"Cosplay": Imaginative Self and Performing Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the emerging cosplay subculture in Hong Kong. A quasi-ethnographic approach including participation, observation, photography, and in-depth interviews was employed to understand the underlying motives and experiences of those engaged in cosplay activities. Authenticity, affective attachment, the extended self, and the negotiation of boundaries are also discussed in this article. From this study, it is evident that cosplay can give participants pleasurable experiences, meaningful memories, self-gratification, and personal fulfillment. Through this participatory activity, cosplayers can momentarily

escape from reality and enter into their imaginative world. It is a form of role/identity-transformation from an "ordinary person" to a "super hero," from a "game player" to a "performer," and from "adulthood" to "childhood."

KEYWORDS: Cosplay, imaginative self, identity, subculture, authenticity, fantasy, ethnography

Introduction

Cosplay or *kosupure*[1] is a term that represents the combining of the words for "costume" and "play" or "role-play." There are several versions of how the term "cosplay" became popular and how its culture began. Nevertheless, journalist Nobuyuki Takahashi (founder of Studio Hard Deluxe Inc.) is generally credited for coining this portmanteau word "cosplay" (Lunning, 2006). According to some articles (Yein Jee 2008), the word *kosupure* first appeared in an article Takahaski wrote in the June 1983 issue of *My Anime*, while other anecdotal resources suggest that Takahaski started using *kosupure* in a number of Japanese magazines after he returning from the Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon in 1984.

In regard to the origin of cosplay subculture, it began at the *doujinshi*[2] (amateurish magazines or manga) marketplaces (e.g. Comic Market or Comitek) in the 1970s. Many exhibitionists used cosplay as a tool to promote their *doujinshi*—by role-playing the auspicious characters from the magazine with real-life performers to draw people's attention.

Cosplay in a modern subculturist context is often used to describe the activities of dressing and acting as characters from *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (cartoon animation), *tokusatsu* (special-effect movies or television shows), video games, science fiction/sci-fi, and music groups. Cosplay can be categorized into various genres such as fantasy, cuteness, romance, horror, sci-fi, fetish, gothic, and mythology, with each genre consisting of a wide array of characters. In the 1990s, this subcultural phenomenon became more popular outside Japan, and has sprung up in many parts of Asia, including Hong Kong, Taiwan (Chen 2007), mainland China (*China Today* 2003), the Philippines (*The Manila Times* 2008), Indonesia (Nurul and Handian 2006), and Malaysia. More recently, its meaning has expanded to include almost any type of dressing up outside traditional boundaries. For example, in mainland China, cosplay has even extended its frontiers to historical Chinese drama, Peking Opera, and non-Japanese sci-fi movies (e.g. *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*) (Xiaomi 2006). However, it is important to note that the Lolita[3] subculture is generally not classified as cosplay, simply because Lolita enthusiasts do not imitate and role-play any specific character.

Manga

According to a study reported by Ito in 2002, millions of copies of *manga* (Japanese comics) were sold on a weekly basis and several hundreds of *manga* cafés (*mangakissa*) were operating in Tokyo alone. *Manga* is a huge and lucrative business not only in Japan, but also in many other countries[4] (HKTDC 2006). Other than comic books and cafés, *manga* culture has also had a substantial influence on entertainment (movies, computer games, and television programs) and cosplay activities. Indeed, *manga* is one of the primary sources for cosplay identities: *Gekiga* (e.g. *Ninja Bugeichō*), *shōnen* (e.g. *Dragon Ball*), and *shōjo* (e.g. *Sailor Moon*) are popular character choices among cosplay enthusiasts (Norris 2009). In 2006, Nike Japan tapped into the movement, launching a cosplay advertising campaign to capture young consumers. In its viral video, cosplayers dressed in colorful superhero costumes (Power Rangers) to promote the customized NIKEiD shoes.[5]

Cosplay

In the wake of globalization and technological advancements, the cosplay culture has become increasingly ubiquitous (Napier 2007). For example, in Hong Kong, cosplay activities have grown in popularity and major events (e.g. Asian Game Show or AGS) related to cosplay are widely reported in various media. In 2009, the turnout at Hong Kong's Ani-Com and Game Fair (or HKACG) increased by 5 percent over the previous year, with a record-breaking number of visitors attending by the final day of the event (SCMP 2009). Apart from commercial events and conventions, many non-profit institutions such as universities[6] and colleges have also organized many cosplay events throughout the year. Without a doubt, Japanese cosplay cultures have played a significant and influential role within youth subcultures in Hong Kong.

However, at the present time there is very little research on Asian subcultures in general and cosplay in particular. Many prior research studies have merely focused on Western subcultures such as youth gangs (Cohen 1955), Teddy boys (Jefferson 1976), mods (Cohen 1972), rockers (Cohen 1972; Levine and Stumpf 1983) skinheads (Clarke 1976), punk (Hebdige 1979; Lewis 1988; Moore 2004), rave and straightedge (Wilson and Atkinson 2005), and hip hop (Bennett 1999a, b; Mitchell 2003). Therefore, we believe that it is worthwhile to explore and examine the emerging subculture of cosplay in Hong Kong.

Tribal Experience: Characteristics of the Cosplay Subculture

Many cosplay enthusiasts tend to form their own communal group(s) or tribe(s) through friends, events, and the Internet/viral communities. Cova (1996: 19) stated that the members of this postmodern community

or tribe "...can be held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs and consumption practices. They exist in no other form but the symbolically and ritually manifested commitment of their members." In other words, tribes or communities are formed and emotionally bonded by their shared experience. They share a sense of belonging, rituals, traditions, and moral responsibility towards each other. In the context of postmodernism, the ideologies and values of tribes are based on their experiences and cultural patterns, rather than merely on their demographic (e.g. social class, gender) or psychographic features (e.g. attitudes, opinions) (Cova and Cova 2002).

However, in cosplay, the image and identity of an individual is never stagnant. It is not uncommon to see many cosplayers move frequently and fluidly between different characters and tribes according to their changing interests and passions. Individuals tend to wear different masks to construct, transform, or reshape their temporary roles or identities over the course of self-formation and transformation.

Maffesoli (1996: 98) posited that a tribe is "without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar; it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favor appearance and form." According to many prior research studies, this tribal/communal experience and consumption can also be observed in cosplaying (Chen 2007) as well as in various other activities such as skydiving (Celsi *et al.* 1993), water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), kayaking (Hopkinson and Davashish 1999), Harley bike riding (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and backpacking (Shaffer 2004).

In order to understand the significance of the cosplay subculture in Hong Kong, it is important to uncover the underlying motives and experiences of cosplay enthusiasts toward its consumption and production.

Cosplayer: Consumer/Imitator and Producer/Performer

According to Duchesne (2005: 18), "...fandom is a particular kind of performance that many members boldly explore, playing with identity and finding their own layers of meaning." Fiske (1992) described fan activities as "(semiotic) productivity and participation." In other words, fans are consumers as well as producers of culture with symbolic meaning. As Henry Jenkins (1991) revealed in his study, many American fans of science fiction actively reimagined and even rewrote the storyline of television programs in order to claim their own subcultural ownership.

In a participatory culture such as cosplay, many fanatic enthusiasts (*otaku*) select a specific character because of their fondness for the character's attitudes and persona. Cosplaying their favorite character (or heroine, idol, or icon) is a way of expressing their fandom and passion. It is not a nonsensical or meaningless activity, but a form of personal

expression and manifestation that exists outside of acceptable norms of mainstream culture (Winge 2006). Cosplay enables enthusiasts to imitate the personas of their adored characters and to re-create an imaginative self in reality. Indeed, it is a fun and playful act of fancy, a fluidity of identification, and self-objectification of a kind that many people are unlikely to attain in everyday life.

In this respect, cosplay is not a simple act, nor an ordinary act of consumption. It is a theatrical performance with high-involvement consumption. Individuals may spend a considerable amount of time choosing their favorite character, and the process becomes a complex interplay with many factors. Some cosplayers choose certain characters because of the role and personality such characters signify; while others do so because the physical appearance of the character may match their own physique. With such perspectives, the following questions were raised in this study: how does a cosplayer engage and emulate her/his character? What types of performance or replication would be considered authentic? And what are the differences between authenticity and inauthenticity?

Transformation of Self and Negotiation of Boundaries

Cosplay is a process of converting the two-dimensional (2D) image/fantasy from a page of *manga*, a screen of *anime*, or any 2D character to a three-dimensional (3D) living character in real time. Cosplay provides young people with dreams, pleasures, romances, and fantasies that cannot be fulfilled or cannot materialize in their daily lives. According to several studies (Napier 2007; *The Manila Times* 2008), it is evident that cosplaying provides performers with a momentary escape from the stresses and monotony of ordinary life; and allows them to enter into a whimsical dream of fantasy or childhood. Benesh-Liu (2007) stated that cosplaying can transform mundane surroundings into a surreal tableau. Participants are constantly exchanging and negotiating the boundaries of "affective play" between "inner" and "outer" or between what is "real" (the real self) and what is "fantasy" (the imaginative self) (Grossberg 1992). In other words, the identification of the cosplayers is not stagnant; it often shifts and evolves over the course of time without a fixed boundary.

It is worthwhile to note that digital games, reality shows (e.g. *Extreme Makeover*), and cosplay share similarities. For example, digital game players have the opportunity to escape from reality as they engage in fantasy role-playing games (FRPGs) by entering into an imaginative cyber world (McBirney 2004; Park *et al.* 2007). This role-playing is a unique mode of self-transformation and symbolic replication. As Crawford and Rutter (2007: 276) put it, "Digital games frequently allow gamers to play with their identities and to imagine themselves

in different social and/or fantastic situations." On the other hand, the reality show is a process of transforming dreams, ideals, or fantasies into a physical reality. Indeed, enthusiasts are often in the process of challenging and negotiating the normative tenets of the state. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between reality and fantasy or the real/actual self and the imaginative/ideal self in the context of cosplay. In other words, how do cosplayers negotiate the boundaries between these binary opposites?

Affective Performance and Engagement

It is evident that cosplay has been highly stigmatized or stereotyped by many people in Asia. Mixed comments and criticisms are often heard from the public (especially from the parents of cosplayers) due to the obvious sexual undertones (e.g. erotic connotations and cross-dressing) elicited by specific characters chosen for imitation. Some social critics have harshly criticized this subculture as being an overly expensive, silly, meaningless, and unconstructive activity practiced by the young. Some have even suggested that cosplay should be viewed as an abbreviation of "cost" and "play."

The cosplayer perceives the phenomenon in a very different way. According to a study conducted in Japan between 2000 and 2003 (Daliot-Bul, 2009), there was a clear indication that cosplayers viewed their involvement with this subculture as the most meaningful and important endeavor in which they could be involved.[7]

In general, cosplay enthusiasts attempt to produce a fantasy and bring their favorite character to real life (Chen 2007). They then work to express complete devotion towards their beloved avatar/character (icon, hero, villain) and the narrative. In order to replicate and perfect an ideal "theatrical" self and to re-create the scenes, they spend substantial amounts of time and money in meticulous attention to every detail—the craftsmanship of extravagant and elaborate costumes, props, hair, and makeup (Li 2008). The emphasis is on capturing the specific look of a character rather than on comfort—in some cases, performers cannot lift up their arms or move freely in their costumes.

At the same time, they also learn signature poses and dialogue for their performances (Wong 2008). The public venues where many cosplayers display and manifest their idealized characters include posing and performing at an anime expos or comics conventions, strolling the high streets and/or parading around in the public areas. Grossberg (1996: 56–7) stated that, "Affect is closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life... different affective relations inflect meanings and pleasures in very different ways." Achieving an accurate depiction and embodiment of their chosen character (facial and bodily expressions and appropriate postures) is of the utmost importance to the performers and spectators alike.

However, the level of commitment, engagement, and involvement of every individual (both cosplayers/performers and onlookers/observers) could vary from absolute to partial to negligible, or from sincere to cynical. Some observers find cosplay performances fascinating, while others see the experience as "weird and creepy."

Research Methodology

A quasi-ethnographic approach was used to examine and understand the cosplayers' behavior and experiences. This method was deemed to be the most suitable approach for the present study because ethnographers can gain an insider's view through interviews and observations. They live among the informants, learn their language, and participate in their everyday activities.

In order to gain a close and intimate view of the subculture, one of the authors not only observed cosplay activity but also cosplayed a character in the AGS. Through direct participation, the ethnographer experienced, mingled, and interacted with cosplay enthusiasts in real time to gain a further understanding of the inner workings of this changing subculture. As Arnould and Wallendorf (1994: 486) said, "Rather than asking people to comment about what they think they usually do or say,...ethnographers prefer to observe them doing it;...ethnographers observe actual people's behaviour in real time; and rather than asking respondents to generalize about their behaviour as in survey research, ethnographers record the particulars of naturally occurring behaviours and conversations." Apart from participation and observation, ethnographic photography was also used to capture the visual richness and construct the meanings of cosplay. As Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) pointed out, photographs and video recordings can serve as mechanical observations to illustrate the temporal flow of activities, the dramaturgy of expressions, and the visualization of description. In addition, data triangulation (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, daily observations, video recordings, and field notes) was employed to offer diverse perspectives and to increase the validity and reliability of all of the data that had been collected (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Cosplay informants were primarily recruited from a university campus, cosplay events, and forums. A total of fifteen informants participated in this study, responding to two types of interview (see Table 1). In-depth interviews were conducted with three female informants, and the duration of these extensive interviews was more than one hour. McCracken (1988: 9) stated in *The Long Interview: Qualitative Research Methods* that, "The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory... The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world." As for the casual interviews, twelve informants

Table 1
Summary of the informants' profiles.

Pseudonym	Occupation	Type	Sex	Age	Duration of interest	Method of interview
Pauline	Student	Cosplayer	F	23	—	In-depth interview
Chelsea	Caricaturist	Cosplayer	F	21	8 years	In-depth interview
Po Yin	Student	Cosplayer	F	16	4 years	In-depth interview
Keung	—	Cosplayer	M	—	—	Casual interview
Joyce	Student	Cosplayer	F	23	—	Casual interview
Kei Fan	—	Cosplayer	F	—	—	Casual interview
Catherine	—	Cosplayer	F	—	—	Casual interview
Rosy Cat	—	Cosplayer	F	—	—	Casual interview
Tam Wing	—	Cosplayer	M	23	—	Casual interview
Andrea (co-author)	—	Cosplayer	F	23	First time	Casual interview
Michelle	—	Cosplayer	F	20	4 years	Casual interview
Jessica	Student	Cosplayer	F	—	—	Casual interview
Ivy	—	—	F	—	—	Internet—Cosplay forum
Ada	—	—	F	—	—	Internet—Cosplay forum
Shin	—	—	F	—	—	Internet—Cosplay forum

(two males and ten females) were solicited through cosplay events and the viral community (e.g. cosplay blogs, forums, and online chat sites).

Level of Engagement

Cosplay is about simulation, role-playing, and performance. Cosplay enthusiasts pay enormous attention to both verbal and non-verbal

expression, and meticulous focus on the costume, image, and persona of their chosen character. Brake (1985) asserted that to perform an ideal/desired identity, participants pursue specific styles of possessions, gait, posture, expression, and argot. A cosplay performance also demonstrates the degree to which a participant is committed to a group in general and to a character in particular. Cosplayers must fervently believe in the role that they are playing. Otherwise, their act or performance will become a form of self-deception and be considered inauthentic or non-genuine.

Our study found that cosplayers did not necessarily share the same interests, motives, or experiences. The level of engagement and the degree of commitment varied among the cosplayers. Newcomers may find it difficult to engage in this activity if they do not have enough confidence, passion, enthusiasm, guidance, and support. For example, Andrea (our participant ethnographer) felt uneasy and nervous when she dressed in a Sailor Moon outfit to perform in the Asian Game Show. It was her first ever cosplay performance.

> Andrea: I went to the venue pretty early in the morning to familiarize myself with the environment... While I was waiting for Pauline [her friend who has cosplayed for a number of years] to bring me a costume, I felt anxious and uneasy. Finally, she arrived at the venue around four o'clock in the afternoon. I got the clothes from her and started queuing outside the dressing room...then I felt even more nervous because I saw many cosplayers dressed in elaborate costumes with extraordinary props and theatrical hairstyles and makeup. Then I began to worry about my first performance... "Am I going to perform well?," "Do I look like a real cosplayer?," "What am I going to do?"...all of a sudden, I felt like an idiot...like a ballet dancer but one who knew nothing about the basic positions and movements.

It was obvious that Andrea was a beginner or novice. She did not know much about cosplay and was not fully prepared for the performance. During the interview, Pauline and Chelsea tried to tell Andrea about a popular visual style in Japan.

> Chelsea: It is about rock bands...they dress in an extraordinary way. They wear heavy makeup...[and have] smoky eyes, a white face, and a guitar. The primary goal is to look like Westerners.

> Andrea: Is it a look like NaNa? [She only knew about the NaNa style/look.]

> Chelsea: Similar, but not really...

> Pauline: Have you heard about X-Japan?

> Chelsea: My God...X-Japan is too old...

Pauline: Then, what about Miyavi? Luna Sea?

Andrea: Um...I have not heard about them!

Pauline: They have been to Hong Kong. If you don't know who they are...then never mind!

Andrea admitted, "They had a wonderful conversation on this topic and yet I felt like an outsider. I almost kept silent most of the time. At that moment, I clearly knew that I don't belong to this circle."

According to numerous prior studies conducted by Goffman (1959, 1963) on the presentation of self, and Butler (2004) on the performative act, most people are concerned about how others or significant others perceive them. The degree to which cosplayers see themselves as connected with or separated from others is important. With this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why cosplayers (including Andrea) would want to be accepted and recognized by their friends or fellow members. As Bell (1999: 1) pointed out "belonging" does not just mean "being" but also "longing" for acceptance.
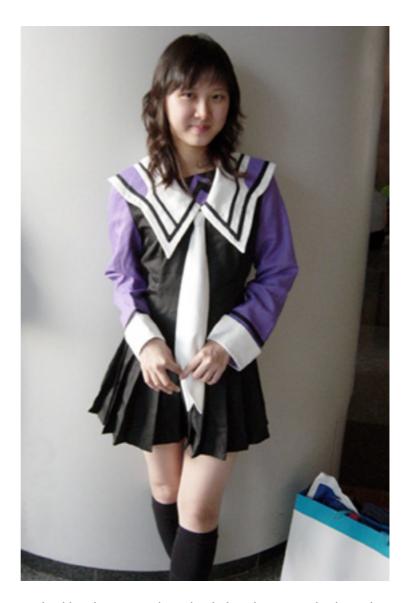
Due to inadequate experience and financial constraints, as was the case with Andrea, many newcomers tend to dress in simple costumes, such as Japanese school niforms (see Figures 1 and 2). Chelsea said, "From my experience and observations, it's much easier for a beginner to imitate and cosplay a character such as Sailor Moon...it's relatively inexpensive...a simple costume—a school uniform...other than that, it's much easier for an individual to perform or role-play a character similar to his or her real identity."

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Commitment and adherence to the original character are important in achieving authenticity. Individuals who mix and merge various styles are considered to be marginal members or novices (Locus 2005). Chelsea is a part-time caricaturist. A cosplayer from the age of thirteen, she behaved and talked like a professional cosplayer and was able to share substantial amounts of information and experiences with other fellow cosplayers.

Chelsea: It's not difficult to tell who is a real cosplayer and who is not. The most obvious indicator is that their costumes do not match the original character in terms of style and color. I saw a cosplayer even wearing sneakers with an ancient outfit. Some of them are not neat and tidy. In my opinion, they should clean and iron their clothes before they cosplay the character. In addition, some cosplayers just sit there or walk back and forth across the venue without role-playing or performing like their chosen character. They only enjoy being there. To me, authentic cosplayers

Figure 1
Cosplayer dressed in a Japanese high school uniform.

should at least wear the right clothes...be neat and tidy...and engage and immerse themselves completely in the performance.

In other words, authentic cosplayers should display interest, affection, and involvement. This opinion was shared by several other cosplayers.

Rosy Cat: Some people don't take it seriously. For example, some cosplayers do not wear a wig to match the hair color of the original character. In some cases, I don't even recognize their chosen character, and this is not professional.

Figure 2
Cosplayers posing for photos at the HKACG.

Ivy: Some people are superficial and insincere. They like to cosplay because they think this is a trend. I don't think they really understand what cosplay is. Some of them may twist the temperament of the role. For example, the original role is supposed to be cool, but then they turn out to be frivolous. More importantly, they should role-play and behave in a decent and appropriate manner without bringing any degrading and shameful act upon the character.

Ada: If cosplayers choose not to wear a wig or color-matching contact lenses, or use different colors for their costume, it is an incomplete look.

> Shin: I think cosplayers who only want to show off by wearing conspicuous costumes without knowing anything about the role are inauthentic cosplayers.

> Tam Wing: I think Lolita and Goths are not cosplayers. They only want to have their pictures taken.

Many prior researchers (Kozinets 2002; Leigh *et al.* 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) have stated that authenticity plays a central role within every subculture and community. Authenticity is a manifestation of what is genuine or real. It is evident that staying "in character" was a primary criterion of authenticity for many cosplay enthusiasts. In the present study, two types of authenticity were identified—visual/concrete and narrative/abstract. Visual authenticity is directly related to physical attributes such as costumes, props, hairstyles, and makeup, whereas narrative authenticity is closely linked to mimetic attributes such as verbal, bodily, and facial expression. Both physical and mimetic attributes play a significant role in shaping and forming the authenticity of a cosplay character (see Figures 3 and 4).

Affective Attachment and Extended Self

Many long-time cosplayers have role-played a wide array of characters and have accumulated a considerable collection of costumes and props over the years. It was clear that several participants were emotionally and psychologically attached to these items. These costumes and props did not merely enhance their appearance and performance but created many unforgettable, pleasurable, fun, and exciting memories. Due to their strong personal attachment, it is not difficult to understand why some cosplayers do not want to sell or give away their costumes and props.

> Pauline: I have so many costumes sitting in my wardrobe. Honestly, I'm running out of space to keep them. I know some high-school students do not have enough pocket money to spend on new costumes. Many of them probably prefer to purchase through the Internet. However, I don't want to sell mine online because I'm worried that my clothes may end up in a terrible place such as a sex shop...or they may be used by someone with dirty or wicked motives. I would rather sell or give them to someone that I know or trust. If nobody wants them, I would rather toss them.

People are more likely to be attached to objects that are significant to an individual identity. In Peony's case, it is clear that her sense of self is linked with her role-played costumes and props. As Belk (1988: 141)

Figure 3
A cosplayer posing for photos at HKACG.

suggested in his seminal article "Possessions and the Extended Self," "We may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us...we may summarize the major categories of extended self as body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences, and those persons, places, and things to which one feels attached."

However, not all of the cosplayers we talked to had such a strong sense of attachment to their costumes. For example, Jessica (female at AGS) said, "So far, I have cosplayed at least seven times...and this time, my costumes were purchased online. Sometimes, I also re-sell my clothes if I decide not to cosplay the same character anymore."

Figure 4
A cosplayer posing for photos at HKACG

Reasons for Cosplaying: Pleasure, Fulfillment, and Transformation

The reasons for engaging in cosplay varied among the informants. Some of them said that cosplaying was their dream, and gave them pleasure and unforgettable experiences.

Kei Fan: I am so happy because my dream finally came true. When I was young, I always wanted to cosplay different characters.

Catherine: I feel like I have been reincarnated as an animated character such as Sailor Moon after death.

Po Yin: I like to capture the precious moment and share them with my friends on Facebook. I like to see their comments and appreciation...sometimes, it makes me feel good...especially if they like my pictures in terms of the quality of the costume, posture, and expression (Figure 5).

The ritualized practice of posing for photos is a key aspect of cosplay performance. In fact, for a short moment in life, cosplaying can make

Figure 5
Po Yin and her cosplay friends
portraying characters from
"Umineko no Naku Koroni" or
"When the Seagulls Cry" (One
Manga 2012).

the participants feel like a star or celebrity. Simply stated, some cosplayers love dressing up and playing their favorite character, and enjoy the feeling of being on stage and admired by onlookers. Many cosplayers admit that cosplaying is not merely a hobby that they love, but also an outlet for personal expression, performance, and exhibition. They want to be recognized, photographed, and admired. Through photo shoots, they can also capture and record pleasurable, memorable, and meaningful moments for self-enjoyment. They can be described as *tableaux vivants* or "living pictures" (Duchesne 2005).

Keung, a male cosplayer, enjoys the entire process of cosplaying. He said, "It is a challenge for me to produce costumes, props, and hairstyles. I feel tremendous pleasure, fulfillment, and confidence throughout the process."

In many cases, people do not solely cosplay a single character. Their choices are greatly affected by the changes that the cosplay and popular culture have undergone since the last time they participated. In general, some cosplay enthusiasts like to take on the challenge of role-playing different characters according to current trends, personal preferences, interests, and passions, while some other cosplayers prefer to dress in the same character as a group to share joy, express passion, and to support one other. Without a doubt, communal bonding, emotional attachment, and collective memory play a significant role in cosplay activities.

As Po Yin expressed it: "I love cosplay because I have met so many cosplayers through various events, activities, and websites/blogs. We have exchanged information and ideas, shared experiences and enthusiasms, and have supported each other in cosplay performance and costume production. It's absolutely fun to communicate, interact, and mingle with other cosplayers."

Negotiation between Reality and Fantasy

Apart from fulfillment and pleasure, people also use cosplay as a form of escapism. They often negotiate the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In a sense, cosplay is a form of identity-transformation from an "ordinary person" to a "super hero, from a "game player" to a "performer," from "adulthood" to "childhood," and sometimes from "female" to "male" or vice versa (in the case of cross-dressing cosplayers). Through this participatory activity, cosplayers can enter into an imaginative world or into dreamlike states of hyperreality.

Cosplayers told us that they often act and role-play their favorite character in order to fulfill a role that is missing in their regular everyday life.

> Michelle: I have cosplayed for four years. Now, I'm cosplaying a rich girl. Although I'm twenty years old, I can role-play or act like a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old pathetic girl.

> Keung: I want to have a breakthrough and bring excitement to my cosplay. I'm thinking about dressing as a girl similar to Lolita or as a character from a comic called *Princess Princess*.

> Joyce: Every time I put on a cosplay costume, I immediately feel like I'm transformed into a new person. It's kind of an experience of changing my identity.

> Po Yin: Being a cosplayer, I can transform myself into many different characters – a heroine, a cute little girl, or even a beautiful boy (*bishōnen*).[8] I'm no longer a passive reader or video game player. I'm a producer and performer.

It is evident that many cosplayers use different characters to create their imaginative world or a magical realm. Imagination allows them to transform themselves and escape from reality. In other words, they can momentarily leave behind their stresses, burdens, anxieties, boredom, and the disappointments of everyday life and enter into a fantasy environment. For many cosplay enthusiasts, this fleeting/fantasized experience is full of pleasure, self-gratification, and personal fulfillment.

Conclusion

Performing Identity: In Pursuit of Joyfulness in their Imaginative World

To feel "alive" in a mundane society, cosplayers constantly search for a comfortable space in which to express themselves. It is obvious that many cosplayers role-play their beloved characters in order to fulfill

the role/dream that is missing in the real life. Identities, including the imaginative and alternative ones, can create meanings as they perform and consume within specific time and space. Hetherington (1998: 19) describes the performativity of identity as "production of chosen identities takes place through a series of performances, or occasions in which identity processes are played out."

Through cosplay, the identity of a person can be transformed from a high-school student to a hero, from a woman to a beautiful boy, from an ordinary person to a celebrity—this changing identity of performativity is a magic wand or time machine which can offer excitement, contentment, escapism, and empowerment. For example, the following excerpt of an interview clearly demonstrates this point:

> Keung: I don't mind if people misjudge me as gay or abnormal. I know what I'm doing. I only dress like a girl in cosplay events, and my friends understand that I'm cosplaying... By wearing this outfit, I feel like I am the character—sweet and lovely. It gives me a chance to fulfill my dream.

Indeed, cosplay is an identity marker, a visual art form that transforms an individual's identity through the reproduction of an idealized character. Performers may enjoy the pleasurable moments being looked at by spectators, or they may be obsessed in objectifying themselves. In other words, cosplay allows enthusiasts to momentarily change their identity in order to create an exciting, extraordinary, and contented self rather than attempting a real-life transformation. However, it is important to note that cosplay is different than punk, hip hop, and gothic subculture in many ways. Cosplay enthusiasts cannot wear the costume or behave as ACG (animation, comic, and game) characters in everyday life; it is impossible for a cosplayer to wear an extraordinary outfit such as Gundam (animated robot) to go to school or work because it is not practical and the wearer will not be accepted by her/his acquaintances.

Transnational Difference: Japan and Hong Kong

According to many previous studies on consumer socialization (Mascarenhas and Higby 1993; Moschis and Churchill 1987), it is evident that parents, peers, and media were identified as the three major sources of influence on a child's development. More often than not, parental influence could play a significant role on their children's perception towards cosplay. In general, Japanese cosplayers receive much more support and encouragement from their parents than cosplayers in Hong Kong. It is not uncommon to see Japanese parents and children involved in cosplay events and activities (JNTO 2010) because many of these parents grew up with ACG and cosplay culture.

On the other hand, it has been almost impossible for the "co-cosplaying" phenomenon to take hold in Hong Kong, as many Hong

Kong cosplayers barely receive any emotional or financial support from their parents. In many cases, individuals must turn to their friends for help and support. As a result, group performance seems to be more common in Hong Kong cosplay culture than in Japan.

Although the perception of cosplay is varied across nations, cosplay activities have gained a considerable amount of recognition over the course of the last decade in Hong Kong. Many parents now believe that cosplay can divert their children's attention from personal problems, offer a place for freedom of expression, serve as a refuge to escape from reality, and most importantly, help people to build friendship and connect with others who share similar passions and interests.

To conclude, modern consumers often consume different goods and involve in various activities to construct/reconstruct or define/redefine their identity. Cosplay is an ideal means for some youths in Hong Kong to express themselves freely and fluidly without normative restrictions and societal constraints. It is evident that many cosplayers in this study were using a specific character and place to construct their imaginative self. Through cosplay performance, they can momentarily escape from reality and enter into their ideal world. However, failure to utilize cosplay as a respectful and authentic form of (re)presentation may lead to rejection by the public in general and their peers in particular. Therefore, the authenticity of a chosen character and the cosplayers' attitudes and behavior are closely linked to communal recognition and respect.

After all, cosplay is not merely an avenue for displaying and expressing an alternative self, but also a means of building one's trust, social-communicative skills and self-confidence. Cosplayers often share their experiences and support their fellow members in costume production, performances, and masquerade competitions. For many participants in any subculture group, including cosplay, receiving understanding and support is important. In a study entitled "Subcultures of Consumption," Schouten and McAlexander (1995) asserted that, through consumption activities, people form relationships that allow them to meet and mutually support each other. Thus, it is not uncommon to see a cosplayer take pictures with other participants in order to show his/her admiration as well as encouragement (Figure 6).

Notes

1. The word "*kosupure*" in Japanese is derived from "costume" and "play."
2. According to a report (2008) presented by the Comic Market Preparations Committee, "In Japan, *doujinshi* marketplaces are almost independent public events where the focus is on the individuals and groups that publish the *doujinshis*... The scale and function can vary

Figure 6
Posing for photographs and
connecting with a fellow cosplayer.

from anywhere between small gatherings taking place in regular con-
ference spaces where only a few dozen circles (*doujinshi* publish-
ing groups) attend but can be big as the Comic Market where over
35,000 circles congregate."

3. The term Lolita originates from Vladimir Nabakov's novel *Lolita*
(1955), but it has no direct reference to it. The Lolita subculture con-
sists of many subcategories, including Gothic Lolita, Sweet Lolita,
Punk Lolita, Classic Lolita, and many others. Lolita enthusiasts are
often seen in Victorian-style girl's clothing with lots of lace, ribbons,

and frills. For more information about The Lolita subculture, see *"Lolita"—Imaginative Self and Elusive Consumption* by Rahman *et al.* (2011).

4. In China, the output of *anime* and *manga* grew by over 50 percent year-on-year to18 billion renminbi (RMB) in 2005. For more information, see the report entitled "Animation and comics evolve into a serious China industry" published by the *Hong Kong Trade Development Council* (HKTDC 2006).

5. A viral video of "'NIKEiD" shoes can be viewed on Youtube: Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ry41RIkqHA (accessed August 22, 2010).

6. Annual cosplay events organize by various universities and colleges, examples:

   • Art Festival by Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
   • Autumn Festival by City University of Hong Kong.
   • Cosplay Party by Hong Kong University.
   • The Never Ending Vow Chinese University of Hong Kong.
   • Dating at UST by Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.
   • Firefly by Hong Kong Design Institute.

7. According to Daliot-Bul's survey, which was conducted between 2000 and 2003, cosplayers clearly indicated that cosplaying allow them to be transformed—by "becoming the character I love," "becoming someone else," and "changing my mood."

8. It is not uncommon to see female cosplayers dressing as male characters because they can play certain characters (e.g. *bishōne*) better than their male counterparts.

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