Play at Any Cost: How Cosplayers Produce and Sustain Their Ludic Communal Consumption Experiences

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Communal consumption is often described as inherently playful; previous research focuses mainly on successful ludic communal experiences and largely disregards their potential pitfalls. Moreover, the marketer is usually seen as the primary facilitator of ludic experiences, which has marginalized the role of the consumer. This article explores how consumers produce and sustain ludic consumption community experiences in the face of growing instrumental costs. It assumes a practice theory lens and is based on an ethnographic inquiry into cosplay, a time- and resource-intensive form of pop culture masquerade and craft consumption. Prolonged engagement in the cosplay community leads to growing emotional, material, temporal, and competence-related costs, which hinder playful experiences. Consumers practice modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration to overcome these costs and maintain the important ludic sensations that motivate communal engagements.

Keywords: ludic consumption, cosplay, play, communal consumption, practice theory

Consumer researchers have extensively studied the communal aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005). These studies reiterate that consumers often develop lasting social ties with fellow community members and make the communal cause central to their identities (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Kates 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). We also know that communal engagements are highly enjoyable for consumers. More specifically, ludic consumption, or play, is considered inherent to many communal consumption experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Martin and Schouten 2014; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

The appeal of communal consumption and its potential to foster ludic experiences has been well documented by previous research. Yet it is important to note that communal consumption does not always guarantee the attainment of ludic experiences (Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2013; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Moreover, research often attributes the successful orchestration of ludic experiences to marketers, mostly through their meticulous servicescape design (Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets et al. 2004; Tumbat and Belk 2011, 2013). The role of the consumer in facilitating play within communal consumption has received little research interest. Therefore, the

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purpose of this article is to uncover how consumers produce and sustain ludic consumption community experiences in the face of increasing instrumental costs.

We conducted our research within the North American context of cosplay, a form of pop culture craft consumption and masquerade. Our ethnographic inquiry found cosplay to be a ludic and enticing communal activity with endless advancement opportunities. However, we also found that cosplayers faced growing instrumental obstacles to their communal engagement, which often compromised the fun factor. First, the servicescapes that cosplayers primarily occupied proved to be less-than-ideal spatiotemporal stages for ludic experiences. Second, cosplayers' immersion into the community led to significant temporal, material, and emotional costs. We illustrate how consumers mitigated these costs via practices of modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review prior literature on ludic experiences in communal consumption; next, we elaborate on our analytical lens of practice theory (Schatzki 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012); and last, we present cosplay as the context of our study and describe our methodology. Our findings unfold in the sections that follow. First, we detail the practices and ludic elements of cosplay; next, we illustrate the costs of maintaining ludic communal engagement; and then we outline the consumer practices that maintain ludic communal engagement. We conclude with a theoretical discussion and suggestions for future research.

LUDIC EXPERIENCES IN COMMUNAL CONSUMPTION

A Brief Overview of Ludic Experiences and Play

Play is a complex sociocultural phenomenon with a nebulous conceptual history (Grayson 1999; Kozinets et al. 2004; Malaby 2009). Most famously, Huizinga (1949) defined play as a voluntary, captivating, and unserious activity that resides outside of or in contrast to ordinary life. Play is a natural human activity that involves no material interests and promotes learning as well as the formation of social groups (Caillois 1961; Schechner 1988). Play becomes the antithesis of efficacy and utilitarianism, a purely hedonic pursuit "for its own sake" (Holbrook et al. 1984). However, Huizinga (1949) also saw play as extremely ordered and distinct from other activities. Because of this, play usually takes place in specific spatiotemporal contexts, or *ludic stages*, that are more conducive to play than others (Huizinga 1949; Schechner 1988; Turner 1982). Hence, play is both freeform and structured.

Huizinga (1949) wrote that modernity weaned out play through its strict division of work and leisure as well as its idealization of productivity. Play became inconsequential make believe and a stigmatized activity for adults, unserious and unimportant (Goffman 1959; Huizinga 1949; Saler 2012; Schechner 1988). In an extreme characterization underlining this nonutilitarian view, Caillois (1961) dubbed play an activity of "pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill and often money" (125). However, modernity's economic, social, and technological developments also democratized leisure experiences (Rojek 2010; Saler 2012). Nevertheless, only specific areas, such as popular culture (Saler 2012) or entertainment servicescapes (Kozinets et al. 2004; Ritzer 1999; Sherry 1998), became sanctioned spaces in which mature individuals may play.

These perspectives on play as irrational, inconsequential, and unproductive are in line with the modernist idea of *Homo faber*, the working man (Huizinga 1949), which sees play as a utopia of release and freedom, a reward for hard work (Rojek 2010). In this worldview, there is no play outside of leisure (Rojek 1995). However, play is often rational and enmeshed in market activity, thus complementing work by extending personal market capacity. A postmodern perspective on play is that of *Homo ludens*, the playing man (Huizinga 1949; Rojek 1995). Here, play is a necessary human activity found in many social domains (Sennett 2008). Work and play become co-constituting and historically mutable concepts, resulting in fluctuating boundaries between play and not-play (Rojek 1995; Schechner 1988; Turner 1982). For example, in Western contexts, work has become more playlike for some (Press and Arnould 2011; Sennett 2008), and play more worklike for others (Belk and Costa 1998; Rojek 2010; Stebbins 1982).

Though the boundaries of play are difficult to discern (Grayson 1999), theorists tend to agree on one important aspect: play is ultimately an emotional experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Holbrook et al. 1984; Huizinga 1949), a source of "joy and amusement" (Caillois 1961, 125). In other words, regardless of its form, play needs to *feel* like play. Moreover, play requires commitment and appreciation of the activity; as Huizinga (1949) wrote, it is not the cheat, but the spoilsport, that ruins play by ignoring and displacing its rules. This mutual appreciation of play acts is important for inducing communion (Arnould and Price 1993; Holt 1995; Kozinets et al. 2004).

Last, play promotes and necessitates mastery and learning (Holbrook and Lehmann 1981; Rojek 2010; Unger and Kernan 1983). Though no two instances of play are ever similar (Malaby 2009), continuous learning staves off the loss of interest that ensues when play activities that were once thrilling become routine (Woermann and Rokka 2015).

Ludic Consumption and Consumer Orchestration of Communal Experiences

Play features pervasively across consumer behavior (Grayson 1999; Holbrook et al. 1984; Holt 1995). It is one

of the defining elements of an idealized leisure experience (Holbrook and Lehmann 1981; Rojek 2010; Unger and Kernan 1983). Play facilitates consumer interaction within shared spatiotemporal settings (Belk and Costa 1998; Holt 1995; Kozinets et al. 2004). Ludic experiences are central to communal consumption—the joyous solidarity, intrinsic rewards, and visceral thrills inherent to many communal experiences sustain communities over years or even decades—and encourage making communal fidelity central to consumer identities (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002; Martin and Schouten 2014; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Tumbat and Belk (2013) noted that the orchestration of ludic experiences is typically considered a marketer's responsibility. For example, marketers often encourage play through meticulous servicescape design (Kozinets et al. 2004; Maclaran and Brown 2005; Otnes, Ilhan, and Kulkarni 2012; Ritzer 1999; Sherry 1998). Marketers also use play to explicitly induce communion among consumers. For example, Arnould and Price (1993) showed how river-rafting guides plan games in order to build solidarity during the extended service encounter. While these experiences endorse communitas, enjoyment, and self-development, they require willing and active participation (Grayson 1999; Otnes et al. 2012). Yet previous research describes consumer participation as having only symbolic, verbal, or emotional influences on the communal experience (Tumbat and Belk 2013). In addition, literature tends to romanticize communal settings and ignore potential practice failures and negative communal dynamics (ibid.). Tumbat and Belk (2013) concluded that "performative competencies of participants are taken for granted, as if in these co-created experiences there is nothing at stake and success is pretty much guaranteed" (50). In countering evidence, Kozinets's (2002) study of Burning Man illustrated play that became compromised when participants' ludic displays became overtly competitive and resulted in communal tensions. Tumbat and Belk (2011) similarly showed that when consumer goals and interactions are mutually exclusive, extraordinary consumption experiences do not result in play or communion.

Existing literature provides hints of how communities might facilitate play. For example, senior members educate new members about the proper performance of communal practices to ensure communal meanings are not devalued (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). This is similar to how the need to reach consensus of play rules necessitates teaching others how to play (Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1949). However, becoming proficient in communal practices may entail significant time and material investments that complicate engagement. Previous community research has made note of such rising demands (Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Tumbat and Belk 2011), yet the full impact of these instrumental considerations on ludic communal experiences has not been explored.

In summary, it is evident that play is central to communal consumption, but ludic experiences can fail to emerge (Tumbat and Belk 2013). This article aims to reveal how consumers orchestrate ludic communal experiences when their engagement in them results in growing instrumental costs, and when the marketer has limited interest in facilitating play. We use practice theory as the analytical lens through which we tackle this question.

Exploring Ludic Experiences through Practice Theory

Practice theory views social life through shared and routinized performances of embodied and materially interwoven practices (Schatzki 2002; Warde 2005). This study adheres to Shove et al.'s (2012) breakdown of three co-constituting practice elements: competence, material, and meaning. Competence refers to the skills and know-how of a practice. Material is the things, tools, technologies, spatiotemporal geography, and physical body within a practice. Meaning, also called the teleoaffective structure, refers to a practice's symbolic, homologically shared, emotional, and aspirational ends (Schatzki 2002). The shared emotional and aspirational ends organize the flow of practice performances. As Malaby (2009) wrote, this makes practice theory ideally suited for studying ludic experiences, given the centrality of emotions in making play feel like play.

Practice theory further posits that practice performances allow for limited spontaneity in stabilizing misaligned practice routines (Schatzki 2002; Warde 2005). In a recent study, Woermann and Rokka (2015) illustrated how different practice elements—such as materials, rules, understandings, and procedures—had to be properly aligned in two ludic activities, free-skiing and paintball, to produce the desired emotional ends of fun, flow, and accomplishment. A misalignment of practice elements resulted in the experience feeling either dragged or rushed. Our analysis focused on similar consumer efforts to realign practice elements in order to sustain the ludic sensations that made practice performances meaningful.

In our view, an appropriate context for studying how consumers produce and maintain ludic communal experiences meets the following criteria: (1) marketers do not proactively orchestrate ludic experiences; (2) the activity is fulfilling and thus not easily abandoned; and (3) engagement results in monetary, material, or emotional costs. As we show next, our research context of cosplay satisfies all conditions.

CONTEXT: COSPLAY AND THE CON CIRCUIT

Cosplay, short for "costume play," is the practice of crafting outfits (including relevant makeup, hair, and

props) based on popular culture source material and wearing them at related events, namely comic book conventions, or "cons." Cosplay spun off from the costumed role-playing circles of the 1960s into its own activity at comic book and anime conventions (Winge 2006). Costume building draws inspiration mostly from "geek culture"—that is, the increasingly popular consumption field of superheroes, sci-fi, and fantasy, and its related TV, comic book, and video game franchises (Jenkins 2012). We emphasize that cosplay is inherently different from costumed activities like live-action roleplay (Seregina 2014) or historical reenactment (Belk and Costa 1998). Those activities entail character immersion and story engagement; hence, costumes are supportive performance elements and their quality is secondary to the storyline and/or interaction. In cosplay, however, highly elaborate costumes are central to the practice.

Cosplayers are usually young, ranging from teens to those in their early thirties (Gunnels 2009; Jenkins 2012). Though we encountered cosplayers with working-class backgrounds, the majority of cosplayers were from college-educated middle-class families with mid-level cultural capital, similar to Arsel and Thompson's (2011) context. A fan portraying a favorite character is a common cosplay initiation story (Gunnels 2009; Kozinets 2001). Many cosplayers with whom we interacted also had a priori socialization into dress-up and costuming through friends or family, particularly for events like renaissance fairs. Halloween was frequently referenced in our fieldwork as a favorite holiday, as was the long-standing family tradition of Halloween costume preparation.

Cosplay proportionally attracts more women (Winge 2006), even though geek culture overall is notably male dominant (Scott 2013). We believe this feminine slant can be explained by two characteristics of the practice. First, the primary skills required for costume crafting, such as sewing and makeup artistry, are stereotypically considered more feminine, which may discourage male cosplayers. Second, cosplay has emerged as an avenue for fan identity politics and a way for women to proclaim legitimacy in the male-dominated geek culture. This is especially evident in a form of cosplay called "crossplay," in which fans portray characters of a different gender. Women exercise crossplay much more frequently than men do and often frame the practice as a challenge to geek culture's male stereotypes (Winge 2006). Crossplay has also been shown to provide escapist experiences from everyday anxieties relating to sexuality and body image (Gunnels 2009; Winge 2006).

Cosplay involves two constituting practices: performing in costume and crafting costumes. Both are conducive to play. Performing in costume brings obvious contrast to everyday practices (Belk and Costa 1998; Huizinga 1949), whereas craft is playfully immersive and improvisational (Sennett 2008; Watson and Shove 2008). The relationship between crafting a costume and performing in costume speaks to Goffman's (1959) depiction of front-stage and backstage activities; costume crafting in private settings facilitates playful dress-up performances on public, communal stages.

Cosplay is highly time-consuming and costly (Gunnels 2009). Outfits can take multiple months or even years to build, with potential costs reaching thousands of dollars. Cosplay's growing temporal and monetary demands invariably become problematic. Thus, we see cosplay as an ideal context for studying how ludic communal experiences are produced and sustained when consumers are faced with increasing instrumental costs.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

We studied cosplayers' communal engagements using ethnographic inquiry. This allowed us to observe social and cultural phenomena, as well as shared meaning systems, through lived experience and as part of their cultural context (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). The first author initially engaged in cosplay by attending cons in Finland in 2011 through 2013. Individually and together we subsequently collected data at several conventions in the United States. We attended a total of 11 conventions, which varied from localized gatherings of approximately 3,000 people to international events of over 150,000 people. The events spanned from two to seven days. Both authors have backgrounds in studying geek culture, which facilitated contextual understanding.

During the conventions, we engaged in ethnographic observation of cosplay and related activities that we recorded with field notes and photographs. We interacted with hundreds of cosplayers and conducted recorded formal and unrecorded informal interviews. In total, we recorded 64 interviews, which ranged from short, 5-minute ethnographic interviews probing costume details to long interviews lasting over 90 minutes. We also followed up with some of our informants via email and their personal web pages. For our interviews, we intentionally sought out cosplayers of various ages, skill, and engagement levels. As a result, interviewees ranged from complete novices to avid enthusiasts and even professional cosplayers. The authors represent both genders, which proved helpful; interviewees were more willing to disclose personal details to persons of the same gender. Consequently, we interviewed cosplayers individually and together, depending on the situation. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

In addition to our ethnographic fieldwork, we conducted an extensive netnography (Kozinets 2010) of one of Cosplay's biggest online communities (Cosplay.com), which our informants frequently referenced. Cosplay.com became instrumental in our efforts to familiarize ourselves with cosplay culture. Both authors became members of the online community and announced their presence to the

TABLE 1

RESEARCH DATA SOURCES

Name	Sources	Dataset	Purpose
Ethnographic notes	Notes from fieldwork at conventions: San Diego Comic-Con 2013; Rhode Island Comic-Con 2014; Boston Comic-Con 2014, 2015, 2016; Anime Con Boston 2015, 2016.	53 double-spaced pages	Gaining understanding of context, and especially of conventions, as leisure locations and materiality. Organized cosplay activities.
Photography	Photography during fieldwork.	908 photographs	Elaborating the intricacies of costume crafting and taste structures based on aesthetic merit.
Recorded interviews	Cosplayers at conventions. Interviews ranged from 5 to 90 minutes (average length 20 minutes).	64 interviews, 312 double-spaced pages	Understanding the process of and emotional engagement in costume crafting, including difficulties and sense of achievement.
Netnography in online community	Cosplay.com archives.	145 discussion threads, 4,278 double-spaced pages	Deeper study of themes through keywords emically identified, particularly in negative cases; boundary conditions, sensitive topics, and anxieties often undisclosed in interviews.
Other netnography	Blogs (CosplayDad, cosplay.ph), Cosplayer Facebook profiles (Kamui Cosplay, Yaya Han), niche media (Kotaku, Buzzfeed).	12 blogs, 9 profiles (16 double-spaced pages of notes)	Understanding deeply engaged cosplayers and their online interactions. Learning from tutorials. Discerning construction of cosplay fame.
Newspaper articles	*New York Times*, *Wired*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*.	10 articles, 67 double-spaced pages	Contextualizing cosplay within marketplace and understanding emerging mainstream interest 2010 and after. Studying advocacy practices.
Documentaries	*Cosplay! Crafting a Secret Identity* (WPBA); *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope* (Mutant Enemy, Thomas Tull Productions, Warrior Poets); *My Other Me: A Film about Cosplayers* (M.O.D. Entertainment and High Deaf Productions).	3 films	Identifying cosplay as an overall phenomenon and gaining deeper knowledge of embedded entrepreneurs.

membership. In all, we analyzed 145 discussion threads that prompted dozens to hundreds of community member replies. Our growing competence with cosplay lingo, coupled with our earlier ethnographic fieldwork findings, allowed us to purposively sample and pursue negative cases within the community's archives (Miles and Huberman 1994). We also went outside of Cosplay.com to incorporate data from blogs and communities connected to Cosplay.com. Most likely due to the anonymity of the interaction, we witnessed more revealing accounts than during our interviews (Kozinets 2010). This supported our ethnographic and interview data, aided our understanding of our observations, and helped us find themes to explore and exclude. The netnographic data was central to refining and finalizing our research themes.

Our initial research purpose focused on understanding fan practices and creativity, but what began to emerge as a strong theme was our informants' struggles to maintain cosplay engagement. As a result, we shifted the focus of our research, and continued, with the help of existing literature (Spiggle 1994), to refine and adjust our ethnography and netnography. In the following text, we use interview and netnographic excerpts to represent our data. All individuals have been given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. All excerpts are from interviews unless otherwise noted in the citation.

In investigating cosplay's practice circuit, we differentiated between its material, competence, and meaning elements (Shove et al. 2012). To reiterate, material refers to the relevant objects, tools, infrastructure, spaces, and practitioners' bodies used in the practice. Competence is the relevant shared skills, knowledge, and understandings of the practice. Meaning refers to the shared symbolic, emotional, and aspirational ends that govern practice performances. We analyzed our data hermeneutically, which involves an iterative process of interpretation and reinterpretation that aims to develop a sense of the whole (Arnold and Fischer 1994). Our data are summarized in table 1. Throughout the research, we moved between different data sources as well as units and levels of analysis. Both authors

continuously compared individual data readings to ensure analytical rigor.

THE PRACTICE OF COSPLAY

Overall, the practice of cosplay is made up of two co-constituting subpractices: crafting the costume and performing in the costume at cons. Informant accounts illustrated a ludic orientation to both crafting and performing. Brad provided a typical narrative: "I cosplay because I need something to do besides work... I always feel so proud of myself when I finish even one piece of a costume, and hanging out with other geeks for a weekend is awesome. It's my annual vacation." Brad evoked prototypical ludic elements: leisurely separation, intrinsic enjoyment, and communion. Ariana (Cosplay.com) provided another example: "There are no rules [in cosplay]. If anyone tells you any differently, they are either elitist or selling something. Do what you want, have fun." Ariana's "anything goes" point of view shuns "elitists" and profiteering motivations, linking ludic ideals of freedom (Caillois 1961) and antistructure (Arnould and Price 1993). Senior cosplayer Ivy similarly encouraged attendants of a "Cosplay 101" con panel discussion: "As long as you like the character, that's all that matters. It's about having fun."

Despite cosplay's emphasis on freedom, costume crafting and performing have implicit rules and understandings that bring structure to the ludic experiences. In this section, we first describe the practice of crafting the increasingly elaborate costumes; we then focus on costume performance and ludic character interaction at cons.

Immersive Crafting of the Perfect Costume

The Costume Crafting Project. A costume project invariably begins with meticulous planning. Cosplayers rely heavily on character representations from source media, such as movies, comic books, and fan art, in figuring out costume compositions. For example, when starting to work on his Captain America costume, Cody was "watching the movie like 10 times over and pausing it and like looking at, like, where they got this made and such."

Insight into geek-culture canon represents subcultural capital that allows for building "just the right costume" that can yield rapid status gains. In discussing her Harley Quinn costume, Kelly said: "I was one of the first people that did it, and this one image of mine kind of went viral. So now people come to me at conventions like 'Oh my god! You're that Harley Quinn! I've seen that!'" Kelly's costume became communally recognized, transforming it into an objectified source of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996) that contributed to her "cosfame," an emic term. To put Kelly's communal fame into perspective, at the time of our interview she had around 322,000 followers on Facebook. Other adroit displays of subcultural capital are mash-ups (combining different characters into one costume), gender/race swaps (switching the gender/race of a character), and depictions of rare versions of character aesthetics. Figure 1 provides examples of typical expressions.

Visible effort and attention to detail are hallmarks of a good costume. The ethos of cosplay calls for crafting as much of the outfit as possible. A true cosplayer would never wear a store-bought costume, Cody explained: "Like as long as it's not a premade costume . . . like you just went out and bought a costume and just put it on. As long as you do it yourself, or like piece together what you made or what you found."

Costume crafting mainly involves "sewing from scratch" (Tina), but can also include pieces from "thrift stores, swap meets, eBay, and flea markets" (Cody). Difficult elements, such as metal or leather parts, are often secondhand purchases. Experienced cosplayers aim for perfection and obsess over tiny details to accurately replicate character aesthetics. In discussing his Superman costume, Sam said: "I'm a bit of a perfectionist... Like I made the belt buckle like six times [laughs] to get it right because it just wasn't looking right." Material choices and their combinations distinguish novices from seniors. Polly exemplified this: "You really have to understand what's going to look good with silk . . . or using more rough material like this." In a similar vein, Maria remarked that "wigs are one of the things that bother me the most, when they're not very good wigs I'm kind of like [makes a sour face] . . . getting a real cheap one and having it look bad hurts my soul."

Tools are, of course, essential for making costumes. A sewing machine represents the bare-minimum investment for even the most novice cosplayer. Advanced practitioners, however, often acquire specialized tools, such as glue guns, dummy models, or woodworking equipment. Investing in tools and materials, and learning related skills, also contributes to cosplayers developing communal identities around their own "style of cosplaying" (Polly), which usually follows either thematic or craft expertise foci. For instance, Sadie cosplays only Disney's rogue characters, while Carol is known for working mostly with spandex.

In costume performance at cons, the body becomes a central element, especially for experienced practitioners. Cosplay induces body reflexivity and encourages developing a better practice fit (Wacquant 2004). We learned that cosplayers often move from portraying favorite characters to ones that "adhere to their body type" (Tina). For instance, Cody chose to cosplay Captain America because "people sometimes say I look like Chris Evans [the actor portraying Captain America]." Cosplay.com even has dedicated subsections that offer dietary and exercise advice to those looking to shape their bodies for cosplay.

The Ludic Appeal of Costume Crafting. The intrinsic rewards of crafting are central to the emotional appeal

FIGURE 1

COSPLAY COSTUMES AND CON PERFORMANCES

NOTE.—First row: Cosplayers posing for ad hoc group photo (left); cosplayers performing in costume contest (right). Second row: Costume with elaborate detail and high levels of accuracy (left); invited guest cosplayer posing in front of her con booth (middle); cosplayer assuming character's signature pose (right).

of cosplay. Carl, who has made over 50 costumes since the 1970s, described his cosplay engagement in this light:

"It's another form of art. It's a technical challenge. It keeps your mind active. You learn to figure your way around problems that develop in making a costume. And yeah, it's a release for creativity. . . My most complex costume is one that I haven't even gotten halfway through yet. It requires electronics that I just haven't mastered yet. But I'm learning. Even at 50 years old, I'm still learning."

Carl's narrative connects to craft activities' ludic and creative sides through intrinsically rewarding problem-solving, learning, and flow experiences (Sennett 2008). In addition to play, Carl's experience reflects other characteristics of a fulfilling leisure experience: intrinsic rewards, building mastery, and positive affect (Holbrook and Lehmann 1981; Rojek 2010; Unger and Kernan 1983). We heard frequent stories of losing track of time or being enthralled by costume crafting problems.

Similar to purposefully building ludic mastery (Huizinga 1949), cosplayers often pursue projects that are slightly beyond their current competence level. New projects enable reflection on previous works and encourage learning. As Jill (Cosplay.com) explained: "I've been cosplaying for about a decade now and each time I select a new character I inevitably find a part or some construction method that I've never tried before . . . The planning of a costume build and the familiarity of materials (glues, fabrics, etc.) becomes much easier with each new cosplay." For Jill, projects serve as "orchestrating forces" that bind practice materials and meaning to specific competence-building goals (Watson and Shove 2008, 81). Competence is further built through reworking outfits based on experience and feedback: "I alter [costumes] to make them better and fit me again" (Sadie).

Buying new tools allows for more craft experimentation and project immersion. Tamara recalled a great sense of thrill and a jolt of motivation after she bought her glue gun: "It was exciting! It was this feeling of exhilaration . . . Just trying things over and over again until you get it right and that feeling of getting right, like, 'wow, that's

awesome!'" Tamara's account illustrates the "hanging together" of practice elements (Schatzki 2002): novel material elements unlock new forms of competence, which in turn facilitate pursuing the practice's desired emotional ends. As Watson and Shove (2008) write, craft consumers' "[practice] competence is embedded in and distributed between tools and materials and many other sources including people, DIY manuals and the internet" (79). Cosplay's online communities are filled with crafting tutorials and discussions related to common problems, aspirations, and novel techniques that members have discovered. We learned that the vast majority of cosplayers maintain online profiles on platforms such as Facebook, DeviantArt, or Cosplay.com. Online profiles help cosplayers gain competence by soliciting feedback for work in progress, and build social capital by interacting with community members.

The inherent ambiguity of crafting is part of cosplay's appeal, as frustration eventually gives way to triumph. As Jerry explained, finishing a costume project is greatly rewarding: "The highlight [of crafting] is finishing everything and trying it on and realizing that it actually works . . . that pays off all the months of hard work or weeks of sewing that people knock out." Rapidly changing communal taste preferences further contribute to the ambiguity of crafting, as peer verdicts are hard to predict. For example, Jacob's satisfaction quickly turned into "feeling bummed" when he saw multiple, better-executed versions of what he thought was an original character choice. This illustrates play's indeterminacy: making a bet with an uncertain payoff (Malaby 2009). That said, crowd appreciation becomes easier to anticipate through both experience and scouting fellow cosplayers' projects online.

Though crafting is playful and rewarding, taking the finished outfit to a con is the highlight of the practice. In the next section, we elaborate on cosplayers' communal play through performing in costume. We begin with the ludic stage itself: the con.

Putting on the Ludic Mask and Going to Con

The Con Stage. Cons provide spatiotemporally bound stages for play (Huizinga 1949; Kozinets et al. 2004), and represent safe havens for still-stigmatized geek-culture consumers (Kozinets 2001). Previous ethnographies have compared cons to pilgrimage sites, in which stigmatized consumers get to "geek out" collectively (Bolling and Smith 2014; Jenkins 2012). In our fieldwork, we heard guests call the con a "homecoming," "our own country," or "a judgment-free zone," indicating themes of liberation, liminality, antistructure, and communion. The sense of liberation was also evident in con-goers' unrestrained reactions to various con attractions, including cosplayers' costumes.

Cons are held in dozens of North American cities. Bigger cons, such as San Diego Comic-Con, New York Comic-Con, and WonderCon, each attract hundreds of thousands of visitors. These cons also have become central marketing avenues for upcoming geek-culture movies, TV shows, and video games (Bolling and Smith 2014; Jenkins 2012). Unlike the reclusive Burning Man and Mountain Man Rendezvous events (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002), cons are usually held at downtown convention centers. Easy access, combined with mainstream interest, has recently created ticket shortages, especially at San Diego and New York Comic-Cons.

For cosplayers, cons serve as the central communal get-togethers in which to interact as well as to gain visibility and feedback for their work. Bigger cons enable more costume interaction and exposure, making them more prestigious for cosplayers. Consequently, the expectations for costume quality are higher. However, while most Mountain Man Rendezvous or Burning Man attendees specifically dress up to engage in shared fantasy (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002), cosplayers represent a minority of con-goers.

Despite the playful and geek-culture-celebrating atmosphere, cons are less-than-ideal ludic stages for cosplayers (Kozinets et al. 2004). The halls are narrow and crowded, and the con mostly retains the bland look of a convention center. Most of the space is reserved for panel discussions and vendor stalls selling geek-culture collectibles. Cons have transformed into more Hollywood-centric events, which undermines organic cosplay-style fan activities. Luciano lamented San Diego Comic-Con's unenthusiastic cosplay policy: "I mean, the con doesn't really do anything to cater for cosplayers, like a photo room or extra stuff at the changing rooms. The con doesn't really care, and they even cut back on [cosplay] panels... It'd be nice if they made more of an effort to keep cosplay alive and a part [of cons]. I think fans think it's important, but I don't think the convention itself does."

Con organizers promote the presence of cosplayers to attract visitors, but many cosplayers see this as cooptation rather than true appreciation. Cosplayers thus have to rely on themselves to improve their less-than-ideal ludic stages. For example, cosplayers often volunteer to organize cons to ensure that cosplay gets featured in event programs.

Smaller cons lacking celebrity guests more prominently feature cosplayers in event promotion and rely on them to create event atmosphere. Larger cons invite famous cosplayers to ensure the presence of high-quality costumes and to "participate in costume contests, help run them, help judge them, [do] certain children's events, do trivia contests, [and hold] panel discussions on the hobby" (Rose). In exchange, the invitee usually receives a dedicated booth space in the vendor area: "This [referring to her con booth] turns out to be an advertisement also for my work. So like a portfolio that people can see," Carol explained. Becoming an invited cosplayer is a significant mark of status within the cosplay community.

Most cosplayers balance costume crafting and con performing, and may thus build only one new costume per year and take it only to select local cons. Some purposefully seek communal fame by taking their outfits to as many cons as possible. Dedicated and famous cosplayers bring separate outfits for each of the con days. Some even hand out business cards or swag that feature links to their online portfolios.

Getting Ready to Play. Performing in costume is an emotional and transformative experience. Merely putting on the outfit creates an immediate sense of separation from the everyday self and allows the cosplayer to be "someone else for a day" (Holly). As Ellen explained: "It's after you do your makeup, and you get dressed and you put on your wig. . . it's almost that moment when you catch a glance of yourself in the mirror and you're like, 'Oh! I didn't recognize me for a second. I'm someone else right now.'" Histories of fandom accentuate these experiences. Mary has been a fan of Janet van Dyne from Marvel Comics since she was six. When she put on the finished outfit she recalled crying uncontrollably and exclaiming: "Oh my god, that's Janet! And I brought her to life!"

Costumes quickly reduce social inhibitions as well: "The number one reason [why I cosplay] is that I'm socially awkward, and cosplay helps with that" (Lee-Ann). Ivy similarly confessed: "In costume I'm not shy at all. . . I'm very outspoken, I'm very 'I can do whatever I want!'" These statements illustrate prototypical ludic behavior in which the ludic stage is used to experiment with social behavior (Belk and Costa 1998). Tatiana chose to portray Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* video game franchise, because the swashbuckling character questions notions of gender and "says 'fuck you' to preconceptions." The outfit also makes her feel "more confident and sexy." Beth, a first-time cosplayer, similarly raved about how her cosplay of Daenerys from the TV show *Game of Thrones* gives her extra mojo: "Daenerys is so strong. I feel so much more powerful than I normally would. And that's just wonderful." Being the center of attention is an important aspect of cosplay's appeal, similar to obverse panopticon experiences in ludic servicescapes (Kozinets et al. 2004). Jamaal, cosplaying the titular character from the Quentin Tarantino movie *Django Unchained*, confessed: "It feels amazing just to walk around and everyone's like 'Django! Django! The D is silent!' [an important catchphrase from the movie] I love it!"

Ludic Character Interaction. Due to the presence of noncosplayers and less-than-ideal ludic-stage conditions, cosplayers' character play is restrained and intermittent. Cosplayers move between costume performing, vendor browsing, and attending panel discussions with other con guests. Costume performance usually begins when someone interrupts a wandering cosplayer with a request to pose for a picture. This then attracts others wanting to take photos. Once the photo op is over, the cosplayer resumes walking around until the scenario repeats itself. Photo requests come continuously for those with impressive outfits, but, as Maria described it: "The constant photo requests are kind of the deal when you wear costumes. You kind of have to expect it."

Competence in costume performing entails learning to mimic the character's signature poses and facial expressions. Here, cosplaying becomes more like modeling than acting or role-playing—the goal is to wear the costume well. It is play as representation, competing with other community members over the accurate portrayal of valued symbols (Huizinga 1949). Cosplayers develop competence by training in front of mirrors or taking test photos to work out precise posture details. Verbal representation is usually limited to one-off utterances of character catchphrases, yet competent voice acting lends itself to doing this more frequently. One cosplayer, dressed as Harley Quinn from the *Batman* comics, delighted con guests with her frequent and accurately high-pitched, "Puddin'!"—her term of endearment for her paramour, the Joker. Another cosplayer got eye rolls from passersby for attempting to channel actor Christian Bale's growling rendition of Batman's voice from the Christopher Nolan movie trilogy. Overtly committed character play thus quickly breaks the illusion of representation (Huizinga 1949). Even so, cosplayers gladly indulge in prolonged character dialogue with awestruck children meeting their favorite characters for the first time. Many count these moments as personal con highlights, as Tiffany's (Cosplay.com) encounter demonstrates: "I had a girl hug me when I was dressed as Elphaba and she told me 'I think you're pretty Elphaba!' I was glad I was wearing green make up because it actually made me blush."

Cosplayers compensate for the lack of a ludic stage by "playing around" with their characters (Grayson 1999). For example, the amusing contrast of supposed demigods dealing with con inconveniences, like queuing for food or toilets or navigating crowded convention halls, often lent itself to intentionally off-key character play. One cosplayer, dressed as Marvel Comics' Thor, the Norse god of thunder, drew laughs in the men's room for his indignant commentary on the inferior quality of earth's porcelain urinals compared to the mighty privy craftsmanship on his home realm of Asgard. Portraying trickster characters is particularly conducive to playing around. The Marvel Comics character Deadpool, famous for addressing and even mocking the reader directly in comic books, is a popular cosplay due to the free license the character affords. We saw Deadpool cosplayers barge into photo ops uninvited, challenge other characters into duels in intentionally awkward pugilist stances, position weapon props as phallic gestures, spontaneously plunge into exaggerated death scenes, and solicit over-the-top-enthusiastic high-fives from con guests.

Banding together elevates costume performances. Cosplayers form preplanned or ad hoc groups of thematically consistent characters (e.g., from the same franchise) for group photos or to perform short skits (e.g., parts of iconic storylines). Outside these group interactions, socializing with fellow cosplayers creates a strong sense of communion (Holt 1995). We saw frequent examples of cosplayers complimenting each other's outfits, sharing crafting tips, and exchanging warm hugs. The con thus intensifies ephemeral and dispersed communal links through shared experiences (Arnould and Price 1993).

Cosplay's highly satisfying costuming projects and ludic con performances quickly grip its practitioner and encourage further engagement. Advancing in cosplay prompts the desire to attend more cons and pursue more difficult projects that yield status gains within the cosplay community. However, deeper engagement means growing pressure to continuously develop competence and invest in better materials, both of which threaten to compromise the emotional ends of the practice. We elaborate on these risks next.

DIFFICULTIES IN MAINTAINING COSPLAY ENGAGEMENT

Compromised Emotional Ends and Problems with Competence

The first set of obstacles resulting from increased cosplay engagement relates to compromised practice meaning. More specifically, time demands, precarious play mood, and competence plateaus threaten communal engagement.

Time Demands. To remain fulfilling, ludic activities necessitate securing time blocks that are mentally and physically devoid of work and family distractions (Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002; Huizinga 1949; Rojek 2010). Due to the complex problem solving involved in costume crafting, cosplayers strongly prefer specific emotional conditions before they are willing to work on their costumes. For example, Selina usually "refuse[s] to work" on cosplay "if I'm not inspired." But as cosplay competences develop and ambitions grow, so do the workloads and the time demands. Selina noted that the necessity of completing costumes often overrules her mood preferences, which she finds difficult to accept. Consequently, the intrinsic joy of costume crafting is threatened by time crunches and exhaustion (Cotte, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2004; Thompson 1996). Time crunch was highly common among cosplayers: "It's sort of rampant in the cosplay scene where everyone talks about how you get a really good idea for a costume, but it's a month out from the con and you end up really crunched for time" (Mandy). As time demands grow, cosplay invariably collides with work and family time considerations, creating "endless stress" (Jenna). Sam routinely struggles with "pulling time together...you know, finding time with *life* in the way." Falling behind schedule caused Joe (Cosplay.com) to sew for "3 days straight, at least 5 hours each day, sometimes even forgetting to eat and such."

Increases in communal social capital can bring additional time demands. For example, Selina's communal recognition induces constant inquiries for crafting tips: "I get questions all the time. I'm the kind of person that welcomes asking questions. I try to answer them as quickly as I can. I do tutorials online, so I get a lot of questions on how to make props... I think it's super-important to share that information so that everybody can begin to craft and make their own art." Senior community members often feel a moral responsibility to share their knowledge, which helps junior members learn proper practice performances (Schau et al. 2009). Selina's narrative clearly evoked this sentiment. However, she later described the frequent queries as feeling "like a second job sometimes." Ivy and Lee-Ann, also senior cosplayers, echoed this sentiment in their account of being featured guest cosplayers at cons:

> Lee-Ann: I think one of the most common misconceptions about doing this is that you just make costumes and you get invited to go all these cool places. Which is part of it, and it's amazing. But it's very hard work and there's a lot of work to it. And sometimes there's just too many things going on. You have to do normal human things. You need to go to the bank, take care of your pets, do your laundry, take care of the family... So it's not like you go home from the con and you kick your feet up like it was a vacation and you just sleep until the next one. We go home and we work.
>
> Ivy: I'll work on my phone until I fall asleep and it falls on my head.
>
> Lee-Ann: Me too. And it happens every other day.

During our interview, Ivy and Lee-Ann emphasized cosplay as being primarily a hobby, but in this example, cosplay becomes "work." We also see Lee-Ann contrast her cosplay duties with other practice circuits, such as various family chores. We interpret these metaphors of "second job" and "work" as signs of rising status within the consumption community transforming volitional leisure activity into obligation, as can happen in serious leisure (Stebbins 1982). This diverges from the findings of previous studies that present rising communal status as primarily rewarding (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Precarious Play Mood. Cosplayers' play mood can become compromised in two ways. First, negative interactions irreparably ruin the joyous mood at cons. Second,

negative experiences outside of cons induce longer-term reflection on how play is perceived by others, thus compromising motivation to maintain engagement.

Interactions with noncosplaying con guests can sometimes lead to tense moments that ruin cosplayers' ludic experiences. In an interview for *Vice* magazine (Linde 2014), model and cosplay veteran Vivid Vika described some of her bad con experiences:

> People would ask for a photo, and "jokingly" grab my butt. Lewd, tactless, raunchy things would be said or asked of me, and followed by a "[joking!] . . . unless you will." I feel like a lot of people don't realize they are overstepping their grounds, and they don't realize how hurtful, scary, and gross they are being. They see this character that they also know and love and I feel they forget that there is a person inside the costume... Just because I am dressed up, doesn't mean I aim to serve your fantasies... I was cosplaying a video game character, Mad Moxxi from *Borderlands 2*, who is a very ample busty character. A couple walked by, and the gent was very excited for the character, as he was a big fan of the game. He asked for a photo with me, and right before the camera snapped, I heard his girlfriend saying that he didn't need photos with "some gross slut. I thought you were into real women." I was crushed. It hurt. I didn't do anything. Why am I not "real"? Why am I a slut? I'm character-accurate, and having fun! I think the girlfriend saw my transparent epic sad face. She fumbled a half-assed apology, but I could tell that she said it without even thinking about me, the girl in the suit.

Vika's account provides instances of a "collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment" (Huizinga 1949, 21). Transgressive play can be fun for everyone involved (Kozinets et al. 2004), yet such "joking" and sexually charged transgressions are closer to dark play—that is, the purposeful ruin of ludic performances for personal gain or enjoyment (Schechner 1993). Echoing Vika's narrative, we witnessed instances of regular con-goers asking to pose with cosplayers, especially scantily clad ones, and then making lewd gestures or using their hands inappropriately. However, not all such transgressions are intentional. For example, overexcited con-goers, especially younger ones, may "glomp" cosplayers by giving unsolicited and uncomfortably forceful hugs, which can even break costumes. Vika's story also suggests that costumes can depersonalize cosplayers for ludic spectators (Turner and Oakes 1986). Some spectators mistakenly assume that cosplayers are paid performers, which may induce further depersonalization.

Extrinsic and intrinsic participation motivations often co-constitute fulfilling ludic experiences (Grayson 1999; Huizinga 1949). However, stark differences in participants' competitive motivations create friction at cons and in the community (Tumbat and Belk 2013). In an effort to seek exposure and expand their portfolios, opportunists, such as aspiring models, actresses, and even porn stars, have begun donning costumes and attending cons. Fame seekers often wear revealing outfits, which many cosplayers see as perpetuating negative stereotypes and undermining cosplay's ethos of fun: "They use and push this as a networking opportunity, which it can be, but at the same time it just throws off a lot of the fun and just the spirit of what this is" (Hank). Overall, there is a growing sense that competitiveness among cosplayers is getting out of hand. Jenny (Cosplay.com) lamented: "Cosplay has become SOOOO competitive. It's always been but it's even worse now."

Interactions outside of cons can also compromise future cosplay performances, especially for those with higher communal status and recognition. Kelly, whose significant Facebook followers we noted earlier, described a moment of realization that her cosplay recognition was no longer merely contained within the cosplay practice circuit: "The past two or three years I've started to become recognized, like I was buying jeans at the mall a couple of weeks ago and someone was like, 'You're that cosplayer!' and I was like, 'Oh no!' I went and hid in the dressing room, like, 'No, I'm not! I'm not wearing makeup or my hair isn't brushed; go away!'"

Though Kelly saw humor in the incident, her story shows how rising status complicates boundaries between leisure and other practices (Thompson and Üstüner 2015). What happens at a con does not necessarily stay at a con. New media, in particular, significantly influences whether a post-con experience is positive or negative. Thornton's (1996) study of club cultures elaborates on the influence of new media and demarcates micro (local online communities) and niche (internationally distributed clubbing magazines) subcultural media. Translating this to con coverage, cosplayers prize niche media exposure over micro media exposure because it carries more status value. Geek culture's niche media, particularly blogs covering superhero movie development, often feature impressive cosplay costumes. Conversely, such exposure often attracts hostile commentary. Maria recounted comments on her image in a popular niche media blog: "'Oh, she's just dressing so slutty for attention' and 'Oh wow, she shouldn't be cosplaying that character and she's not the right body type.'" Fueled by growing competitiveness, cosplay's online communities are not immune to this type of negativity. We saw costume pictures attracting hostile scrutiny, outbursts of jealousy, and even cyberbullying. Famous cosplayers are more likely to be the targets of such hostility. Carol, Ivy, and Lee-Ann all recounted experiencing harassment and unwanted sexual advances at cons and online. Carol's harassment incident even required police involvement.

Adults that "play too much" are quickly labeled childish and irresponsible (Caillois 1961; Grayson 1999). Cosplay's roots in geek culture further perpetuate this stigma (Kozinets 2001), complicating long-term engagement.

Our data includes examples of cosplayers being called "weird," "geeky," "nerdy," or even "insane" and "crazy." Cosplayers thus often fret over the hobby becoming public knowledge at work, similar to derby grrrls (Thompson and Üstüner 2015). The most prominent form of anxiety stems from family members' accusations of cosplay dominating time use and distracting from priorities. For instance, Cindy's family thinks her "free time could be better spent." College students and recent graduates like Jaime (Cosplay.com) worry that cosplay may threaten their livelihoods: "I'm 25 and started cosplay when I was 15. At first I thought I would never give up cosplay... I'm back to working and trying to balance cosplay and everything else. But after this, I'll probably have to go on hiatus while I think about graduate school and trying to find another job after my contract is up next August. I have no idea if I'll come back to it, but I'd feel it would be a total waste if I didn't." Prioritizing cosplay over one's career creates anxiety, and, in Jaime's case, prompted scaling back on ludic consumption involvement, to his great regret. Such anxieties increase with age. For instance, Ian lamented that his family thinks he is "too old and responsible to cosplay."

Competence Plateaus. Cosplay demands constant productivity. Fame garnered from previous costumes fades fast and character trends change rapidly. This creates tension between competitive motivations to build status and the playful meanings of the practice. Many fail at balancing the two, leading to frustrating failures in crafting. Such failures are often connected to materials. For instance, working with new tools or fabrics may produce unforeseen failures. Tim (Cosplay.com) recounted a traumatic wardrobe malfunction just before a con: "I was so infuriated that I packed up my things and left, tossing the POS costume in the dumpster on my way out, and coincidentally [sic] washing about $250 down the drain (hotel room reservation and con registration)."

Insufficient time or a lack of routine may similarly compromise projects. Bettie (Cosplay.com) laments her lack of preparation in constructing her Elsa costume from Disney's *Frozen*, resulting in hours of wasted labor and a letdown of personal standards: "I didn't do enough test fits on the dress. In fact, I jumped into sewing sequins on, spent roughly 100 hours sewing them on and horribly regret it... It is soooo not up to par." As many only have the opportunity to go to one or two cons per year, failing to complete an outfit before a con can be a major emotional setback, as it denies the sense of fulfillment and communal con performance appreciation that motivate future projects.

Compounding Material Constraints

Prolonged cosplay engagement leads to compounding material constraints. Cosplay practices begin intersecting with other practice flows, especially domestic ones, due to cosplay's growing material colonization. Moreover, cosplay brings about mounting material costs that further compromise practice meaning through the challenge of making ends meet.

Material Colonization. Costume crafting is usually confined to predetermined spaces in the home, such as garages or guest rooms. However, rising ambition necessitates more materials, which leads to space management problems. While cosplayers living alone tolerate the ubiquitous and messy material elements, those with families experience pushback due to cosplay's frequent interruption of domestic practices, indicating a lack of consensus over family practices and material relations (Epp and Price 2008). As Jim explained, "[cosplay] consumes your life sometimes... my wife's been very patient with, you know, me messing up the garage and messing up the house." Problems may dissolve once a costume is ready: "The neatness [of my home] is inversely proportional to proximity to con," Michael joked. However, material elements can also permanently colonize home areas and hinder domestic practices. Amy expounded on this: "My boyfriend just shakes his head. He gave up trying to get me to keep my cosplay area under control. He also gave up the hope we'd ever eat at our dining table." Problems flare up especially during fundamental life changes, as Stephanie described: "Before my fiancé moved in I had lots of floor space in my room, and now it's halved... I need a new wardrobe; mine's full and most of my cosplay stuff is squeezed tightly in between a wall and my wardrobe. The pile is getting bigger there, so I'm desperate to get my own space." Quite naturally, the toxic fumes, loud noises, and sharp objects inherent to costume crafting limit options for setting up practice materials within domestic settings. These material problems induce guilt that is comparable to earlier depictions of cosplay dominating time use, thereby disturbing the distraction-free mindset needed for crafting.

Making Ends Meet. Cosplay's monetary costs escalate rapidly with growing ambition, leading to the practice's strongest source of anxiety. Moreover, absorption in the practice can reduce awareness of how expenses accumulate over time. Ivy and Lee-Ann recounted being shocked when tallying the costs of their recent projects:

> Ivy: I plugged in how much I'd spent, I was like, "Jesus, I've spent so much money on this thing"... It's obscene, like when you're not paying attention and you're doing it over a certain period like that... You'll be like "God, this could've been a vacation!"
>
> Lee-Ann: It just blows your mind how much you can spend so quickly. Like 5 dollars here, 10 dollars there. It doesn't seem like a lot, but like over a year it's like, "Wow, that's thousands of dollars on a costume that's not even made yet."

These concerns further intensify when other practice circuits' demands increase. For instance, Carl admitted that the mounting expenses of his daughters' hobbies and education have made him increasingly reflexive and anxious about cosplay projects. This also connects to earlier accounts of cosplayers worrying about being distracted from career goals.

Increasing difficulties can eventually make cosplay engagement altogether unsustainable. Mary (Cosplay.com) quit cosplay because she needed "to use my money to support myself rather than on costumes." Becca stopped cosplaying because her job as a nurse crowded out leisure time: "It is hard to get time off work and the hours are very demanding… Sure, succeeding in life comes way before a hobby, but it's really hard to give up a hobby which you love and enjoy so much." However, many find ways around the challenges we have described and stay engaged in cosplay. We illustrate this next.

HOW COSPLAYERS MAINTAIN THEIR COMMUNAL ENGAGEMENTS

In practice theory, integrated practices are complex and holistic entities involving multiple actions, whereas dispersed practices are simple yet helpful actions found across many integrated practices (Schatzki 2002). Arsel and Bean (2013) showed the dispersed practices of problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization to produce novel taste displays and consequently reshape the integrated practice of home décor. We similarly uncovered three dispersed practices that help sustain cosplayers' communal engagement: modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration.

Modularization: Breaking Down and Rebuilding Practices

A practice circuit implies a bounded set of conditions through which actions are pursued (Schatzki 2002; Warde 2005). These conditions also denote relations *between* circuits, including the possibility to create circuit intersections or the necessity to separate them (Shove et al. 2012). Rojek (2004) wrote that time scarcities promote leisure modularization: favoring hobbies that can be pursued at opportune times over those with rigid schedules. We appropriate the term "modularization" to describe how cosplayers mitigate crafting pressures by breaking down cosplay practices into modular parts and then devising new practice flows that intersect with other circuits or achieve proper separation.

Emphasizing Small Gains and Momentum. An essential part of modularization is breaking large tasks into smaller ones, and propelling the project via small gains. A famous cosplayer described this on her Tumblr page ("Cosplaying-on-a-budget," May 2014):

> Massive cosplay projects can get overwhelming. Many times I'll be half way through a project and realize I've forgotten an important detail or forgotten to make a component of the costume entirely. Other times I'll be getting close to a deadline and become overwhelmed with the work still left to do. I find that the best way to deal with these problems is to keep detailed lists. I usually keep at least one spread sheet going that keeps track of what I need to do while working on a project. I will sit down and think about every element of the costume as I study reference photos and break down the costume into parts. I will then list every step that will be needed in order to make each piece… I find that when everything is broken down into small parts nothing seems overwhelming. This also helps with organizing and prioritizing. In the above list I realized that all the weathering and distressing for the costume (highlighted in yellow) could be lumped together and done at the same time. This would save me set up and clean up time when I did it. Having everything laid out on paper also assists with setting up a timetable. When you can see every step that needs doing you can organize it to fit in your schedule. You can fit those 15-minute touchup projects in at the end of a busy workday, or plan on doing 2 hour pattern drafting and mock-up session some time during a free day. This keeps you from neglecting the important aspects of your day-to-day life while still getting progress done on your costume.

As the excerpt shows, even experienced practitioners find it necessary to improvise their costume crafting, which can become "overwhelming" and emotionally compromising. Modularization makes the practice's material, emotional, temporal, and labor demands apparent, thus reinstating a sense of agency through synergistic prioritization. For example, "15-minute touchup projects at the end of a busy workday" are tasks that can be performed in less-than-ideal emotional and temporal conditions. Yet they free up time for project phases with inflexible, time-consuming practice timeflow structures (Woermann and Rokka 2015), which are left for "free days." Moreover, modularization soothes boundary tensions between practice circuits, as shown by the juxtaposition between "day-to-day life" and cosplay.

The preceding excerpt mentions the use of color-coded lists to keep track of project tasks. New technologies often mirror the logic of human labor they complement or displace within practices (Shove et al. 2012). Modularization principles are apparent in a helpful cosplay app that Ivy uses to make sense of her material procurement needs and to manage time use: "There's this app called Cosplanner… It literally breaks down everything from your costume. You know, if you need to buy a wig, fabrics, all the different materials, how much they cost . . . you can also break down all the different components of your costume that you need to make, percentage completed on each one of those… You can realistically see how much it's costing you." Ivy further noted that the app gives cosplayers enough time to plan material procurement and hunt for

bargains. Modularization thus reduces monetary anxiety by making project costs apparent and allowing the search for alternatives. Tim (Cosplay.com) explained this benefit: “My biggest secrets are shopping during sales/with coupons and buying my materials over time. I usually start a project six months before I need it, sometimes less if it’s not a real big one. That way, I can still have money for everything else I need, but can make my cosplay.”

Saving for a new costume usually begins a few months prior to a con, but some cosplayers begin saving up to “a year in advance from the con’s date” (Stan, Cosplay.com). Cosplayers use apps like Cosplanner to stay almost ubiquitously engaged with their projects.

Bundling. Another form of modularization is bundling tasks by identifying actions that can be performed concurrently after they have been broken apart (Shove et al. 2012). Long-time cosplayer Mandy used this approach to complete her outfit in time for a con:

> Even if you don’t feel motivated to physically work on something, try and find work you can do for a different part of that costume or a different costume you might have in mind. So it’s like, “Oh, I can’t really work on sewing, maybe I’ll see if I can figure out what the construction of the back could be” and just write that down on paper... If I were to watch TV anyway I can work on something that’s handwork; I can’t work on a [sewing] machine as well, but spending half an hour sewing one of these [shows her costume’s embroidery] I can do.

Mandy employs modularization principles by matching project stages with appropriate motivation levels to maintain leisure time’s emotional qualities, pursue small gains, and move the project forward. But she also combines the repetitive task of embroidery with TV watching to fuse cosplay with another leisure circuit. Ivy described a similar practice fusion. She lets her favorite TV shows “pile up” on her DVR and catches up on them during crafting.

Cosplay practices can also be bundled with work circuits. For instance, hunting for costume source materials fills dead time at work: “When not making rounds [at work] . . . I do cosplay things to pass time and help stay awake” (Emma, Cosplay.com). Moreover, cosplay can become an enjoyable way to simultaneously improve work and leisure competences. A sizable number of cosplayers study or have careers in theater or fashion, furthering cosplay skill and practice overlaps. Sadie, a costume designer for a theater, said her Little Mermaid costume was motivated both by Disney fandom and a desire “to experiment with building better bustles for work.” Slightly tweaking her cosplay practice thus helps build work-related competence. Hank expressed a more intricate fusion of work and leisure through approaching cosplay as an “extremely enjoyable way to diversify my portfolio” for his work as a theater costume designer. Sadie and Hank use cosplay to make learning work competence playful (Press and Arnould 2011), soothing the guilt of spending too much time and money on leisure. Fusing leisure and work can even change career aspirations. Garret (Cosplay.com) plans “to go back to school and get a college diploma in fashion arts . . . so I can turn my love of making things into a career.” Even so, possibilities for work-leisure fusions become scarce for those with careers outside of aesthetics or crafts.

There are, of course, limits to breaking down a cosplay project and bundling it with other circuits, as Mandy’s remark about the sewing machine suggests. Crucial phases necessitate concentration, time, and spatially bound tools. Synergizing work and cosplay practices also has limits, as the combination can erode cosplay enjoyment. For example, Casey, a wardrobe assistant, lamented: “I sew all day at work, so the last thing I want to do when I get home is sew some more.” Casey’s narrative illustrates that leisure needs to maintain a proper emotional distance from work to remain fulfilling (Rojek 2010). We also stress that modularization mostly relates to costume crafting. Other than the aforementioned exposure opportunists, we saw scant evidence of committed cosplayers modularizing practices of performing in costume. Maria was an exception, as she told us that coming to San Diego Comic-Con also allowed her to “put [herself] out there as an actor.”

Reinforcement: Managing Practice Boundaries

Cosplayers employ organizing principles to reinforce boundaries between leisure and other practice circuits. The process of reinforcement involves adhering to moral allocation principles, separating the cosplay practice circuit, tempering competitiveness, and engaging in practice advocacy.

Adhering to Moral Allocation Principles. Using moral allocation principles for money and time use allows cosplayers to manage boundaries between leisure and other practice circuits, thereby addressing the challenges of making ends meet and their increasing anxiety over time use. Pred (1981) wrote that dominant projects, such as work and family, provide foundational structures to other life practices. Carl reflected this idea, evoking a typically Western framing of playful leisure being surplus time from work and family practices (Rojek 2010): “Family is the most important thing, and the job is what supports the family. [Cosplay] is the recreational part.”

Dividing money among practice circuits brings clarity to different regimes of economic capital. Reily (Cosplay.com) described her approach: “I divide my paycheck into separate sections: my rent, my school, my spendy money (which normally goes to cosplay)... So I just let it add up.” Once her necessities are covered, additional gains go to the cosplay circuit. Kat (Cosplay.com)

displayed the “leisure as surplus” mentality in managing overtime compensation: “I work by hourly so any time I have overtime, I put that money directly into a separate account that is used only for cosplay related purchases. It helps me keep track of exactly how much I spend per costume.”

Cosplayers structure their time use in a similar way. However, because cons are held at fixed times, individuals have less flexibility in time allocations. Securing vacation time between early spring and late fall when big cons are held (“con season”) is then crucial: “I take both Friday and Monday off for a con, so each convention I go to takes 2 days of vacation time. Vacation time gets spent pretty quickly” (Bernard, Cosplay.com). Putting in vacation requests in advance creates a moral justification for the requests. For instance, Sam accrues overtime hours to bolster his bargaining position when asking for days off: “I put in enough hours to deserve the time off, so I don’t feel guilty using sick days for conventions.”

Separating the Cosplay Practice Circuit. Communal consumers are known to appropriate alternative identities that draw from the context’s symbolic lore (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002). Cosplay’s ludic masquerading and geek-culture lore readily lend themselves to devising alternative identities and personas. These identities create a sense of mystique and artistic prestige around the practice. In online interaction, they also mitigate fears of boundary spillages between leisure and other practice circuits. Hanna (Cosplay.com) explained: “I’ve taken extra precaution by keeping my cosplay life separate from my real life... I’ve made a separate Facebook account for cosplay... When being interviewed and your possible future employer asks for your hobbies, just say that you sew things.” In typical ludic fashion, Hanna contrasts the circuits of cosplay and “real life” and expresses a desire to separate cosplay and real-life identities. This is especially important for older consumers with careers. To support persona separation and further insulate leisure identities, some cosplayers even choose characters that conceal all facial features. Separation of identities can also be a security measure. Carol, whose harassment case we noted earlier, meticulously scrubbed all online information linking her cosplay persona and her real name.

Following Goffman (1959), maintaining fulfillment in a stigmatized activity like cosplay necessitates extensive backstage labor on the part of cosplayers to manage frontstage audiences and outsiders’ exposure to their communal engagement. Artist personas give cosplayers agency over practice performances by channeling status gains into virtual entities, soothing fears of leisure identity spillages. Cosplayers often thus resist the communal practice’s identity colonization (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) in an effort to maintain its ludic meaning.

Tempering Competitive Impulses. Status gains are usually seen as an important end in communal engagement (Schau et al. 2009; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). However, our analysis found that fears of jeopardizing long-term practice enjoyment prompted many to routinely ignore attainable status gains. Serena (Cosplay.com) affirmed these fears:

> I am one of those cosplayers who make their own stuff and won’t accept commissions, although I’ve had dozens of strangers at conventions ask me to. First of all, I have a normal 40-hour-per-week job - actually, career in science - that has nothing remotely to do with costuming or cosplay. I costume and cosplay because it is my favorite hobby, and I hesitate to turn my hobbies into second jobs. I work on things when I’m in the mood to, and I know that if I’m not excited about working on a new, unique project, I’ll be bored and even the prospect of being paid won’t tempt me to get anything done on it. That being said, I do do custom costume pieces for 3-4 select “clients” who are good friends... But commissioning for the general public? Eeeek, no thanks.

Commission requests are a noteworthy acknowledgment of competence and have significant status value within the community. However, Serena rejects opportunities to pursue these gains. As Lastowka (2009) wrote, ludic practices are often kept purposefully inefficient to maintain their contrasting emotional ends vis-à-vis the efficient, bureaucratic, and market-driven practices of work. For Serena, pursuing status and market opportunities would compromise cosplay’s meaning as a ludic release from the rigors of her work life and turn it into “a second job.” To protect their practice enjoyment, cosplayers with established communal standing were more likely to resist such opportunities. Carol, a sought-after commission worker, limits her intake of commission projects, as “[cosplay] is still just something that I love as a hobby.” Lee-Ann, also an entrepreneurial cosplayer, described her recent costume as a departure from status chasing in favor of intrinsic joy: “This [costume] is something I did just for me, I really wanted to do it and I loved working on it.”

Engaging in Practice Advocacy. Kozinets (2001) found that Trekkies periodically engaged in charity work at blood drives and charity auctions to legitimize their stigmatized fan activity. We similarly encountered multiple cosplay groups explicitly geared toward charity ventures—most notably, the *Star Wars*–themed 501st legion with 6,000 worldwide members. We also encountered purposeful cosplay advocacy that sought to challenge outsider perceptions of cosplay. The general audience and mainstream media often describe cosplay as childish, escapist, and overtly sexualized. Cosplayers counter these views by emphasizing craft and artistry, as in this interview for

Nerdbastards.com (2014) with Yaya Han, one of the world's most famous cosplayers:

> Interviewer: What's one thing that you'd like people to appreciate/understand about cosplay?
>
> Yaya Han: Cosplay is an art form. A unique blend between fan expression and creativity. Many cosplayers create jaw-dropping, professional looking costumes and photos as pure hobbyists. It's the passion and love for the character that drives them. I would like to see more understanding and appreciation for that.

Senior cosplayers we interacted with during our fieldwork displayed similar readiness to challenge perceptions. In con panel discussions that worked as Q&A sessions for novices, Carol, Hank, Lee-Ann, Ivy, and Selina all took the stage, praising cosplay as a "fulfilling," "healthy," "social," and "creative" hobby for adults and children alike. We also saw multiple discussion threads on Cosplay.com advising on how to convince parents or friends that cosplay is a worthwhile activity. These support the idea that shaping external perceptions would allow for more guilt-free practice engagement.

Perceptions of cosplay are indeed improving. Carl, whose cosplay engagement spans four decades, said he has witnessed a notable change in general audience reactions: "When I was younger, if you wore a *Star Trek* uniform to a *Star Trek* convention, you were totally ostracized. Now, you have, in this con alone, 25,000 people. That's acceptance."

Cosplayers, together with organizers, also have taken a more proactive approach to improving ludic experiences at cons. Many cons now put up posters stating, "Cosplay is not consent," as well as encourage guests to ask for permission before taking photos and to respect personal space. Cosplay.com members additionally urge vigilant harassment intervention at cons.

Collaboration: Joint Projects and Leveraging the Communal Hybrid Economy

Cosplayers often specialize in craft skills, which can revolve around a type of prop, clothing, material, or means of production, including sword and wig making, metal work, and leatherwear construction. Specialization benefits both the community and individual cosplayers, weaving individual competences and materials into practice networks (Shove et al. 2012) that produce collaboration opportunities in the communal hybrid economy (Scaraboto 2015) while granting status to individuals.

Networking Practice Elements. Cosplayers recruit fellow practitioners to improve project outcomes, as Tina testified: "My friend actually helped me. She made the yellow part, the headband; the rest of it I made." Cosplayers also infuse practice circuits with sharing and using other cosplayers' tools and materials. Tamara frequently lends her glue gun to friends, while Violet often uses her friends' accessories: "My friend bought a wig and I can use it."

When friends are unable to help, cosplayers turn to the community at large. For instance, cosplayers often use existing tutorials to learn competences, thus mitigating temporal and monetary costs. Tanya often uses tutorials by famous cosplayers, as "a lot of them will show their process [of making costumes] and it's cool to see how they do it . . . rather than learn everything completely from scratch." Cosplayers also make open calls for help within the community. Our netnographic fieldwork found examples of tool loan and service bartering, queries for carpooling and hotel room sharing, preplanning con skits and group photo shoots, organizing pooled material procurements for scale benefits, and buying and selling secondhand materials to save on costs. The availability of these communal options influences project planning. Mia noted monetary benefits from communal sourcing: "I especially love buying wigs from fellow [Cosplay.com] members because a lot of the times they bought it new and didn't like the color or something . . . you can get high quality things for a really good price." Mia's story shows that prior ownership by and seller descriptions from fellow cosplayers act as social proof of the material's quality, and thus reduce buyers' purchase risks. Sellers benefit by recuperating costs from previous projects and funneling them into future ones, as described in this excerpt from the "cosplay selling guide" on eBay.com:

> As an avid cosplayer, I am always putting together new costumes for cosplaying at conventions. However, this does mean that some of my costumes are older and could use selling. Usually I will hang onto a costume for a few years but after a while, it would be nice to get some of the money back that I spent on the costume in the beginning. This does not mean I have sold all of my costumes – on the contrary, most have sentimental value and represent something I put a lot of work into creating. So the biggest rule of selling a costume on eBay is to be 100% positive you won't regret losing it.

All materials don't enjoy equal liquidity within the communal market. Wigs and props are in high demand, but used costumes less so, in a community that grants status from craft acumen. Costumes are thus taken to noncommunal marketplaces like eBay to maximize returns. Personally meaningful items are considered off-limits for economic capital conversion, as the preceding excerpt illustrates. Marcelo (Cosplay.com) echoed this sentiment: "I only sell a costume when I *know* I'm not going to wear it again, otherwise you could be wasting on money opportunities."

Cosplay's emphasis on novelty creates a short shelf life for costumes and encourages constant productivity, which benefits the active secondhand market. Moreover, selling unneeded materials solves problems relating to cosplay materials' colonizing presence at home. Channeling

recuperated costs into new projects also links back to the moral allocation principles described earlier.

Those with time constraints or insufficient crafting skills may opt to commission large portions of a costume or even a full one from the communal market. Rob explained this approach: "If it's something you *know* you will have trouble doing, and will go through expensive trial and error in making, it's best to commission." For the one taking on the job, commission work provides an avenue for building status (costumers are expected to be credited for their work) and a secondary income: "The ones that [commission] as a mix of hobby and side money actually make some pretty decent cash for basically just putzing around with art and craft supplies while they watch TV" (Helen, Cosplay.com). Cosplayers tend to keep the commission money they make within the cosplay practice circuit, affirming the moral allocation principle once again. Clark (Cosplay.com) recounted: "In order to go to more than just two cons a year, I get artist alley tables and sell my [cosplay] wares. I make back my expenses in a day or two, it's a win-win." For Karen (Cosplay.com), commissioning is central to maintaining cosplay engagement:

> I'm trained as a teacher, but due to some crazy allergies that popped up while off having a baby, I won't be able to go back to that. Cosplay taught me that I'm REALLY good at sewing, and that I love it. I'll be using my sewing skills to make money for the rest of my life, most likely. Is it annoying sometimes? You bet. But it's something I'm good at and it doesn't require me to put my kids in daycare... As long as I can make enough money to pay for my own cosplay supplies, some private lessons for the kids, and our vacation fund, I'll be satisfied.

Karen's conversion of her cosplay-related competence to economic capital has become central to supporting her cosplay engagement as well as to her family practices. However, extensive commissioning may introduce ambivalence to ludic sensations, as exemplified by Karen sometimes finding her favorite hobby annoying.

Collaborative Status Gains. Commissioning lends itself to collaborative status-building arrangements that are commonly motivated by crafting difficulties. Cosplayers often commission key components from more skilled craftsmen. Maria described her arrangement:

> I actually commission because I am terrible at actual construction, but I work with the people that I commission very closely... That's how I managed to get my badge [to San Diego Comic-Con], because the costume maker, she got a professional badge and she allowed me to go because I'm a representation of her work. I mean, that's her business. Her business is making costumes. I definitely tell people, I give credit where credit is due... I'm more of an idea maker than an actual builder. I just recognize that I can't sew, and I can't really build things really well. And if I try, it won't come out as well; it will take more time and more energy and more resources than if I just had somebody who knew what they were doing do it in the first place. So, it gives them business and connects me with some really cool people, and it allows me to not get frustrated and waste a bunch of time and money.

Maria purposefully pursues recognition as a performer, as shown by her earlier assertion that she was the first to cosplay certain characters in the US con circuit. She acknowledges that her crafting competence has plateaued, which conflicts with her ambition. She fears pushing through the plateau would further compromise her cosplay enjoyment and waste resources. Maria and the commission builder mutually benefit from their arrangement: Maria debuts a new outfit for communal attention, and the costumer gains recognition for her crafting competence. While status gains drive the arrangement, Maria's account shows a desire to avoid compromised emotional ends. Given cosplay's emphasis on craft, those who commission are expected to participate in the process. Maria was sure to note that she influenced the project with her own ideas, while giving full credit for the work to the costumer.

Communal social capital facilitates finding mutually advantageous collaboration opportunities (Arsel and Thompson 2011). For example, Roxanne was one of the few cosplayers we encountered who openly embraced the title of professional cosplayer. She revealed that some of the recent outfits she wore were given to her by aspiring costume builders in hopes of exposure, an arrangement she described as mentorship.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has found communal consumption highly conducive to ludic experiences and its related sensations of antistructural communion, social bonding, and fun (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Celsi et al. 1993; Holt 1995; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). However, the orchestration of ludic consumption experiences has been defined as a marketer purview (Arnould and Price 1993; Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry 1998; Tumbat and Belk 2013), while consumers' own facilitation and potential difficulties in doing so have been ignored. Our ethnographic inquiry of cosplay provides a detailed account of how consumers produce and maintain ludic communal experiences within a servicescape, wherein marketers provide limited facilitation.

Prototypical descriptions of play define it as a free, social, unproductive, and voluntary activity done for its "own sake" in order to achieve a leisurely escape from everyday concerns (Caillois 1961; Grayson 1999; Huizinga 1949). These elements were undeniably apparent in many cosplayers' stories; cosplay revealed itself to be an emotionally rewarding ludic activity that combines intrinsically

pleasurable costume crafting with joyous communal masquerading. However, cosplayers' ludic experiences were intermittent, irregular, and never guaranteed. More importantly, they were the result of hard work and entailed tradeoffs between various ludic ends. Our findings thus depart from previous studies that presented ludic experiences as inherent, ubiquitous, and even inevitable outcomes of communal consumption (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002).

The tradeoffs and threats to ludic experiences grew with deepening engagement in cosplay. Through the exploration of these, we clarified the role of various instrumental costs to communal consumption, which have received little attention in previous research (Celsi et al. 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Belk and Costa's (1998) study of Mountain Man Rendezvous events provides an appropriate comparison study, given the contextual similarities. Like cosplayers, mountain men value homemade costumes and ludic performances at their respective "cons," the rendezvous. Belk and Costa briefly note the growing material and temporal demands of communal engagement, but treat them largely as inevitable or nominal consequences. In our context, mounting instrumental costs compromised ludic experiences in the short term and threatened engagement in the long term. For example, costume crafting was central to cosplay's ludic appeal, but frequently led to time crunches, frustrating failures, various tensions in domestic settings, and even fear of stigmatization, which further complicated finding the right play mood. Similarly, status and peer recognition are usually considered inherent to the appeal of both play and communal consumption (Belk and Costa 1998; Huizinga 1949; Schau et al. 2009; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Yet in our context, status gains could actually compromise ludic enjoyment by introducing additional communal duties, threatening leisure volition, and attracting hostile communal commentary.

Mounting instrumental costs even caused some to abandon cosplay altogether. This allowed us to provide a novel perspective on why consumers leave consumption communities. Previous works have identified inevitable life transitions (Goulding et al. 2002; Thornton 1996), the loss of consumption practices' identity value (Arsel and Thompson 2011; McAlexander et al. 2014), and negative shifts in communal dynamics (Muñiz and Schau 2005; Parmentier and Fischer 2015) as primary reasons for leaving. Though these three elements were evident in our cosplayers' stories, we believe the decisions to move away from cosplay were primarily motivated by pervasive practice misalignments that resulted from growing instrumental costs. In other words, ludic experiences were becoming more and more unattainable. Our findings answer the call made by Woermann and Rokka (2015), who urged researchers to pay more attention to the consequences of practice alignment and misalignment, as they saw these dynamics as integral to understanding how consumption practices remain attractive to consumers.

To regain their ludic sensations and maintain communal engagements, cosplayers utilized a set of dispersed practices we call modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration. Again, these responses entail tradeoffs between various ludic ends. Modularization means compromising leisure's important spatiotemporal separation from work and family practices to maintain project momentum. Reinforcement entails avoiding clearly attainable status gains and skill recognition to maintain play volition and leisure separation. Collaboration introduces entrepreneurial market rationality—anathema to prototypical ludic experiences (Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1949)—to the practice to protect its long-term viability. The latter three responses extend previous findings on how consumers shape their practice flows to improve their outcomes. For example, similar to our reinforcement response, Arsel and Thompson (2011) showed indie enclaves insulating consumption practices to shield their identities from unflattering hipster associations (see also Kozinets 2001). Our findings on collaboration practices complement studies that present help seeking within a community mostly as a form of soliciting emotional peer support or as proactive practice learning (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Schau et al. 2009). Furthermore, previous research has privileged the role of subcultural and social capital stocks in practice advancement (Kates 2002; Schau et al. 2009; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), yet modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration deemphasize the role of these capitals in practice advancement, opening up the possibility for new pursuits within the community.

The three responses also reaffirm the importance of a practice's teleoaffective structure (Schatzki 2002) or meaning (Shove et al. 2012) in driving practice realignment by determining "what constitutes a problem and for what reasons this problem needs to be resolved" (Arsel and Bean 2013, 913). Here, we agree with Thompson and Üstüner (2015), who noted that previous studies have overtly detached consumers' volitional communal consumption experiences from other practice circuits, in their case gender role scripts at work and at home. While our analysis is not grounded in sociological circumstances like Thompson and Üstüner's (2015) study, cosplayers' mounting instrumental costs are often inherently linked to domestic practices and boundary issues between leisure and other practice circuits. Solving these problems requires further cross-circuit considerations.

The frequent tradeoffs between ludic elements we have identified reintroduce concerns over play's conceptual murkiness (Grayson 1999). If most of its defining elements can be compromised to some degree, what, in the end, is play? Here, we agree with Malaby's (2009) assertion that contemporary ludic experiences, which he sees as diverging from Huizinga's (1949) and Caillois's (1961) idealized

depictions, are best defined through a disposition toward the indeterminate: “Play becomes an attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account” (206). Despite all the compromises, cosplayers ultimately cherish a sense of expectation and discovery within their practice. For example, for senior cosplayers, the practice has become more serious and rationalized than for novices, yet their experiences retain the important elements of surprise and improvisation.

Our findings also bring new insight to the theorization of value. We extend Schau et al.’s (2009) work that described how continuous learning of community practices expands members’ consumption opportunities with their favorite brands, thereby increasing their use and symbolic value. We have shown that modularization and reinforcement give consumers control over costs and allow them to seek better value through bargain hunting. Collaboration has even more profound value implications, as joint projects give members the opportunity to sell their production to recuperate costs or to pursue time and material savings. These gains could, in turn, be invested into new projects within the communal practice circuit. Collaboration also reduces costs and risks through the availability of secondhand materials that have been “vetted and reviewed” by knowledgeable consumers.

Our study further sheds light on communal hybrid economies and, particularly, how moral relations between exchange forms (e.g., gift giving and selling) are negotiated (Scaraboto 2015). Cosplay’s status logic emphasizes self-crafting as much as possible. However, cosplayers have a shared understanding that costume projects are pursued with mounting material costs and amidst pressures of family support. Awareness of these shared struggles greatly influences the moral structuring of communal exchange forms. For example, selling production “out” from the community is permitted within cosplay, which runs counter to typical findings from communal or subcultural economies (Kozinets 2002; Thornton 1996). Though it conflicts with cosplay’s craft ethos, cosplayers are highly understanding of costume commissioning. It follows that communally shared practice struggles influence the negotiation of commoditization principles—that is, what types of communal production can be bought or sold, and by whom (Schau et al. 2009).

Martin and Schouten (2014) similarly found permissiveness to monetization in the context of Minimoto. We propose that this permissiveness was influenced by shared concerns about the long-term viability of both the practice and the community. Martin and Schouten (2014) noted that building Minimotos entails tradeoffs between adrenaline-filled fun and family safety concerns. Our findings suggest that maintaining specific emotional ends of a practice is central to the process of consumer-driven market emergence.

Last, our findings on the practice of reinforcement provide a novel understanding of the role of social media in consumption community engagement. McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips (2013) found that rising status and growing communal audiences changed fashion bloggers’ expressions from personal to more “detached,” and their professional taste displays to more carefully cultivated blogger personas. They described this as a process of maturation that follows cultural capital accrual. Similar to fashion bloggers, cosplayers cultivate communal followings in the hundreds of thousands and build detached online personas. However, our findings suggest that these personas create a sense of security and control over communal engagement. Directing communal status gains to a virtual identity gives consumers agency in managing the communal activity’s identity colonization (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and maintaining the emotional ends of the practice.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research was conducted in various North American cities and in the specific context of pop culture conventions with relatively young and mostly college-educated consumers. Findings may therefore vary across national, cultural, and, especially, subcultural contexts. We also limited our study’s focus to the instrumental costs hampering ludic consumption experiences. We feel that expanding the notion of engagement costs and subsequent consumer responses is a high priority for future research. We also believe that such a project would benefit from more sociologically grounded approaches—for example, a comparison of how high-cultural-capital and low-cultural-capital populations’ responses differ (Holt 1997).

While our study found implications for value research, we did not specifically mobilize value as a key concept in our research. We believe that difficulties in maintaining communal engagement combined with value analyses may provide fruitful avenues for future research. On a related note, we conceptualized modularization, reinforcement, and collaboration as dispersed practices likely to be found in other contexts, similar to Arsel and Bean’s work (2013). As considerations of practice boundaries were central to all of these, we believe that our findings may also have great impact on the study of how consumption fields or practices evolve through consumers’ practice innovations. We further believe our article provides new directions for studying consumer entrepreneurship. Most of our informants did not pursue entrepreneurship, but did take opportunities that arose in the community while refraining from professionalizing their hobby for fear of losing practice enjoyment. Fully unpacking this dynamic would be of great benefit to research.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

Both authors were present at the San Diego Comic-Con in 2013, when the most substantial data collection took place. The second author conducted individual ethnographic fieldwork at conventions and other cosplay events in Boston and Providence, Rhode Island, at various times during 2014 and 2016. Both authors were involved in continuous netnographic fieldwork from early spring 2013 to early 2016. The dataset consisted of field notes, interview transcripts, pictures, saved online discussions, and numerous secondary materials garnered predominantly from online sources.

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