying techniques and skill sets. In the past two years' cosplayer, have begun increasingly using Patreon. Patreon is a site for an artist to profit from tutorials, videos, and photos. Their followers, called patrons sign-up for a monthly subscription to see people work on different projects that are not available for free. Cosplayers like Kamui have published several tutorial books that are specifically for fabricating cosplay props and armor out of thermoplastics and foam.





*Figure 5 Several of the cosplay tutorial books offered on Kamui's website in digital and hardcover autographed copies. Photos taken from cover of ebooks.*

#### 4.2 Putting the Play in Cosplay

Cosplay represents an intersection of material consumption and "textual poaching" techniques (Jenkins & Tulloch 1995). Terence Turner (1993) describes the skin as a natural boundary between the self and the social sphere. Through the adornment of the body, people may be read as a text by other people thus marking their identity and membership within a social group (Turner 1993). Mendoza-Denton (1996) study of *cholas*, Latina gang girls, discusses how commodities like makeup are used to mark their difference from mainstream culture and display membership within a community. Cosplayers can be read as fans of a text based on the character they cosplay. Generally, it is safe to assume cosplayers belong to some section of the nerd fandom community. The social skin is not limited to the body of the cosplayer. Many cosplayers decorate their car, backpack, laptop, and phone with memorabilia. These items are identifiable outside of the convention with insider knowledge.

People also use cosplay to express themselves in their daily life. And with varying degrees get into character. Crystal cosplays characters that resonate with her profession. “I like Professor X and Dexter. They are scientists, so I can express my love for science. Connie, from Steven Universe, is like me but at twelve. She’s someone with my skin tone, big glasses, and awkwardness.” Some cosplayers are very dedicated to their character portrayal. Raven is a computer engineer in her early fifties. She started cosplaying with a Harry Potter fan group and slowly began cosplaying other characters as she attended conventions without her group. She enjoys wearing leather or corsets to show off her curves. Raven does not eat or drink in costume. She even avoids going to the bathroom if possible. This is partial to avoid breaking character or having an unflattering photo taken of her cosplay. Despite the fact, many people in the community believe it is disrespectful to take a picture of someone without asking. Cosplay allows people to connect with characters on a different level than watching or playing the character in other formats. Rachel argued that this can be done for the cosplayers enjoyment or for the enjoyment of others. “For me, cosplay is about loving to play a character. Some people believe you are the character like children. For kids, they think you are the character, especially Disney princess cosplayers. And people will slip right into character.” Cosplay deepens the relationship between the fan and the text. Rachel is a hardcore gamer and mostly cosplays characters from those games: “Video games are my favorite because I get to play through a game where I was the character, then in real-life, I can almost be that character. So, for me, it’s a passion that’s combining creativity with the character.”



*Figure 6 A group of Disney cosplayers at the Children's Hospital of Atlanta for a fundraiser event. This photo is published with owner's permission.*

For others, it takes an extra barrier between the self and others to achieve the essence of a character. Mike loves acting and directing, so for him, cosplay is serious character acting. He describes it best with this statement:

“It’s easier to get into character if I have a mask on. Because if you have something completely covering your face, then people outside of yourself can’t see you behind the mask. In sociology, we all put on a show for people, like this is who I am to this group of people. And then I am a different kind of person to my family. And then like somebody else to people I don’t know versus friends or family. You put on 3 different personas. It’s kind of like that, but it’s easier to hide behind a mask because you have a physical barrier between you and the other person. So, I think it’s easiest to become the mask itself. Which is something that performance studies have talked about for a long time? Where and when does the separation between the person and the character begin and end? And sometimes you become that character you are playing...a lot of the time you don’t even know you are doing it [in social situations], but in the mask, you are doing it on purpose.”

The use of a mask to conceal oneself is useful in the acting realm but is used daily with impression management strategies. Although you are not in a literal mask as with cosplay, people often hide aspects of themselves depending on the social context.

Additionally, cosplayers like Gerry, are very aware of the image they put into the foreground. “I cosplay as I walk up the street. I actively try to incorporate things from past cosplays into everyday things. I have worn the hoodie and jacket from my One-Piece cosplay with jeans and sneakers to go to the store. Sometimes during presentations for class or if I just feel like it, I’ll cosplay as the 11<sup>th</sup> Doctor.” In this case, the importance of role-playing is incorporated into the cosplay persona and daily activities. These individuals do not hide their involvement in nerd fandom. They may even get tattoos representative of their favorite series. Cosplayers express themselves differently from other identities they take on.



*Figure 7 A Spider-Man cosplayer is reenacting taking pictures for the Daily Bugle. This photo is published with the owner's permission.*

### **4.3 Cosplay Contest and Social Hierarchy**

Cosplay contests are some of the most highly-anticipated events on the convention schedule. Although these events are huge, few of my informants have participated in them. DragonCon has six different contests: The Cosplay Contest, Friday Night Costuming Contest, The Hallway Costume Contest, The Masquerade Costume Contest, Miss Star Trek Universe Pageant, and the Star Wars Costume Contest. Many of my informants explained that these events take up too much time for them to be interested in participating. From my experience volunteering at AWA, the pre-judging and competition phases are a whole-day ordeal. After waiting to be judged during the initial round, contestants must wait for the next round; then they must get in place at least half an hour or more before the main event.

Cosplayers also fear how competing will affect their image. Most want to uphold the philosophy that cosplay is about fun. Participating in competitions is believed to change your perspective on cosplaying. Informants cite being publicly judged, dealing with snobbish attitudes, or being labeled as “just someone in a costume” as reasons not to compete. However, they will be supportive of friends that do compete.

Competing does change your status in the community, as evidenced by Rachel, who has competed about 10 times: “I have judged at so many conventions around the southeast. At this point, I have judged more than I’ve competed. I don’t know when I’ll get to compete again without being a poor sport.” She further explained that winning a contest, qualifies you to become a judge for competitions. Judging changes your status in the competition area. “It’s considered poor sportsmanship to compete at a convention you’ve judged at or if I know all the judges. And anytime I’ve known one of the judges or they know who I am I’ve lost every single time.” While slightly disappointed her competition days are over, she still loves the cosplay community and mostly enjoys participating in group cosplays with friends like Sarah.

Cosplay contest at conventions ordinarily has different categories for contestants: Junior/Youth, Novice, Journeyman, Master, and Professional. These divisions are, set to allow an equal opportunity for contestants to win based on their skill level and pass involvement in competitions. People in the novice or journeyman division may have won a limited number of awards or no awards, and they do not make a living from cosplay. Some cosplayers in the master division are well-known cosplayers, they have won awards in several competitions, and some individuals even sell prints of themselves in cosplay. Individuals in the professional division can range from people that make commissioned costumes for cosplay, theatrical performance, or they can be professional costume designers and special effect artists working in

the film industry. These participants may have studios, workshops, teams, or have worked on film sets in the past.

Cosplayers like Kamui, Yaya Han, and Jessica Nigiri are professional cosplayers. Professional cosplayers make a living off cosplay by selling merchandise or commissions. Yaya Han is considered by mainstream media to be the ambassador or queen of cosplay. She has amazing craftsmanship and an incredible lineup of cosplays (Heroes of Cosplay). She has judged and made guest appearances at conventions and costume contest across the globe. She has partnered with commercial retailers to expand her presence. In 2016, she released a line of specialty fabrics sold at Joann fabric stores. McCall's patterns also partnered with her to design a line of sewing patterns tailored to a cosplay audience.



*Figure 8 Several patterns from the McCall's Costumes pattern line with designs created by cosplayer Yaya Han. This photo was taken by the author.*



*Figure 9 Cosplay fabrics by Yaya Han on the shelves at Joann fabric and craft store, located in Duluth, GA. This photo was taken by the author.*

Cosplay models are the few men and women that have reached a level in their cosplay career that they can sell merchandise, prints of themselves, and sign autographs. Cosplayer Yaya Han and promotional model and cosplayer Jessica Nigiri, for example, have a well-established niche in the cosplay community. However, several of my informants and cosplay message boards criticize their overly sexual pictures. Nigiri has drawn heavy criticism in the cosplay community for not making her own costumes and not acknowledging the people who created her cosplays. Despite the controversy she generates, she is one of the most highly followed cosplayers on



social media. Many female characters in nerd fandom are sexualized representations of women, catering to male fantasies (Kendall 1999). Women are rarely faulted for accentuating their physical features, especially by a male audience; however, overly sexual cosplay can negatively affect a cosplayers' reputation in the community.

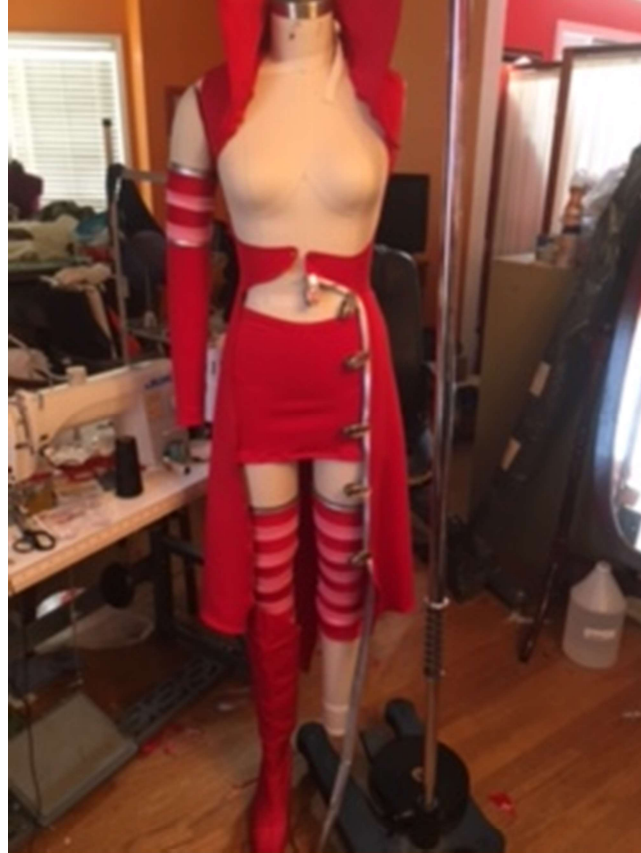
#### **4.4 The Power of the Lens: Photography**

Photography is a tool of power and can be used as a defense against social anxiety (Sontag 1977:8). It also provides evidence that things happened, special events and traveling are popular posts to share on social media (Sontag 1977:3-24). Photos are essential to the management of a cosplayers status and popularity in the community. A cosplayer who wants to generate interest or require the approval of others will post to cosplay-based Facebook pages. This is particularly true for new cosplayers who are unsure of themselves and require encouragement from the cosplay community. These individuals seek this approval to determine if they would be welcomed or excluded from the community. I found this occurred with greater frequency on the Black Girls are Kawaii and POC cosplayer Facebook pages, which act as a supportive community for the more marginalized demographic of cosplayers. Raven and Crystal are very active on these sites, frequently encouraging others to push themselves.

Unauthorized photographs of cosplayers by the public are a violation of cosplay etiquette and privacy. Cosplayers are not inanimate objects to be consumed without the permission of the individual to do so is a violation of their privacy. Cosplayers generally do not mind their picture being taken unless they are eating, fixing a part of their cosplay, in the bathroom, or in a position they feel uncomfortable. However, when people approach cosplayers and ask for a picture they are usually happy to strike a pose for the camera. Mike expresses his feeling on cosplay

photography: “I love people taking photos of me. I gauge how successful my cosplay is by how many photos are taken of me. Or how excited people are to see this character. If I have a character that’s well loved, I enjoy a lot of people taking my picture.” Most cosplays enjoy having their pictures taken if proper etiquettes are followed. During sanctioned photo shoots cosplayers can pose in the most flattering ways, accentuating the best aspects of their cosplay or iconic poses of the character. These pictures are highly coveted by cosplayers to post to their social media pages. Even cosplay that is not 100 percent true to a character can generate many likes on social with an interesting pose or a well-known photographer.

Policing in the community has risen to give appropriate credit to cosplayers and photographers, as well as the event they were attending. The Facebook pages of conventions are flooded with pictures for several weeks following the event. People post their photo albums to these pages so cosplayers can tag themselves and share links to their associated cosplay pages or websites. Cosplayers regularly post photographs of themselves at cosplay related events, daily life, and especially any progress on their cosplay. The hashtags `cosplay progress` and `cosplay w.i.p.` (work in progress) are frequently used. Posting your cosplay progress is an important aspect of cosplaying. It shows others that you made your cosplay or commission progress. People are heavily critiqued if they attempt to pass off a purchased costume as something they made. Although it is socially acceptable to purchase or commission somebody to make your cosplay, it is unacceptable to take credit for somebody else’s work.



*Figure 10 An example of a cosplay work in progress. This costume is of Heartseeker Vayne from the PC game League of Legends. This costume was created and photographed by the author.*

Before a convention or other cosplay-themed events, cosplayers will post their cosplay lineup--several pictures that correlate specific convention days with a specific cosplay--on the public convention's social media pages, cosplay groups, and their personal pages. This allows attendees to become excited and personally seek these individuals out to take their own photographs. The attendees are also used to connecting with people they have only interacted with online and enjoy taking their own pictures with cosplayers they admire. Sometimes cosplayers have several cosplays over the course of a four-day convention or have multiple wardrobe changes in a single day, but this is usually reserved for those with elaborate or heavy costumes which require a simpler costume for easier mobility later in the day. Others prefer to

wear one cosplay throughout the whole convention and switch into regular clothes or nerdy gear. There is no set standard or rule in this regard.

Whether a cosplayer has one or several cosplays to wear at a convention, the very best is saved for Saturday. Saturdays are the most attended day of any convention. When attending larger conventions that require an advance ticket, like NYCC and SDCC, Saturdays are the first tickets sold out. People may only attend one day because they have other obligations but attempt to maximize their time. Ashley, a fellow GSU Anthropology graduate, is in her early thirties and has been going to DragonCon for the past five years. She usually does closet cosplays and relies on thrift stores for most of her cosplays. She confessed, “I usually just go to DC on Saturdays unless there is a celebrity I really want to see. That’s when you see the best cosplays.” Wearing your best cosplay on Saturday guarantees that the maximum number of people will see and request photographs of the cosplayer. Saturdays are also the day for the cosplay contest/masquerade. This pertains to most conventions in my study, except DragonCon which uniquely has six different costumes themed contest throughout the four-day convention.

Photo shoots are a mainstay of any convention with a large segment of cosplaying attendees. These events may be officially included in the convention’s events listing, but many are fan organized on social media and spread through word of mouth. AWA will list the photo shoots and their location in the convention program, but fans must organize and find photographers for the shoot, which is not difficult. Most of the photo shoots I have attended were suggestions from fellow cosplayers in passing with a simple “Hey, I love your cosplay. Will you be at the photo shoot later?” Photo shoots connect cosplayers not only to fans of the same series but also to cosplay photographers for free. Networking with photographers is beneficial to cosplayers hoping to promote their cosplays or commissioning business. When I posed the question to

Raven one day during our many conversations on building our cosplay businesses, she laughed “You just have to network girl.” She told me she has never personally paid for a photo shoot. Many of her pictures were taken by photographer friends, or she was invited to join a group photo shoot. Professional photographers who are skilled in taking good cosplay pictures can cost anywhere between \$30 to \$500 for a photo shoot, depending on their sphere of influence and photo editing techniques. Understandably, photographers with a large following or likes on social media can request higher prices, because they will post pictures to their business social media accounts. This gives the cosplayer access to a boarder audience.

Photo shoots are highly anticipated events for cosplayers, second only to participating in a costume contest. The most anticipated photo shoot for me was the DragonCon 2016 POC Cosplayers Meet-Up and Photoshoot on Sunday, September 4th at 10:30 am. This event was co-hosted by the POC Cosplayers and Black Geeks of DragonCon Facebook pages. That Sunday morning, I was frantically trying to get to the photo shoot on time. I was nearly out of breath sprinting in two-inch heel boots for the half-mile trek from Carnegie park lot near GSU campus to the Hilton Atlanta. When I arrived several minutes after 11 a.m., I was afraid the event would be over. However, upon my arrival at the designated location, a large group of cosplayers and photographers were taking photos. They encouraged me to place my personals down and join the group quickly. Although I was in cosplay, I had intended on just taking my own photographs of the group. I was so taken back by everybody's enthusiasm that I could not refuse. I simply placed my items with everyone else's, turned my badge around, so it was not visible, and struck my best pose. Badges, purses, and other personal items can ruin a picture because it distracts the observer from the character. The POC Cosplayer photo shoot was the highlight of my DragonCon 2016 experience.

At the end of 2015, I found the Facebook group ‘POC cosplayers’ while searching for various cosplay themed pages. Since then, I have had many exchanges on the discussion board. Three of my informants Raven, Crystal, and Gerry are active members of the group; several cosplayers I follow and admire on Instagram are members too. After the photo shoot, I was finally able to meet Crystal, who along with Raven was interviewed via skype several months ago with whom I maintained contact. Even though I meet up with Raven Friday evening, I was impressed by her original Sith Lord cosplay in-person; she had a different cosplay for every day at the convention. Crystal was wearing what she called a “sexy version of Snow White” based on a design from a fan fiction comic she loved.



*Figure 11 A group photo from the POC cosplayer meet-up at DragonCon 2016. This photo was taken by the author.*

## 5 COMMUNITY

### 5.1 Socialization

Some scholars have compared fans to religious practitioners who visit Church, Temple, or Synagogues on a weekly basis (Aden 1999; Sandvoss 2005; Turner 1982); in fact, many fans will tune in weekly to watch their favorite television series. In the case of fiction, audiences enter an imaginary realm where people and places do not exist. However, this does not limit one's ability to connect to these characters and worlds on an emotional level. According to Judith Butler (1999), fantasy tests the boundaries of reality because it moves people beyond the present and into the idea of endless possibilities. Audiences can form a community based on their shared interest and experience with the text. This interaction can take place online or in person and is the crux of nerd fandom. Additionally, the regular participation of fans when watching their favorite show becomes a sacred space, in the sense that a specific time slot is dedicated to its viewership (Sandvoss 2005).

Some fans go beyond this experience taking part in symbolic pilgrimages to conventions annually. Conventions act as sites where the meanings and ideas regarding nerd fandom are intensified in response to an insufficient amount of focus on these topics within everyday life (O'Brien 2008:97). All my informants have been to conventions, and actively try to attend at least one if not more a year. This requires them to plan months in advance by saving money, making travel arrangements, taking time off from work and creating a cosplay outfit. Throughout my study, informants either found out about conventions by looking online or were introduced by previous attendees. After this initial exposure, they expressed interest in finding other conventions to attend in the future.

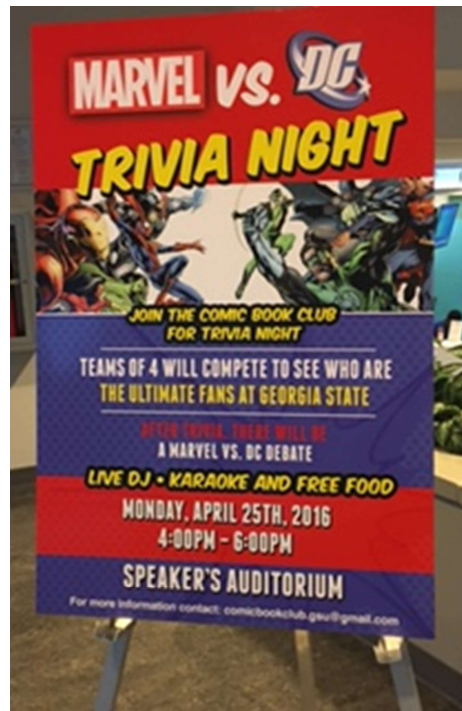
Franchises capitalize on the fan experience at conventions. Companies can make the most of the fans who want to have the subcultural clout of being on site, with decorative displays at booths, exclusives, and meeting industry personnel, like popular actors, actresses, producers, and editors. Generally, conventions with these public figures have stricter guidelines and safety precautions due to crowd volume. These conventions sell out tickets within a couple of hours. During my attempt to purchase New York Comic Con 2015 tickets, all the multi-day, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday passes sold out within two hours of online registration opening. NYCC and SDCC (San Diego Comic-Con) average upwards of 100,000 people over the course of a 4-day weekend. Although these figures are great for the companies that host and attend these events, hundreds of fans feel alienated by the ticket registration process. This can be especially disheartening if you are a cosplayer trying to gain attention in a large arena.

## **5.2 Conventions as Social Spaces**

Cosplay and nerd fandom community is solidified at conventions that take place around the world. Cosplaying generally takes place at conventions or sponsored events. On a daily basis, individuals can stay connected through social media, local clubs or fan group meetings. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the anime clubs played a key role in the foundation for anime and manga fans establishing a community. Clubs were the main way members could gain access to new series, until the popularity and availability of online streaming (Napier 2007; Eng 2012; Allison 2006). Science fiction fans could foster a fan base using mail-ins, zines, and fan fiction until pop-culture conventions became a standardized part of the community and access to the internet (Jenkins and Tulloch 1995). Similarly, comic books fans and table top gamers created a



community by establishing themselves at local comic book stores. Eventually, some of these groups began to form larger events in their neighborhoods and then conventions (PBS 2013).



*Figure 12 A flyer for a GSU Comic Book Club event. Anime and comic book clubs still play an important role for nerd fandom. People can make new friends and participate in activities outside of conventions. This photo was taken by the author on Georgia State University's campus.*

Conventions are a place where fans congregate around various genres in nerd fandom (Eng 2012:115). The socialization at conventions compensates for the lack of face to face interactions with other fans during “normal” life and facilitates face to face interactions. Most conventions occur over the course of three days. Many people only attend one to two conventions a year. This varies based on disposable income and geographic location. Georgia state is unique in that the city host three large conventions annually and several smaller conventions and events throughout the year. I took full advantage of living in this nerd

nexus, plus several prominent cosplayers live in Georgia, too. So, they are frequently making guest appearances or hosting local cosplay events around the Atlanta area.

Conventions enable people to show a level of unrestrained admiration for media they are not able to express in everyday life, intensifying emotions. This aspect of conventions is one of Foucault's principles concerning heterotopias (Foucault 1984 [1967]). Also, the principle that time is non-linear and measured differently than in daily life is also present among con-goers. The way in which time differentiates varies on a person's role. Convention guests, staff, and volunteers have different roles in the convention space; this affects their schedule availability, too. In my experience, time moves differently when you volunteer and adhere to a strict schedule at a convention. As an attendee, everything seems to move faster; you barely recognize your lack of sleep or food. Most people do not volunteer at conventions. As Crystal told me, "Cons are my escape from working, allowing me to escape into my fandom." Con-goers attempt to maximize their time by forsaking normal routine for the convention experience. Hence, why many complain about "con crud," an illness that spreads around at pop culture conventions due to the large numbers of people who gather and interact in one confined place, after a convention. Lack of sleep, drama, stress, travel and post-convention depression may also weaken the immune system, contributing to con crud.

People often spend time exploring the convention space and participating in consumption practices. For those that play various types of games, DragonCon had an entire floor in the AmericasMart building devoted to tabletop gaming, like Dungeons and Dragon or Magic the Gathering. Some people enter video game tournaments, play in the arcade, or conduct photo shoots, in-between exploring the Dealers' Room and Artist Alley. One of the benefits of staying on location is the ability to be fully enthralled into the convention experience. Leaving

the convention space disengages the attendee from that experience and space. This is another example of Foucault's principles of a heterotopia (Foucault 1984 [1967]). Exiting the convention area is symbolic in how behavior changes and become aware of their otherness.

"During, DragonCon when you walk outside of the convention area you become more aware of how you dress, and I feel a little weird or uncomfortable," says Ashley.

Conventions usually facilitate everything people need, like AWA has food trucks set up inside the Dealer's Room and a food court area. DragonCon is a short walk from several eateries and stores, and through sky bridges attendees can bypass the street, walking directly into an adjacent hotel. Convention centers house most events in a singular location, the lack of windows in these facilities further construes the concept of time passing.

Conventions bring a variety of people together who would not normally occupy a shared space. Another element of Foucault's heterotopia is the juxtaposition of different people who are not normally compatible in a single location (Foucault 1984 [1967]). Conventions have fans from thousands of titles and genres in one location, where a *My Little Pony* fan could easily be sitting next to a *Donnie Darko* fan. Numerous incompatible sites are within the convention space. This juxtaposition is most evident when I attended DragonCon because the programming includes hundreds of hours of events divided into "fan tracks."<sup>1</sup> Fan tracks simplified navigating DragonCon's 100+ hours of programming by separating different fandoms and subjects from each other. However, the nerd fandom community allows for such fluidity. This also applies to cosplay, because characters that would never interact inhabit the same time and space. Cosplayers sometimes create unique character mashups that would never meet, like a Slave Leia Wonder Woman mashup.

Conventions become sites that simultaneously represent, contest and invert other sites (Foucault 1984 [1967]: 239). A hotel lobby or convention center would normally be considered non-places based on Augé's model of a non-place (Augé 1992). These locations typically hold no meaning as people normally pass through these locations, they do not create a shared history or social connection. This is different for con-goers that connect with the hotel and convention center as a central location for social interaction. During the first few years, I attended AWA; there was a mix of convention attendees and hotel guest sharing the same space. Over time, due to AWA's popularity, the Renaissance Waverly Hotel would be booked exclusively for con-goers. The Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel was simultaneously hosting AnimeUSA 2015 and a United Nations Mock Trial conference. While the mock trial group had little connection to this Hotel, con-goers expressed a deep connection and fond memories of past events in and around the hotel. Attendees can have such a strong emotional connection to these hotels any changes to their beloved space is criticized. DragonCon attendees expressed some dismay with the re-carpeting of the Marriott Marquis Atlanta. The removal of its iconic geometric pattern carpet spurred a wave of cosplays and merchandise and even salvage carpet pieces.

Conventions provide a gateway into another world that is unlocked by gaining admittance into the conventions. This is done by procuring a badge from registration. This signifies a symbolic opening and closing that triggers a change in behavior this is another requirement of a heterotopia (Foucault 1984[1967]:239). Wearing a badge is a symbolic activity that marks the beginning of a convention and transforms the attitude of the wearer and how others interact with them. There are no misconceptions about whether they are a part of the nerd fandom community. Conventions act as sites for social rituals generating a sense of community in nerd fandom that

takes place through the effervescence the attendees create (Durkheim 2004[1912]). People experience a sense of effervescence when they engage in social rituals with other group members (Erickson & Murphy 2003:90-92; Durkheim 2004[1912]). As they return to their normal lives, the longing for the sense of community felt during the ritual, amplifies community relationships (Durkheim 2004 [1912]:92-93). This feeling can increase with large groups of cosplayers from the same series and obscure characters. Leaving a convention means the return to normal life. Some of my informants stated they needed an additional day after the conventions to recover. This is both from the exhaustion of the convention and the cultural shock they experience returning to normal life.

### **5.3 Con-engagement at Field Sites**

In this section, I cover the various cosplaying events I attended that promote the cosplay community. The largest national and global cosplay event is Halloween. While it is debatable for the community if people are cosplaying during Halloween, many cosplayers consider it to be one of their favorite holidays and plan new cosplay outfits or wear past ones to the various Halloween-theme events in their area. Several movies' premiers gather large crowds of cosplayers as well. Local news outlets across the USA reported hundreds of people dressing up as Jedi and Stormtroopers for the *Star War VII: Force Awakens*, movie premiere. There are three big conventions in the Metro-Atlanta area DragonCon, Momo-con, and Anime Weekend Atlanta. These conventions facilitate the nerd fandom and cosplay community in the area. Additionally, I attended Anime USA in Washington, D.C. to conduct participant observations and host my first convention panel.

DragonCon, DC, is held every year in Atlanta, Georgia on Labor Day weekend. In 1987, it was started by a local gaming group. It has grown into one of the largest pop-culture

conventions in the Southeastern United States, operating out of five hotels in the Peachtree Center area of downtown Atlanta. Over the course of three decades, it has grown to 63,000 people in attendance and in 2014 it contributed an economic impact of \$55 million to the downtown Atlanta area (Exhibit City News 2014). It hosts a variety of guests, celebrities, industry leaders, events, multiple costume contests, workshops, and panels spanning across multiple works of fiction and genres. DragonCon has several different cosplay events people can participate in during the convention; these contests are run by the directors of different fan tracks, most notably the Miss Star Trek Universe Pageant. In 2002, DragonCon organized the first costume parade through the streets of downtown Atlanta, currently starting at Woodruff Park (DragonCon.org). In 2016, the DragonCon Parade was broadcasted live on Atlanta's CW station. Although I had been aware of DragonCon for a few years, I never attended until 2013 when a friend had free passes. The price of DC's tickets varies throughout the year, but typically cost about \$130 at the door for the whole weekend. Despite its continued growth in attendance, there are no plans to move out of its hotel venues.

MomoCon is another multi-genre convention that emphasizes animation and video games. It is held in either March or May. Established in 2005, it was originally organized by Georgia Tech's anime club, Anime O-Tekku. Initially, it was a free event held on Georgia Tech's campus, inside their student center and an adjacent classroom building. Ultimately, in 2012 MomoCon began charging admission, due to its location inside of the Georgia Tech Hotel and Conference Center thus increasing their production cost. Throughout the years' attendance has increased to over 22,000 and is growing fast. MomoCon 2015 was anticipated to draw such a large crowd it relocated to the Georgia World Congress Center. Besides MomoCon's annual convention, they host numerous events in the Atlanta area: various Photo shoots for cosplayers; a

Charity Ball for breast cancer awareness; and Cosplayers on Ice. The co-founder of MomoCon and former president of Anime O-Tekku, Jessica Merriman, is also the animation track director for DC. I first heard about MomoCon when the anime club and convention were featured in the February 2005 issue of *Newtype USA*.

Anime Weekend Atlanta, AWA, is an anime convention held annually at the Cobb Galleria Center, Sheraton Suites Galleria, and the Renaissance Waverly Hotel. Since 1995, AWA has been held in either September or October. In 2015, AWA had over 25,000 attendees making it the largest Southeastern anime convention and the seventh largest in North America (Delahanty 2016). Anime USA was founded in 1999 by the Northern Virginia Anime Association. In 2004, it became a non-profit educational organization dedicated to educating the public about Japanese arts and promote popular culture ([AnimeNewsNetwork.com](http://AnimeNewsNetwork.com)). Other significant conventions in the United States, but I did not attend are San Diego Comic Con, New York Comic Con, Otakon, and Anime Expo. San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCC), founded in the 1970s is the largest convention in North America, with over 150,000 attendance coming from all over the world. New York Comic Con (NYCC) established in 2006 at the Javits Center in New York, is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest comic book convention. Otakon created in 1992; it is the longest continuously running anime conventions in the USA. It is the second largest anime convention, rivaled only by Anime Expo held in Los Angeles, California which reached 100,420 attendees in 2015.

Anime conventions focus exclusively on Japanimation and Japanese culture. Considering this focus, it does not limit the range of genres represented by cosplayers. Among attendees, anime conventions generally have a younger audience. MomoCon prides itself on being a family-friendly environment. Correspondingly it has a much stricter dress code for cosplayers. In

comparison, DC allows partial nudity if explicit body parts are covered. The age range of DC and NYCC spans across generations, as such programming is divided for mature and young attendees.

People make and maintain a friendship through their involvement in the cosplay and convention scene. Nerd fandom facilitates and sustains networks of people and connects new people. Whether it is sparking a friendly conversation waiting for a panel to begin or a shared appreciation for similar fan groups, the community is urged on by fans that want to maintain that connection to the community. This has led to the popularity of gaming bars, the resurgence of arcades, and daily interactions on social media.

#### **5.4 Virtual Communities**

Living in the highly connected internet age, many groups maintain cohesion via social media. Fans of mass media span the globe and can interact with each other in online communities. They are more connected today than they were during the emergence of fan groups like the Trekkers of the 1960s (Jenkins 2006, 2008:357-364). Fan groups were once maintained by mail-ins, magazines, tape exchange networks, and local club meetings at schools or libraries, and they would communicate with flyers, word of mouth, publications or mail (Jenkins 2012; Napier 2007:191-204). Nowadays many publishers, actors, movies, television shows, fan groups, and conventions have Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, or Instagram profiles. On these sites, administrators can directly address their target audiences, and those audiences can interact with the sites and other fans.

The cosplay community exists both online through social media pages and discussion forums and offline at conventions devoted to science fiction, fantasy, and Japanimation fans. People geographically dispersed connect and use social media as a significant form of cultural



exchange and communication. While conventions can give cosplayers a tangible community that acts as a site of community building, networking, and consumption (O'Brien 2008:2). The internet allows an unprecedented number of people to interact with each other who have shared interest. Social media websites have expanded the capabilities of cosplayers to connect with each other to organize events, find people with shared interest, express opinions, do research, and exchange information. The ability for people to share progress photos and make video tutorials is a great asset to the community. I have personally learned from tutorials, as I discussed in chapter four.

Most fans daily involvement in the community takes place via online interactions. Conventions are the ultimate events in nerd fandom community. And the best place to see some of the best cosplayers as well as popular cosplay guest. While many conventions are, fan run, they have varying levels of industry involvement.

People maintain interest in cosplay throughout the year with a select group of friends. These science fiction, fantasy, and Japanimation circles eventually organized in groups to attend conventions. By pooling together their resources, they can reserve a hotel room splitting the cost expenses. It is a misconception that all nerd fans are introverts and socially awkward. Many are very functional in everyday society. While conventions play an intricate role in the cosplay community, they make up a small percentage of the interaction that occurs. Some have made friends with strangers at conventions that grew into long term friendships. Social groups are encouraged to attend conventions because they frequently offer a discount for large groups attending conventions and purchasing their tickets together.

There are hundreds of websites devoted to individual conventions as well as different segments of the conventions going population. Conventions typically have official social media

pages where people discuss panels, guest announcements, vendors, and various events. Fan pages can have a wide array of users and topics. The POC cosplayer group is one such page devoted to people of color that cosplay. These sites are necessary for the establishment and reinforcement of identity. Although I was privileged by living in the metropolitan area of Atlanta. Others are not as fortunate to have the reinforcement of diverse groups in their community. I frequently see on the POC cosplayer page new people to the cosplay community. Many are afraid of the possibly toxic environment of the convention outside of a diverse metropolitan area.

Raven and Crystal believe it is necessary to have tailored Facebook pages because they support and encourages people of color and women to continue cosplaying. Crystal argues in support of these pages, “It’s important for there to be those groups and it’s not to the exclusion of others. It’s to create a safe space, so people can post their pictures online. We have a positive or support group to encourage each other.” The Black cosplayer experience is different from other races especially Asian and White cosplayers. Their accessibility to look more “accurate” to popular characters in media is limited. Most characters in nerd fandom appear to be of European descent or a blend of Asian and European in Japanimation.

People of color had to carve out a safe space for themselves, one that excludes racial slurs or fat shaming. Raven grew up during the Civil Rights movement, this has shaped her perspective on racial issues: “I am happy that we have those rooms with different colors and sizes. I like to share tips and give advice.” Many cosplayers meet online this way and built relationships. Generally, Facebook pages have administrators who set regulations dictating acceptable topics, phrases, and actions. For the most part, politics and the political climate are not topics to be discussed on these sites. They are deemed safe zones. Thus, maintaining the

illusion of an “imagined community” that is outside of reality. Political discussions are well known to become divisive, which is counter-intuitive to the community’s formation and purpose.

## 5.5 Fan Consumption and Spectacle



*Figure 13 The Dealer’s Room at MomoCon 2015 (top). A wide shot view of the Dealers’ Room at DragonCon 2016 (bottom). These photos were taken by the author.*

Cornel Sandvoss (2005:8) defines fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, music, as well as sports teams and popular icons and stars (athletes, musicians, actors). The sociality at conventions provides a safe place for fans to engage in consumption without judgment from outsiders. Thus, conventions become a form of the fortified enclave that is safe to engage in fan consumption (Caldeira 1996). Conventions place a large focus on spectacle and consumption, with the size and scale of the Dealers' Room and Artist Alley (Bakhtin 1984; O'Brien 2008:44). The spectacle of the Dealers' Room and Artist Alley is based on amusement rather than practicality comparable to shopping malls that encourage consumption practices (Rappaport 2000:40).

Consumption at conventions is highly encouraged. Licensed vendors and production companies create large displays to invite consumers to their booths. Some dealers like Kotobukiya and Bandai host panels at conventions to display current and future merchandise. Often these items will be available as convention exclusives or for purchase at their Dealers' Room booth. These retailers play into the emotional commitment of fans to revisit objects of their fandom (Brooker 2002). Cosplay, further adds to the spectacle of convention consumption as they offer free advertisement for producers. Cosplay is useful for producers to understand what texts are currently popular, this contributes to the popularity of a series.

Shopping is a huge focus of the convention experience; as Gerry states, "I go to conventions to buy shit I don't need." Convention attendees can spend hours walking around the Dealers' Room and Artist Alley for merchandise. The Dealers' Room is an area where retailers, vendors, and producers have booths to display their merchandise and product offerings. Dealers

at larger conventions and expos occasionally use cosplayers or freebies to market to audiences, generating interest in new products. Artist Alley is more forced on fan-made products. Artist will sell fan art and handcrafted items. These commodities are used to identify what section of nerd fandom they closely identify with inside the convention space and during daily life (Miller 2001).

There are those in the fandom that can afford to attend conventions, purchase merchandise, and participate in other fan activities, like collecting. The level of consumption among fans varies, and socio-economics influences their decisions. While some fans are not able to attend several conventions annually. Others cannot participate in such events, because of their income. Watching television shows, reading comics, and collecting memorabilia can become expensive for fans. Many obtain media from pirated sources online. Ashley, Anne, Gerry, and Sam all confessed they watch anime on illegal streaming websites. They also admitted to buying only their favorite comic book, anime, or manga series after completing them. This practice is very common among anime and manga fans partly because television programming does not provide enough variety for them, thus purchasing a series without knowing if they will enjoy it could become a costly practice.

## 6 CONSTRUCTING FAN IDENTITY

In the realm of fandom, it is difficult to distinguish between the terms geek and nerd. According to Merriam-Webster, a geek is a person who is socially awkward and unpopular: usually a socially inept intellectual. These people are usually interested in and know a lot about, a certain field or activity. A nerd is a person who behaves awkwardly around other people and usually have a unstylish, unattractive, or socially inept person, and who is devoted to intellectual or academic pursuits. Nerds and geeks inhabit the same social function in society, and their interest is relatively the same. Therefore the terms can often be used interchangeably. Like many subculturalists such as Goths, Punks, and Riot Grrrls, nerds and geeks are juxtaposed to other social groups; these terms are usually used to define other groups that are considered socially acceptable like the stereotypical jock (Kendall 2002:80). The jock and nerd/geek juxtaposition questions, notions of masculinity in cultural practice. This further plays into the acceptability of different sections of fandom and subcultural association. The expression and behavior of sports fans are deemed acceptable in mainstream society. However, this juxtaposition is further problematic because it assumes an exclusion of women in the membership of nerd and sports fandom. The exclusion of women as members of fan communities and objectification of their presence is an example of how subculture is deviant but upholds some hegemonic practices about gender dynamics and maturity.

Fans of various interest are often referred to as fanboys or fangirls.<sup>10</sup> The words “girl” and “boy” assumes a connotation of immaturity among fans as something to be outgrown. While some fans do stop enjoying the textual subjects in the community, but many do not. According to Tulloch and Jenkins (1995:4), 53 percent of all Americans considered themselves Star Trek fans.

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<sup>10</sup> Fangirl/boy moment is when someone has deeply emotional response and connection to something, usually an object or person. Extreme excitement.

This does not mean half of all Americans are part of Star Trek fandom, but it does represent how subcultural products can be a significant part of an individual's identity or a passive leisure activity for others. Fandoms can produce intense emotions in some people; simultaneously it is increasingly common and important for consumption and marketing strategies (Geertz 1975, Grossberg 1992).

The public awareness of fandom culture has served to either contaminate or threaten the structure of the community. The paradigm shift in traditionally outcasted media has changed the perspective of what it means to be called a nerd or geek. Many of my informants, myself included, explained how they found refuge in their cosplay and the nerd fandom community. The community is considered a warm and accepting environment that encourages creativity, individuality, and overall proponent of being yourself. However, this is not always true.

It has become the prerogative of some self-described nerds to embrace the geek or nerd label (Wright 1996); this is seen as a form of further resistance. Although not denoted by race or gender, being called a nerd and to a lesser extent otaku, which among Americans usually means someone who is a fan of Japanese manga and anime; however, in Japan it carries a condescending connotation, but it has been deemed acceptable to American members of the community (Eng 2012). Being labeled a nerd or a geek can make someone a social outcast; yet, this does not make them an all-inclusive subculture. Comic books, video games, and certain TV programming caters to a male audience with limited representation from minorities and women. The marketing of nerd culture is gendered in its visualization and production (Duffett 2013). The children's toy section of stores generally has more comic book, video game, anime, and science fiction characters in the boys' section. The girls' section gears young girl towards domestic life, pink, fashion, and shopping. The boys' section has vehicles, technology, monsters, superheroes,

and weapons. While female nerd youths struggle with stereotypical connotations of the nerd, they additionally fail to adhere to gender norms, for beauty and behavior in a masculine realm (Haenfler 2010). Nerd men traditionally reject the hegemonic behavior of other men and distanced themselves from hyper-masculinity. They still employed similar sexist behaviors and attitudes towards women (Seymour and Hewitt 1999).

## 6.1 Identifying Nerds, Geeks, and Otaku

In the United States when people typically think about fans who are deeply devoted to media, Trekkies (or Trekkers) come to mind. There were fan groups before Trekkies, but they have become more prominently and visibly active to a mainstream audience. *Star Trek* (1966) was one of the first television shows to have a large enough fan base to convince NBC to renew the series after its first season, even though its ratings never picked up (Jenkins and Tulloch 1995). Today's fandom communities share the same enthusiasm as Trekkies. They also face some of the same social stigmas being a nerd, or a geek marks them as immature losers and who lack the social skills to attract the opposite sex (Kendall 1999).

During all my interviews, I asked: "what would you consider yourself: nerd, geek, otaku, fangirl or fanboy?" I partly did not want to give a list of terms for fear I was excluding some identity unbeknownst to me. However, asking such an open-ended question could have led the interview in an entirely different direction. Informants' responses varied how they defined the differences between these terms. Many experienced a fangirl/boy moment at some point. Ashley said, "I almost cried when I saw the guy that play Chewbacca." I was very excited to see the cast of *Arrow* and *The Flash* talk about the show on a panel. I still cherish my autographed copies of



comic books signed by Jim Lee and Grant Morrison at SDCC 2010. Another term for fangirl/boy is the action of “geeking out” these are all visceral emotions prompted by a special event, person, or object.

Like Henry Jenkins (2006) who describes himself as an “aca/fan.”<sup>11</sup> Being a fan comes with negative connotations of over sensitivity, femininity, excess, and immaturity (Jenkins 2012). I differ from Jenkins in that my identity as a fan supersedes my identity as an academic, but I would ascribe to an aca/fan identity. The field of anthropology allows me to be both self-reflective of my identity and positionality to my study group. I critically engage and analyze how I perceive myself in fan activities.

Despite the overlap in meanings Gerry and Danny distinguish the differences between nerd and geeks. Geeks are interested in the science and mythology of a text, whereas nerds are more interested in character lore. The word “otaku” is highly contested and has fragmented meanings globally (Eng 2012:85). Since the 1990s, otaku have argued their subcultural identity, the importation and evolution of the term, and the significance of being called an “otaku” in the United States (Eng 2012). In a cultural climate where people increasingly do not want to be labeled, the contested meaning and identity that comes with being called an “otaku,” “nerd,” “geek,” or “fangirl/fanboy” shows that these subcultures are aware of their otherness. While some oppose these labels because of the possible social implications, others embrace them.

Despite the social implications, many celebrities have admitted to being science fiction, video game, and comic book fans. Some have even expressed themselves with cosplay. At the *Warcraft* (2016) movie premiere Jamie Lee Curtis and her son, Thomas Guest, cosplayed as orcs

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<sup>11</sup> An academic who is also a fan of the subject and people they are studying is called an aca/fan.

for the event. Curtis was quoted saying, “We’re serious about our games” (Seemayer 2016). In 2015, Curtis cosplayed as Vega from the video games series *Street Fighter* when she attended the Evolution Championship Series. Actor Ryan Reynolds told *Late Night* host Seth Meyers how he fell in love with *Deadpool*, because of a reference to them looking alike, prior to *Deadpool*'s deformity in one comic issue. Ever since 2000, Reynolds advocated for a *Deadpool* movie, with himself cast as the lead character. He also stipulated he would keep the costume to wear it at charity events and conventions. Actors and actresses usually cannot keep official props from the movie set. On *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert would frequently make references to *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* in their political commentary.

Words have different meanings depending on the cultural context. This relates to Gadamer’s (1979) reception theory, in which the cultural context for terms are received differently, for better or worse, in that country. The negative attitude towards “otaku” in Japan is partially due to the high-profile case of Tsutomu Miyazaki. From 1988 to 1989, Tsutomu Miyazaki kidnapped and murdered several young girls (Eng 212:88; Kinsella 2000). Since this case, excessive interest in anime has been linked to perverted sexual desires. This bad reputation is parallel to how the Columbine shooters’ interest in heavy metal and rock music demonized the genre (Eng 2012:91). Often, people describe “otaku” as someone who is obsessed with Japanimation. I have seen people use it to characterize themselves as well as distance themselves from hardcore fans. Because they view them as the worst of Japanimation fandom (Eng 2012: 94). Prior to the close of the bookstore Borders, they had a section labeled “otaku” that contained anime, manga, and various Japanese-related products and stationary. Throughout my research and observations, a distinction exists that separates otaku’s love for Japanimation from other genres in nerd fandom. As the early anime fans in the late 1980s and early 1990s grew up, they

nurtured their need for more knowledge of Japan; this led to an explosion of interest in Japanese culture and language on college campuses.

## **6.2 Issues in a Multi-Cultural Subculture**

When addressing the complexity of fandom within the cultural framework of dominant culture, some essence of group habitus and engrained social hierarchies appear in subcultural practices, regardless of the diversity in the fandom community (Allison 2006; Bourdieu 1986; Napier 2007; Sandvoss 2005:34). Cosplaying offers an interesting place for women and ethnic minorities within nerd fandom, where they are highly visible active members of the community. People in regular clothing fade into the background, as cosplayers grab the spotlight at any event. This places women and ethnic minorities cosplayers at the forefront in what was traditionally seen as a White male dominated space (Jenkins and Tulloch 1995). While early subcultural theorist believed, women were restricted to the domestic sphere and were passive consumers, and disregarded the subcultures of minorities. Female cosplayers are visibly active in the community by attending public events, running panels at conventions, and dominating the mainstream imagery of the cosplay community.

It is not surprising that cosplay has become an international community. As stated earlier, the costuming tradition at conventions originated in the US with the idea flowing to Japan and has since become a transcultural product. Popular characters have spread through various mediascapes fostering a similar pattern of material consumption (Appadurai 1990). Using the US and Japan as a model fans desired to establish conventions in their own countries (Appadurai 1990). Domestic and international cosplayers form a segment of the nerd fandom community. They mostly engage each other online and rarely at larger conventions in the US like New York

Comic Con, San Diego Comic Con, and DragonCon. However, this global community is not cohesive as members come from different cultural backgrounds. These cultural differences created tension in the cosplay community, especially on the issues of race and body type.

For many people, the nerd community was a place of safety, for those that felt like social outcasts. Many stories in fantasy, science fiction, video games, comics, and anime feature unique individuals with special abilities; they also show how they were accepted for their abilities but simultaneously shun for their abnormality. Superheroes' have alter-egos that allowed them to blend into mainstream society. Fans of nerd media until recently did not fit into mainstream society. The increasing incidents of slander, violence, and sexual harassment may be an attempt by older members in the community to deal with the threat of a younger, and diverse crowd, to maintain control. As the demographics changed and anonymity of internet personas were possible people used internet forums and comment sections to voice their concerns. By reproducing the kind of hegemonic power, they were supposedly avoiding, women and minorities became the target of heavy criticism.

Representation of women and minorities in nerd media has not been inclusive. The image of strong White men, or Asian men in the case of Japanimation, has dominated. Some fans have been resistant to the change in audience demographics. However, publishers have been making efforts to diversify their products. There are relatively few characters of color in comics, fantasy and sci-fi media. The comic book powerhouses DC Comics and Marvel have significantly increased their lineup of women and ethnic and religious minority characters. Also, characters in video games have become increasingly customizable with a variety of hair, eye, and skin color options. The lack of representation did influence how minorities could express their fandom as

cosplayers. Raven, felt she could only cosplay black characters when she first started, but this limited her options. She also embraced the strong Black woman stereotype by confusing on villainous characters, “I especially like doing evil characters. I don’t see myself as a princess. I will even put an evil spin on the character. I think I play evil well.” Subculture plays an important role for self-identification, the rise of mainstream interest in comic books and science fiction has given rise to new terminology in the community, like “cool geek” or “sexy-nerd.” This has changed some hegemonic attitudes to the subversive nature of the nerd subculture.

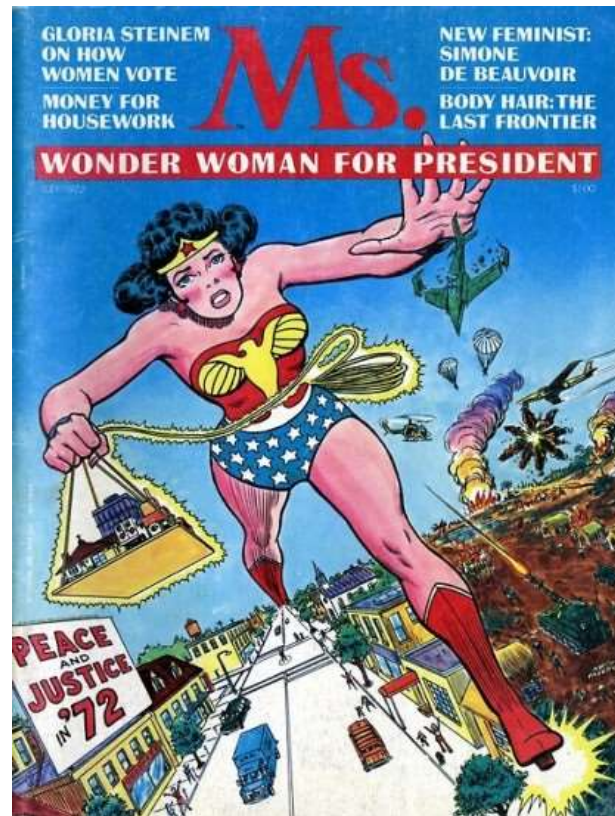


*Figure 14 An original Star Wars Sith Lord character, designed by Raven. This picture is published with the owner’s permission.*

### 6.3 Gendering Practices

Often women are excluded, or their authenticity is questioned more than men in nerd fandom. Female cosplayers are believed to be attention seekers and not "true" fans or to be the significant other of a male fan. This is comparable to female sport fans (Gray et al. 2007). Both female fans of nerd media and sports use this association to construct their identity, but they are perceived as a threat to masculinity as they enter male-dominated spheres.

Women that have successfully entered a computer programming arena are deemed a possible threat, because their intelligence and skill may overshadow their male peers (Seymour and Hewitt 1999). Many female characters like Wonder Woman subvert gender roles and enter male-dominated spheres, hence why she has been a symbol of female strength since her creation by Morton Hurston in December 1941 (Lepore 2015). She has empowered women across generations. Women that are more interested in "guy things," like comics and mechanics, are often labeled Tomboys and lack femininity because of their interest and rough behavior. However, the predominance of men in the comic book and video game industry has contributed to the negative reception and hyper-sexualization of female characters and female industry personnel (Dewey 2014).



*Figure 15 Wonder Woman on the cover of Ms. magazine in 1972. Wonder Woman has always been a strong feminine image for women.*

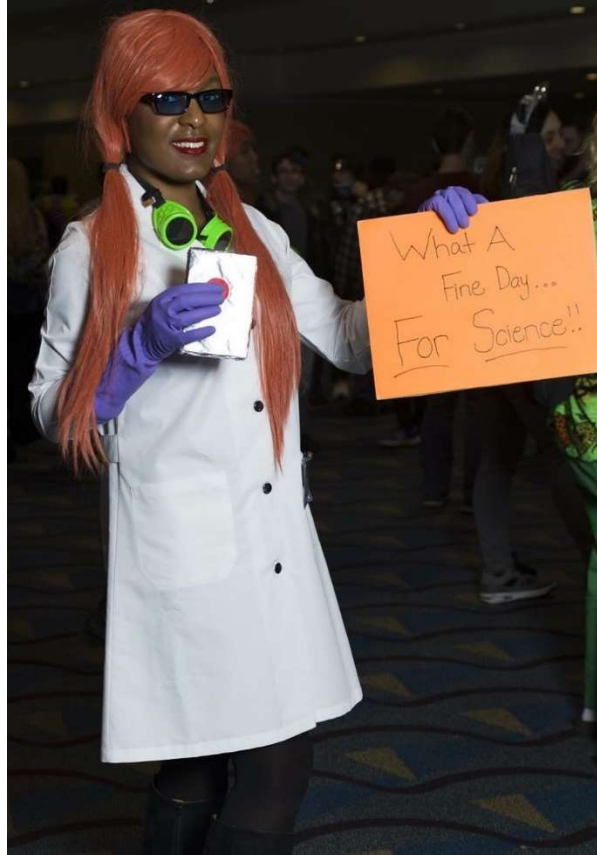
Gail Simone is one of the few well-known female comic book writers. She has worked for DC Comics and Marvel contributing to the success of many titles like, *The New 52 Batgirl* that was on the New York Times Best Selling Graphic Novel in 2013. The success of *Batgirl* outshined other titles featuring renowned characters like Batman and Superman. In March 1999, Raven co-created the website Women in Refrigerators. The site highlights how female characters in comics are disproportionately brutalized to serve as plot motivation for male superheroes. The site lists characters that played both supporting and superhero roles who were “depowered, raped or cut up and stuck in a refrigerator” (Simone 1999). Raven has been very outspoken for equal rights and representation in comics and engaged with the fandom. It is partly in thanks to Gail Simone

and the diversity of creators in comics that publishers are pushing more female characters in their lineup (Abad-Santos 2014).

Often young girls that are interested in computer programming, video games, martial arts, and other activities labeled for men they are called Tomboys. A tomboy is a girl who enjoys the rough, noisy activities traditionally associated with boys. This label strips girls of their femininity and sexuality. They simultaneously feel excluded from female activities but are not completely accepted in the boy sphere. Cosplay allows women to reclaim and craft their own ideas of femininity and refashion the characters' attire to their specific needs (Gauntlett 2008: 11).

Comic books and video games are mostly geared towards a male audience. This marketing strategy alienates women with stereotypical character portrayals and graphic or hypersexualized representations of women (Duffett 2013). Children's toy sections are very gendered. Usually, the boys' section has more comic book, video game, anime, and science fiction characters highlighted with blues and earth tones. On the other hand, the girls section gears girls toward domestic life, pink, fashion, and shopping. This distinction creates a cultural demarcation of what is and is not acceptable to be interested in based on their gender. The cultural implications on the separation of interest based on gender can negatively influence children. Navigating girls away from science and technology could correlate and reinforce the cultural beliefs that women are not interested in these fields nor fictional media. However, Raven is a computer engineer, Crystal is a psychologist, and Jessica is a wildlife biologist.





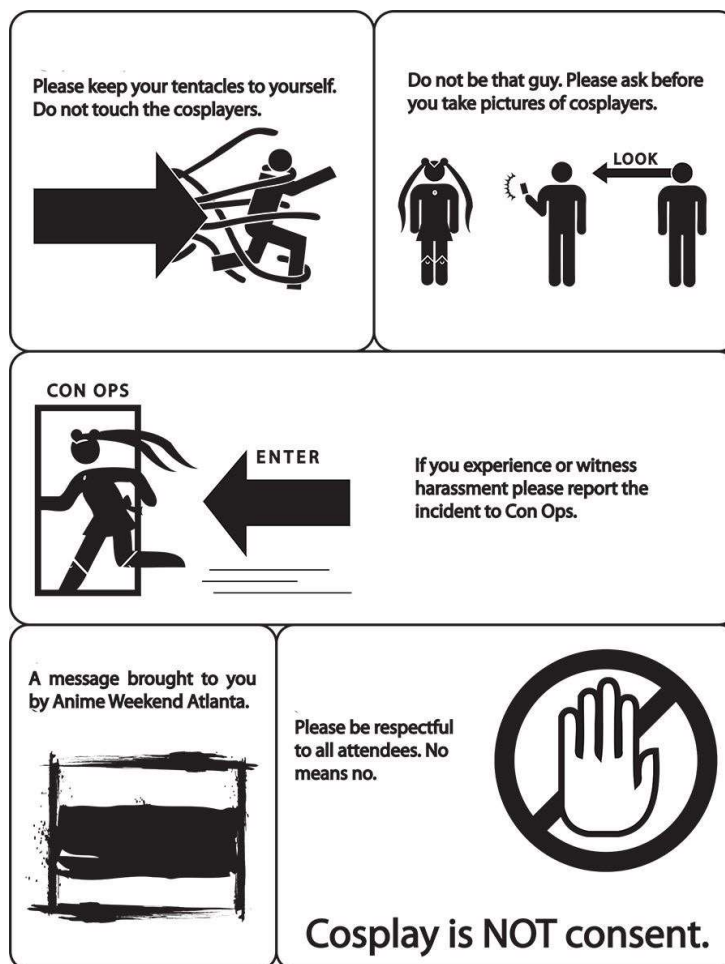
*Figure 16 Crystal cosplaying as the character Dexter from the Cartoon Network show Dexter's Laboratory. This photo is published with the owner's permission.*

Several popular websites that frequently report on a wide range of nerdy media perpetuates the gender dynamic. Nerd fandom is perceived to be a male-dominated sphere. This perspective has been changing as women become more outspoken about their love of popular culture. Most of the women interviewed for this project stated that their interest in popular culture developed in early childhood and continued to grow as they got older. While already considering themselves fans by the time they frequented conventions their immersion into cosplay was a way to express their authenticity as fans in a male dominated space and their love for a character. Raven, Ashley, and Crystal expressed that they cosplay female characters, for their individuality,

strength, and personality. They can stand up to the established patriarchy and maintain their femininity.

One of the most prevalent issues in the cosplay community and the internet, in general, is sexual harassment, racism, and fat shaming. This has sparked the creation of the “Cosplay is NOT Consent” movement. The movement aims to empower cosplayers and speak out against inappropriate social and sexual behavior at conventions. Many of the cosplayers I have talked to throughout my research and prior to it have experienced some form of harassment or trolling on pictures of their cosplay. In these incidents people are usually judging their cosplay based on their ethnicity or body type, completely disregarding the craftsmanship that went into their cosplay. If all cosplayers were held to the standard of only cosplaying characters that you physically represent it would be severely limiting for people to cosplay any characters. However, this criticism is not unilateral. More plus-size and minority individuals complain about harassment than their slimmer white women, counterparts even if they cosplay characters outside of their race.

Most people in the world are not naturally built like fictional characters who have a variety of body types, eye color, height, race, gender, species, or hair color. The wonderful thing about cosplay is that it is an interpretation. While many cosplayers attempt to stay true to character, by agonizing over fabrics, color, and material there is plenty of room for interpretation. Animators and illustrators can draw any type of clothing on characters with little consideration for practically, reality or gravity. Fans actively engage the source material and critically analyze elements of the character to bring them to life.



*Figure 17 A poster displaying Cosplay is NOT consent from AWA 2015. This photo was taken by the author.*

Although one of the appeals of cosplay is the additional visibility it gives to the wearer, there are downsides to this increase exposure, for female cosplayers. Objectification is an issue in the cosplay community especially conventions when people take pictures or want to touch cosplayers. Frequently female cosplayers are on the receiving end of comments regarding their appearance which may also include their picture being taken without their permission.

Carol Gardner discusses how the street remarks women receive is treating them as if they are “out of place” despite behaving within their role (Gardner 1980:161). Being in the public sphere,

the “home territory of men” they believe it gives them “licensed to make...commentary” (Gardner 1980:161). Women at conventions occupy a “safe” space via spectacle and consumption, but their appearance is commented upon and further magnified by the practice of cosplay. Mike sums up a common attitude held by men:

“The thing is guys don’t respect women unless there is another guy present. Which suggest you are only as good as the man that associates with you. It’s so wrong and disturbing that anyone could think like that. Guys seem to respect other men. It falls along the lines of how a guy comes up to talk to you and ask if you have a boyfriend first. If you say yes, most of the time they leave you alone. If you say no and even if you suggest that you aren’t into them, it doesn’t matter because you are not someone else’s property. So, it’s like free game to them, and that’s crappy.”

This statement while disturbing is a common problem in the daily lives of women in public spaces. Many of my female friends and I have experienced this attitude walking around campus or taking public transportation.

Subculture studies uses Butler’s model of gender performance and fluidity to understand the constantly changing identities within subculture (Butler 1999; Muggleton 2000:92). Cosplay offers a way to escape gender norms by embodying the characteristics of a character (Muggleton 2000:103-106). Based on my observations there seems to be more gender fluidity within the anime and manga cosplay community, especially when American and Japanese cosplayers are compared to each other. It’s difficult to pinpoint if this relationship is influenced by the treatment of female audiences. In America, science fiction, video games, and comic books were traditionally labeled as a “guy thing,” thus excluding women from participating (at least openly) in the community or attending conventions. Japan, however, has tailor made anime and manga for their audience: shojo, a genre that specifically targets women under the age of 20; shonen, manga for young boys and teenagers; josei, manga for teenage and adult women; seinen, manga

for grown men into their 50s (Lunning 2006). These categories and the androgynous depiction of characters in Japanimation allows gender performance to be more fluid among these cosplayers or at anime conventions.

#### **6.4 Sex and Sexuality**

Male participants in fan subcultures, such as Star Trek and Star Wars, are often represented as feminized or desexualized by mainstream culture. It is assumed they cannot have a conventional relationship with women (Jenkins 1992:10). This viewpoint is still held as many people, who jokily comment on the virginity of nerds and geeks because they lack the necessary social skills and general interest required to attract women (Kendall 1999). Seth Meyers, comedian and Late Night television host, joked about how “the Star Wars VII” movie premiere was one of the largest gatherings of virgins outside of comic-con.” These jokes though entertaining to some is offensive to others who identify as Star Wars fans, especially women who are often overlooked as fans.

When one culture judges another base on their viewpoint those ideals impose gendered characteristics, sexuality, and norms from a different frame of reference. This is problematic as the sexuality of youth is discusses from the perspective of adults and community outsiders (Bucholtz 2002:534). The focus of sexuality in America focuses extensively on the female body. This heighten focus on women’s body cast especially young girls and women as victims to their own psyche. Many assume female nerds lack the self-confidence to dress up or look pretty. Hence, why the female nerd is frequently overlooked as “true nerds or geeks” because they are the object of desire they cannot be “true” social outcast, even as avid fans. Youth practices are seen as deviant behavior rather than agentive; it is believed young women always discuss body

image in a negative connotation disregarding their usage of body image as a social tool among other women and does not make them any less of a nerd, because of it (Bucholtz 2002:535).

Tied in with impression management and sexuality is the increased focus on body image. While women bear much of the criticism to attain an ideal body image, this perspective applies to masculine identities as well. For gay and transgender men, mainstream masculinity does not fit with their identity. Therefore the gender norms and sexuality norms in American society excludes some populations. Cosplay message boards serve as a place of encouragement and support for those with both positive and negative body image, which is further complicated by racial dynamics of beauty too. Often female cosplayers will post pictures of themselves working out or food pictures when they are not displaying their cosplay work. Among women, discussing diets and workout routines are a common practice. This does not denote a widespread negative body image issue among cosplayers, although it is not uncommon. Much like actresses' diet and workout to achieve a desired look for a role. Both men and women in the cosplay community frequently try to look like their cosplay inspirations.

It is rare to see male characters that are not muscular or women that are not slim. Anime female characters are especially known for their accentuated features. Black women and Latinas can become increasingly self-conscious as they cosplay because their natural curves have been a source of criticism. While not universally held as a belief some feel having curves or being thick delegitimize the character being cosplayed, making them less appealing. There are many websites that encourage cosplayers of all body types to cosplay the characters they love. The Black Girls are Kawaii group is especially encouraging for plus-size women. However, there has

been negative backlash against slim cosplayers in the group; subjecting other women to the same mistreatment they experience.

## **6.5 Racial Identity in the Cosplay Community**

Typically, when someone is asked to name a character of African descent, the list comes up relatively short. The most recognizable characters are Storm, Black Panther, Uhura, and John Stewart (one of several characters labeled Green Lantern). The representation of minority characters in science fiction and fantasy is relatively sparse, even more so in Japanimation. Some fans have been resistant to the change in audience demographics, whether they are women or ethnic minorities. This lack of representation influences fans that rarely see characters that look like themselves as the heroes or anti-heroes. Black cosplayers and other people of color have received negative criticism for cosplaying characters outside of their “range” and their “lack of accuracy” (Cumberbatch 2013). This criticism is usually not applied in the same manner for Caucasian cosplayers who cosplay characters outside of their race. Except in the rare cases when someone darkens their skin, which many consider Black-face.

The historical context in which fan production and practices takes place has been dominated by white women, even though the media targets a white male audience (Jenkins 1992). Although I am aware of current trends and issues in the cosplay community and at conventions, I have not experienced racism like some of my fellow Black cosplayers. In this way, my experience differs from some of my informants and many individuals on the “POC” (people of color) cosplayer online groups I frequented (Narayan 1993:675-678). I have never directly faced racism or racist remarks in the community, nor have I experienced negative

comments on my appearance. However, I have dealt with several sexist remarks, but none of these situations have escalated to the level of sexual harassment some have faced.

Black cosplayers often receive very offensive and racist comments online. The issue of racism in the cosplay community was exposed most notably by cosplayer Chaka Cumberbatch, self-described curvy Black female. In 2010 she cosplayed as Sailor Venus from the anime series Sailor Moon and posted her picture online. She expected to receive comments related to her craftsmanship or choice of accessories, but instead, people reacted to her complexion, calling her “Nigger Venus” or “Sailor Venus Williams.” This form of online harassment is a constant issue throughout the internet, called trolling. These trolls frequently instigate others to illicit a negative response, typically with the protection of the internet to conceal their identity. However, these individuals will rarely if ever make a comment to someone in person. Crystal expressed her emotional response to having one of her cosplays posted on the forum website 4chan. While some people praised her cosplay, others called her ugly, gross, the wrong shade, and they also volunteered other hurtful comments. Although initially, she wanted to stop cosplaying, she resolved herself to remember all the compliments she received at the convention. "These people are cowards. They will never say these things to you in-person because they know it's wrong, but online they can hide. I don't take it to heart anymore."

If minorities or plus size people are restricted to characters that look like them, then their options would be limited. White people seem to get a free pass when it comes to cosplaying a character outside of their race. In the case of anime, many of the scenarios take place in Japan, albeit more fantastical, so one could assume these characters are Japanese. However, they appear more European. Essentially people are telling cosplayers they cannot identify or relate to a



specific character or express their love for that character because they do not physically match that character. Seeing an ethnic minority in a position of power can be empowering, a character's personality is not defined by their ethnicity unless it is explicitly mentioned in the source material. For example, the comic book character Black Panther is king of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. His identity as the king of Wakanda is central to his character.

When Gerry and I first entered the cosplay community as high school students, we did not feel restricted by our gender or race. We just wanted to show our love for the characters. Gerry's perspective over the years changed "I didn't think about being black, just the costume looking good and if people would like it. It [race] didn't even cross my mind until years later."

However, this racial dynamic does not seem inherent in people who identify as white. "I don't feel weird or uncomfortable cosplaying a character outside of my race, as long as I don't offend anyone. I've always liked the character, Black Panther." Danny expresses his love for the Marvel character Black Panther. Even though he would cosplay characters outside his race, he is cautious to cosplay a character whose ethnic identity is central to the character's story. "I may never cosplay him, because of the whole racial, and black power representation. That would make other people uncomfortable. And I wouldn't want to do that. The association with the black panthers (organization) isn't something white people should appropriate, and I don't have a burning desire to cosplay him no matter the cost. But if he wasn't such a strong divisive character I would." Characters like Black Panther, are strong cultural symbols for Blacks. Other minority populations that have been colonized and forced to assimilate or conform to Westernization, which is based on Christian European values. Danny who identifies as White

embraces his Jewish heritage. He appreciates how the fictional country of Wakanda has maintained its cultural identity.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Subcultural studies have developed over the decades from a form of youth deviance in urban environments with imbalanced opportunities, to a postmodernist study on identity within a larger framework of society. For nerd fandom, mainstream society has found an interest in aspects of popular nerd culture and is now marketed for mass media consumption. Many aspects of nerd subculture had become interesting to those they were traditionally juxtaposed to, the jocks. The popularity of video games in the mainstream market caters to different taste. Jocks would probably gravitate toward sports games and nerds towards RPGs. The inclusion of women as members of the nerd subculture may prove to be a threat to men.

What emerged from my ethnographic research is that becoming part of nerd fandom was not an act of defiance and resistance. Many already felt like social outcasts before they began to attend conventions. Additionally, for them cosplaying was a welcome release to express themselves in a way they cannot in their daily lives, especially in a place they felt comfortable to be their true self without fear of judgment. Through my ethnography on nerd fandom and cosplay, I have identified some of the hidden power structures, agency, and resistance and replication of hegemony in the cosplay community. I conclude that cosplay is a matter of personal taste, not everyone that goes to conventions cosplay but all cosplayers seem to go to conventions. Cosplaying deepened their relationship with the convention space and textual subject.

Conventions can be identified as heterotopias for fans, and in this environment, cosplay was born and has thrived (Foucault 1995). However, as traditionally nerdy or geeky media has become more mainstream, there is the threat of more hegemonic values entering the community. This can already be seen as companies commercialize superheroes from well-known comic

books into children's toys and other merchandise. While merchandising is not new to the genre the scale and wide availability of it has changed significantly in part to blockbuster movie success, which has also led to the popularity of conventions and dramatic increases in attendance.

Even though there is a large community of cosplayers and millions of fans, the core of cosplay is about an individual's connection to a specific character or series. Cosplay is an artistic hobby that requires multiple skills, techniques, and materials. Like many crafting hobbies some individuals have mastered and monetized cosplay at various levels. Professional cosplayers and models can profit from their cosplay activities and merchandise, while others casually engage in cosplay, like the closet cosplayers. The deeper people become in cosplay, the more it becomes a way of life. Everyone performs a level of impression management throughout their life, and to a degree, everyone is cosplaying. While some people view cosplayers as wasting their time trying to be fictional characters, think about how you dress and act for certain occasions. The term cosplay specifically pertains to fictional characters, but these lines can easily be blurred with live action television series and movies. If a stock broker draws inspiration from Leonardo DiCaprio's portrayal of Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), which is based on a true story, and attempts to dress like him and mimic his demeanor is this not cosplay?

The rise of mainstream interest in nerd fandom and the shift towards a "cool geek" or "sexy nerd" have diluted the subversive nature of the community. While some individuals are happy to not be looked down on because of their fandom, others feel this threatens what it means to be a true and authentic fan. Someone who embraced the characters and stories before they were popular, and are not following trends. For cosplayers, this seems to mean someone who identifies with a character on an emotional level are willing to spend both time and money to

portray a character that means so much to them. Cosplayers are not delusional, as some media outlets suggest, they do not believe they are aliens, witches, or demons, but sometimes the characters they identify with are. For some people, especially minorities and women, the strength and determination of a character can motivate them to succeed or become a better person.

Some men point to the increase in women, minorities, and a politically correct culture changing the nerd community for the worst. They may feel isolated or threatened by a broader interest in the genres at conventions. Unfortunately, this has led some to enforce the same practices that originally excluded them from mainstream society. As Mike said, “there will always be those few bad apples that try to ruin everything for the rest of us.” What these individuals fail to realize is that women and minorities have always been part of the community, but were not explicitly involved in the community because of social stigma. To an extent cosplay has allowed these individuals the ability to be more visible in the community and manage how people will perceive and receive their presence, thus affecting their status in the community.

For many people, the nerd community is a safe place where they feel accepted and have a strong sense of belonging to a group. People at conventions can let down their guard knowing they are not weird or would be considered social outcasts. Fantasy realms often feature unique individuals with special abilities and tell the story of how they balance being shunned for their abnormalities and at times being embraced for them. People can connect to these stories and identify on an emotional level with these characters. While some people see superheroes as fictional beings with outlandish powers, cosplayers see the strength, resilience, compassion, wisdom, and beauty that they represent. Yes, cosplay is about playing dress up, but to some, it means so much more than a simple costume. By cosplaying a character, you embody their personality attributes and invoke an emotional response within yourself and other fans. A

sentiment echoed by every cosplayer I encounter and one I personally resonate with is “If you aren’t having fun then you are doing it wrong.”

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A Glossary

**Anime** – a style of Japanese film and television animation, typically with a corresponding manga.

**Artist Alley** – is a specific area at a convention where local artist or crafters can sell merchandise to convention attendees, this section is usually near the Dealer's Room and is smaller in scale

**Comic Con** – is a type of convention focusing predominantly on comic books and comic book related media

**Con** – a shortened form of the word convention

**Cosplay** – is a portmanteau of the words costume and roleplay. It is the practice of dressing up as a character from a television show, movie, comic, book, or video game

**Cosplay is NOT CONsent** – is an anti-harassment movement and policy adopted by many conventions to make a safe and welcoming space for all attendees

**Cosplay Contest** (Costume Contest) – is a contest typically at conventions to judge the craftsmanship of somebodies' cosplay outfit

**Dealer's Room** – is generally a large room at a convention where vendors can sell merchandise to convention attendees

**Fanboy** – a male fan who behaves in an obsessive or overexcited manner

**Fanfiction** – is fiction written by a fan of a series, featuring characters from a specific show, movie, video game, etc.

**Fangirl** – a female fan who behaves in an obsessive or overexcited manner



**Geek** – a person who has excessive enthusiasm for and some expertise about a specialized subject or activity. It can be a term of pride among community members but is frequently used disparagingly by outsiders.

**Geek chic** – To have the dress, appearance, and culture associated with computing and technology enthusiasts, regarded as stylish or fashionable

**Geek out** – to become extremely excited or enthusiastic about a subject, typically one of special interest

**Goth** – a member of a subculture favoring black clothing, dark make-up, and goth music. They are typically interested in apocalyptic, horror, and supernatural elements.

**Hipster** – a person who follows the latest trends and fashions, especially those regarded as being outside the cultural mainstream

**IGN** (Imagine Games Network) – is a media company that is the leading news outlet focusing on comic books, films, television, video games, and technology.

**Japanimation** – is an all-encompassing term for Japanese animation, manga, and video games.

**LARP** (live action role play) – is a type of role-playing game in which participants physically act out scenarios in costumes with props

**Lolita** – is a fashion subculture based on Edwardian and Victorian clothing, originating in Japanese street fashion. Lolita fashion is primarily focused on the brand of manufactured garments and material.

**Manga** – A Japanese-style comic book and graphic novels, sometimes it has a corresponding anime.

**Masquerade** – a show of several people in disguise acting like the characters they are portraying

**Nerd** – a single-minded expert in a certain technical field

**Nerd fandom** (nerdom) – a fan community that is interested in various genres and terms in the areas of science fiction, fantasy, video games, anime, and manga.

**Soft power** – a persuasive approach to international relations, typically involving the use of economic or cultural influence.

**Swag** – products given away freely, typically for promotional purposes.

**Trekkie** – a fan of the science fiction television show *Star Trek*. This term was originally used by the media and was seen as a negative term by early *Star Trek* fans.

**Trekker** – a fan of the science fiction television show *Star Trek*. This term is used among older fans of the series, before the popularity of the franchise during the 1980s.

**Troll** – someone that makes a deliberately offensive or provocative online post with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response.