Dressing the Part: Communication of Identity in a Performative Fandom Community

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Sarah C. P. Sagardia

December 2017

This dissertation titled

Dressing the Part: Communication of Identity in a Performative Fandom Community

by

SARAH C. P. SAGARDIA

has been approved for

the School of Communication Studies

and the Scripps College of Communication by

Christina S. Beck

Professor of Communication Studies

Scott Titsworth

Dean, Scripps College of Communication

Abstract

SAGARDIA, SARAH C. P., Ph.D., December 2017, Communication Studies

Dressing the Part: Communication of Identity in a Performative Fandom Community

Director of Dissertation: Christina S. Beck

Fandom is an important element of modern life for many individuals, and while some fan practices are not well known within the mainstream of society, they allow their participants to engage in a community of interest and fulfill their own goals as fans. This study explores the fan practice of cosplaying through the lenses of identity and performance to understand cosplayers motivations, processes, and benefits as they move through the planning and execution of their cosplays. How do cosplayers communicate identity through their performances? What motivates fans to engage with the fandom community through cosplay, and what role do these performances play in their experience of fandom? How does participation in cosplaying specifically and the fan community broadly shape fans' conceptions of self and identity? Through in-depth, open-ended respondent interviews, this study explores the relationships between performative fandom, community engagement, and identity work. After inductive analysis of the data, three key themes emerged: cosplay serves as a performance of social engagement, as a performance of the unique self, and as a literal performance for those involved. These themes shed light on the importance of performative fan practices like cosplay for the formation and maintenance of engaged fan communities.

Dedication

For Christian and Audrey, who have been my greatest sources of joy, support, and understanding throughout this process. Thank you for your unwavering faith in my ability, strength, and perseverance, even when I had lost sight of them.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to sincerely thank the members of my committee for their thoughtful,

genuine feedback that helped me refine my work and bring it to a state of completion.

My deepest appreciation goes to Christina Beck – thank you for your untiring assistance

and meticulous eye throughout the process of editing and revisions. I cannot overstate

how much I appreciate your mentorship throughout this entire process. I would also like

to thank the faculty and staff of the Communication Department at the University of

Dayton for their support and understanding as I worked to balance teaching and writing

to finish this project.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

For me, as I suspect is true for many scholars, my research interests often spring

from my own life experiences. I develop questions and make observations about the

groups to which I belong and the activities in which I engage. As a researcher, I am

rarely distanced from or completely objective in approaching topics of interest, as these

interests develop and grow out of personal connections to the topic. Fandom is no

exception to this rule, and, as such, my personal experiences are where this study begins.

I consider myself to be a fan of several varied genres and texts within popular culture; I

have pored over and repeatedly immersed myself in the worlds created by authors like J.

K. Rowling, Suzanne Collins, and Jane Austen; I consider myself a Whovian, following

the storied history of the Doctor and his companions on their adventures through time and

space, and I love the lore of Middle Earth and the robust characters created by J. R. R.

Tolkien. Most of these interests stop at consumption and simple appreciation (or even

love) of the text; however, a few of my interests have grown into something more

involved. It is this kind of fandom, one based on appreciation of the original work but

involving much more active participation on the part of the fan, that I set out to explore

with this study.

Over the past several years, I have engaged in fan groups both to serve my own

interests, engaging with like-minded individuals and exploring texts with which I have a

strong affiliation, and to better understand others' actions and their motivations for

engaging in certain activities. I have viewed fandom from both insider and outsider

subject positions, experiencing the strange looks many outsiders give to fans and trying to moderate my own reactions to others I might find peculiar. Moving between these positions of internal experience and external observation of fan experience, I have become interested in developing a better understanding of how fan groups operate on a more general level. What experiences and motivations are shared among different types of fans? What does it mean to be a fan from the perspective of the fans themselves? How do we communicate our fandom to others?

In this study, I explore these ideas about fandom and identity in the context of the participatory fan activity of cosplaying. I will discuss cosplaying in more detail in later sections, but, at a basic level, cosplaying involves attending fan events dressed in costume and performing as a character from a favorite media text (Brehm-Heeger, 2007; King, 2013; Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Stevens, 2010). Through in-depth respondent interviews, I sought to understand how individuals construct and communicate their identity as fans through performative play at fan community events. In addition to exploring how the fan identity is constructed and performed through cosplaying, I examined how fans make sense of this identity in relation to other important identities and relationships in their lives.

Scholarly Perspectives on Fandom

Scholars have noted the importance of studying fan culture as a response to the taken-for-granted nature of fandom. Most people are fans of something, so we may mistakenly think of fandom as something simple that does not require extensive

exploration (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). However, understanding how and why fans form strong attachments to particular popular culture texts is important because the relationships that fans have with characters, storylines, and other details of the texts that they enjoy help to shape their self-narrativization; fan identities help us make sense of who we are and what we experience more broadly within our lives (Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2011). Fans do not passively and solitarily consume a text; rather, the text enters into relationship with other areas of their lives. Fans come to understand themselves, their relationships, and their own life-world through their relationship with the text.

What is fandom? Although fandom as a topic of academic inquiry is a relatively young concept, the practice of fandom is extremely commonplace (Lewis, 1992). Whether individuals consider themselves fans of an author, a television show, a musical artist, an athletic team, or something else, fandom can be a profoundly important part of one's life. As Duffett (2013) stated, "Media fandom is the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture" (p. 2).

However, a comprehensive definition of fandom is more difficult to pin down. Jenkins (1992b) claimed that fandom is not timeless and stable, but rather "fandom originates as a response to specific historical conditions" (p. 3). While it is likely true that fandom changes in response to historical and cultural shifts, it would be helpful to have a broader conceptualization of what different fandoms at different points in time

3

have in common. Fandom is also about what fans do; "He/she is also a person driven to explore and participate in fannish practices. Fans find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked out as fandom" (Duffett, 2013, p. 18). Under this conception, fans become fans because their identities become intertwined with the enjoyment they get out of participating in fan culture and fan activities.

Harris and Alexander (1998) approached fandom (and media audience activity in general) from the theoretical perspective of Bourdieu, viewing fan activity as a response to cultural, social, and/or class constructs that place individuals in subordinated activities. Harris and Alexander envisioned fandom "…as a spectrum of practices engaged in to develop a sense of personal control or influence over the object of fandom in response to subordinated social status" (p. 42). Fan activity can be a way to claim power. Empowerment, under this conception, comprises one of the main benefits of participation in popular culture. Individuals who occupy subordinated or lower-power positions in other areas of their lives can gain power and recognition for their knowledge and skills within the fan community.

In an article examining the cult fandom surrounding the 1990s television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Bloustein (2002) suggested that one of the things necessary for fandom is a sense of realism; something about the fan text must ring true with the fans' own lives and experiences. However, for shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and other texts within the fantasy genre, fan experiences must correspond to the emotions and

concerns of the fans rather than similarity to real life. Fantasy may actually be what makes these texts "real" for their fans. Although the storyline is sometimes absurd (how many people can relate to problems like living on a hellmouth and fighting demons and vampires?), the trials of growing up and dealing with increasingly more complex social, educational, and relational issues is what resonates with *Buffy* fans. To explain this process of making connections between the fan text and their own experiences, Bloustein drew on Taussig's (1993) concept of mimesis, "the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other" (p. 431).

I would expand on this connection between fandom and mimesis; fandom itself, especially participatory fandom, could be described as a process of mimesis. Not only does the fan identify with the text, but also appropriates, alters, and expands it to draw on the power or magic of the text and bring it into their own life. I argue that performative fandom exemplifies this urge. In entering the narrative world of the fan text, fans can become Other (either through becoming a character or becoming something new in their imitation and appropriation of a story world) through their performances.

Clearly the fandom literature features fandom as an avenue to explore and express personal identity. This identity work can be done both individually and socially, in interaction with other fans. While part of fandom is pursuit and exploration of something that the individual enjoys, it also has more personal implications for identity and sense of self. While the terms fan and enthusiast are not entirely separate, they also may not be accurately treated as synonymous. Duffett (2013) clarified that, while some envision

5

emotional intensity as the primary distinction of fans from other media consumers, this distinction does not work in all cases; not all fans would identify as deeply emotionally engaged with their object of interest. Rather, simply engaging in self-identification *as a fan* encompasses incorporating the role of fan into their personal identity. As Lewis (1992) claimed, "By participating in fandom, fans construct coherent identities for themselves" (p. 3). Through self-selection of and participation in fan culture, fans can work to create and refine their own personal identities.

What level of engagement with a text makes one a fan? Does frequent, repeated consumption of a fan object automatically qualify someone for fandom? Harrington and Bielby (1995) clarified this problematic, stating "we believe that this conceptualization of fan as doer obscures an important dimension of fanship, the acceptance and maintenance of a fan identity. One can do fan activity without being a fan, and vice versa. Fanship is not merely about activity; it involves parallel processes of activity and identity" (p. 86-87). While emotional engagement with the text and active involvement in a fan community both contribute to fan identity, we cannot lay out a simple formula to determine how much of each element is necessary to make someone a fan.

Fantasy and play in fandom. Beyond considering what makes someone a fan, scholars examining fandom have explored the role and function of fantasy within fans' experiences. One theme explored in previous fandom research is the importance of fantasy as a link to childhood. The themes of many popular fan texts, especially within the fantasy genre, represent a return to the freedom to (explore, pretend, play) and

freedom from (stress, responsibility, work) that characterize the life of the child. As

Bloustein (2002) explained, "fantasy is separated out from the everyday, differentiated as

an enclave within life rather than life itself. For the child, however, play and fantasy are

not separate localized experiences. Everything is still linked, transformable and can be

incorporated" (p. 440). Just as children can immerse themselves in imaginative play, fans

return to a sense of childhood freedom by delving into fantasy and the imaginative play

of many fan activities. Jenkins (2006) made a direct connection between fan pursuits and

childhood, writing "[l]ike rebellious children, fans refuse to read by the rules imposed

upon them by the schoolmasters. For the fan, reading becomes a kind of play,

responsible only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of

pleasure" (p. 39). Similarly, Hills (2002) linked fans' performative activities and

concepts of fantasy and play, claiming "[t]hinking of fans as performers means displacing

an emphasis on the text-reader interaction, and focusing instead on the myriad ways that

fans can engage with the textual structures and moments of the favored cult shows,

reactivating these in cultural practices of play" (p. 41). When fans move beyond a simple

consumer relationship with the text, they imaginatively and inventively interact with the

storylines, characters, and fictional worlds represented in the original work.

Criticisms of fandom and fans. Not all analyses of fans and their actions have

focused on the positive and affirming ways they engage with their texts. Outsider

conceptions of fandom have often been far from flattering. To those not within a fan

culture, its members might seem obsessive, socially awkward, or just plain odd (Gray,

Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 1992b, 2006; Porat, 2010). However, outsiders struggle to understand this type of embedded, engaged experience, especially when peering with a judgmental gaze. Schiappa (2008) argued for audience-centered research of popular media texts, looking to those who consume a text in order to properly understand how that text should be interpreted. Similarly, I argue that, in order to properly understand a culture (fan or otherwise), we must look to how those within the culture discuss and make sense of their experiences. Fandom is, in many respects, an important aspect of identity that is at once individual and collective (Stevens, 2010); while we can make overarching observations and assumptions on a group level, we must also consider how unique fans conceptualize and talk about who they are and what they do within their fan role.

     Much previous writing on fandom has addressed the negative view that general society has of fans and their interests. According to Brown (1997), fan consumption of texts and creation of cultural capital within the fan culture offends others because fans use the methods of high culture for the service of low culture. Rather than creating all new methods of evaluating and critiquing fan texts, fans assume the methods used on literature, classical music, theater, and fine arts – careful analysis, scrutiny, rereading, and accumulation of vast generic knowledge. Duffett (2013) also referenced the high culture versus low culture distinction, explaining that the negative image that some outsiders have of fans, as well as the defensiveness with which fans in many cases describe themselves and their interests, is based on the view that fan pursuits (pop culture and

popular media, specifically) are not meaningful or worthwhile. According to Duffett (2013), "[t]he question then becomes a political one: who is in control of deciding what 'trivia' means and what seems trivial?" (p. 39). When fans are denigrated as in pursuit of trivial interests and activities, who gets to decide what is important and what is not? Why are certain activities legitimated and others disparaged? While outsiders have denigrated, disrespected, and belittled the interests and activities of fans as not worthy of time, money, and attention, fans have found identity, solidarity, and community within this disrespected subject position (Jenkins, 1992b). Ideas of taste may always be present in the analysis and judgment of fan groups by others, but this critique may have actually served to bond fans closer together.

One tension within the study of fandom over the years has been the distinction between fandom and fanaticism; indeed, until recent years, the distinction has not always been clear. In an article exploring the use of cultural capital within fan communities, Brown (1997) explained the distinction between fanaticism and fandom, claiming "Rather than blind devotion, fandom is a means of expressing one's sense of self and one's communal relation with others within our complex society" (p. 13). Brown described the oft-held view that fans have an unhealthy fixation on their interest. However, fanatical behavior could signify the complex relationships that we form around fan texts (both with the texts themselves, with other fans, and with ourselves).

Both academic and popular media examinations of fandom have considered the possibilities for antisocial behavior, obsessive tendencies, and other negative social

implications of fandom. Jenson (1992) explored the characterization of fandom as pathology, examining several models of pathological fandom that have been common in the literature, such as the obsessed loner and hysterical crowd tropes. Jenson argued that the two common images of fans – the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd – are based on an implicit critique of modernity. Once a critic categorizes fans in one of these rote ways, they can easily deal with them (and, essentially, write them off). According to Jenson (1992), "[t]he fan-as-pathology model implies that there is a thin line between 'normal' and excessive fandom. This line is crossed if and when the distinctions between reality and fantasy break down. These are the two realms that must remain separate, if the fan is to remain safe and normal" (p. 18). Fandom as deviance or pathology justifies elitist views and values, favoring those who focus their time and attention on "worthwhile" endeavors.

Sandvoss (2005) suggested that the negative representations of the fan in popular media may center on a desire to blame an individual for bad things that happen, rather than considering larger social forces. Attention paid to the potential negative impact of fandom on people like the Columbine High shooters (fans of Marilyn Manson and first-person shooter video games) or Mark David Chapman (John Lennon's killer) highlights an unhealthy obsession with a celebrity or text, overshadowing the average (and much more benign) interests of most fans. Similarly, previous attention to fandom in popular culture has treated fandom as either groups of strange people with an unusual obsession or as charming, clever media users who can do no wrong; fans are either harmless geeks

who need to get a life or dangerous obsessives who can go too far and hurt others (Bailey, 2005). Fans have often been an othered group, viewed and critiqued as weird or abnormal. Jenkins (2006) wrote:

> The fan constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary American culture, one that calls into question the logic by which others order their aesthetic experiences, one that provokes an excessive response from those committed to the interests of textual producers. Fans appear to be frighteningly "out of control," undisciplined and unrepentant, rogue readers. Rejecting "aesthetic distance," fans passionately embrace favored texts and attempt to integrate media representations within their own social experience. (p. 39)

These polarized perspectives on fan activity may cause us to overlook the more common and, therefore, significant fan identities that become a part of many individuals' self-conceptions.

What do fans do? As stated previously, Duffett (2013) claimed that fandom is not only about the object of fandom, but also about the action – what does fandom do, and what do individual fans do? What behaviors mark out fans as members of the group? While fan activities likely differ from group to group, genre to genre, there are some general categories of behavior into which much of fan behavior falls: consumption, collection, and connection. While not all fan activity can be fit into these categories, most fans engage in some form of these behaviors.

The most basic activity all fans perform is consuming a text. Whether or not consumption comprises the primary fan activity remains for debate, but all fans spend time and money consuming their primary media text (as well as related products and possibly fan-created texts). Writing about sports fans particularly, Crawford (2004) stated "it is my assertion that though not all fan related activities can be seen as directly involving acts of consumption, being a fan is primarily a consumer act and hence fans can be seen first and foremost as consumers" (p. 4). Applying Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) audience paradigms to the fan experience, Crawford noted three perspectives that can be used to look at what audiences (or, specifically, fans) do – they passively consume content, actively mold content to meet their needs, and employ the consumption of the fan text as a springboard to create their own unique content. As fans move through fan experiences, they can essentially progress from passive to active consumption activities. Duffett (2013) distinguished between two different definitions of consumption – economic consumption (i.e. a buyer of a specifically marketed product) and cultural consumption (i.e. thoughtful, meaningful examination of some text or object).

Especially to outsiders, fans may seem like pawns of the media industry, buying into (literally and figuratively) whatever media producers dish out for them. To stop at this categorization, however, misses out on the nuances of fan behavior, for, as Duffett (2013) stated:

To see fandom as primarily about consumption is to forget, first, that fans often

like things for free, and, second, that they are always *more than* consumers. They

are more than buyers and their transactions are pursued with a cultural interest

that goes beyond merely practicing the process of buying. (p. 21)

Indeed, Hills (2002) agreed, claiming that fans are "*always already* consumers – as we all

are – but they necessarily have more roles than that" (p. 27). Fans network, create,

collect, engage, and expand on the original text. At the beginning of their engagement

with fandom, however, they are primarily consumers.

Fans move beyond mere consumption of the fan text through their capacity for

critique. Fans do not simply accept the products of media producers with no deeper

thought or consideration. Rather, fans critique the producers, storylines, and actors

because they care about making the fan text as good as possible (Jenkins, 1992b). As

fans regularly discuss the merits of different aspects of the fan text, part of entering into

fandom may be learning "the right way" to interpret and discuss the text, or the right way

to conduct fan criticism. For example, fan critique of a television show moves beyond

the entertainment value of a particular episode to its coherence within the story universe

and within the series timeline. Each individual episode, rather than being taken as a

singular unit, must be interpreted within the context of all that has come before. This

viewpoint highlights the difference between the simple consumption or viewing activities

of the average viewer and the evaluation/criticism of the fan. Jenkins (1992b) suggested

that fan criticism may be a reaction against fans' own sense of powerlessness or lack of

control over the fan text, asserting that "[f]ans have little to say about what happens to their characters or their programs, but fans claim the right to protest and protest loudly decisions contradicting their perception of what is desirable or appropriate" (p. 118). Because fans have little recourse to actually change or shape what happens to their beloved text, criticism is one of the few ways in which they can express their joys and frustrations with the ways in which their text is treated by the authors or producers.

As fans gather together, one of the main ways that they express their status within their fan community is their display of knowledge and tangible collections of fan memorabilia. In his article on comic book fandom and cultural capital, Brown (1997) argued that comic book fandom is unique in that the focus of fan interest is tangible as fans collect and possess physical objects. He claimed that other fans focus on experience, and, while they may collect objects related to fandom (action figures, tapes, t-shirts, etc.), the actual focus of fandom does not represent both economic and cultural capital (Brown, 1997, p. 22). I disagree with this assessment of comic book fandom as unique in its focus on possession and collection of the fan text. Not only do many fan cultures emphasize collecting and possessing goods to confer special status on the individual fan (for example, baseball fans collect baseball cards and music fans collect the albums of their favorite artists), but I would argue that comic fandom is still largely about fan knowledge – do fans know what the important texts are? Can they recite obscure details from different story universes? Simple collection of the texts is not enough to confer social capital within the comic book fan community. The knowledge of how those texts

interact, reference each other, and the minutia contained therein are just as important (if not more so).

While fans do engage in consumption, collecting, and knowledge acquisition, many fans move beyond these relatively private, individual activities to more active engagement with the fan community. As Harrington and Bielby (2001) stated, "To 'view' television is to engage in a relatively private behavior. To be a 'fan', however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing" (p. 34). Fandom involves more than solitary consumption. Fans engage in a variety of activities that fall on a spectrum from lesser to greater participation in the fan community, but this aspect of participation is central to the experience of fandom. Fiske (1992) envisioned popular culture as primarily a creative product of the audience, writing "Popular culture is produced by the people out of the products of the cultural industry; it must be understood, therefore, in terms of productivity, not of reception" (p. 37). Fan writing comprises one of the activities that scholars like Jenkins (1992b) have discussed as an important form of expression and engagement within fan communities. Fans writing fanfic (fictional stories based on the original text) take the original media product and mold it to fit their own needs and desires. Jenkins (1992b) argued that "[f]an writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored" (p. 162). Fan writing satisfies fan desires for the story to turn out as anticipated, often when the producers have failed them in some way in the original text. Fans' ownership of the text

15

allows them to make the changes (or completions) that they perceive as necessary to maintain the integrity of the story and characters.

Fans also participate in fan activities that move beyond the creativity and engagement of the mind and imagination to more active pursuits that require physical participation with other fans in imitation and imaginative play. Hills (2002) explored the fan's use of physicality – the conscious, purposeful use of the body – in actions of costuming and impersonation through theories of performativity and consumption. Hills challenged Butler's distinction between performance (which is volitional) and performativity, claiming "each and every expression of fan identity is hence both a non-volitional citation *and* the (consumerist) 'choice' of a volitional fan-subject" (p. 159). Fans are often unable to articulate the emergence of their fandom, but their self-representations as fans (especially in instances of costuming and impersonation) are fully volitional and purposeful. This idea of fandom as both volitional and non-volitional – what Hills termed "performative consumption" – is inherently contradictory but acceptable as long as we expect and accept this as one of the central contradictions of fandom. Fans are always both passive consumers and active participants in fan culture.

Fandom as community. While much of fandom revolves around what fans do, the social aspect, or with whom they do these activities, is also central to the fan experience for many individuals. Even the consumptive act, often a solitary activity, can be transformed into a sociable and community-building endeavor when fans come

together to share their experiences. Jenkins (2006) succinctly described the importance

of community to the experience of fandom:

> This ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial
> culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom.
> One becomes a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by
> translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings
> and thoughts about program content with friends, by joining a 'community' of
> other fans who share common interests. (p. 41)

According to Jenkins (2006), it is not the mere consumption of the media text that

makes a fan; indeed, there are many people who view a television program every week or

enjoy a film without becoming fans. Rather, the translation of that consumption into

social engagement establishes fan identity. The pleasure of connecting with others of like

mind is one of the benefits that fans gain from their participation in fan culture. Duffett

(2013) described the pleasure of connection as solely the desire to connect with a

celebrity or media creator. However, I argue that the pleasure of connection could be

expanded to include other social interactions, specifically the pleasure of interacting with

other fans. Indeed, Jenkins (1992a) claimed that fandom provides an alternative social

structure where isolated individuals can fulfill needs for community and acceptance

among other likeminded individuals. Whereas traditional (geographical) communities

are often organized on the basis of class, race, religion, profession, or proximity, fan

17

communities emerge based on shared interest, and members gain status through their contributions (e.g. knowledge, creative products) to the community.

Music and sports have been two of the areas of fandom frequently studied by scholars interested in fans and their actions. In a study of how popular music functions in groups of children as they attempt to establish identity, Ali (2002) claimed that the use of fan knowledge is both gendered and gendering, as well as a basis for power negotiations among these children. Ali found that fan knowledge served as cultural capital within the groups of girls in the study, which apparently did not hold true among their male classmates. In contrast to the girls' coalition (friend group) formation around shared likes, the boys in the study used knowledge of cultural capital around disliked artists; they formed coalitions based on whom they mutually loathed. Having the "correct" knowledge, being fans of the "correct" objects is how these kids gained and used cultural capital. In a study of co-viewing practices of sporting events, Gantz, Fingerhut, and Nadorff (2012) found that sharing the viewing experience and discussing their interest with other likeminded fans enhanced the viewing experience for sports fans, while co-viewing with those who didn't share their knowledge or interests (for example, non-sports fans or fans of other teams) was annoying. These studies show that sharing fan activity and discussing fan interests with other likeminded individuals can be a pleasurable and bonding experience. However, it is not simply the company of another person that satisfies fans' social needs. Rather, it is the company of someone with similar

18

preferences, fan knowledge, and cultural capital that matters. Fans want to be with fellow fans.

Performance

Clarifying that the performing arts – theatre, dance, and music – are a subset of performance, Schechner (2004) defined performance as "a broad spectrum of activities including at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life" (p. 7). In another text, Schechner (2002) explained performance as "showing doing," the highlighting or underlining of a particular action (p. 22). This process of making ordinary actions obvious takes practice and training, even when a performance consists of everyday actions or behaviors. McKenzie (2004) emphasized the importance of liminality to performance, writing that the unique impact of performance is the ability to inhabit the in-between to play with social structures:

> We have come to define the efficacy of performance and of our own research, if not exclusively, then very inclusively, in terms of liminality – that is, a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic "in betweenness" allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed. (p. 27)

Performance, then, allows us to inhabit the spaces between our normal roles, actions, and social expectations and the unlimited possibilities of our imaginations.

With such a broad conception of performance, what is the significance of defining

and identifying performative actions? Carlson (2004) unpacked this problem, outlining

and analyzing several common definitions and categorizations of performance that have

been presented throughout performance studies literature. Breaking down three major

approaches to the concept of performance, Carlson explained that the key components of

performance may be the display of skill or expertise by a trained performer, an attitude of

consciousness in carrying out specific actions (as opposed to others who may do the same

things unthinkingly), and/or the success of the activity as evaluated by some standard of

excellence or achievement. According to Carlson's categorizations, we can still include

much of human activity under the umbrella of performance, but these guidelines prove

useful in determining whether a particular instance of that activity counts as performance

or not.

While it is important to consider what type of actions or activities constitute

performance, it is also valuable to examine the motivations behind those actions. Why do

humans perform? What do we get out of performative activity? Schechner (2002)

identified seven functions of performance – to entertain; to make something that is

beautiful; to mark or change identity; to make or foster community; to heal; to teach,

persuade, or convince; and to deal with the sacred and/or the demonic. Very few

performances satisfy all of these functions, but most incorporate at least a few of them.

The first function listed, to entertain, may be the most common function for performance,

including both the entertainment we seek to bring to an audience as well as the self-

entertainment that we seek out and achieve through play. Huizinga (2004) discussed the significance of play in the performative act, explaining that there is a purpose for play – it means something or meets some need for the individual at play. According to Huizinga (2004), "[e]ven in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function – that is to say, there is some sense to it" (p. 117). Schechner (2002) also discussed the role of play in performance, writing that one possible definition of performance is "ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play" (p. 79). This conception of performance places play at its center, as both a goal and a primary characteristic of the activity. Schechner proceeded to explain the purpose of play in the performative context: "Both child play and adult play involve exploration, learning, and risk and yield flow or total involvement in the activity for its own sake…Playing is full of creative world-making as well as lying, illusion, and deceit" (p. 82). While play does serve specific purposes, meeting the felt needs of the individual, it also exists as an end unto itself. We have to acknowledge that play is not wholly logical (an activity in which one engages for a specified purpose); rather, play happens for its own sake. Play, in large measure, occurs simply for fun. In this sense, performance as play both meets specific individual needs as well as providing enjoyment for the performer.

In addition to play, performance serves as a means to explore and construct identity. Performance is part of the everyday; the way we present and represent ourselves

to the world is a performance (Striff, 2003). Butler (2004) specifically discussed the use

of performance in the formation of gender identity. Rather than a stable, predetermined

role, Butler explained that gender is formed and constituted through performative action,

observing that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which

various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity

instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (p. 154). I argue all forms of identity can

be seen as constituted in time and through performance. Personal identity is always

constituted, always created through our actions in relation to others. Through

performance, we form and communicate our identities. Understood this way,

performance is not a false act (pretending to be something that one is not), but rather,

taking on different roles allows us to explore various aspects of the self.

Examining the performances of fans helps us to understand how they think about

themselves and how they want to be viewed by a wider audience. According to Hills

(2002), "[t]hinking of fans as performers means displacing an emphasis on the text-reader

interaction, and focusing instead on the myriad ways that fans can engage with the textual

structures and moments of their favored cult shows, reactivating these in cultural

practices of play" (p. 41). Hills explored the performances of fandom as a form of play

in which the fan engages with not only the beloved text but also other fans and

individuals outside of the fan culture. Similarly, Duffett (2013) described the

performative nature of fandom, claiming "[w]hile fandom is an identity that can feel

innate, it is also often publicly adopted…Performance is a complex term that combines

implications of repeated doing and theatrical artificiality – or at least self-consciousness – with measurable success or failure" (p. 27-28). This description of the fan identity would suggest that the role of fan is both internal and external; while the fan develops their interests and self-concepts of who they are as fans within themselves, part of who they are as fans is also constructed and expressed through their performance of that role to others.

One of the main questions that this conception of fandom as performance raises is that of the audience: if fandom is performance, for whom are fans performing? While this question may seem to be fairly simple (and perhaps one that could be answered through a study such as this), I argue that the question of the audience, and the performative definition itself, is a complex and problematic issue. Duffett (2013) stated,

Performative definitions tend to measure fandom primarily as an activity in public life. There are fans who never 'come out', however; closet fans who pursue their passions in private and sometimes in secret…To locate fans as defined by their public performance is to progress in a way that implies the centrality of either community, theatricality or perhaps even contagion, none of which seem to offer a firm foundation for defining fandom. (p. 28-29)

In accordance with this concern over fandom being defined as a public performance of interest or desire, I do not seek to present performance as part of my definition of fandom throughout this study; rather, performative fandom is on one end of a spectrum of public-private expressions of fan interest and activity. There are many ways that fans engage

with their chosen texts, both publically and privately. My interest in this study centers on those more public activities.

Performative Fandom: A New Conception of Fan Activity

  This study examines a concept that I call *performative fandom*, the performance of fan identity to communicate membership in certain fan communities. This performative communication of identity goes beyond consumption and discussion of a particular text to active engagement in a story universe and nuanced performance of the fan identity. Performative fandom exemplifies Schechner's (2002) "showing doing" within the fan community. It is the conscious performance of fan activities for an audience with the purpose of demonstrating fan identity and fan knowledge. Performative fandom involves not just social interactions among fans, but public enactments of the fan role as it intersects with, appropriates, and sometimes changes the original fan text.

  I believe that performative fandom may become more common as young generations of fans have come to expect to be able to interact with and manipulate the object of their interest online. Millennials have grown up with technology and the internet as a central part of their daily lives. As young people have grown up in a Web 2.0 world defined by the ability to connect, collaborate, and create through various social media platforms, they have come to expect these interactive modes of engagement in others areas of life (Alvermann, Hutchins, & McDevitt, 2012; Bird, 2011). As "digital natives," this generation enacts online engagement and manipulation of mediated texts as

just as much a part of fandom as consumption of the original text (Ballano, Uribe, & Munté-Ramos, 2014; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). When these individuals bring this expectation into their daily lives, they create new practices and texts that allow them to interact with other fans and the original text in new and interesting ways. While I believe all fans perform their role as fan to some extent, the physical, social, and emotional engagement in a fan community where an individual participates in activities of fandom is a more intense and nuanced process that is worthy of study. Through this study, I seek to understand what motivates these individuals to engage in performative fandom, what they get out of these experiences (if and how they benefit from this intense engagement), and how fans go about performing their fan identity, both for themselves and for others.

The concept of performative fandom is worthy of study because it offers a new perspective on fandom and fan practices that differs from previous research within popular culture and communication literature. The novel contributions that this study offers to the broader area of fan studies research involve a scope and focus that have not been present in most previous fan studies. Rather than focusing on fandom as an individual activity of consumption within unique fan communities, I explore fan activity as an inherently social and proactive activity that exists across different fan communities. Also, rather than being studied as an isolated activity, I investigate how fan activity influences and interacts with other areas of fans' lives.

In the past, fandom has mostly been studied from the individual perspective. Popular culture scholars have examined what individual fans do and how they engage

with their preferred texts (Bailey, 2005; Chen, 2007; Porat, 2010; Stevens, 2010). While individual motivations and experiences are certainly valid and important, in this study I expand this focus to include the social aspects of fandom. For many people, the experience of fandom is inherently social; we express and experience our fandom through interactions with other fans, whether those interactions take place online, in our local communities, or at fan gatherings like national conventions. Understanding the importance that these interactions hold for many fans, in exploring performative fandom, I consider how fandom is performed and developed through relationships with other fans. In this way, the communicative nature of fan interactions becomes central to the development and experience of fan identity. Although traditional fandom may have developed (and likely still develops) in the interaction between the individual and the fan text, I argue that participatory fandom develops and is performed in the interactions between members of the fan community. By explicitly exploring the social nature of fandom, this study expands our understanding of the importance of community for fan culture.

In addition to broadening the focus from the individual fan experience to the interactions between fans, I also move from examining fandom as an activity of consumption to understanding it as a creative pursuit. Just as much fandom research has examined individual fans, previous research has also treated fandom as primarily a consumer pursuit (Crawford, 2004; Duffett, 2013; Harris & Alexander, 1998; Hills, 2002); individual fans seek out fan texts and associated merchandise and paraphernalia.

26

Within this perspective, fans are often approached as audiences and examined to understand how they receive and engage with the texts and related products themselves. While exploring the creative potential of fan engagement is not an entirely new idea (as some scholars have explored efforts like fan-fiction and fan website creation) (Davisson & Booth, 2007; Duffett, 2013; Harris & Alexander, 1998), I focus on this creative potential as the primary emphasis of my research. I believe that a central part of performative fandom involves the urge to create something new from a beloved text. In the process of recreating or reimagining the original fan text, active fans make something that is uniquely their own and is an expression both of the original text and of themselves. This creative activity, as it is performed in collaboration with other fans, is a novel approach to the actual "doing" of fandom.

Hills (2002) suggested that "fandom is not simply a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically. It is also always performative…it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work" (xi). Examining the performances of the fans themselves helps us to understand how they think about themselves and how they want to be perceived by a wider audience. According to Hills (2002):

> Thinking of fans as performers means displacing an emphasis on the text-reader interaction, and focusing instead on the myriad ways that fans can engage with the textual structures and moments of their favored cult shows, reactivating these in cultural practices of play (p. 41).

27

Hills looked into the performances of fandom as a form of play in which the fan engages with not only the beloved text but also other fans and individuals outside of the fan culture, clearly orienting to fandom as a social activity, one in which the individual engages with others within the context of performance and play.

Cosplaying and Fan Conventions

This study examines the fan community of cosplayers. The term *cosplay*, a portmanteau of the English terms "costume" and "play," refers to taking on the appearance and demeanor of a particular character from manga (Japanese comics), anime (Japanese animation), video games, film, or other media (Brehm-Heeger, 2007; King, 2013; Norris & Bainbridge, 2009; Stevens, 2010). Cosplayers congregate at anime and science fiction conventions, either cosplaying on their own or in groups with other fans portraying related characters. Many cosplayers remain in character for the duration of the convention, posing for pictures and interacting with other convention-goers as their chosen character. Stevens (2010) explained this appropriation of a character during cosplaying, noting that "[d]edicated cosplayers see what they do as a form of public performance art: like a stage or film actor 'inhabiting' a role, cosplayers speak, walk, and act as their chosen character would. Think of them as avatars in the flesh" (p. 30). According to Norris and Bainbridge (2009), "in its purest form, cosplay is akin to performance art, taking on the habitus of a particular character through costume, accessories, gesture and attitude; it is, therefore, not simply 'dressing up' but rather inhabiting the role of a character both physically and mentally" (paragraph 1). As

performers inhabiting their characters of choice, cosplayers use the convention as their stage and other fans and outsiders alike at their audience.

Cosplaying is one vehicle fans may utilize to explore their own identities and deepen their participation in their chosen fan culture. Duffett (2013) recognized these purposes of cosplaying, arguing that "[f]ans adopt the garb of fiction characters as a way of extending their participation, exploring their identities and interacting with others. Cosplayers also use their own *costume-making* talents to express their fandom. They can explore issues of performativity in the way that they use their bodies" (p. 189). The exploration of identity may be a particularly salient motivation for female cosplayers, who are able to play with gender and new subject roles in ways they feel they are unable to in their everyday lives. As Hjorth (2009b) stated:

> Cosplayers provide new avenues for expression and subjectivity, operating in an ambiguous space in which females are both objects and subjects. Transformation and subversion are all part of the game as cosplayers perform online and offline fantasies and fictions, bringing the politics of 'techno-cuteness' into the corporeal world (p. 274).

There is a separation between who cosplayers get to act like in costume and who they are in real life; cosplayers feel a freedom to express themselves in ways that would not be acceptable in their everyday lives. Joseph-Witham (1996) quoted a Star Trek fan, Tiger Manning, who dressed up as a Klingon for conventions and other fan events, saying "You can wear push-up bras and fishnets and you're not like a slut. You're a Klingon.

Klingon women…have power over themselves. Dressing like this isn't dressing for men…It's your own thing" (p. 24). Whether cosplayers take on different gender identities or play with sexuality in ways that feel safe and empowering, through their costuming, they are able to perform new roles and inhabit new identities that interest and excite them.

Cosplaying is one of many ways that fans can choose to participate and engage with other fans. Similarly, cosplaying serves as a means of exploring the nuances of beloved characters and storylines. Individuals can try on different personalities and skills by taking on the role of a particular character, exploring areas of their respective identities that they may not feel that they are able to express in their everyday lives (Gunnels, 2009; Lamerichs, 2011). Hills (2002) argued that the act of performance allows the fan to explore the contradictions present in the consumer product, but also intensify the value for the fan, or the exchange value of the product in the fan community. In this way, cosplaying becomes one way for the fan to take their valued text past a simple object of consumption and explore its value to them as individuals. Cosplaying can be personal, political, just for fun or making a statement; the subjectivity of the cosplaying scene lends itself to being molded to the needs and intentions of each cosplayer to some extent (Hjorth, 2009). Donning a costume gives the individual license to explore new horizons and express their identities as fans, largely because they feel that their performances will be accepted by those around them who share their interests and hobbies.

Cosplaying also provides a creative outlet for fans. Many fans design and

construct their own costumes, spending months and significant amounts of money

crafting intricate costumes that are artistically proficient and accurate to the original text.

Through this process, cosplay serves as an excellent representative example of

performative fandom. Cosplayers get personal satisfaction out of the creative outlet of

crafting their costumes, but the cosplay event itself is always a public performance of fan

identity for others in attendance at conventions. Joseph-Witham (1996) explored the

motivations for individuals' cosplaying, explaining their costumes, the work that goes

into them, and what they get out of the experience. For many cosplayers, the motivation

to create and don their costumes lies in escape, social connections, and the creative outlet

of the process. Joseph-Witham explained these motivations for crafting costumes:

> For many fans costuming is a very personal art that fulfills deep psychological
>
> needs…Finishing and publicly wearing an outfit made by one's own hands gives
>
> a feeling of accomplishment and fulfills the need for a creative outlet…Fans see
>
> themselves as participating in a very special phenomenon, and the uniforms they
>
> invent can aid them in feeling that they are outside of time and in a fascinating
>
> realm. (p. 30)

Whether costume artists adhere strictly to rules of authenticity to the original text or view

their costume as enabling them to inject their own personality and creativity into the

process, the act of crafting and wearing their own work provides a creative outlet through

which they can display both their skills as artists and their interests and knowledge as fans.

Comic conventions (and similar fan gatherings) provide a safe space for fans to engage in this particular type of performance. Indeed, fans describe conventions as "*utopian spaces*: welcoming, tolerant, accepting, multicultural and enlightened" (Duffett, 2013, p. 245). While the comic convention (or con) is not the only place in which fans gather and engage with one another, it is one of the most well-known and fastest growing locations for fans of many different genres of popular media to come together. As Joseph-Witham (1996) outlined, the first science fiction convention was held in Philadelphia in 1936. Science fiction fandom was growing steadily at that time, and by 1939 the fan community and interest in science fiction had grown enough to warrant a world science fiction convention. The early seeds of cosplaying were already being planted at these first cons, where costume contests were held annually for the participants. In an article exploring the ideas of social capital within fandom, Brown (1997) described the range of size and focus of anime and comic cons today, explaining that they can range from small regional cons attracting only a few hundred people to "Super Cons" lasting days and attracting tens of thousands of fans. While non-fans may not be familiar with most of the smaller cons, the biggest "Super Cons," such as the San Diego Comic-Con held annually in July, attract over 100,000 attendees and feature artists, writers, directors, and actors from all of popular culture (Comic-Con International: San Diego, 2014). Cons provide both a chance to immerse oneself into the environment

of appreciation and consumption of the fan text (buying, selling, and trading goods; viewing films; listening to guest speakers), and an opportunity to connect with others who share the same interests. Cons are "the market place of fandom's cultural economics" (Brown, 1997, p. 17), a chance to demonstrate one's knowledge and expertise as a fan and to establish and gain cultural capital.

While fandom research is a well-established and robust field of study, work on cosplaying and cons is relatively sparse, especially outside of Asian Studies and Asian contexts. The work reviewed here on fandom provides a good foundation with which to move forward and examine American cosplaying and the convention experience for fans specifically. By bringing together these specific contexts and the theoretical foundations of performance, identity, and equipment for living, I hope to provide an interesting and unique view into the fan experience and the construction and formation of fan identity.

Chapter 2: Theory

In a way, this study sits at the crossroads of several fields of research. While fandom has been examined by scholars in a variety of fields of research, from communication studies (Aden et al., 2009; Beck, 2012; Booth, 2008; Burr-Miller, 2011) and media scholars (Bailey, 2005; Gn, 2011; Murray, 2004), to sociologists (Gunnels, 2009; Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2011) and professionals in Asian Studies (Chen, 2007; Galbraith, 2013; Hjorth, 2009a), this study's key concerns lie primarily in the use of popular media to communicate identity through performance. As such, my theoretical foundations for this study draw on work from identity and performance studies, fandom studies, and work important to communication scholars. In order to examine the interactions and perspectives of fans within the broader categorization of participatory fandom, I build on Goffman's (1959) conceptions of performance and identity, as well as Burke's (1941) concept of equipment for living.

Goffman (1959) discussed identity not as a fixed, singular reality, a set description of who we are in all situations; rather, he explained that identity is complex, ever-changing, and prismatic – we show different sides of our multifaceted identities depending on who we are with and what we are doing. Based on this conceptualization of identity as highly contextual, I explore fan identity within the context of fan communities as well as in relation to broader conceptions of self. I want to know not only who individuals are as fans, considering how they conceptualize fandom and how

fan identity is performed and displayed to others, but also how their identity as fans

interacts with other important identities in their lives.

Performance of Identity

Several different theoretical conceptions of identity have been advanced in the

scholarly literature. Bailey (2005) reviewed some of the major theoretical approaches

that have been used to explore the issue of the self within and in relation to society. The

debate between Althusser's interpellated subject (treating subjectivity as formed through

discourse) and Thomson's view of human agency (which questioned the place of

experience within Althusser's model) represents two Marxist theories of the subject.

This debate represents the split between conceptions of the active and passive self. Fiske,

on the other hand, gave primacy to agency rather than subjectivity, although he has been

criticized for giving too much ultimate power to the individual (presenting a view of

agency without the constraints of structure) (Bailey, 2005). Grossberg's articulation

theory works through rejections of most of the popular theorizations of the subject that

can be in any way linked back to a Kantian approach (which focuses on the importance of

mental, symbolic, individualized meaning-making). In response to all of these previous

conceptualizations, Bailey proposed a "hermeneutically-inclined ethnographic approach"

as a way to analyze both the symbolic structures of fan cultures and the self-formations of

fan subjectivity (Bailey, 2005, p. 50). Rather than taking an either/or approach to the self

as constrained by society's structures or a free agent able to actively form one's own

identity, Bailey accepted a middle-ground conceptualization that recognized that agency

and constraining structures can co-exist and can both shape an individual's identity.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Goffman (1959) brought together the

concepts of identity and performance. Goffman discussed the parties to the traditional

performance – the actor, the other performers, and the audience. His model reduces these

three parties down to two – the actor (the individual) and the audience/other. We take on

specific roles both in relation to others and for their benefit – we both perform for and

with the other, so the audience both observes and shapes the identities we present.

Goffman addressed the active choices that individuals make in portraying a specific

identity or role in any given situation, stating "when an individual appears in the presence

of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will

convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (p. 4). Much of

Goffman's discussion of "face" and presentation of self has to do with the definition of

the situation; we give shape to the social scene through our actions and interactions with

others. In this way, we define the scene just as it in some way determines the role that we

will play. This projection is not free of value judgments or ideas of interpersonal

responsibility; rather, Goffman claimed "when an individual projects a definition of the

situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular

kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and

treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect" (p. 13).

Individuals project status through their performance of identity, and others respond to them according to their understanding of and respect for that particular status position.

Broadly, Goffman (1959) defined performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 15). In this sense, performance privileges the audience, as individuals perform in any given situation in order to influence those around them. In relation to identity, performance influences others' thoughts and behavior in relation to the role or characteristics that an individual seeks to portray. This understanding of identity, as the roles we portray in order to shape others' views of us, can be seen as complimentary to Mead's (1934) view of identity, which is shaped by the important people in our lives. According to Mead, an individual's identity forms in relation to those around them with the development and interaction of the concepts of the "I" and the "me." The "me" is the aspect of individual identity that represents learned behaviors, attitudes, and the expectations of others. It is the aspect of the self that represents the culmination of all past experiences; the "me" is what we see when we reflect on what we have done, how we have behaved, and how others have responded to us. The "I" is the individual's identity based on the response to the "me." It is the present and future possibilities of the self that bring together social expectations and personal preferences; the "I" is our imaginings of who we might be or who we aspire to be jumping off from our picture of who we have been in the past. According to Mead, no predetermined self exists at birth; rather, an individual forms identity by interacting with others, responding to and

internalizing others' opinions of and reactions to them, and processing feelings about these interactions and experiences. In both Goffman's and Mead's conceptions of identity, an individual's identity relies strongly on their relationships and interactions with others. Whether the individual employs their experiences and interactions for better self-understanding or to express their chosen identity to important individuals in their lives, the self is always formed and expressed in relation to the other.

Mead's conception of the self and identity in relation to important others can readily be applied to the fan context. In an article exploring the idea of fan interaction with a text, Davisson and Booth (2007) proposed that, rather than viewing fan engagement with the text as one way and even dysfunctional, textual engagement as a social experience has value to the individual. While many characterizations of fans present them as fanatics who are unhealthily attached to a particular text, this depiction of fandom only partially represents the experience of fan activity. Davisson and Booth compared the conception of parasocial relationships (how fans' connections to the text are often described) with their concept of projective identity. Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed that mass media audiences experience a "simulacrum of conversational give and take" (p. 215) with the performers they view on the screen, despite their connections with fictional characters being nonreciprocal. Audience members experience parasocial interactions as immediate and personal connections with characters or performers. Where parasocial relationships imply an inauthentic connection – one that is not quite close, but instead is based on something imagined on the part of the fan – projective

identity involves the interface between the fan's real world and fan world identities. Fans

do not simply imagine they have a relationship with a character or celebrity; rather, they

interact with characters and virtual identities, which shape their own conceptions of self.

Through their consumption of and interaction with the text, fans shape and reshape their

ideas of who they are and who they want to be. Fandom is not merely a passive act of

consumption, but an active interaction with the self and real or imagined others which

shapes personal identity.

In attempting to understand how fan identity specifically is formed, we can look

to how the processes of consumption and fan activity shape a fan's identity. Sandvoss

(2005) discussed the relationship between the fan text or fan object and the individual's

conception of self as a process of self-identification with the object. Sandvoss writes

"fandom is not some particular thing one *has* or *does*. Fandom is a process of being; it is

the way one *is*" (p. 101). Sandvoss expressed the idea that the truly engaging quality in

objects of fandom is their "reflective capacity" – their possession of qualities that enable

us to see ourselves (p. 104). The reflective relationship between fan and fan object is

reciprocal. Just as the object has a reflective capacity that allows the fan to see him- or

herself in it, the fan also imitates and reflects the object. Thus, fans not only see

themselves in the object of their fandom, but they grow and change in their relationship

with the text/object to become more like its characters and values.

Using these theorizations of the self and the formation and performance of

identity, fans' relationships with others, both fans and non-fans, and their interactions

with the fan text greatly impact self- and other-perceptions. The interaction of fans'

multiple identities, however, also constitutes an important concept to consider. While

individuals can compartmentalize their different roles and identities in different contexts,

these multiple identities must also impact and reflect each other in some way. Thus, what

is the relationship between individuals' fan identities and their "real life" identities, or

those they take on and express in their everyday lives?

Equipment for Living

Considering fandom as an aspect of identity, or a unique identity among many

that an individual assumes at different points in time, how does fandom serve those who

partake in it? The popular culture texts that fans consume can serve them as more than

mere entertainment; according to Brummet (1991), individuals use media as a major

source of both knowledge and logical patterns for sense-making. Fans of a particular text

not only take away tools for making sense of their experiences, but also for making sense

of themselves. Through identification with characters and modeling of identity in media

texts, we grow to understand ourselves, who we want to be, and how we should behave.

In addition to the stories and characters of popular texts, we should also consider

how specific uses of popular culture texts enable fans to deal with events and issues in

their lives. In an examination of fantasy baseball, Burr-Miller (2011) explained how fan

participation in fantasy baseball leagues helps participants to make sense of issues in the

game and reframe or reimagine baseball in a way that better suits their needs and desires.

As opposed to mere passive consumption of the games, active participants in these

40

leagues engage with the sport while bypassing possibly troubling issues or controversy, such as steroid use. Such interaction with and cooptation of the original text enhances fans' ability to work through problems that they have with it or reshape it into what serves them best. As illustrated in online fan activities (such as production of fan-fiction and original art inspired by books, television, and film), engaging with the ideas of a popular culture text and with other fans on their own terms allows fans to claim a level of ownership over the text that benefits them in ways that simple passive consumption cannot (Murray, 2004).

Burke's (1941) concept of equipment for living is useful in conceptualizing a text's utility and impact for fans. Burke posited that all literary works are based on more simplified lessons or basic plots. These underlying stories, or representative anecdotes, help readers to make sense of their lives because they are able to vicariously solve their problems and better understand real situations by seeing solutions or resolutions reached within the story. As Brummett (1997) explained, we learn how to speak about different life circumstances through different types, components, or structures of the media we use. In addition to learning about how to handle different situations within our lives, we also gain tools for telling our own stories through engagement with popular culture narratives (Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2011). Through identification with characters and modeling of identity in media texts, we grow to understand ourselves, who we want to be, and how we should behave. I believe that the concept of equipment for living can be expanded beyond the text itself to fans' interpretations and applications of the stories that

they love to their lives. By applying the idea of equipment for living to performative fandom, I explore how fans' interpretations of the original fan text influence participation in fan culture, fans' self-conceptions, and the fulfillment of their individual needs.

Communication Scholarship and Fandom

Communication scholars have approached the study of fandom from several different angles. While some have focused particularly on a specific area of fandom, such as sports fandom (Aden et al., 2009; Cohan, 2013; Rowe, 2014) or fans of a particular musical group or television show (Dollar, 1999; Williams, 2011; Wood & Baughman, 2012), others have considered how fans use the fan text (Booth 2008; Shefrin, 2004) or how they talk about their experiences of fandom (Beck, 2012; Oh, 2013; Stanfill, 2013; Young, 2014).

Several communication scholars have explored the ways that fans communicate to establish themselves (and recognize others) as members of their particular fan community. Aden et al. (2009) examined how fans at University of Nebraska watch parties recreate a fan space, or an "intermediate place," that is symbolically connected to a real place (the state of Nebraska, the university campus, even the football stadium) through their use of attire, language, decorations in the space, and the performance of fan rituals. They argued that these behaviors create a sense of social identity among fans and facilitate a sense of physical connection with the state of Nebraska, the team, and fans elsewhere. Fans at these watch parties recognized insiders versus outsiders through their use of these cues, and they forged connections with one another through the appropriate

42

display of fan identity. While this study looked at how the nonverbal and verbal communication of Nebraska fans builds connections between fans and links them back to the physical place of the campus/stadium, I am interested in how the nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors of cosplayers (the performance of fan identity) work to both link them to the rest of the cosplaying community and communicate about their own individual identities, expressing a tension between the desire to both fit in and stand out.

In her article about "show talk," Natalie Dollar (1999) examined Deadheads (fans of the Grateful Dead) as a unique speech community. She argued that their use of community-specific patterns of speech about concert events enabled Deadheads to demonstrate group membership and identify other fans through their display of shared cultural knowledge. Dollar used ethnography of communication to examine Deadheads' use of show talk to "enact and affirm their shared identity" (p. 102). Speaking like a group member is a way of showing oneself to be a member (or, even, a way to become a member). Dollar's article explored a similar topic as this study, as both look at ways that identity is communicated. However, whereas Dollar focused on specialized speech patterns, the concept of performative fandom expands this focus to include both verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. Indeed, the performance of fandom includes ways that fans talk to each other and about their shared interests, but it also includes the nonverbal aspects of costuming, physical appearance, and the performed physical presence of the character.

43

Young (2014) analyzed fan discourse on *Westeros.org*, a prominent *Game of Thrones* fan site, for fan discourse on issues of race within the fan community. Young argued that whiteness is an assumption within the fantasy fiction genre, and explicit discussions of race within these fictional worlds are often treated as not "correct" according to the norms and expectations of the fan community. Questions about race reflect these assumptions and norms, with individuals raising issues often approaching the topic in an apologetic tone and using language that minimizes the importance of the topic right off the bat. Even in an online fan community without markers of race (so fans of any race can hypothetically be included as true fans), Young argued fans must accept whiteness as a default assumption within the fantasy text. While Young examined an online fan community, where "fitting in" depends on accepting and following the norms of the community, this study examines the performance of fan identity in a context that brings appearance to the forefront. Race is only one of the areas where fans must consider how their own identities and those of the characters they are portraying can work together to portray the character in an accurate or "correct" way.

Other scholars have examined how fans use self-narrativization to make sense of a media text, using their own real-life experiences to connect with the characters and add meaning to the storylines. Beck (2012) examined the intense emotional reactions of soap opera fans to the cancellations of these long-running shows. Beck argued that soap opera fans become deeply invested in "their stories" because the narratives of the shows that they watch become intimately intertwined with their own life stories; indeed, many fans

treasure memories of sharing fandom with their mothers and grandmothers and growing up with these shows.

Williams (2011) provided another example of fans using their self-narratives to make sense of a media text – in this case, fans used their own real-life experiences to make sense of the storylines and deal with the cancellation of the television show *The West Wing*. Williams coined the term "post-object fandom" to talk about the experience of fandom after a media text has moved from an active, ongoing project to one that is closed, stable, and complete (a "dormant fan object"). Williams questioned how the narrative closure of a fan object affects fans' self-identities. Fans experience a period of mourning at the closure of the show not unlike we experience with the death of a loved one; they mourn the loss of something loved while also rethinking and rearticulating a sense of self that is separate from what has been lost. Rather than examining how fans integrate the narratives of a media text with their own life stories, this study aims to better understand how fans integrate fan practice (in this case, cosplaying) with their own personal identities and the other areas of their lives. Fan practice is not separate from the lives and identities of fans, but rather, something that is outside the "everyday," situated in stories, actions, and communities that are distinct from the daily world of work, school, family, and community life. Fans often have to negotiate how these different parts of their lives integrate into a unified sense of self.

Finally, several communication scholars have examined the practice of fans assuming character identities in online forums, looking at how role-playing serves as a

form of identity play that both promotes the media text and also serves as identity work

for the fan. Booth (2008) discussed the practice of fans creating MySpace pages for

fictional characters from the television shows and films they enjoy (specifically the CW

network shows *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars*). In this creative enterprise, fans not

only appropriate and rewrite the stories of these characters (a form of textual poaching),

but they also identify with and perform as the characters. Booth argued that the

interaction between fans and simulated profiles of television characters on MySpace

serves as a form of identity management for fans; as fans interact with the characters in

this online space, they build their own identity in relation to them. By interacting with

the character personas online, fans engage in narrative identity construction in relation to

the fan text.

Similarly, Wood and Baughman (2012) discussed the use of Twitter by fans of the

television show *Glee*, arguing that fan practices on Twitter are at the same time actions of

participatory fan culture and also consumer behavior that is supported by producers

seeking to strategically engage their target audience. As the Internet has been embraced

by the traditional broadcast media as another way to reach audiences, some fan practices

online have transformed from a niche medium of fan interaction to a mainstream method

of new media marketing. Wood and Baughman specifically examined how *Glee* fans use

Twitter as a means to explore the characters and storylines of the show through character

accounts, posting as the characters themselves. Posters tweet for the purposes of identity

control, supporting and expanding on the character personalities as portrayed on the

show. In this way, their appropriation of the characters becomes less about transgressive practice and more an interactive audience activity that supports the goals of the show's producers. In the practice of cosplaying, fans take this process into the real world by physically taking on character personas. While online character profiles comprise a form of fan fiction (where fans appropriate and expand on or alter the storylines), cosplaying entails a physical appropriation of the character identity itself.

Most communication studies on fandom have examined the different ways that fans talk about the object of their fandom. While fan talk is important, few scholars have focused explicitly on the nonverbal behaviors that fans use to communicate their membership in the fan community to explore and construct their fan identities. This specific focus on the nonverbal expression of identity within fandom is what this study seeks to understand through exploration of performative fandom and cosplay.

Research Questions

In order to understand the processes involved in the communication of identity through performative fandom, as well as the motivations behind the choice to cosplay and participate in the cosplaying community, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do cosplayers communicate their fan identity through performance?
- What role does performance play in the experience of fandom for cosplayers?
- What motivates fans to engage with the fan community through performance?

- How does participation in the fan community generally and cosplaying specifically shape fans' conceptions of self and identity?

By seeking to answer these questions, this study advances what we know about communication in several important ways. First, I seek to better understand the communicative importance of self-presentation. The way that individuals craft their identities and present themselves to others communicates important information about their values and worldview. What do fans communicate about themselves and their experiences of fandom through their interactions as cosplayers? Second, I explore the importance of performance as a communicative act. Both formal and informal performances serve to communicate with a particular audience. In this case, who is the audience for cosplaying fans? What messages are they communicating to others through their cosplaying performances (both of the particular character and of the identity of "fan")? Through these lines of inquiry, this study utilizes and expands on previous knowledge of how fans communicate within and about fandom.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In an effort to understand the fan experience from fans' own perspectives, this study utilized in-depth respondent interviews as the primary means of gathering data. Allowing participants to think through and explain their own experiences with performance and fandom can provide unique insight into the communicative processes involved in developing and expressing identity as a fan. Through an open-ended question design, I sought to give voice to fans' own perspectives and understand the motivations, purposes, and benefits of active engagement in the cosplaying and convention cultures. Through direct engagement with fans through respondent interviews, I obtained data regarding the processes involved in performative fandom.

Coming into this study, it was important for me to recognize my own involvement with and relationship to the topic. I consider myself a fan of several different genres and works within popular culture and identify with several aspects of what has been deemed "geek culture" more broadly. While the term "geek" was originally a pejorative term used to describe social outcasts, specifically those with a socially unacceptable, intense interest in technology and obscure media, with the rise of the Internet and digital technologies in the 1980s and beyond, the label has been embraced and used more broadly and positively within society (Bray, 2014; McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015). Geek culture includes (but is not limited to) fans of science fiction, fantasy, comic books, video games, anime, and manga.

My own relationship with fandom started in early adolescence with my first intense connections to musical groups. Coming of age during the early years of widespread access to the Internet, I sought out and voraciously explored fan websites for my favorite bands, and I even tried my hand at web design to create my own digital shrines in their honor. As I entered my teenage years, I developed a love of science fiction literature and film, and devoured both the original texts and the fan fiction I found online to further explore those story universes. As an adult, I am still active in several fandoms (although perhaps not as avidly as I was when I was 13!). I am a fan of Harry Potter, Doctor Who, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Game of Thrones, occult fiction, and crime dramas of all sorts.

While I have developed and nurtured my own fandoms for more than two decades, my familiarity with cosplay comes secondhand, through my personal relationships. My husband and several of our close friends are casual cosplayers (having attended a few conventions in costume over the years), and many of their friends are more seriously and regularly involved in the cosplay community. I have not participated in cosplay formally at conventions; however, I have dressed up in costume for movie premiers (a practice that one of my participants thoughtfully pointed out to me is a form of cosplay, although I had not previously recognized it as such), and I was a member of my university's quidditch team (a real-life team sport based on a fictional game within the Harry Potter story universe). Although I personally understand intense fan interest and the drive to explore a story or genre beyond consumption of the text, I recognize that

my own experiences with fandom and fan practice may differ from those of my participants. As such, I designed my interview questions in such a way as to leave room for my participants to describe and expand on their own experiences and motivations. I began our conversations by detailing my own connections to fandom in order to establish a foundation of shared interest and experience with my participants, but I then focused my questions on an exploration of their own experiences and motivations for participating in cosplay specifically and fan culture broadly.

Participants

Recruitment of participants took place in several stages, engaging a broad cross-section of the cosplaying community across the country. Overall, I recruited 16 individuals to participate as interviewees. My first contacts for this study were personal acquaintances who actively participate in cosplaying. My husband was a member of the campus anime club at the university where we completed our graduate studies, and many of his good friends from school were anime fans who also cosplayed. I requested their assistance with identifying and contacting participants, and my husband, as well as two of his cosplay friends, helped me gain access to other active cosplayers, posting on social media to spread the word about my study and request that their friends and acquaintances participate. I provided a brief script that they could copy into their posts, explaining the focus and purpose of my study as exploring the relationships between cosplaying, fandom, and identity. After speaking with these initial contacts, I used snowball sampling to expand my pool of participants and reach individuals to whom I would not

have otherwise had access. Snowball sampling, a process that uses referrals made by participants for other individuals who share desired characteristics, is a useful means of reaching a specific desired subset of individuals, especially those who may be geographically dispersed or difficult to access (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). By utilizing these personal contacts who are intimately involved in the cosplaying community, I was able to reach individuals across the country whom I would not otherwise meet and to whom I would not have access.

I also posted messages explaining my study and requesting participation in social media interest groups focusing on cosplaying and convention attendance. Online fan communities provide an opportunity to reach a wide array of cosplayers, especially those outside the university community, and utilizing these networks allowed me to reach a more diverse pool of participants. Whereas most of my personal cosplaying contacts are university students or recent college graduates, the cosplaying community is not so limited in age, educational background, and socio-economic status. Reaching and recruiting from a wider audience of cosplayers provided me with the opportunity to gather insightful information about the process and experience of performing as a fan within this community that would not be available through traditional recruitment methods.

Five of my participants came from the first phase, responding to the social media posts of my cosplaying acquaintances. Another five participants responded to my posts in online cosplaying and convention interest groups. The remaining six participants were

referred by other interviewees (these were the contacts I gained through snowball

sampling). Out of this group of 16 participants, my interviewees represented a variety of

ages, professions, and experiences and history in the cosplay community. Three of my

participants were college-aged at the time of our interviews, six were in their mid- to late-

twenties, and seven were in their thirties or forties. I interviewed students, college

professors, software engineers, a police officer, a Japanese translator, an artist, and two

individuals who channeled their passion for cosplay into charitable organizations that

they run full-time. My participants included both new cosplayers, who had only been

active in the cosplay community for a year or two, and those who had been cosplaying

for a decade or more and were deeply connected within the community.

Interview Process

After recruitment, I contacted each participant through email to further explain

my goals for the study and to arrange the logistics for the interviews. Because of

geographical distance from participants, I was not able to conduct in-person interviews,

necessitating an alternative means of communication. I conducted interviews via Skype

and audio recorded them through an in-app program called Call Recorder. In addition to

the audio recording, I printed out a unique copy of the interview protocol for each

conversation and used that as a template for handwritten notes of any important

discussion points that stood out to me, ideas I wanted to come back to, or follow-up

questions I wanted to ask.

I gathered data through in-depth, qualitative respondent interviews. After obtaining informed consent, I utilized my IRB-approved interview protocol (see Appendix A for full interview schedule), as well as my own spontaneous questions and follow-ups based on the content of the conversation, to guide each discussion. Interviews were semi-structured, combining the focus and standardized question paths of structured interviewing with the possibility for participants to expand and provide narrative that is found in unstructured interviewing. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) defined semi-structured interviewing as "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 3). As Brinkmann (2013) wrote, "semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewer" (p. 21). As such, interviews were structured in such a way as to seek out specific information on participants' experiences with fandom and cosplaying, but also included open-ended question paths that allowed participants to expand on ideas and tell their own stories. Open-ended questions allow for less directive and more detailed responses, encouraging participants to express their ideas, tell stories, and provide information that they find relevant, rather than eliciting specific information (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). By discussing the planned questions, as well as any relevant follow-up questions elicited by the participants' responses, I engaged with each individual in an in-depth discussion of their experiences with cosplaying specifically and fandom more broadly.

Interviews ranged from 30 to 80 minutes in length (averaging 50 minutes). After completing this set of interviews, it seemed that I had reached a saturation point in the data for information relevant to identity and performance, so no additional recruitment of participants was needed.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, I personally transcribed all interviews. I listened to each interview, reading over my handwritten notes and adding additional thoughts as they came up. I then listened to the audio recording a second time to transcribe a full record of the conversation, not only accurately recording the language of my participants but also noting pauses, tone of voice, and nonverbal cues when they seemed relevant to convey the full meaning of what was said.

After completing each transcription, I read through all transcripts in order to code them into appropriate categories through inductive analysis of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). During the coding process, I closely read through each interview transcript and examined them for emergent themes concerning fandom, performance, and identity. As I analyzed each chunk of the data, it was either matched with current themes or I created a new theme to describe its content. When all data had been coded, I analyzed the emergent themes for broader categories and connections that could be made between them. This process of analysis helped to identify overarching concepts about how fans communicate identity and connect with others through their cosplaying performances. By the end of the coding process, I had identified three main themes, which are

represented in the following three analysis chapters. I identify and unpack subthemes

relating to each main theme within each of those chapters.

At the end of the transcription process, I had a total of 214 single-spaced pages of

transcribed interview records. In the following chapters, participants are referred to by

their first names or, in the case of a few who did not wish to be identified, by a

pseudonym that I assigned.

Through this process of qualitative interviewing, I sought to gather data and

discover themes that explain how and why fans engage in the performative play of

cosplaying. This community provides a unique and nuanced setting in which to explore

the heavily participatory nature of modern fandom. By striving to understand how

cosplayers communicate their identities as fans to others, what role fandom plays in their

lives, and what personal benefits they gain from the practice, this study sheds light on the

concept of performative fandom more broadly and creates a better understanding of how

performance and play may be relevant to many modern fandom communities.

Chapter 4: Cosplay as a Performance of Social Engagement

Figure 1. Cosplay brings new friends together. (ThinkNu, 2014b).

Throughout my interviews, fans repeatedly expressed the idea that social connections were one of the primary motivators for getting into cosplaying and one of the greatest benefits they received from the experience. The ability to form relationships and engage in fun and meaningful interpersonal interactions loomed large as an immensely important part of the cosplay experience. Although all of my interviewees discussed

social connections as one of the key elements of cosplaying, these connections took different forms and served different specific needs.

For some fans, the entire cosplay experience is social; they would never attend a convention alone, and the entire process of creating and presenting a cosplay is social in nature, from the selection of a character to the experience of attending a convention with their friends. For others, the new connections that they form with other fans using cosplay as a topic of conversation are valuable and memorable. Finally, a few participants voiced an interesting segue from fandom and cosplay to community engagement and philanthropy.

Out of these experiences, I identified two central themes that can be used to examine the social motivations that shape cosplayers' experiences. First, cosplaying serves as a point of shared interest through which fans can make connections and build relationships. The visual indicator of shared interest functions as a social lubricant, which facilitates interactions that might not otherwise take place. Second, cosplaying is a vehicle for positivity in the lives of fans who participate in the cosplay community, allowing them to share and do good with others.

Social Lubricant

Cosplaying provides opportunities for fans to meet their needs for social connection and engagement by serving as an external signifier of shared interest. Through cosplay, participants recognize visual markers of similarity. Costume choices enable convention attendees to understand other attendees, determining their fandom

membership and discovering a potential shared interest. Through cosplay, fans can both project their own interests to others and also make judgments about others based on how they present themselves in costume. Previous research has looked at how alcohol serves as a social lubricant, especially for individuals with low social self-esteem, to decrease inhibitions and ease social interactions that might be more difficult when sober (Ferris *&* Hollenbaugh, 2011; Monahan & Lannutti, 2000). While cosplaying's role as social lubricant cannot be explained by chemical changes in the brain, cosplayers clearly reveal that it does lower inhibitions and helps them to feel comfortable with initiating and engaging in social interactions that might not occur out of costume.

Costumes facilitate initial interactions. Whether accurate or not, cosplay serves as an indicator of personal interest. For most of the cosplayers in this study, personal interest in a series and connection to a character comprised primary deciding factors in which characters they selected to pursue for their cosplay costumes. These individuals who valued a personal connection to the text expressed that they needed to at least like a character or series to some extent in order to select it for a cosplay.

While discussing her process in selecting a character for a new cosplay, Tetra said, "Usually I go for a series that I really like. I find that I continually go back to the same series…I'm one of those people who can't cosplay a character they don't like…I have to kind of enjoy that character or admire that character." Similarly, when I asked how her own personality impacts her character choices for cosplaying, Meghan said:

59

Most of the time, yes, I do try to pick things that I do like. Like if I'm watching an anime with my friend…we'll be sitting there and both yell, "I call so-and-so!" Usually it's the same person! But, we do try to pick people that either look like us or that we can relate to on a character basis.

This preference for characters that people personally like or relate to is not surprising, as many cosplay costumes require a significant investment, both in time and resources, from their creators. Since character selection extends from personal interest and fandom membership, cosplay costumes can usually serve as a strong indicator for others of a person's knowledge of and interest in a series.

While some cosplayers choose characters from series that they like and follow, others select characters based on different criteria. In our discussions, Michael, Dave, and Tetra all told stories about cosplaying something just because it looked cool or their friends were into it, not really because they personally loved that show or character. Even so, they recognized that people assume a cosplayer knows a lot or is well read based on character selection, so it is important to know enough to engage with other con-goers who initiate a conversation or ask for a photo. For example, Dave noted:

People automatically assume that you're at least into the thing that you're dressed as, which I've seen backfire for some people because they're in a friend group of some kind who, you know, they're just filling out the costume that the other friends who care more about the show need…but they don't really know anything

about the show. And so, usually wearing an outfit kind of implies that you know

what's going on with the series.

Dave recognized that being in costume implies familiarity with the fan text from which

the costume was derived.

Michael talked about his own experience selecting characters from comic books

or shows that he didn't actually follow. For him, finding a costume that looks cool and

fun to create and wear is enough, but he still recognizes the expectation that someone

who cosplays a particular character knows at least a basic level of information about the

character and its story. He may not be a fan who has seen every episode of a series or

gone online to analyze intricacies of a character's motivations with other fans, but it is

important to know who the character is, what their relationships are to other important

characters in the text, and perhaps what they are most well-known for within the fandom.

Michael explained:

> Admittedly there are some characters I cosplay as, I don't know anything about, I
>
> just like the way they look and I think I can do a cool job with the costume. I'll
>
> personally – a prime example, there's an anime called Fairytale, and my one
>
> friend…asked me "Hey, do you want to do this character called Panther Lily?"
>
> Never heard of Panther Lily, so I went online and saw, "Oh wow, this is kind of a
>
> cool character," and so, "Yeah, I'll do it." So, I made the character, and what I'll
>
> do is I'll just do a quick Wikipedia search and just read up on the character, just
>
> only because I know someone's going to talk to me, and it does mean a lot to

other people when you can just hold a small conversation about the character, even if you don't know a lot of the character. I'm not doing it really for myself, I'm doing it to make them happy, because it makes them happy to have a conversation.

In both Dave's and Michael's cases, being able to converse with others about the character and series at a basic level almost seemed to be a responsibility that they felt toward other fans. Looking at these interactions from the perspective of Goffman's (1959) conception of the performance of identity, the cosplayer assumes a responsibility toward their audience (other fans in attendance at conventions) to present a more nuanced, complete performance of their chosen role. More than donning the costume, cosplayers must also know their lines and the context of their performance. While Michael described doing basic research such as Googling the character or looking them up on Wikipedia in order to know enough to hold conversations about a character with other fans at a convention, Tetra talked about how such explorations can lead to a more personal interest and introduction to a new fandom:

If I'm interested in someone visually who I don't know anything about, I go and I try to form a connection with the character. Like, one of my favorite characters to cosplay is Black Canary, and at first, I just wanted to cosplay her because she looks cool and I really didn't know anything about her. But then I decided, "Ok, well, I can easily make this costume and I think she's cool, so I'm going to learn about her." And then I just dove into a lot of the lore about Black Canary…and I

just discovered it because the visual appeal drew me into the character, and then

through that I decided to learn about the character and I want to cosplay

characters that I have connections with.

These examples illustrate that, even when cosplayers' character selection is not based on

a strong fan connection with a particular character, cosplayers recognize that their

costuming is perceived by others as an outward manifestation of fandom.

This expectation that cosplaying can serve as a visual signifier of interest can also

help fans to make quick judgments about people that they meet at conventions.

Specifically, cosplay can serve as an indicator of membership in a fandom, especially for

members of obscure fandoms. Within fan communities like anime, fantasy, or science

fiction, fans can expect that other members of the community who are well-versed with

the genre are at least familiar with well-known texts with broad fan bases. However, not

all fans, especially those who are newer or more casual fans, have encountered older and

lesser-known texts. People cosplaying characters from these more obscure fan texts

signal their knowledge and membership to others who share their interest and might want

to interact with them. One of Schechner's (2002) seven functions of performance is to

mark or change identity; when choosing to cosplay a character that only select fans (those

who share membership in these more obscure fandoms) will recognize, cosplayers use

their costuming to visibly mark their identity within their particular fan community.

Exemplifying this use of costuming to visibly mark oneself as a member of a

particular fandom, Ada discussed making the conscious choice to cosplay characters from

63

series that are more obscure, assuming that interactions with people based on her costume will likely be more interesting and engaging for her:

I often strategically cosplay things that are not very well-known, and when people recognize me, I often get into an excited conversation about that thing. Because I've cosplayed something…[that] not a lot of people read…the people who do are usually very serious manga people who know the manga world better than most anime fans do, and then we'll be able to sit down and have a nice conversation about levels of knowledge of the manga market in Japan that most American fans don't have, because American fandom is so anime dominated. So that affects interactions.

Especially for fans of more obscure works, cosplaying provides an insight into shared interest that will indicate to other fans that they share this unusual fandom. Fans of lesser known shows, books, or games may not have large fan gatherings or forums to connect with one another, so seeing other fans cosplaying from older texts or those with smaller fan followings broadcasts this interest to fellow fans who recognize the characters being portrayed. Tetra also described recognizing and interacting with other older fans of a series:

In a sense, I guess, what you show up in at a cosplay gathering, it's kind of like a representation of what you're interested in…And if you go to a general Fire Emblem gathering, if I see an older fan, I will immediately have, like, a different perspective, or I guess a different view on what they might be interested in. And I

guess that's more in line with what I'm interested in, so I'm more likely to approach them.

This recognition of the judgments made by other fans based on the choice to dress as more obscure characters reflects Goffman's (1959) claims about the way individuals project status through the performance of identity. Fans who make the choice to project their interest in lesser known texts through their cosplays expect others to recognize their status as dedicated or "old school" fans and afford them the respect associated with that fandom membership. The thought that goes into choosing cosplay characters based on the types of interactions that they will elicit also reflects one of the key components of performance outlined by Carlson (2004): an attitude of consciousness in carrying out specific actions. It is apparent that fans make these choices with a conscious thought toward how others will respond to them. Being able to recognize a shared interest through costuming helps other mutual fans recognize one another and have a better expectation for how that interaction might go. When fans of lesser-known works see others cosplaying from that text, their shared and unique interest fosters a special connection and leads to more nuanced social interactions.

In addition to allowing members of more obscure fandoms to recognize one another, individuals can use others' cosplays to evaluate what an interaction with that person will be like and to decide whether or not they wish to pursue that social interaction. Ada brought up this idea that cosplay can provide information about the quality and content of possible interactions:

So you can, when you know the cosplay world well, you can type-spot people. You know, is that person cosplaying from a manga that doesn't have an anime that is, you know, semi-obscure? That's going to be a person that's very interesting to talk to about the anime world. That person is going to be plugged in to unusual and interesting events. Is that person cosplaying something that's super old school? They may be somebody who's been in fandom longer than most other people. So, you can guess very quickly from just a palate of people walking by what kind of experience you will have talking to each of them.

Through reflections on others' costumes, fans ascertain fandom membership and involvement and knowledge in the world of fandom more broadly. A fan who demonstrates familiarity with an obscure fandom through their costuming may be more plugged in to the nuances of both the source material and the fandom community than more casual fans or those newer to the genre.

Just as the shared interest that is communicated through outward costuming can provide introductions to interactions and new relationships, the act of cosplaying itself provides more opportunities for social engagement and makes both cosplayers and other con-goers more comfortable with initiating these interactions with new people. Cosplaying provides an introduction and invitation to interaction. Cosplayers feel more comfortable and confident approaching others and forming new social connections in costume than they do in their regular clothing.

By serving as a visual marker of fandom membership, cosplaying allows for easier interactions in general at conventions and fan gatherings, encouraging fans to initiate conversation with new people and providing a shared point of discussion between new acquaintances. The visual indicator of interest provides an introduction to interaction and an easy topic of conversation. Participants in this study indicated that cosplay facilitated conversations with other fans that might not have otherwise taken place. The connections made between fans may only be short, in-the-moment exchanges, but they enrich the social experience had by those involved. Li explained how cosplaying helps initiate and facilitate interactions and connections with other fans at conventions:

> It's social because I'm going out and meeting and seeing people, and connecting with people…One of the last cons that I went to was Boston ComicCon, and I was wearing my Magical Girl Pretty Deadpool dress, and, um, met up with a couple Lady Deadpools, and we just instantly were having fun. We posed together, interacted, and, you know, we knew nothing else about each other, other than we liked Deadpool and Lady Deadpool, and just had an instant connection. And so, it is a social thing for me, because it's just – again, becoming part of the event and connecting with others that way.

Li met and interacted with other fans who were dressed as the same character simply because they were able to easily see upon meeting that they shared this interest. Holly

also discussed how being in costume facilitates interactions and makes it easier to meet people:

> If I'm just in street clothes, I feel like I really would have to go up to someone to have a conversation…whereas if I'm in costume I can just go like, "Hey! So-and-so character name, how are you?" and then just start talking about whatever…I'd say it's much more apparent for jokes and discussions about the characters and the fandom, because it's a lot easier to go up to someone and say, "Hey!" and start the conversation.

Cosplayers are able to recognize fellow fans through their costuming and have something to talk about if they want to initiate social interaction. It provides them with a basis for conversation with people whom they might otherwise never approach. As Jenkins (1992a) claimed, fandom helps individuals fulfill their needs for social engagement by situating them within a community of like-minded individuals. Because it provides a visual cue of this community membership, cosplaying essentially serves as a ticket for fans to gain entry into a particular fan community. This facilitation of community formation exemplifies one way that cosplaying as a fan activity serves as equipment for living. As Brummet (1991) explained, individuals use media as a source of knowledge and logical patterns for sense-making. There are various examples in the literature of people who are able to better process and understand experiences in their own lives through their fandoms (i.e. processing loss through mirrored storylines) (Beck, 2012; Burr-Miller, 2011; Williams, 2011). However, perhaps fans also use the knowledge they

glean through fandom as a tool to navigate within this particular social climate.

Essentially, after gaining entry to the fan community through their media use and specific

selection of media fandoms to highlight, fans are then able to navigate that community

and make a place for themselves within it through their expert use of fan knowledge

(demonstrating their fan knowledge as a marker of social status and belonging).

Interactions between fans at conventions do not have to be in-depth and

meaningful, leading to long-term relationships. Indeed, short exchanges are common,

with people asking for photos or asking a question about the character. These queries

from fellow con-goers then allow the cosplayer to respond in character for short bits of

role-play, pose together for photos, or just have brief but enjoyable conversations. Molly

described her social interactions at conventions:

> A stranger comes up and says, "Oh I want to take your picture." Or there's a
> series that I adore that literally nobody has ever seen, and whenever I run into
> another character from that series when I'm dressed up as one of its characters,
> it's just this great mutual experience of, "Oh my god, you love this show too!
> Let's take a picture together!" You kind of get your little 5-second friendships
> out of it. So, nothing really lasting, but it's fun.

Even if a lasting connection isn't formed, it can be satisfying to briefly connect with

fellow fans who share that particular interest.

Ada also mentioned requests for photos from other con-goers, and this type of interaction came up in many of the interviews. In discussing what types of interactions take place in costume that wouldn't happen if she weren't cosplaying, Natasha said:

> Definitely the whole picture-taking thing. Nobody's going to take pictures of me randomly just in street clothes…Yeah, and other people would kind of come up and ask me how I did it and put things together, and that's kind of fun too, to just be able to share knowledge and experiences with other people.

Requesting photos, admiring the work that a cosplayer put into their costume, and discussing how costumes were made comprise social interactions that revolve around the costume. Fellow fans ask questions about the technical skills necessary to make the elements of the costume or compliment the cosplayer's work. Tetra also mentioned conversations that are focused on the costume itself when I asked about her in-costume interactions:

> I feel like it's less-so with fabric cosplays, because you have to get really close to see the hand-embroidery or the hand-details, but I have friends who do armor, and people will just come up to them like, "How did you make that?" and that will just start a conversation. Um, I have had experiences where, because I'm in a lot of small fandoms, when someone sees you in costume they're really, really excited, and it's always a really good way to make friends.

70

In this way, cosplay encourages interactions that might otherwise not happen. People see an interesting costume or a character that they recognize, and that recognition becomes the basis for interaction.

Simply being in costume sparks more interaction with others than attending a convention in street clothes. The cosplayers I spoke with recognized that people are more likely to approach them and start conversations when they are dressed in costume because they display a willingness for engagement with others simply by dressing up. Other convention attendees will approach them and talk to them more when they are cosplaying than when they are not because they have already made the choice to participate in the event in a publically observable way. During my interview with Rebecka, we discussed her non-profit organization, Heroic Inner Kids, which she started in order to use cosplaying to help others and improve her community. In her role as founder and leader of this type of organization, she felt that she is already quite outgoing, but she spoke of the difference that she has witnessed in how others react toward her and other cosplayers when in costume:

> It's funny because normally – usually I'm a pretty jovial person in and of my own personality, just because you've got to be kind of awkward and freaky and weird to do this. Most people choose a 9-to-5 job, and my job is dressing up as Goldilocks. So, you're not talking to a wallflower as it is, but it's funny to see, you know, the approachability. People will come to you where they wouldn't.

Dave also experienced this increased approachability in costume. When I asked him how being in costume changes his experience of a convention, he replied:

> You will get more interaction than if you're in plainclothes. That's the big thing, if you're in plainclothes you're just kind of walking around…no one really knows what you're into. People automatically assume that you're at least into the thing that you're dressed as…So, you know, you'll get people who maybe talk to you about the show, or they want to tell you about, you know, someone else who's dressed like you, or someone who's dressed like the best version of some other character from the show or some other well-known character from another well-known program that's in the same genre. You know, that kind of thing.

Tetra talked about how it is actually harder for her to interact at fan gatherings when not in costume. She said that she generally only approaches other cosplayers at conventions and other fan gatherings because "if I'm going to cosplay it wouldn't occur to me to bother them, I guess, because I feel like I'm not really sure what they're there for." Cosplay can serve as an indicator that someone is open to interaction – as Tetra said, others know what they're there for. In this way, cosplaying fulfills another of Schechner's (2002) functions of performance: it fosters community. When someone is in costume, people know they are willing to be viewed and open to being approached because they've put themselves out there in this performance of their selected character. Shareece talked about having experienced both sides of this approachability coin,

attending cons both in and out of costume. In discussing the differences between those

experiences, she said:

> In casual clothes, it's easier to kind of blend into the crowd and just kind of
>
> observe…But at the same time, um, you get a lot more people that are just so
>
> excited to see that character in cosplay that you'll meet more people when you're
>
> in cosplay. Um, you'll get a lot of photos, compliments, generally…From what I
>
> can see, there's a lot more camaraderie with people that are in cosplay, and not
>
> necessarily even from the same series, just people seem to be able to, like, run up
>
> to them and talk to them…If you're casual, you have to seek it out. When you're
>
> in cosplay, it almost seeks you out.

Sophie noted the same idea:

> People are always more willing to talk to you when you're in costume, and if
>
> you're in costume it's easier to meet up with other people who are from the series
>
> you're cosplaying from, because that's just an automatic thing you have in
>
> common. And I've made so many friends through cosplay that I wouldn't have
>
> otherwise…It's just a thing people have to talk about that's out there from the
>
> beginning.

As these excerpts suggest, participants stressed that social interactions become easier and

more comfortable with someone in costume at a convention than with someone who does

not have that clear visual indicator that they are there to participate in the event. This

idea that cosplaying is "out there from the beginning" helps explain how it serves as a

social lubricant for fans. Cosplayers put themselves "out there" for communication with others by dressing up for conventions and other fan events. They could more easily blend into the crowd in street clothes, not drawing attention to themselves or providing any indication of their membership within a particular fan group. Not everyone at a convention participates in cosplay; fans could easily make the choice to simply attend and observe. In this way, the choice to cosplay is itself a communicative act. When a fan cosplays for a convention or other fan event, they communicate to others "This is my fandom" and they make themselves more approachable as a part of the event itself.

In addition to making others more likely to approach and initiate interaction, being in costume can be a freeing experience for cosplayers. Even if they tend to be shy and more withdrawn in their regular lives, cosplaying takes away inhibitions and makes them feel more willing and able to step outside of their comfort zone and do things that they otherwise never would. Dave talked about not being as involved in cosplaying recently as he was in college, but still seeing how it has impacted the way he interacts in social settings. He said, "I'd say it makes me more likely to get into whatever kind of weird quirkiness is part of the social interaction, rather than staying off to the side…It unencumbers you to a certain extent." Li also expressed how being in costume makes her feel more outgoing:

> I'm probably just that little bit more social in costume. Um, I'm more social and
> engaging at conventions in general than I am out of it. I'm a bit shy and

introverted, but conventions are an area where I really come out of my shell and I

interact and I'm stage and presence in the costuming even more so.

T'eao recognized cosplay as an "icebreaker" or a vehicle for interaction for many

participants:

I'm not one of those people that needs an icebreaker. Like, I will walk up to

random strangers in the middle of DC on the metro and say "Hi." But for people

that do, it's an amazing icebreaker, because you already know somebody likes the

same thing as you if you're cosplaying a similar character or whatnot, and you

already have a basis for conversation. And so it's a brilliant vehicle that way. Or

if you're like me and you're a bit of a ham, and you kind of want to be able to

carry the stage everywhere with you, it's a brilliant vehicle for that, because

everybody loves when you're dressed up as something, even if that something…is

nothing they've ever seen before. They love the idea of the character, or fashion,

or the portrayal of the character.

While some cosplayers, like T'eao and Rebecka, are already very outgoing and feel they

can interact with people in any social situation, they recognize that others feel freer to

initiate interactions or more open to socialization when they are in costume or are

interacting with others in costume.

Costumes facilitate character-driven conversation and role-play. Costumes

not only serve as an introduction to interaction between fans, but they can also structure

fan interactions at these events. By taking on the role of a particular character, fans have

75

a sort of template for interactions with others. They know how their character acts with and toward other characters from the story, so they are able to use role-play as a way to engage with fellow fans. Li described her experience at a convention where the series she chose for her cosplay was very popular:

> I would run around and any time I saw one of the characters from that series I was able to say something in character to them and have this brief little interaction. And it's like, I knew nothing about that person other than we had this shared love of this series, and we both knew that we liked it because we were cosplaying from it.

Costumes visually indicate common interest as well as allow cosplayers to interact in character, playing not only with the social context but also with the characters and relationships from the original work.

For some fans, cosplays are often planned around the interactions that the costume and character will facilitate. Ada explained:

> The centerpiece is whether the interactions you're going to have with others are going to be important. Or are going to be fun. And so sometimes it'll be "Well, this isn't my favorite character, but his interactions with that other character are really cool and since my friend is being that other character we can have fun doing this thing.

Even when her connection with the character isn't as strong as it might be with others, knowing that she will have satisfying, fun interactions with other fans in costume is important and can make the entire experience more fulfilling.

One of the reasons that cosplaying provides more opportunities for social engagement with other fans stems from the expectations of easy and predictable interactions with others dressed as characters from the same series. Cosplayers are able to interact with one another in character, performing skits or short interactions based on how their characters would interact within the storyline. These role-play interactions function as the basis for many fan exchanges, and they can lead to more meaningful introductions and fan discussions. Ada described these in-character interactions when discussing her first cosplay experience:

> I think that Harry McDougal was a particularly great first costume because he's a secondary character from what was at that point a very popular show, so I was able to run into 12 different people cosplaying the protagonist, and 8 different people cosplaying the female lead, but no one else cosplaying my character. So, whenever I ran into them we were able to react to each other in character and go through the various imitations of the way these characters interact with each other in the show, so we fell very naturally into a fun way to break the ice with a stranger and interact in a role-play setting, because the show was popular but my character was rare.

Cosplayers have ready-made interactions with others dressed as characters from the same series. Holly described the role-play interactions that she has at conventions:

> It always depends on who I'm with and what character I'm being…If there's, like, one of my friends who's also with that character who plays along, like, I'll goof off with them or I'll do little scenes or I try to be in character a little bit more. And if I meet someone new when they're also with a character that works out together – from the same series or something or they know the character – I'll sometimes do a fun little thing in character with that.

Role-play becomes a way to interact with others, whether through fun interactions with friends or with new acquaintances that are cosplaying from the same fandom.

Ada also talked about the short interactions that take place at conventions, focusing specifically on the role-play that can be performed in these encounters:

> When you're walking along you'll do chunks of role-play that last 5-10 minutes. When you run into someone from the series you can do chunks of role-play, but even then, it's much more common for somebody who's cosplaying the same series I am to come up and say, "Hey, can I have my friend take a photo of us together?" than to come up and actually initiate a role-play interaction. Very common are random people not in costume who will shout at you some kind of comment that relates to the show, and then you respond with an in-character appropriate retort, and you'll have these single-exchange moments of role-play frequently.

One of the primary ways to interact with others in character is to engage in short skits or bits of role-play, saying phrases for which the character is well known or responding in a way that would be expected of that character. For example, a cosplayer dressed as the character Groot from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* series would know to respond to all in-character interactions by saying "I am Groot." The cosplayer has a script for their interactions with others, and fans of the series would be delighted in the performer's consistency with the character (knowing that Groot only ever says these three words). In this way, fans get the chance to engage with others as they act out their respective roles. Character choices serve as both a point of interest and a social script.

Costumes facilitate fan communities. For some fans, cosplay becomes such a major part of their lives that it serves not just as a way to interact with others at conventions, but as a structure for their friendships and an activity around which regular socialization occurs. They spend time preparing for conventions with other fans, planning costumes that coordinate, making costumes together, and attending conventions in groups. The stories made at conventions and while prepping and constructing costumes become the mythos of the friend group, the stories that are repeated again and again to reminisce and reinforce bonds. Holly talked about the interactions she has had because of cosplaying and how they have impacted her friendships:

> My roommates last year, most of them cosplayed, and so our entire apartment right before a con was a disaster of fabric and, like, expanding foam, but we work on it together, we give each other help, we think about, like, if we do a photo

shoot what things to do…Making jokes about mistakes with our cosplays in the past. Like, a huge hot glue incident with me and a friend, since I decided I was lazy and was going to hot-glue a trim onto a tunic. I forgot that I did that, and then my friend, with a nice iron that didn't belong to either of us, tried to iron my tunic and it was OK but it was also 2 A.M. the day before, so she was not happy with me at all. And sort of sharing those stories again and again and again.

Cosplaying as a shared activity with close friends was a common theme that came up throughout all of my interviews; in fact, in describing their introductions to cosplaying, almost every person I spoke with talked about being "dragged to" their first convention by a friend or sibling or getting involved because they had friends who were also fans. Tetra explained that many of her friends also cosplay, and this shared interest often shapes their interactions and conversations:

It is definitely a way to interact with my friends. A lot of our conversations steer towards, "So, I want to do X character from this series, do you want to do a cosplay group?" And then it turns into, like, this mass scheduling bonanza. Like, "Well, I'm going to Fanime, but you're not" …and, yeah, that is definitely a thing.

Being able to share not only a passion for a fan text but also the creative process of costume construction and the fan activity of convention attendance and cosplaying may provide a special social bond between friends. Cosplay serves as the basis for

80

interactions, not just for meeting new people, but also as the structure of friendships and the activity around which socialization occurs.

Beyond a shared activity between friends, all of these examples of cosplay encouraging and facilitating interactions between fellow fans demonstrate how fan activities like cosplay facilitate the formation and maintenance of community. Bailey (2005) discussed a model of fan subjectivity and construction of identity that balances individual agency and the constraints of broader societal structures. I argue that just as the individual fan makes personal and subjective choices to shape their own identity while also being constrained by systemic forces, their individual performances of identity simultaneously construct and constrain the communal identity of the fan community to which they belong (or wish to belong). Through their performances, fans construct the boundaries of their chosen fan communities, defining what it means to be a fan of a particular text or genre and how fans behave and interact within that context.

Positivity

In addition to helping facilitate social interactions and relationships between fellow fans, fandom and cosplay provide a way to share and do good with and for fans' communities. One of the themes that was most surprising to me, but which came up in several interviews, was fandom and cosplaying as an avenue through which fans serve higher goals, whether that be altruism and philanthropy or a general desire for positivity and hope. For several participants, the act of cosplaying was the introduction to a more vibrant and fulfilling community of people who want to improve their world. Fans' use

81

of cosplay to better their communities and the lives of others highlights the possibilities of liminality in cosplay performances (McKenzie, 2004). Cosplayers play with and inhabit the spaces between spatial, temporal, and symbolic boundaries in their embodied representations of fictional characters and storylines, and some fans use this ability to inhabit the "in-between" to challenge and change social structures.

Cosplay promotes an attitude of positivity and hope that appeals to fans. The fandom community consists of people who are creative and positive. Fans are people who are willing to look at the world in a different way and imagine that things could be different than they currently are. Attending conventions allows fans to connect with others who share their hopeful view of the world and its possibilities. Ada was particularly interested in this idea of fandom as a community of positivity and hope:

> Within science fiction and fantasy, it means being part of a literary community that's also future-oriented, creative, and positive. The centerpiece of it being that the kinds of people you meet at science fiction conventions are generally all people who are excited to create and generate things, whether those things are new code in a program or new works that are being written as fiction or working as a librarian or being an academic, and I think that it's a community that's particularly good for younger people in a world with a discouraging job market to go there and see, "Hey, I'm surrounded by 15 different interesting people who are doing interesting jobs."

Ada liked being part of a community of people doing interesting and meaningful things in their personal and professional lives. She reinforced this idea that fandom is uniquely suited to this pursuit of the good, saying, "Fandom is full of people who are doing things that they are passionate about and that are positive and helping to contribute to progress." Ada noted that fans, especially fans of science fiction and fantasy genres, reflect on ways that the world could be rather than just seeing the world as it is right now:

> It's exposing you to a community of people who are not just, "We're in this world, this world has problems, these problems are bad. The best thing we can hope for is to battle against them getting worse." It's a community of people who are like, "We're in this world, but in 10 years we're going to be in a different world, and we're going to make that world together. And look at all the different ways a world could be. Which of these do we want to try to make real?" And that creates a different type of optimism, not optimism in the sense of expecting everything to go rosily, but optimism in the sense of expecting change and feeling empowered to be part of the change. And feeling like your own contributions are valuable and significant, as opposed to insignificant.

Ada contended that fans buy into the idea that the world could be a vastly different place. The imagination that it takes to immerse oneself in the fictional worlds created by the authors of genres like fantasy, science fiction, anime, and manga also serves fans in allowing them to imagine the ways in which their own

world could be changed and improved (and their own role in making those changes possible).

Fans are able to appreciate one another's skill and creativity through cosplay. One benefit of cosplaying is the ability to share in others' fandoms. Even if an individual does not personally enjoy or follow a particular series, by seeing the creative and impressive things that others do in homage to these works, they can vicariously enjoy and appreciate different areas of fandom. Meghan explained how appreciating others' skill and effort shapes her experience of fandom:

> I think it just makes it more, you know, interactive and fun, because you're getting to not only dress up in character as somebody that you really, like, love potentially, but you're also getting to see other people who are doing something that they love…like, let's say I'm not the biggest fan of *Attack on Titan*, because it freaks me out…I might not be the hugest fan of it, but at the same time, you see these people who are cosplaying as the Yeagers, and you see how great their costumes are. It's like, "Wow, they really did get the character. They really did understand." Watching it caused them to feel like they could fly through the trees and want to make their suits that allow them to fly. It's like you can tell that however much you might not like it, their passion for it has caused them to be able to create potentially a working machine.

Cosplaying and cons provide an outlet for fans to share a deeper appreciation of each other's fandoms. Although a fan might not particularly care for a specific work,

cosplaying enables appreciation for the attention and creativity that others put into their costumes. At cons, fans are not only able to share their passion for their own fandoms through their cosplay creations but also explore and learn more about other fandoms through observation of and discussion with other fans.

Cosplaying provides opportunities for mentorship. Some older cosplayers (relative to the broader cosplay community, which is comprised largely of college-age individuals) discussed the appeal of being able to mentor younger fans, helping them see the possibilities for personal and professional growth by modeling their own successes. Whether cosplay provides them with ways to help their communities, engage creatively with the world at large, or find unique and fulfilling career opportunities, showing younger fans how to channel their fandom into positive changes in their lives comprises one of the most satisfying parts of their experience with cosplay. Ada talked about the ability to positively influence younger fans through the unique interactions that happen within the fan community at conventions:

> For me, I think partly because of being a teacher, a big hunk of it is the opportunity to get to interact with young fans who are finishing high school or in college or starting college and are trying to make those decisions about "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?"…And just being able to be a happy adult, which is something – a happy adult but also a peer, as opposed to a happy adult but and adult in a separate category, because when I'm at a convention and I'm in

costume, I am by definition in the same category with these people, even if I'm 10

years older.

For Ada, conventions provide a unique opportunity to relate to younger people on a peer

level, helping to serve as an example of someone happy and successful, but also being

someone relatable with whom they can comfortably interact. Cosplaying puts people

who, in other contexts, might be separated by age, power, class, and other social

differences on a more even footing. As peers in the fan community, people like Ada

connect with and mentor younger fans in a way that they may not otherwise be able to.

Michael also talked about positively influencing others as one of the main benefits

he gets from cosplaying:

[The third benefit] is just a whole positive aspect. I mean, like, the cosplay

community is awesome, but it does have a – especially now, it has a negative

competition-like vibe going on right now, and that sucks, because…a lot of

people aren't in it for the competition, but they're kind of getting swept up in it,

and now they feel like they're not good enough to do certain things or enter a

contest or anything like that, and I'm not, that's not me. And so, I want to put

forward that it doesn't matter if your costume's homemade, it doesn't matter if

it's made out of resin or if it's made out of cardboard, you're all on the same level

or the same plane, you know what I mean? You're all cosplayers, that's all that

matters.

Michael stressed that different skill levels, time commitments, and investments into costumes don't matter. A cosplayer is a cosplayer, period. As a well-known member of the community who is known for having very high-quality cosplay costumes, Michael brings credibility and authority as he reinforces this message of equality within the community.

Cosplay can serve as a tool for philanthropic work. Michael was one of several cosplayers in my study who participate in charity work in costume. When in costume at these events, he sends the message to kids that anyone can be a hero, and heroes can be people like them. During our interview, he told a story about one of the most memorable charity events he ever did, where his ability to be a positive influence on young people really became evident:

> One of the most memorable things about a charity event that I did – I did a school. It was an anti-bullying event, and I went as Batman, and the school's predominantly white. And I did the event, and a couple days later one of the teachers contacted me, and one of her black students came to her, and he was just so excited. Like, all he could talk about for the next couple days was how Batman looked like him, and he could be, like, "Oh my god, do I maybe know him? Like, I could be Batman!" He was just so happy that Batman looked like him, and so that means a lot, you know? So, yeah, and definitely that anybody can be that hero, anybody can be who they want to be.

The satisfaction that cosplayers get when they are able to send a positive message to young people is indicative of the larger sense of joy and accomplishment that can come from using their fandom as a channel to work for the greater good.

Ada described the satisfaction of being able to contribute to philanthropic efforts and help others do good things through cosplay. She participated in charity events using her fandom to raise money for good causes, but she also described helping her students organize these types of events and the pleasure of seeing them discover the joy of working toward something bigger than themselves:

This spring, the local anime club is doing a fundraiser, which involves costumes, so they're going to be borrowing some costumes from me to wear for the fundraiser to raise money for refugees in the Mediterranean area. Another great example of how using your costuming to bring together the community is then empowering that community to do something that's really valuable for the world, which then leads young people to say, "Hey, wow, I did something powerful. I feel powerful now, I can do more things." It wasn't costumes specifically, but there's a charity auction at a science fiction convention called Vericon, which Harvard runs every year, which I was involved with when I did my PhD…and we raise thousands of dollars each year to send to charity, and often I've heard people comment, undergraduates or graduating undergraduates, "Wow, that was the most powerful thing I've ever been part of, that was the most good I've ever done for the world. That felt really powerful, I can't believe we did that just with our fan

energy. I can't believe I raised that money just from the fan fiction that I wrote or

the fan art I drew or the dressing up as The Doctor skit that I did." And making

people think differently about themselves and realize the power they have to

change the world through their excitement activities.

Ada gets satisfaction from using her fandom to do something good for her community,

but she also enjoys helping young people realize their own power to affect good in the

world. As a teacher, she finds it particularly gratifying to help empower young people to

use their own passions and interests to make the world a better place. This ability to

channel fan interest into engagement with and service toward one's community could be

seen as one way that fandom and cosplay can serve as equipment for living for fans

(Burke, 1941). While fans use the stories from their favorite texts as tools to understand

real problems in their lives and as models for telling their own stories, they can also use

fan practices as tools for engaging in their world and pursuing larger goals (Harrington,

Bielby, & Bardo, 2011).

Several participants discussed the ability to channel their interest in fandom,

costuming, and cosplay into altruistic efforts to improve their communities. They

repeatedly expressed the gratification of using their fandom to help others. It was what

kept them involved in cosplay, and it added deeper meaning to their lives. One of the

main motivators for philanthropic behavior, and especially continued giving, is the

personal satisfaction and happiness that those giving their time, skills, or money receive

(Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007; Mount, 1996; Wang, Tran, Nyutu, & Fleming,

2014). For cosplayers, this motivation is no different. Being able to channel their fan interests into something that improves their communities or the lives of others is a deeply satisfying endeavor. Michael described this altruistic motivation in his story about one of the first charity events in which he participated:

> At first, it was just strictly the charity work, the charity aspect of it…my first big charity event we did…was an event called Lighting the Bat Signal for Jaden. And it was, Jaden Barbour, this 5-6 year old kid, had leukemia, and he actually was a Wish kid at, like, 3 years old…So his wish at that time was to meet Batman, which was Christian Bale. And in two weeks, we got 10,000 people to fill up one of our high school stadiums, and we had a Super Heroes and Kids in Ohio, it's a costuming and charity group out of Cleveland, so they came in, and at the time I was working on Batman, but they already had a Batman, so I joined them as Green Lantern, and we had about, probably about 10 different superheroes there. We came into the stadium and we had this giant bat signal that we lit up in the sky, and then Batman comes in in this car that was donated from one of the car dealerships, it was like a souped-up sports car that looked like the Batmobile, and they drove around the city and stuff. It was so cool…So, that was my first big event, and seeing the impact that it has, I just wanted to do more and more and more. So that was really my driving force in getting into it.

Michael's primary motivator for getting more seriously involved in costuming and the cosplay community was seeing the good that he could do through it. He saw how happy

90

he could make sick children and the money that could be raised for good causes, and that realization prompted him to become more involved.

Rebecka shared this motivation of bringing joy to others. Like Michael, she is a big fan of different works and genres, but she was drawn into the world of cosplay by seeing the positive impact that she could have on others by dressing up. She described her first experience of seeing this joy in others as a teenager volunteering at a local hospital:

> So, back in the day, before cosplay had an official title, I started as a mascot junior volunteer for a hospital in Tyler, Texas. And I was a giant, 6-foot-tall panda bear who got to stalk Catholic nuns. And I got hooked. I saw the joy it brought, I saw the change in people's affect, how they went from the, you know, kind of "I'm doing the daily grind," to suddenly seeing adults light up. I mean, and these are medical professionals, so they've seen it all, they've been there, they've done it, and suddenly you saw this 6-foot-tall panda bear playfully stalking Catholic nuns through the lobby, and you saw the registrars suddenly giggling about it. And the Catholic nuns, who were also nurses in many cases, giggling about it. And then you'd go up to the floors with the kids, and you'd get completely swamped by small children, and they're giggling and happy. And that's all they wrote. I was hooked.

The main draw and what initially got Rebecka "hooked" on dressing up was the joy it brought to others. Helping others to indulge in a little fantasy and play in situations that

might otherwise be serious or stressful was fun and personally satisfying. As an adult, she pursued this interest further through her charitable organization. Rebecka described what she gets out of her experiences with costuming:

> For me, particularly, it's always been the difference it's made for people, so it was much more social and philanthropic…I looked at it and went, "How can this serve others to help them? How can we bring attention to things that are normally ignored?" So I approached it more from, you know, the standpoint of, "How can we take these ideas, the concepts behind the comic books, behind the heroes, behind what inspires children, and then move it forward to, you know, hospitals? Move it forward to other concepts that would inspire others?" I wanted to actually take the stories behind it and make those inspirational. So, I really didn't care if, you know, I was famous for it, never really have. I was more into the, "How can we better the world and take these wonderful stories, like bards of old, and inspire others?"

The ability to inspire and make a difference for others trumps any personal recognition or acknowledgement that she may get for her talents in costuming.

Fans use cosplay to bring hope and joy to others' lives. Part of the motivation to do good for others seems to be the ability to facilitate a moment of magic for someone who needs it. Just as the stories that inspire the costumes of cosplay are based in fantasy, set in worlds where the impossible becomes real, through cosplay fans engage others in interactions that help them to move beyond their regular life into a world where anything

seems possible. Rebecka described this ability to help others move beyond disbelief and

into a moment of magic:

> One of my most profound recent moments was a 50, I think he was about 50 years
>
> old, and he's a veteran SWAT team member, who was like, "Yeah, this is cute,
>
> great, whatever." And I watched this man turn into a 5-year-old boy the second
>
> he saw Batman, and he was like, "Oh my god, Batman!" And you see this man
>
> suddenly get in touch with his inner child, and you saw the thrill and the wonder
>
> and the joy and the imagination just spill out of this man…That's why we do it.

Whether for a sick child (or family members who must deal with the stress and

uncertainty of a loved one's illness) or an adult who has become disconnected from the

world of childhood imagination, cosplayers who channel their costuming into

philanthropic work transport others to a world of wonder.

Serving the greater good through costuming is not limited to those fans who move

beyond attendance at conventions and participate in formal charity work in costume.

Facilitating moments of magic and spreading joy to others can happen at cons as well.

T'eao shared that part of the challenge of staying in character when in costume is rising

above the petty concerns of life in order to spread joy to others:

> I've talked to a lot of people who do mascot stuff…and they talk a lot about it's
>
> the joy of seeing children react to them as the character. And this is what I mean,
>
> I think, by saying you have to stay above all those things that are petty. Your goal
>
> is to sort of portray the magic, portray what the world can be. You're trying to be

larger than life, you're trying to be better than life, you're trying to be higher

morally in an odd sort of way, because you're representing the more simplistic

morals usually done in comic books where the good guy wins even when he was

originally the bad guy. You know, there's redemption, there's justice…In the

cultural conversation, it is your job to embody that mythos and not destroy the

magic for anyone else…You have to be that elevated figure, otherwise you're

doing a disservice to the costume put on and a disservice to the effort you put in

to make it.

Even if cosplayers have other concerns or serious things going on in their own lives, they

recognize a responsibility to rise above those issues and embrace the story in which they

are participating as cosplayers. This commitment goes along with the mythos of many of

the stories from anime and manga that cosplayers represent - a simplified moral code

where good wins out. Thus, in representing the character effectively for others,

cosplayers must stay above any negativity in their lives and present a face of joy and

happiness both for themselves and for others.

Closing Thoughts

Whether cosplayers pursue altruistic goals or not, a big part of the cosplay

experience seems to be the connections that are made with others. Cosplaying allows

fans to meet others with similar interests, engage in stimulating exchanges that might not

take place without cosplay as a social lubricant, and help affect positive change in their

own communities. Participants do not cosplay alone. Even when cosplayers dream up

and create their costumes individually, they do so with the end goal of being seen by others in a social setting. Many options exist for fans to engage with the object of their interest, but cosplaying is inherently social. Perhaps the desire to connect with others is a unifying characteristic of cosplayers. Not all fans cosplay, but all cosplayers want to make social connections within the fan community. The choice to cosplay is, in part, a choice to perform the role of community member.

Chapter 5: Cosplay as a Performance of the Unique Self

Figure 2. Cosplay leads to self-discovery. (ThinkNu, 2014d).

In the previous chapter, I detailed ways in which cosplaying serves as a social context in which fans connect with others to perform and reinforce their membership within the fan community. Another key function of participation in cosplay that emerged throughout my interviews was the ability for cosplayers to develop and communicate a clear sense of personal identity, both to themselves and to others, through their

performances in costume. Cosplayers' choices in costuming not only serve to represent their chosen character in a way that honors the text and represents the character authentically, but these choices communicate important aspects of the self in connection with the character. The process of developing, creating, and performing a cosplay also affords fans opportunities for self-improvement and the discovery of new skills and interests. Cosplaying can be a way to explore personal identity and make explicit choices about how to present oneself to others within the fan community.

Two primary themes around the self and personal identity came out through my interviews. First, cosplaying affords fans the opportunity for personal development and the demonstration of competence. Second, cosplay is a means for self-expression and the performance of identity. Through the process of cosplaying, fans gain new skills and display their competencies and confidence in their abilities to others. They are also able to express important aspects of their personalities through the adoption and expression of their chosen character. Through both of these aspects of the cosplay experience, fans gain an outlet through which to explore and express their individual identity.

Personal Development

Many interviewees noted their satisfaction when they develop new skills through their activities within the fan community. Whether they developed new techniques needed to craft high quality costumes or learned lessons and skills that would serve them in other areas of their lives, several of my interviewees expressed the joy they felt in discovering that they could make something interesting and creative. Indeed, cosplaying

97

serves as an outlet for creative impulses for many people, giving them a way to craft and create while also pursuing their fan interests.

Cosplayers discover and refine creative skills in order to craft their costumes.
Creating costumes requires technical and creative skill. Some cosplayers are not focused on having costumes that meet high levels of proficiency, feeling the fun of cosplaying is simply dressing up to be part of the event. Sophie explained that you do not need to create professional-grade costumes or possess certain skills in order to be a cosplayer:

> Anyone can do cosplay. Everybody starting out wants to be something, and they generally want to be something really cool and complicated and they might not be able to do it. But I just want people to know that anyone can be a cosplayer. And it doesn't matter how much technical skill you put into your cosplay or how accurate it is or how other people reacted to it – if you want to be a cosplayer, I think it's like if you want to be a fan. If you say you are, then you are, and anyone can do it.

It is not necessary for other fans to validate an individual's identity as a cosplayer; as Sophie said, "If you say you are, then you are." While it may be necessary to possess certain skills in order to become a proficient or competitive cosplayer, those skills are not a prerequisite for participation. Just as Lewis (1992) asserted that fandom is a self-constructed identity, coming to be out of engagement and self-identification rather than by meeting specific criteria, cosplaying is similarly inclusive. Anyone can cosplay.

98

While participation in cosplay does not require an extensive creative skillset, many fans develop and refine creative skills throughout their experience of cosplaying in order to create costumes that will be recognized and admired by other fans at conventions. The skills needed to build visually appealing and accurate cosplays are acquired with effort and practice throughout the process of cosplaying, and many fans see this learning process as one of the great benefits of taking part in cosplay. Li discovered skills she would not have otherwise known she possessed through cosplaying:

> I learned to sew more than I would have otherwise, that's for certain. I still, I'm not very good with machine sewing, and the yard of fabric sitting in front of me terrifies me, but I am really good at hand stitching…I am really, really good at hand stitching, and I would never have known that without cosplaying.

Cosplaying can help people discover and further develop skills they otherwise might not have pursued. Without the motivation to create a specific costume, many cosplayers would never try their hand at different creative endeavors that they discover they excel at and enjoy immensely. Michael explained that it was only through cosplay that he discovered his own creativity and talent for costuming:

> Once I actually started making more costumes, that's when the creative aspect came in, because I never really thought I was – I'm not an artist. Like, you tell me to draw something, I'm drawing you a stick figure, and even that's all crooked and stuff. So I started looking on YouTube and looking at tutorials, and it was

just trial and error in making stuff, and I don't know, I just – that creative side just kind of oozed out.

Cosplaying can also serve as a motivator to learn and refine creative skills. Fans who want to participate in cosplay and have specific costumes in mind may not have the skills necessary to create those costumes, so they work on improving those skills in order to create the costumes they want to build. Tetra described her introduction into the cosplay community and her creative process in learning new skills:

So, in my first year of college, I - you know college is a time to start a lot of new things, so I basically decided that I was going to go and start cosplaying. So I went to a fabric store with a bunch of my anime club friends, bought fabric and a pattern and took it home for spring break. So that was a good 5 years ago? And since then, I picked up a lot of different sewing skills, and knitting and crocheting and embroidering, for the sake of cosplay.

Tetra knew about cosplaying and thought it looked fun, but she didn't have the skills necessary to create the costumes. When she decided to get involved, cosplaying motivated her to gain those skills.

Cosplaying offers a creative challenge for people who want to push themselves. While some cosplayers learn new skills in order to be able to cosplay the characters they like, others envision cosplaying and the process of building a new cosplay as an opportunity to challenge themselves to do something new. Many fans grow to enjoy the challenge of creating unique and interesting costumes. Even if they love a

100

character, they might choose to cosplay another character rather than making a simple, straightforward costume. Part of the fun involves the challenge of creating an intricate and visually exciting costume. Holly explained, "A lot of times I find that even if I like a character a lot, if their costume's really simple, I might not want to do that one, just because if it's just a t-shirt and a wig, for example, at this point I'm not finding that as fun to make, because I like the process of making it." The technical skill necessary to create an interesting costume can be just as important as the personal connection a fan feels to the character. For some fans, like Natasha, the appeal of a particular cosplay comes from a combination of the love of a character and the creative challenge presented by the costume:

> For me it's a lot of, like, if the costume's really intricate and really interesting looking, I feel like this would be a really fun thing to make, and also the character is really cool and someone I can kind of connect with and respect and appreciate, then that's kind of what my deciding factor is…It's the creativity part of it – I look at the thing and think "How can I do that? That looks so cool." That's another fun part of it, too, is like – you see things that kind of physically are not possible. Like, these costumes are very ridiculous. So then it's kind of like, "How can I make this? How can I actually create this thing that really should not exist in the first place?"

The fun of cosplay often comes from the challenge of figuring out how to bring interesting characters that have previously existed only in the imaginations of fans and artists into the real, physical world.

Moving beyond the basic skills necessary to piece together a costume, some cosplayers pursue unique and difficult costumes as a challenge to do something new. Holly described this process for some of the different projects she had worked on:

It's like, whenever I get into a fandom, I might find a character that I like and just want to recreate it, but then it's also, at this point, wanting to work with new materials and seeing what I can do creatively…skill-wise, because in the past I used to just work with – and there's tons of stuff that you can do with just fabric stuff – but I've tried making props and, um, adding some wefts on wigs that work out. And then eventually making an expanding foam head…And I had to make a huge shell and a head just to put on my head, and I had to make a base of cardboard and then put expanding foam around and carve it out in the shape and hot glue fabric around that and put sheer mesh in front of the mouth so that I could see out slightly…And so trying to work with new materials.

While working with fabric and learning sewing techniques can be challenging, fans like Holly find a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment in working with new materials and creating elaborate costumes, pushing themselves to think outside the box. Taking on these creative challenges becomes its own goal, with the experience of cosplaying the character being secondary to the personal accomplishment of pushing one's creative

102

skills to new levels. In fact, sometimes the selection of a character for a cosplay has nothing to do with the character and everything to do with the aesthetics of the costume and the enjoyment the fan will get from creating and wearing it. Sophie explained her criteria when selecting a character for cosplay:

> It's also just a purely aesthetic choice sometimes. I've cosplayed several characters from series' that I've never actually read. A lot of professional cosplayers and non-professional cosplayers do the same thing, because they just turn it into fashion or an art form. Even if you don't really care about the video game, you want to experience the challenge of figuring out how to make the armor, or, like, watch the movie but you just think she's so beautiful so you want to be her.

For fans like Sophie, cosplaying isn't always about paying tribute to a beloved character. Instead, their focus is the technical challenge of creating an intricate costume or replicating the look of a character that appeals to them aesthetically.

Cosplaying as an outlet for artistic expression. Taking the creative and aesthetic challenge of the creation of a cosplay costume one step further, some fans see cosplay as an art form. The focus of their creative process is not just in bringing a character from a comic or film to life, but also putting their own creative fingerprint on that character. Michael explained that his creative process centers on finding a new way to envision popular characters:

I try to put my own spin on costumes. I don't like to copy a costume that's seen, like, in the movies or TV or whatever, I'm going to always put my own little twist to it…I just don't like having it look exactly like it was drawn, and the way I always tell people is, you have a character like Daredevil, and you have so many people that have drawn Daredevil differently, and their vision, depending on who the writer is, who the director is, if it's a movie, the artist, whatever – cosplayers are artists in their own right, so it's your vision. So there's no guideline you have to go by, just create the character in your own vision. Just as any other artist would.

Just as different authors have imagined the same characters in different ways, cosplayers functioning as artists create their own versions of beloved characters. While some fans aim to create a costume that conforms as closely as possible to the representation of the character from the fan text, part of the challenge and fun for Michael is coming up with his own spin on well-known characters, creating his own vision of what this character could be. Considering cosplay as a form of art, the unique vision of a character that a cosplayer creates is both an expression of their own interpretation of the fan text and an invitation for other fans to consider the text from another perspective.

For some fans, the creative pursuits of costuming and design preceded their participation in cosplay and fan culture. The love of creative pursuits was there first, and cosplay followed as an activity in which they could pursue that passion and refine their skills. Shareece described this introduction to the cosplaying community:

104

For cosplay, I guess – well, I was kind of a theater geek beforehand, and into fashion and costume design, so it was just kind of one of those things that just fit for me, because it just was a way to express myself creatively…I saw something and was like, "I have to recreate that," you know? So it was more just like the fandom of the character or the design, and then I just had to find a way that I could actually recreate it.

For Shareece, a general interest in performance and creative pursuits preceded her interest and participation in cosplay as an aspect of fan culture. Shareece was interested in clothing design and theater first, and cosplaying became another way to pursue those creative interests that fit well with her overall hobbies and artistic pursuits. Contrary to fans who discovered cosplaying and then learned new skills in order to be able to participate in the cosplay fan community, fans like Shareece find cosplaying as an outlet for the creative skills and hobbies they already enjoy.

Fans develop personal and professional skills through cosplay. The creative skills fans acquire and refine in order to create their costumes and participate in cosplay events are the most obvious form of personal development that takes place for cosplayers, but several participants brought up tangential skills they developed through cosplaying. In fact, taking part in cosplay can help fans develop many skills and interests that can serve them in other areas of their lives. Tetra described different skills that are central to cosplay that do not revolve around the crafting of a physical costume:

105

I feel like cosplay takes up so many different skills. Like, even if you just sew your costumes, you still have to learn how to put on a wig sometimes and how to style that wig. I've learned how to put on makeup for the sake of cosplay. I never used to wear makeup, and after doing photo shoots I'm like, "Eh, I don't want to retouch these. I'll have to learn how to put on makeup." And so I feel like in a sense you do have to kind of pick up a lot of different skills that you might not have.

Cosplayers have to learn and master a variety of skills in order to put together and present a high-quality costume. Cosplayers may even develop skills that are useful in other areas of their lives, especially in their professional endeavors. Sophie described the impact that cosplaying has had on her personal development:

Cosplaying has not influenced my life significantly, besides the social part, but I know that it has helped me a little bit. Like, in terms of project management, managing your time, managing your resources, things like that. An experience cosplaying teaches you to do that – like, I need to plan time for this, I need to know how to create a calendar for this, I need to know how to evaluate my personal abilities for this, I need to know how to handle money like this. It just very subtly…gives you experiences and responsibilities or pressure.

The personal skills Sophie learned through cosplay, beyond the technical creative skills necessary to build a costume, are tools that can help her in various areas of her life. While the goal of cosplaying is not learning responsibility and management skills, the

process of preparing for and participating in cosplay events may help fans develop those tangential skills and abilities.

Cosplaying is not just about creating costumes and having fun. Successfully navigating multiple costumes and weekends full of fan events can push cosplayers to develop planning and organizational skills, make professional connections, and discover interests and abilities that they can pursue in other areas of their lives. Sophie explained how her experiences with cosplaying and fan conventions have helped her acquire other useful skills:

> Cosplay and being a geek in general have really helped me in terms of professional development as well…After I attended my first anime convention, SakuraCon, which is one of the biggest anime conventions in the U.S., I saw an ad for a job position on their Facebook page, and that being the social media coordinator, and I applied to that. And through that I've met a bunch of other people…And it's just, like, through these little lines you can make all these connections that you would have never anticipated, and we're always having fun as we do it.

Involvement in conventions and the cosplay scene can lead to professional development with skills and experiences that open doors and help participants advance in other areas of their lives. Reflecting on how cosplaying had changed the way she sees herself, Ada recognized that her own experiences with planning and leadership in cosplaying events shaped and strengthened her confidence in these professional skills:

107

I think that some of my experiences staffing and organizing things at Anime

Boston, which has been in costume and for costumers, has given me that

experience which is valuable later for things like transitioning to teaching and

organizing events and conferences and classes of 40 people, since I was used to

having to organize groups of 40 people.

Ada took the skills for planning and organization that she developed through engagement

in the cosplay community and transition them into professional skills that helped in her

academic career.

Other fans recognized that cosplaying could help young people develop skills that

will be invaluable to them as they move into their professional careers. Ada reflected on

these personal benefits that she has observed in the young cosplayers within her social

circle:

You get older cosplayers mentoring younger cosplayers, and lots of

encouragement of people to develop entrepreneurial skills, you know, marketing

your art, marketing your wigs, marketing your whatever. Or to develop language

skills, learning Japanese which is then a very marketable employment skill. So I

think that anime fandom is actually very good at encouraging young people to

develop skills that are really valuable later, professionalism especially… I think

that's something that gets passed on in the cosplay community is being serious

and professional in that way, and I think that then helps a lot of people when they

move forward to job interviews and so on. So they don't realize that that's going

to help them while they're doing it.

Ada recognized that the professional skills that young people develop not only help them

as they become more serious and proficient as cosplayers, but older and more

experienced cosplayers have the ability to model how creative interests can be directed

into professional pursuits in a variety of fields. Looking at fandom as a co-culture, more

experienced members of the group mentor and demonstrate important skills and values

for younger and newer members, showing them not only how to perform successfully as

cosplayers but also modeling the skills and behaviors that are valued within the culture

(Bandura, 1977). Just as Sophie talked about developing a mindset of professionalism

and responsibility as a result of her participation in cosplay, Ada recognized that these

professionally valuable skills are a secondary but significant byproduct of engaging with

the cosplay community, especially for young people who have not yet entered the

professional world.

Developing competence and confidence through cosplay. Whether a cosplayer

is refining their creative skills to build and sew more intricate costumes or honing

organizational and leadership skills that will help them succeed in their personal and

professional lives, part of the satisfaction of cosplaying seems to be developing

confidence through the acquisition of proficiency in these various areas. As fans grow in

their skills and abilities in cosplaying, they recognize their own competencies and

creativity in a way that buoys their personal confidence. Part of the joy that comes from

cosplaying is the sense of accomplishment from making something cool with your own hands and recognizing the success that came from your time and efforts. Natasha reflected on the personal satisfaction that comes from creation:

> The, just, like, high from creating something is really, really great. And the – as frustrating as it can be to do the process of it, you know – the whole time I'm fighting with my machine or things go wrong, and it's so frustrating, but it's so rewarding, too. Like, at the end of this, I made this thing! It's great! So that kind of high, of creation, is really great…It has given me more confidence. Especially with the whole creation aspect of "I made this thing and it's great." And knowing, like, this physical representation of skill that you have…it's not just "Yay, neat, you got this trophy" I have this thing, you can see it…And so it's a huge confidence boost.

For adults who feel they lack a creative outlet in their daily lives and careers, and the ability to create can be therapeutic and personally gratifying. Creative activities, such as art, music, and dance, have therapeutic and healing potential for individuals suffering from chronic diseases and mental health conditions (Haen & Weil, 2010; Stevens & Spears, 2009; Ziff, Pierce, Johanson, & King, 2012). A creative outlet not only allows for stress release and relief from anxiety, but it can help individuals express important ideas and concerns that are difficult to articulate. Cosplayers may only be dealing with the average stresses of modern life, but the ability to create and take pride in those skills

helps them manage those stresses and gain a therapeutic release. Sophie recognized the reward of cosplaying as a creative outlet:

> I just really like crafting and drawing and things like that, and cosplay lets me do those activities. So, it's therapeutic…I just feel like I found myself. Like, I didn't know how to make something out of foam before I started this, but now I've made it. And even if I throw it in the garbage, I know I now have the skill to make something, and I know that in the future I can make it. And previously I had no idea I could do this and now I can do it. Isn't that cool? You learn something new.

Recognizing the ability to make something new and possessing a skill that others can observe and appreciate provides a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment for cosplayers.

Throughout these discussions of the benefits participants gained from their experiences with cosplay, the focus returned again and again to the personal self-improvement that comes as a result of cosplaying. Fans may not set out with a mindset of wanting to learn something new or better themselves, but they realize after the fact that this personal development is part of the resulting rewards of cosplay. Research in other areas indicates that taking on personal challenges and developing new skills, such as training for a marathon or engaging in team-building in the workplace, improves self-confidence and enhances an individual's perception of the self (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Dewhurst, 2011). Through learning new skills, taking on creative challenges, and

achieving success in their cosplaying endeavors, fans experience and express a sense of competence and creativity that they may not have in other areas of their lives.

Self-Expression

While cosplaying and the experiences that accompany it can enable fans to develop and refine new skills and abilities, it can also be an extension of other interests and a channel for expressing the authentic self – a way to express a side of the individual's personality they may not feel free to express in their daily life. For some, cosplay is about taking on the persona of the character, but for others it is an opportunity to express an aspect of their own unique identity. Through the process of creating a cosplay, taking on the character's persona, performing a role, and interacting with other cosplayers, fans examine, embrace, and express parts of their identity that are important to their self-concept. Goffman's (1959) conception of the performance of identity becomes particularly relevant in this context; cosplayers make choices with their audience (other cosplayers and fellow fans) in mind, thinking about how they want to be seen and responded to as they plan and shape their cosplay persona. We can also see how cosplaying functions as equipment for living for fans (Brummett, 1991; Burke, 1941). Through their engagement with the characters and stories selected for cosplay, fans are able to connect with and explore aspects of their identity and parts of their self-concept that are for whatever reason otherwise inaccessible to them. Fans not only perform their chosen character when in costume, but through character selection, the creative choices

112

made in costume construction, and the interactions they have with others while in costume, they communicate important ideas about who they are or who they want to be.

Marking oneself as "Other." For some fans, cosplaying is an extension of a broader interest in all things "different." For individuals who take an interest in media sources and entertainment genres outside of mainstream American pop-culture, cosplay serves as an extension of this interest in alternative texts. Meghan explained her own fascination with media sources outside of what is available in mainstream American entertainment:

> I've just always been very into, like, counter-culture things, I've always been a nerd also. And I love learning about new cultures, especially those that are categorized as more bizarre than ours…I've just always been fascinated by anime in general. I love fantasy books, so it was just a natural jump when I started watching television to, or when I started watching anime to, you know, watch the fantasy series.

For Meghan, participation in cosplay evolved from her fandom of anime, science fiction, and fantasy in general. Discovering and exploring these genres can be a means of exploring an identity that is outside of what is considered average or normal in fans' communities and realizing that they are not alone in their "otherness." As Jenkins (1992b) noted, the exact critiques that outsiders often level at fans, insulting their interests as juvenile or weird, are often what bond fans together in solidarity. Molly also

expressed this experience of embracing her identity as "other" and finding confidence in this identity through cosplay:

> Um, it makes me feel – a little complicated. I feel really good about it in a, "I know this is weird and I'm confident enough in myself to do it anyway so go fuck yourself" kind of way…So it's, it's been a confidence builder. I've always been strange, um, I will never ever know what it's like to be mainstream or normal or popular or whatever, and when I cosplay I feel like it's taking that and just shoving it in the world's face and just saying, "Yeah, this is me, what are you going to do about it?" And it's awesome, deal with it, that kind of thing.

The experience of cosplaying allows some participants to embrace and accept an identity of otherness or "strangeness" in a unique way, as they are both other and a part of a group at the same time. When attending a convention or fan event in costume, cosplayers subvert broader social expectations (after all, adults aren't supposed to dress up in costume unless it's Halloween) while also taking part in a fan-culture social norm. Those who are mainstream or "normal" at cons, dressed in street clothes or not embracing other outward demonstrations of fan identity, are the outsiders in that setting.

The use of cosplay to embrace and perform the role of the "Other" may be seen as an interesting application of Mead's (1934) conceptions of the "I" and the "me." The "me" includes an individual's imaginings of how others respond to them. Perhaps general societal views of fans and fandom represent part of fans' conceptions of their own "me," in some ways constraining how they imagine and enact possibilities for the

114

"I." If the "me" includes the negative critiques of fandom that exist throughout the broader culture, the "I" may include aspirations and personal hopes for who one could be, but it is also necessarily constrained by the "me." Fans who embrace an identity of "weirdness" as a fan mark themselves as "Other" as a way to process and reframe outsider perspectives on who they are and who they can be as fans.

Indeed, for many cosplayers part of the pleasure in the experience of dressing up and participating at cons is the ability to subvert social norms and thumb their noses at the establishment while enjoying something they love. In their daily lives, they may not feel as if they fit in with those around them, but, at a con with other cosplayers, fans can embrace their "weirdness" and let it shine. Nick discussed how he presents himself and behaves differently when in costume at a convention versus in other social settings:

> [A]t a convention because so many people are dressed up, it's sort of a liberating kind of like, um, I dunno – I feel weird, but everyone else is probably feeling equally weird, so it's ok, you know?…At a convention, a lot of anime fans are kind of socially awkward anyways, so having that sort of communion of, "We're all being weirdos together" I think makes it – it enables people who normally don't feel comfortable interacting in a social setting to feel more comfortable doing that.

Something about being in costume at a convention gives cosplayers the freedom to embrace and express their weirdness. Nick recognized that it can feel liberating to be weird because "we're all being weirdos together." Engaging in this non-normative

115

behavior in a setting where it is not only accepted but also expected to do so removes constraints that cosplayers may experience in their daily lives and allows them to be themselves.

Character choice highlights important aspects of personal identity.

Cosplayers choose characters with whom they feel a personal connection. Something about the character resonates with their own experiences and personal identity; they opt not to represent characters that are altogether dissimilar from them. Daniel described his process of choosing a character for a cosplay in these terms:

> It's more personality similarity…is this a character that, you know, that I can relate to in one way, shape, or another? It's more, is this a character that would think the same way or that, you know, that I can share not just a style trait with, but also just, you know, some of their character elements.

Being able to identify with the character can help the cosplayer get into the right frame of mind for the experience and enjoy the process more. Kathleen also expressed a need to connect with the characters she cosplays, describing a need to feel a "level of love" for the character:

> It's more of a level of love…when you feel like you're never going to finish, which is every single time for some reason, no matter how much you plan it, it's always you're never going to finish, you need to feel like you're making that for a reason, and if you choose a character that you aren't absolutely in love with, then, oh god, then I can't imagine what that would be like. Then you would just, then

you would never finish. You'd just stop working on it. And then, also, when

you're wearing that character and you have three blisters on each foot, and no one

cares that you're that character, and maybe you're cross-dressing so everyone

complains that you're cross-playing or someone has handed you their camera and

asked you to take a picture of them with someone else in your party or something

like that, you need to feel that you're doing this for a reason and not get upset and

throw in the towel. It's very important to be excited about who you are. I just – if

you're just someone that you only kind of like or someone who's, who you just

like the outfit for, it's not going to be worth it.

Participating in cosplay can be a major commitment of time and resources, and when a

cosplayer's character selection revolves around the ability to embody and express a

character that they connect with on a deep level, it makes that commitment worth the

effort.

Through cosplaying, individuals have an outlet to express the depth of their

fandom. Cosplay is a deeply engaged form of fan activity – as such, the mere act of

cosplaying says something about who you are as a fan and as an individual. Shareece

explained what it means to her to be a fan and how cosplaying serves as a means of

exploring and engaging in fandom:

To be a fan, to me it's having a passion and an earnest interest into something.

And, um, being able to show your appreciation for whatever you're a fan of and

to express yourself that way, be it through cosplay or reading or, you know, fan

fiction or whichever, you know? And then being able to connect with others who

are passionate just like you are.…It's a lot of those things that you end up being a

fan with, you just connect so much on a deeper level than you do with other

things, and you almost have this need to express that, to – be it through just telling

people or doing cosplay or just having to consume as much as you can of it, you

know? That's what it means, I think.

Cosplaying can be a way to express this deeply-held fan interest; it is by no means the

only way to engage in fandom, but it is one way for fans to express their passion for the

object of their interest. For Shareece, this self-expression is a central part of fandom –

not just loving something, but showing and expressing that appreciation. Cosplaying is

one of many ways to express deeply-held fan interest.

Part of the connection between cosplayers and characters can be a recognition of

mirroring between the characters' experiences and their own. Daniel described his

affinity for characters through which he can express and channel his own experiences as a

fan who's getting older and no longer one of the "young guys" in the group:

The characters that I go for are, you know, they're very, they're simple, they don't

have a lot of, how do I put this…they're not over-the-top personalities, so it's

very simple for me to kind of adapt my own personality to those elements and

maybe with this particular character, he's a leader in the show, and his "thing" is

that he's a superhero, and he is only able to kind of function for a limited amount

of time in his superhero power, and because he's getting older, um, he starts to

kind of fade. And what's kind of ironic is that I'm also getting kind of on the

older side, and it's one of those, it's clear that this is the guy to go to, this is the

guy to talk with, but it's also, "Oh, he's not the young 21-year-old that was

running all over the place" anymore.

While the character might have a personality that is easily adapted to the individual

cosplayer and Daniel doesn't feel a deep personal connection to them, it helps him to

identify with part of the experience or circumstances that motivate that character. In this

case, the shared experience of having skill and recognition for talent but also the

limitations of physical aging struck a chord for Daniel and helped him understand the

experiences of the character on a personal level.

Holly also described connecting with the experiences and motivations of a

character more than the specific personality. She described that she often chooses

villainous characters to portray through cosplay, but despite being the "bad guy" she can

identify on some level with their motivations:

The thing I really loved about the character is that I could explain every single

thing that he did and his entire beliefs on hope and talent and stuff like that. And

I can't justify what he did, but I can explain everything. And then it actually had,

like, a really strange parallel with my life at that one time.

Holly went on to detail how her own experiences with a crush at the time mirrored the

plotlines of the character she was portraying, and through her reflections on her own

circumstances and the way the character responded in a similar situation, she learned

something about herself and experienced a deeper connection to the character. It is this type of experience that highlights how fandom broadly and cosplaying specifically can serve as equipment for living (Burke, 1941). By engaging with and portraying characters who share personality traits or life experiences, fans examine themselves and their own lives and gain insight into themselves through their understanding of the text. Sandvoss (2005) wrote about the reflective capacity of fan objects; cosplay highlights this engaging process encouraging self-reflection. Fans take on an alternate identity through their performances, but in many cases they are also able to better see themselves through this process, either discovering some new part of their identity, reflecting on how their own experiences mirror the character's, or better understanding themselves in contrast with a character who is very different from them. Holly gained insight into something going on in her own life through her cosplay and her exploration of the character. Even though the characters fans choose to cosplay many not be completely similar to their own personalities, they might be able to understand the character's experiences and motivations through mirrored experiences in their own lives.

In addition to being able to connect with and embody a character that a fan loves or feels a personal connection to, the process of cosplaying can allow individuals to express elements of their personality or personal identity that are important to them or that they don't have the opportunity to express in other settings. Rebecka explained that cosplaying shapes her experience of fandom by allowing her to take what she feels on the inside and openly express it on the outside:

If you look at why people play what they play, oftentimes, to me, I feel it's reflective of something that exists within that person. Um, I play a lot of background characters, like a doctor of Shield, but I won't necessarily play Black Widow. I play a lot of literary characters – well, I'm kind of a bibliophile. Or Mon Mothma, which is again, she's a background character, but I'm not going to be up in somebody's face. When I've watched people, I've noticed – some of our people in the organization even – you'll notice that those are either deficits that they have that they wish they didn't have, or truly just a reflection of what's there only magnified…So there's a lot of different ways that I think cosplay shows an aspect of people. If you really look at why people are playing what they play, and maybe it's because of that psychology degree and I should never have gotten it, but I've noticed that if you watch people and who and what they play…people who play the same kind of characters over and over and over, oftentimes you'll find that there's something about that character type that fits them. So for me, it's pretty much a reflection of who I am. In some shape, form, or manner, it's going to be part of me.

Rebecka observed both for herself and for others that character selection is about this expression of something from one's own personality. It is a reflection and amplification of the self through the adoption of similar characters. Similarly, Shareece explained that one of the biggest benefits she gets from cosplaying and one of the reasons she continues to do so is because of the opportunity it affords her for self-expression:

To me, it's always been an expression of myself, or, like, a creative expression of my soul you might want to say. That's kind of heavy-handed, but it's definitely been something that, even when I can't cosplay as much as I would like to, I still see something like, "I gotta do that, I've got to make that!" So it's always been just a way to express who I am.

Cosplaying provides fans with an opportunity to express something about themselves; they may choose a character that embodies and amplifies something about them, or cosplaying enables them to take on a characteristic that they lack. The chance to choose a character to portray can give them an opportunity to act out traits that they wish they had.

Cosplaying allows for expression of hidden parts of the self. Rebecka mentioned that some cosplayers seem to focus their efforts on characters that represent something lacking in themselves or characteristics they wish they had. Natasha expressed a similar idea when she talked about whether or not she tries to stay in character when she's at a con:

I would like to. I really wish I could, but there are way too many pictures of, like, smiley cute Black Widow, just like "Yay, this is so exciting!" And it's like, that's not how she would act! And so it's really hard, because oddly enough the characters I pick are ones that are a side of me that nobody really sees, or like, something that I've always kind of wanted to be. Or, like, I would want to be more stoic, I'd want to be more reserved, but just for whatever reason I'm not. So

it's, I don't know, it's like an homage to this part of my personality, but it's also

really hard for me to stay in character.

Even though it can be difficult to stay in character and realistically portray that persona,

Natasha is drawn to characters that possess traits or characteristic that she does not (or, at

least, that are not part of the self she regularly shows others). At another point in our

conversation, Natasha expressed the idea that cosplaying allows her to present and

express a version of herself that those close to her may not know. She explained what

she uniquely enjoys about cosplaying as opposed to other fan experiences:

It is very immersive, and it's so personal…For me cosplaying is like, this is my

whole self, and it's also – everybody cosplays for different reasons, but for me

it's, like, other people see this other side of me. Which I guess really only matters

for people who know me at all; other, like, random people taking pictures don't

really get that message, but it's, that's what I would kind of try to put out there.

By taking on a character's identity, she performs a version of herself that she usually

keeps inside. Other participants expressed similar experiences, being able to act in

different ways and show different sides of themselves in cosplay. Li said, "I'm probably

just that little bit more social in costume. Um, I'm more social and engaging at

conventions in general than I am out of it. I'm a bit shy and introverted, but conventions

is an area where I really come out of my shell and I interact." By getting in costume and

participating in cosplay events, Li could present herself as more outgoing and social,

expressing a more extraverted side of her personality. Reflecting on her early

experiences when she first got into cosplay, Molly described a similar experience of coming out of her shell:

> I was a really, really shy, backward teenager, and that really helped me feel like I was part of the group, and people laughed and they thought, "Oh, this chick is cool and fun," that kind of thing. So, social acceptance was really a huge part of that first cosplay.

For a young woman who had been shy and introverted, cosplaying provided an avenue for exploring being more outgoing and gaining social acceptance within a group of like-minded peers. It encompassed a safe space to engage in this experimentation and connect with others doing the same.

While, for some cosplayers, the act of cosplaying allows them to express parts of their personality that they don't often show to others, for others, it can be a chance to learn something about themselves that even they hadn't previously recognized. Sophie recognized that taking part in cosplay has changed the way she sees herself:

> Cosplay has made me, ah – it's made me so social…I've always envisioned myself an introvert, but at the last convention I was at, my friend was like, "There's no way anyone could say you're an introvert right now." And I think cosplay has helped me become a social person, because it shows me – it's given me a lot of opportunities to be in social environments and it's given me a lot of opportunities to test out, like, different ways of acting in environments. So if – it's totally, like, changed who I am as a person because it helped me be more

confident and it provided opportunities that I would not, that I absolutely would

not have had without cosplay.

Cosplaying can help an individual to realize and explore parts of their own identity that

they didn't realize were there before. It is not necessarily a means to express alternate

personality traits (ones that they hide from others in most contexts), but, rather, it brings

out traits they didn't realize were there before. This process represents an extension of

Davisson and Booth's (2007) concept of projective identity, through which fans'

interactions with characters and virtual identities serve to help them shape their own self-

conceptions. Davisson and Booth examined how fan engagement through media

consumption can represent an active process of interaction and identity construction.

However, through cosplay, fans do not merely engage in a mental processing of the

storyline and imagined social interactions with the characters; rather, cosplayers put

themselves into the mindset and physical presence of a character and step into a real

social situation in which they can engage with other characters from fictional worlds.

This performative engagement encourages fans to process what it means to think like and

act like their chosen character, and in so doing to reflect on their own similarities and

differences with that character.

Perhaps part of the self-expression in cosplaying is not only through being able to

explore certain personality traits through the performance of a specific character, but the

expression of one's personality through the act itself. Rebecka described this opportunity

for self-expression through the act of cosplaying in her discussion of her work with the service organization that she founded:

> Um, some of it's because I believe in that whole concept of imagination empowers you, and you can become whatever you want to. There's a power to that, and so I want to see that in other people. I want to inspire people to be their own hero. And I really fully believe in that concept, so I tend to kind of spread it…So, yeah, I dress up as Goldilocks and my ultimate dream is dressing up as Mother Goose and goofy stuff like that, but I make a difference, at least for one life, and periodically I get to see that difference, and that rocks.

It's not that the characters Rebecka portrays necessarily express some deep part of her own personality, but the act of dressing up allows her to touch others' lives, take on the role of "hero," and show them that they can also make a difference in the lives of the people around them. A big part of the practice of cosplaying for her is being able to live life on her terms – as a woman living with a disability, cosplaying allows her to focus on the positive and on empowerment through the act of dressing up. Through cosplaying, she embraces a strong persona when others might say "you can't do that" or try to define her in another way.

Cosplay as a tool for identity exploration. As a counterpoint to cosplay bringing out parts of the personality that are hidden and expressing important facets of one's personality, cosplay also provides an opportunity to escape from the self and play with identity. Cosplaying allows fans to be whomever they wish to be for a day. You

126

can be anyone in costume, and the convention atmosphere, where cosplay is expected and accepted, encourages a suspension of disbelief – the person you see before you in costume is that character, even if just for a moment. Michael described the ability to transform himself and be anything or anyone while in cosplay as one of the major draws of cosplaying for him:

> I have about 61 costumes I've made now, and I try to do something either that I grew up loving, so I do a lot of old-school stuff, but I also do things just kind of to exercise the creative muscles and stuff. Like when I first started, people would, they would always suggest just black costumes and characters, but then they started seeing, like, what I could do, and now they're, like, suggesting any and everything, not just the black characters. It's awesome…Like, skin doesn't matter, your size, body size – like, I'm not a very thin person, but I'll rock spandex all day long, you know? So, size doesn't matter, your sex doesn't matter, color doesn't matter, you can be whoever you want to be.

Through cosplay, fans are not limited in who or what they can portray. Cosplaying permits fans to pay homage to favorite characters, play creatively, or just have fun. One of the major benefits of the practice is simply getting to be whoever they want to be when in costume.

All of these modes of self-expression can provide personal benefits to fans who engage in cosplay. Cosplay can result in an increase in the confidence felt by these fans.

127

Holly talked about becoming more comfortable herself and more confident expressing

the silly or weird sides of her personality after participating in the cosplay community:

> I think I'm in some ways a little more confident with my goofiness or silliness.
> Um, I'm just like, "Yup! Well, if I've done this for cosplay, I can definitely do
> that." Like, we have an event at our school called Scav, or the scavenger hunt,
> and it's really, really wild and it's absolutely amazing…But, um, there's a lot of
> stuff that you just have to go and say, "Hey, I find myself in a sort of Link
> costume walking my little dog around campus in the rain, knowing that I'm going
> to be shooting at targets with a Nerf bow and arrow while in a shopping cart, and
> my dog is going to be in a reverse dogsled race and playing space invaders, and
> I'm 100% OK with whatever's going to happen today."

Cosplayers regularly stretch their comfort zones by taking on characters and engaging in

events that require them to let go of some of their inhibitions. By perceiving success in

their efforts and feeling supported in a context where they will not be judged by other

fans, they can feel more confident in their ability to take on new challenges in other areas

of their lives.

Closing Thoughts

Both through the creative pursuits and skill development of costume creation and

through the actual performance of the character, the cosplayers I spoke with recognized

the ways in which cosplaying has benefitted their lives. Dedication to cosplay motivates

fans to learn, develop, and refine creative skills, but participation in cosplaying also helps

them develop personal and professional skills that can aid them in other areas of their lives. The satisfaction that comes through this proficiency can improve a cosplayer's confidence in their own abilities, as can recognition from others of the effort and skill that goes into their work. The choice of characters and performance of the character in costume also allows fans to express parts of their personal identity that may be hidden or that they wish to highlight. Fans often select characters that they not only like but also with whom they feel a sense of connection and personal similarity, as the character they cosplay not only communicates to others what fandoms they follow but also how they think of themselves in some key way. Various art forms provide a platform for acts of authentic self-expression, and cosplay is no exception (Tshivhase, 2015). In this way, cosplaying is a supremely personal endeavor for many fans – cosplays are not one-size-fits-all, but rather they are a unique expression of the self.

Chapter 6: Cosplay as a Literal Performance

Figure 3. Cosplay can facilitate moments of imaginative magic. (ThinkNu, 2014a).

As I established in the introduction of this study, performance is a very broad term. It may be useful at this point to review Carlson's (2004) three key components of performance: the display of skill or expertise by a trained performer, an attitude of consciousness in carrying out specific actions, and/or the success of the activity as

evaluated by some standard of excellence or achievement. I believe we can use each of

these criteria to understand how cosplay functions as a form of performance. First,

cosplayers work to display not only their skill in costuming, developing and refining

techniques to create intricate and impressive costumes, but also their expertise and

knowledge concerning their chosen fan text. Second, they make conscious choices about

costuming and behavior in order to present a true-to-character, recognizable

representation of their chosen character. Finally, cosplayers evaluate one another's work

and strive to meet standards of excellence in their own creations. While not all

cosplayers enter into costume competitions (which are regular events at most

conventions), most do think about how their costume will be viewed and received by

other fans and make choices to try to impress and gain approval from their fellow fans.

In each of these parts of the performative nature of cosplaying, fans think about how their

cosplay is going to be viewed and received by others; what will their character choice, the

quality of their costume, and the way they interact with others at the convention say about

who they are as a fan and to which fan communities they can claim membership?

Several key themes related to the performative nature of cosplay came up

throughout my interviews. First, the physicality of cosplaying (not only being able to

accurately physically represent the character, but the experience of embodying the role

and the impact of the performance on the fan's experience) is an important part of the

cosplaying experience. Second, the ability to put oneself into the character's shoes and

the imaginative world of the fan text through cosplay allows for an escape from daily life.

Being able to pretend, take on bigger-than-life personalities, or even highlight another side of the self (escaping from the "average" or the known and highlighting alternative personality characteristics) can be both enjoyable and therapeutic. Third, another major draw of cosplaying is simply the fun of doing it – cosplay serves as an outlet for creativity and role-play, it is a source of entertainment, and it allows the fan to go back to revisit the imaginative play of childhood, reveling in the joys of pretend that children love but in which many adults no longer get a chance to indulge. Finally, cosplaying serves as an avenue to full participation within the event itself and the cosplaying community more broadly. Through cosplay, fans feel like participants in the action rather than just observers. Cosplaying allows them to take the stage and feel like they are contributing to the event in a way that simple attendance in street clothes does not allow.

Physicality

Physical embodiment of the character. A central theme that came up throughout my discussions with my participants was the importance of the physical embodiment of the character to the cosplay experience. There are many ways to engage in fandom and be part of the fan community, but cosplaying requires the fan to use their body to represent their chosen character and demonstrate their fan interests. When asked what she uniquely enjoys about cosplaying as opposed to other fan activities, Tetra noted that cosplaying requires a physical and social manifestation of one's interest:

> I feel like it's a very physical manifestation of a love for a series, and not
> everybody has the time for it. In a sense I feel like, from a fandom, cosplaying is

132

– I feel like it really puts you out there, in a sense. Because there's no way to really cosplay without putting yourself in the physical costume, whereas if you drew fan art you could just post it on the internet and not ever have to bring it out into, like, the outside world. It could just be your own private thing.

While other fan activities can be performed solitarily and in private, cosplay requires physical investment in the process and putting oneself out there in a social context. This physical representation of fan interest highlights the importance of embodiment in performance. The individual's physical and cognitive experiences through their performance cannot be separated; physical experience shapes cognitive processing, and the physical manifestation of the experience will impact the psychological and emotional responses of the individual. This aspect of embodiment in performance has long been recognized in traditional theatre, as there is an ethics of embodiment between the audience and performer, negotiating the real and the virtual through the embodied relationship between the self and the other (Bessel & Riddel, 2016). Not only does cosplaying by definition involve the physical representation of the character, requiring the fan to use their own body to shape and communicate their interpretation of their fan interest, but it is also always a social engagement of the fan community. No one cosplays alone; it is always within the social context of a fan event and in coordination with other fans, even if only as an audience. Fans interact with one another to negotiate their respective roles and places within the fan community. This communication between embodied subjects is central to the communication of the self and the construction of

identity (Sekimoto, 2012). Fans communicate their membership within the group and their own identity as fans through both physical and symbolic interactions with one another.

Practical considerations and constraints. In considering the unique challenges and constraints of cosplaying, several participants brought up the practical considerations that have to be taken into account when planning and presenting a cosplay. Because cosplay is a physical process of representation, cosplayers have to think about comfort as well as stress and other constraints, like time, that will impact what they can realistically pull off at a convention. Ada discussed part of her decision-making process for choosing characters to cosplay, focusing on the physical practicalities that must be considered when thinking about what costumes she will wear:

> I sort of categorize costumes into how uncomfortable and awkward they are, because I often find on the Sunday of a con, when I'm very tired, that I just don't have the strength to face putting on one of the ones that has elaborate scar latex makeup or other complicated, slow, and uncomfortable elements, so I'll save the costumes that are most comfortable and the least work for Sunday.

Some costumes require more work to put on and are physically taxing and tiring for the fan to wear. These practical considerations have to be taken into account when thinking about whether or not the costume is "worth it" – it may be an impressive costume and a character the fan loves, but if they don't have the energy to pull it off the fan may choose

something simpler. The limitations of the individual's physical and mental energy are a relevant consideration when planning and executing a cosplay.

These concerns over the practicality of a costume are not just limited to the effort it will take to put together and wear the costume, but also how the costume might restrict or inconvenience the cosplayer when worn all day. Molly discussed her main considerations in choosing and preparing a cosplay:

[The second thing I think of] is can I move in this costume comfortably? Am I going to be, like, paranoid about my body? Most human beings, I think throughout the day, your stomach will start to sag and stick out as gravity pulls at you, um, plus there's this thing called eating that I like to do, and so I don't generally like to bare my midriff. Cons are almost always cold, um, there's always a lot of air conditioning if you're going to a summertime con, and then if you're going in the winter it's cold. So am I going to be warm enough, am I going to be comfortable, do I look like the character?…Do I look like them and will I be comfortable, can I enjoy the con while dressed as this? Those are the two biggest points for me.

Molly prioritizes comfort and practicality in her selection of characters for cosplay. She considers her comfort level throughout the experience of cosplaying at the con – being able to move, eat, and interact comfortably in the con setting are important considerations to her choice of cosplay characters. Rebecka, who cosplays for children's events with her

nonprofit organization, voiced similar concerns about the practicality of wearing a costume:

> So you have to have things that can take, you know, am I going to be outside in the rain? Am I going to be inside? Storm Troopers are very limited because, you know, plastic and electronics do not mix with rain…I can deal with painted handprints on me, I can deal with all kinds of small children coming at me and bending down to their level, because that's the other thing when you work with kids, because you have to really deal eye-to-eye with them…And there are times when you can skip that, but especially when you know, you're doing a group that specifically works with kids, you have to consider things like that.

The normal concerns of her comfort and ability to move in the costume are relevant for Rebecka, but she also has to think about how her costume will hold up to the bending and touching that goes along with working with small children. No matter the context, the ability to accurately represent a character while maintaining a level of physical and emotional comfort can be an important consideration in choosing a cosplay.

For other individuals, the practical considerations of what it takes to wear a costume all day are part of the decision-making process, but they don't necessarily limit their choices. Tetra talked about some of her own experiences that shape how she thinks about her costumes but described how she is still willing to make some physical sacrifices for a costume that will be cool and fun to wear:

136

There are some aspects that are more practical, like, "Is my wig going to fall off?"

That becomes a little different, and to a certain extent not all cosplays are very

comfortable to wear. I've definitely had some where, like, I can't breathe very

well, or like I think it's a running gag with my friends that I always cosplay

characters from Fire Emblem where they have capes, and they're like off-shoulder

capes, so I can't lift my arms. Uh, so I think in a sense, practically speaking there

is that aspect, but on the flip side I think it's a lot of fun.

Cosplayers do need to consider the physical experience of wearing a costume all day and

what it will feel like to physically embody that character at a con, but, for some fans, the

discomforts that come along with intricate, complicated costumes are worth it for the

reception the costume receives from other fans and the fun of wearing it and performing

that character for the day.

Resemblance to the character (or lack thereof). Along with the practical

concerns over the effort and time required to pull off a costume, fans may think about

their own physical similarities with a character. It is important to many fans to have an

accurate, recognizable cosplay, and choosing characters that share some important aspect

of their own appearance can help with that process. Meghan described how she selects

characters for her cosplays:

We do try to pick people that either look like us or that we can relate to on a

character basis. Or at least that's what I do…I usually pick characters that have

longer blonde hair or have their hair in ponytails just because it's easier, or like

137

when I did random schoolgirl #1, it didn't matter what I looked like as long as I

had the Asian bat-wing eye makeup and, you know, the generic school uniform.

In addition to liking a character or feeling a personal connection to them, some

cosplayers prioritize the ability to physically embody the character in a convincing way,

so they select characters based on being able to pull off a specific "look." Daniel

described similar criteria for selecting characters, needing to have a character match his

own style and appearance in some way:

> For me, it's about finding a character that meets my kind of style…I wear a
>
> particular style hat, and it's a driver's hat, and there's one character I've seen that
>
> actually has a similar hat and when I had the opportunity of finding said hat, I
>
> then said, "OK, I'm going to try to start cosplaying this character."…And, for me,
>
> it's about finding characters that I kind of can relate to in some way, shape, or
>
> form. And when I was cosplaying Inuyasha, that character has long hair. At that
>
> time, I had ridiculously long hair. And it's about just trying to match my, not
>
> necessarily my full personality, but more what do I look like and what can I
>
> actually pull off?

Dave explained that he sometimes has lofty ambitions for a costume that would be

creative and interesting to make, but the practicality of choosing a character who already

looks like him wins out:

…after a while sort of the reality sets in and you're like, "Ehh, that guy wears glasses, I wear glasses, and we have the same color hair, and if I shave my beard a certain way it ought to work. So, let's just go for that one."

Characters who share physical characteristics with the fan can be easier to convincingly portray without a lot of work. If a main consideration in selecting a cosplay involves whether or not the fan can achieve a recognizable and believable representation of the character, physical similarity can be a valid concern in thinking through how they will be able to realistically embody that character.

While many fans think about how their own physical appearance may limit and shape the choices they have in accurately portraying a character, others consider the overall effect and focus on key details that are important to the representation of the character. Tetra described her main concerns while preparing a cosplay:

I always think it's the primary pieces, and more than anything it's the wig styling. I've seen a lot of cosplays where the costume itself is really good, and then, like, I don't know what happened to the wig – maybe they had a bad day, maybe they ordered the wrong color, and it throws the entire thing off. It's kind of like a really small thing, but if you can get the hairstyle right, automatically it kind of clicks in people's minds that that's the right character. So I guess in a sense it's, like, can someone recognize you as that character, that's, like, have you succeeded in making an accurate cosplay to me.

139

Tetra talked about the idea that it's not necessary to be completely accurate to the look of the character, but rather to get certain details right or get the "feel" of the character right. Considering the elements necessary to get someone to recognize her as the character is central to how she plans out and shapes her costumes. Tetra sees a successful cosplay as one that is recognized by other fans, but a perfect physical representation of the character is not necessary to achieve this recognition. A literal interpretation and perfect embodiment of the character may not be all that is required to accurately represent the essence of the character.

Although the ability to convincingly and accurately portray a character is an important consideration for some cosplayers, others reject this standard for judging the quality of a cosplay. Michael talked about how his own process of selecting characters evolved as he became more experienced and confident in his costuming skills. He talked about one of his first cosplays and how his choices have changed over time:

> The reason why I chose John Stewart is – I do love the character, but I chose him because he was black. I didn't know if it was really socially acceptable for me to be Batman or Superman or, you know, a traditionally white character. So that was the reason I chose John Stewart. And then, once I actually got into the community and I saw that, "Man, you can be whoever you want, and that doesn't matter." And even with the charity aspect, you know, kids they look at the symbol on your chest, they're looking at that bat symbol, they're not looking at the color of your skin. It doesn't matter, you are Batman.

140

Michael selected his first character mainly based on physical match – both he and the character were black, and he felt that he had to choose characters that fit his appearance in this straight-forward, literal way. However, he now rejects this perspective, believing instead that anyone can cosplay any character they like. Indeed, the process of embodying a character, whether the cosplayer is physically similar to the character or not, could be a liberating experience for fans. If not constrained by their resemblance to a character (or lack thereof), fans have the opportunity to be anyone they want, if only for a day. Similarly, T'eao explained that one of her greatest satisfactions in cosplaying is creating something that shouldn't exist in the real world:

> The practicality of fashion versus what you can draw is a big thing for me, figuring out how to do – like, Cowboy Bebop, I don't remember the name of the girl, but she's got the sort of…floating yellow shorts. Really hard to physically make those, because they don't really touch her body in the way that they ought…so that's the puzzle that I like. The physics, the idea that you create a version, a real version of something that's impossible.

Many characters and costumes from anime or video games are fantastical and seem to defy the laws of physics. While some fans look for a costume that they can easily replicate or characters that already match their own physical features to some extent, fans like T'eao love the challenge of creating something that at first seems impossible. A physical match between the cosplayer's and character's appearance is not relevant in these situations because no one can actually look like the character in real life – they are

141

fantastical. Figuring out how to translate these characters into something that can be worn and to allow these characters to step off the screen or page and into the convention hall can be more exciting and satisfying than finding a character that is easy to resemble in real life.

Cosplay requires mental preparation for a convincing performance.
Accurately and convincingly creating a physical manifestation of fictional characters is an important part of a quality cosplay performance. However, the outward physical representation of the character is not all that matters. Several fans described the importance of getting into the right mental frame to embody the character. Shareece explained that the process of getting both into and out of character can be time consuming:

> I've done the, just watching lots of the video or clips, and seeing how the character reacts or how they talk…yeah, actually there have been times where I've done a 10 hour event, and I was in the accent that long that it took another 10-24 hours for me to get out of the accent. But a lot of it is just, I just sit there and think, "Well how would this character react to that," and, you know, watch clips and stuff like that. It's a lot of improv, too.

The process of getting into character and embodying that character both physically and mentally can be so consuming that it takes time to come out of character and fully return to the normal self after an event. Li described the importance of accurately portraying the personality of the character in addition to the physical representation:

It's not necessarily portraying about myself so much as I definitely try to keep personality of the character in mind. Many years ago, I cosplayed a character Akabane, Dr. Jekyll from a series *Get Backers*. He is a sociopathic mass murderer, um, who is dark and twisted and really all he wants is to find someone who will make him go all out with his fighting, but he's soft-spoken with this very menacing aura…the character is, you know, very tall and I am a very short person, but I had this coat that just lengthened me, and I would just glide down the hallways with this, you know, murder look, and I terrified people, and it was great and I had a fabulous time. I tried cosplaying that character again a couple years ago, and I couldn't, because I was laughing and having too much fun. So the characters I'm playing more these days are more light-hearted so I can be silly and interact with people. I do the bad guys, but I would need to be in a sort of, um, frame of mind where I could get into that darker side and most – I'm hanging out with a bunch of my friends who I'm silly with now and I can't quite get that darkness. And so, I do lighter, happier ones now.

Part of embodying the character is being able to get into the right mindset for that particular persona. When she is having fun and being silly with friends, Li feels she cannot properly portray dark, evil characters because she cannot get into the right frame of mind to do justice to the character.

The physical and mental processes of getting into character and embodying a particular role are certainly not entirely separate. Being able to physically resemble a

character can help a cosplayer "feel like" the character, just as being in the right frame of mind to portray the character can make their performance more convincing. Ada explained how being in costume and getting into character changes her physical experience of the event:

> I mean, there's certainly a shift in body language. I know that I move and walk differently in different character costumes…I often find that I feel the sort of body language change setting in when I get to the stage of the costume where I have the shoes on. You know, shoes and wearing different shoes often have a certain effect on your awareness of your own musculature and skeletal structure, because any pair of shoes gives you slightly different physical disposition. And so when I've changed into the character's shoes for a particular character, I notice at that point sometimes that I can see the body language feeling sets in…And I think that what my mind does is learn to associate that slightly different feeling with projecting this different body language. And so then when I change into the costume, especially if it's a familiar costume, I feel that kicking in.

Performing a cosplay is not just about putting on a costume. For Ada, a physical embodiment of the character takes place, causing her to actually hold herself differently and feel different in her body when in costume and in character than when she is not. Indeed, the embodied experience of representing the character can enhance the fan's connection to the character and their ability to understand that character's experiences. In a study looking at virtual embodiment of minority avatars in video games, Behm-

144

Morawitz, Pennel, and Speno (2016) found that the process of physically embodying a minority avatar in virtual reality can help individuals reduce stereotyping and adapt favorable beliefs about minority groups in society. The process of physically embodying someone "other" can help increase empathy and an effort to understand differences in life experiences. In the same way, when cosplayers get into costume and take on the physical manifestations of their chosen character, the physical shift that takes place can help them shift their mindset as well to think in terms of the motivations, feelings, and experiences that would help them accurately portray the character.

T'eao also addressed how clothing impacts feelings and experiences in different settings, with cosplay serving as just one example of such a context:

I would argue that anything you wear changes your experience. Like, when I dress up and actually put on a bra for the day, it changes my experience! Versus when you wear your pajamas all day, and you're like, "I am hiding, I don't want to come out." So like, I am firmly in the belief of, not necessarily fake it till you make it, but wear your armor appropriate for the endeavor. And cosplay is just another level of that. If I put on an evening dress and go to the supermarket, I have a different experience than if I put on sweatpants and go to the supermarket. Appropriateness is an issue, but interestingly enough, if you are overdressed for an endeavor, people will always be more social to you.

Dressing up in costume for conventions, physically putting on the clothing (and makeup, wigs, and various other accessories required for many cosplays) necessary for the

145

costume, invariably shapes one's experience. Without a costume, no cosplay occurs. The

physical experience of wearing the costume is integrally linked to the process of

portraying the character, and so the experience of cosplaying at a fan event does not just

have practical implications on comfort and ease of movement, but it can change the way

in which the fan physically, mentally, and emotionally experiences the event.

Cosplayers have responsibilities to their audiences when portraying their

selected characters. The process of physically embodying and representing a character

does not just impact the cosplayer, but it can be a process in which the fan must be

mindful of their responsibilities toward others and make choices about their

representation based on how others will receive it. In this way, the cosplay performance

can be very audience-focused; cosplayers have to think about whether or not others will

recognize their character and what their responsibilities are to those who will observe

them. Rebecka discussed this responsibility to present an accurate performance of the

character when she explained how she works to stay in character at her charity events:

> A lot of times, I'm in character…Last night, for example, I played Maleficent.
>
> They wanted heroes and everybody was like, "Why is Maleficent there?" Well,
>
> my goddaughter Aurora was there. So that whole evening I stayed in that mode.
>
> So when Baymax, a character that's going to be complete foreign to an evil –
>
> well, a former semi-evil – witch or fairy comes by, I'm looking at him and I'm
>
> like, "What is this?" So I'm asking characters questions of "What is he? He's so
>
> 'huggable' looking," you know… So you actually play those characters. The

concept for us is that you bring that imagination, that imaginary character, to life so the imagination of the child continues with that. You are that character…So we become those things for those kids at those events, because that's really what we're there for…It makes for fun, because you have to figure out ways to communicate to the world in the actual character's voice.

When cosplayers think about how to "be the character" for those with whom they interact and how to communicate and behave in a way that is authentic to that character, they recognize that role-play is often just as much for the audience as it is for the cosplayer. This idea came up in other interviews, with participants talking about how they often only role-play at conventions during interactions with others who see them and want to engage with them or take a photo; when others seek them out and want to interact with their character, they will pose, use lines from the character's show or game, and act in ways that are consistent with what the character would do. In this case, Rebecka explained how she and the other cosplayers in her organization stay in character and act as true-to-character as possible in order to make the experience feel more real for the children, attending to detail not only in costuming (having a realistic and high-quality costume for the character), but also in acting skills. It is not enough to look like the character. Rather, a cosplayer in this type of situation must **be** the character. Along these same lines, Sophie explained her thought process concerning how she represents her character when in costume at a convention:

When I'm in costume, I'm aware that people aren't thinking of me as me, but as the character, and I think that successful people are thinking of you as the characters that you meet…When someone's in their costume, they are representing the character. So when I'm in costume I'm conscious that more people might be looking at me, so I want to act not just, like, too stupid or too lazy or something like that…So I'm just aware that – I'm just aware that there might be photos taken, so act in a way that you would be proud to show your parents.

Part of the process of cosplaying involves thinking through how the cosplayer presents themselves when in costume. When in costume, people often view cosplayers as the characters they portray (rather than as individual fans), so many cosplayers think through how their actions or behaviors reflect on not just themselves but on the character. Whether out of a sense of responsibility to the self, others, or to do justice to the character, they understand that their actions are not entirely their own while in costume.

The process of physically embodying and representing a character for cosplay is important in many different ways. Cosplayers have to consider the practicalities and physical limitations of costume choice while also trying to present an accurate, recognizable, and believable representation of the character for others. Putting on a costume and becoming a character for the day can be liberating, allowing a fan to become anything or anyone they like in the context of the fan event, but it also carries with it obligations to others, as every performance has an audience that both enables and

constrains the performer's choices. Throughout each of these aspects of the cosplaying

experience, the physicality of the cosplaying experience should not be overlooked.

Escape

While a major element of cosplaying entails the ability of the fan to put

themselves in the shoes of a favorite character (both literally and figuratively) and the

practical concerns that go along with that embodied performance, a major draw of

cosplaying for fans is the feeling of being able to transcend their daily concerns and

escape from regular life, if even just for a day. Although cosplayers must think about

how to accurately represent their chosen characters and how their performances will be

received and responded to by others, they also get to let go of the self temporarily

through this process. McKenzie's (2004) emphasis on the importance of liminality to

performance seems particularly relevant to this theme of cosplay as escape. McKenzie

claimed that performance is an activity "whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'in-

betweenness' allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and

perhaps even transformed" (p. 27). It is not just social norms that can be suspended,

transcended, and challenged through cosplay, but also the limitations and concerns of the

self and the mundane elements of daily life. The performance of cosplay allows fans to

inhabit a space somewhere between reality and fiction, providing opportunities for fun,

personal fulfillment, and therapeutic release. Particularly relevant to the experience of

cosplay is the idea that cosplayers are not only escaping from their daily lives, but also

escaping to a world of fantasy, magic, and fun. This process of both escape from and

149

escape to allows fans to inhabit the liminal space of the fan convention together. In this light, ritual, play, and escape are part of the equipment for living fans gain from fan practices like cosplay.

Performative escape is fun for cosplayers. Several participants brought up the simple pleasure of engaging in make-believe. When fans cosplay, they have the ability to pretend and be the character for a short time. Holly described the enjoyment she gets from taking on not just the appearance of the character but also a sense of who they are and what they do through cosplay:

> I think it's, um, it might be just like the couple times that you can dress up and look like a character and at some points…feel like a character. One of my costumes is from Fire Emblem, and I felt like I could just go off and fight a dragon while wearing it…And it's really cool to have the feeling and also the interactions with other people while I'm in character, because I can't get that otherwise.

Cosplaying provides an opportunity for fans to take on not just the appearance but also a sense of the personality and abilities of a character. Fans who choose characters from science fiction and fantasy genres might experience a sense of empowerment in taking on the mantle of the skills and abilities of these strong, almost superhuman (or literally superhuman!) characters. In their daily lives, they can't fly or fight off hordes of monsters, but, in costume, they almost feel like they could. Cosplaying also allows fans to connect with fantastic storylines and characters and immerse themselves in worlds that

150

are vastly different from their own. Sophie described this immersive experience as one of the major draws of cosplaying for her:

> And then, it was like, it's such an interesting way to connect with a story, I feel, because when you're consuming this media – these are all stories from, like, different time periods or different planets or, like, universes that don't exist in real life or anything like that, so you would never actually have a chance of going to them because they don't exist, but now you can put yourself in them. By doing something that really isn't – it's not an innovation in a technical sense at all, because people have been doing costumes ever since the beginning of theatre…but it's like a way for you to connect with that history and those stories that you feel a connection to.

Cosplaying is a way for fans to put themselves into stories or settings that would be impossible in real life. Fans who feel a connection to a story or a character from another time period or planet can become that character for a little bit and imagine what it would be like to experience that world through their performance. Fans can certainly have immersive experiences simply consuming a text (whether that be reading a book, watching a film, playing a video game, or consuming some other form of popular media), but the physical representation and performative role-play that fans engage in while cosplaying encourages this kind of imaginative, immersive escape more so than mere consumption of media.

Escape is a chance for identity play and exploration. Even for fans who do not

go down the rabbit hole of immersive role-play, cosplay allows them to be someone else

for the day. When they put on a costume, they get the chance to choose who or what they

want to be for that event. For some, cosplay means being able to step into the shoes of

characters they admire for traits or characteristics they feel they lack. Kathleen explained

that she often chooses to cosplay characters that differ from her for this exact reason:

> If I chose characters that were similar to myself, I'd always be the glasses guy and
>
> that outfit sucks, and the glasses guy sucks…I mean, I'm not someone who
>
> necessarily acts like the characters that they dress up as. Um, you know, it's just
>
> kind of briefly for poses, um – you know some people take it really seriously and
>
> act like their characters all day. Um, that's not what I do…I guess I just want to
>
> look fabulous…I'm definitely a lot more confident and a lot more talkative, it
>
> seems like. And a lot happier. Umm, generally, even though, you know, you
>
> can't tell because you're interviewing me, I'm not very talkative. [laughter] Um,
>
> and I'm generally pretty sullen, but, I don't know, at a con, and even when I just
>
> change from my cosplay to my street clothes at cons, it's like, it's a pretty big
>
> difference. But, I don't know, something about just being anyone in cosplay is,
>
> like – I don't know, it really is like you just, like, become a model and it's like
>
> here you're fierce and fabulous even if you're dressed up as, like, a guy in street
>
> clothes…

152

During this section of our interview, I was struck by the sense that cosplaying can allow individuals to escape even their own perceptions of self for a time. In taking on a role and performing as a character, fans clearly have the capacity to behave and engage in a different way than they normally do, but, in costume and in character, they feel less constrained by their own image of who they are and how they are supposed to behave. Cosplaying enables fans to be someone fiercer and more fabulous than they feel in their normal life because, when in costume, they are not constrained by their own self-image.

Not all fans want to escape from their personality or identity. Even so, cosplaying provides a freedom to express a broader palette of behaviors and personality characteristics. Natasha talked about the ability to explore and express herself as one of the personal benefits she received from cosplaying:

> Well, you're – you are being someone different. It's like you have a day to not be yourself, or to be a different part of yourself, where nobody expects you to be who you are. If anything, they expect you to be this character. So it's a really nice way to kind of let that out a little bit, to whatever extent that you can portray that or exercise that part of yourself. Just a little bit.

When in cosplay, fans may be completely taking on the identity of the character for the day, but they may also be exploring other aspects of their own identity. It can be an exercise in identity exploration, both in portraying characteristics that are different from and outside their conception of self and also in exploring different parts of who they feel they are. Even if it's not a total escape from the self, cosplaying can allow a fan to

amplify some "different part of the self" that doesn't get expressed in everyday life. Michael recognized both of these sides to the joy of escape, recognizing that for some fans cosplaying is a chance to discover a different side of their identity, but that for many the joy is just in the escape of being someone different for a day:

> The idea of you're someone else, whether it's the character you really love or if it's, you know, displaying and saying, "I made this." You know, whatever it is, you're just not yourself, you're someone else, and that's, you know – everyone wants to be somebody else at some point in their life. So you get to be another person…Yeah, it's definitely an escape. And I think for some people it is, like, unlocking a whole new side of themselves they never knew they had, personality-wise. For me, for me personally it's just an escape. You know, like I said, the personality that I display, whether it's in character or not, I've always known it was there, but for me it's just the escape of being someone else.

Performative escape is a form of stress relief. Another benefit of cosplay as a form of escape is the ability to escape from the stresses of everyday life. For cosplayers, conventions are a highly anticipated event. While professional cosplayers and those most active in the community may attend many conventions throughout the year, more casual fans often only have a few local or regional conventions that they regularly attend. These events offer a form of entertainment and are an experience outside of the everyday hustle and bustle of life, but preparing their costumes ahead of time can also be a source of

154

stress relief. When I asked how cosplaying has influenced other areas of her life,

Kathleen expressed this capacity for cosplaying to serve as an escape from stress:

> It kind of feels like, um, it's like the only constant in my life. Kind of, now this is
> kind of sounding like therapy. [laughter] It feels like everything else is a freaking
> mess, like school is like a ball of stress that keeps on circling around me. And
> then, it's like OK, you're still, like – every year we try, some years we go to a
> new con, but we always go to Kumoricon and Sakuracon, and like, Sakuracon is,
> like, the freaking best, it's always so good. Um – and so, it's just like things are a
> mess, and then every night I go to sleep and I'm just like, "It's ok, it's ok, we're
> still going to work on our cosplays, and things are going to be so good because
> we're going to be these characters, and we're going go to this con and everything
> is going to be OK."

For Kathleen, cosplay is a constant positive to counteract major sources of stress; even
when everything else feels like it is falling apart, cosplay can be something positive and
fun on which to focus. Cosplay and attending conventions can be something to look
forward to when other parts of life are stressful, and even the preparation of a costume
can be viewed as a personal accomplishment and success when other areas of life feel
like a mess.

Others discussed the need to rise above daily stressors while cosplaying and the
benefits cosplayers get from doing so. T'eao explained that conventions are a busy time
with many responsibilities and demands on her time, but, when in costume, she has to

rise above those stressors to help maintain the sense of wonder of the event, both for herself and for others:

> It isn't maintaining the persona, but more in terms of in the face of reality, because you're walking around what is a dreary convention hall…And so you're talking about big crowds, slow-moving people and people trying to get places, people trying to stop you for pictures. And you're usually tired, and you're usually stuck two people to a hotel room bed, and you've usually gotten three hours of sleep, and there's usually 8 things you need to do other than cosplay that day, and I go and do panels and sell stuff, so like there's 6 other worries in my head. So the challenge is keeping that persona and maintaining it in the face of reality, because you have to sit there and go "Reality is over here, and this is the awesomeness we're going to do." And so it's not even staying in character so much as staying larger than life, and staying above all of your anxieties and worries that are in any other way part of your focus, and just kind of being like, "Nope, I don't have any of those things! I am the Starlord today! I have to worry about the galaxy! That's way bigger than my art table, ok?"

Part of the challenge of cosplay is remaining in a mindset to become a character even in the face of other worries or concerns. The convention setting does not erase physical needs or mental concerns, but part of dressing up and being in character is the escape from reality and the worries that go along with it, if only for a little while. This need to set aside the worries of daily life and focus on the fun and magic of the character and the

156

story you are representing can be important for the cosplayer's audience (maintaining a believable and authentic presentation of the character for those who observe them), but it can also be energizing and uplifting for the cosplayers themselves. By inhabiting their chosen character for the day, cosplayers get the chance to rise above stress, mundane concerns, and indulge in a sense of childlike wonder and magic that many adults rarely get the chance to experience.

Along with the ability for cosplay to serve as an escape from the stressors of life, another benefit of using elements of creative play within cosplaying is the ability to make light of and have fun with characters or storylines that might otherwise be darker. Fans may connect with and admire a series or character that deals with more serious subject matter, but through interactions with other fans they are able to present that character in a more lighthearted way. Tetra explained what she uniquely enjoys about cosplaying that she doesn't get from a more general fan experience:

> I feel like it gives you a really easy way to make fun of your favorite characters. Because it's all the sudden really, really easy to do gags, because all you have to do is, like, walk up to a character that you normally would never hang out with if you were in character and just pull funny faces and do dumb things. My cosplay photos are, like, serious photos and derp-face photos. And the derp-face photos far outnumber the serious photos…I have a tendency to gravitate toward darker series, so in a way it is kind of like comic relief.

157

Even when cosplaying a villain or a character from a darker series, cosplaying can provide a way to have fun with that character and with the interactions between characters and not focus on the seriousness or darkness as much. Cosplaying can provide an avenue for more lighthearted engagement with serious fan texts, allowing fans to engage with and express their fandom without getting drawn into the emotional tone of the text.

Play/Fun

The ability to escape the stresses and demands of daily life can itself be enjoyable, but almost all of my participants described cosplaying as an inherently fun activity. One of the main draws for the practice and the most frequently stated reason for continuing to cosplay was the fun they have and the joy they get from engaging with their fandom and other fans in this way. As Schechner (2002) noted, one of the main functions of performance is to entertain. Cosplayers certainly entertain their audience - other attendees at conventions and fan events - but the act of cosplaying also provides entertainment for the participants themselves. Dressing up in costume is fun! Both Schechner (2002) and Huizinga (2004) discussed the significance of play in the performative act. Creative play meets both physiological and psychological needs, engaging the individual in exploration, creativity, and controlled risk. The function of play in the performance of cosplay should not be glossed over – play meets individual and psychological needs that do not disappear with the end of childhood, and cosplay is one avenue through which adult fans can engage in this sort of creative play.

Role-play and theatrical performance as a form of play. One of the ways that fans engage in performative play through cosplay is through the ability to role-play and experiment with acting out their character. Although many cosplayers have little or no background in acting or theatre, cosplay events and interactions with other fans give them a chance to experiment with those skills and pursue interests they might not otherwise have the chance to develop. Li linked her own interest in theatre and performance with her enjoyment of cosplaying:

> I've always loved playing pretend and theater and acting, and I never pursued it. Got involved with other things, I did a little bit of the school drama and whatnot and community back in my youth, but never pursued it beyond that. And so the cosplay – and particularly in the cosplay events – have given me a way to, you know, act…because I haven't been able to otherwise. It's an outlet for that expression. And so, that's – that's, I guess, the main reason why I like cosplay, other than, you know, it's fun to dress up and show off and to connect with people that way.

Cosplay is often a literal performance; it is a way to explore role-playing and acting for those who have an interest in theatre and performance but have no other outlets for that interest. At another part in our discussion, Li talked about how her participation in cosplay events at conventions (an involvement in the planning and execution of contests and activities beyond simply attending the convention in costume) has given her a spotlight in which to perform for and with others:

Um, mostly I do a lot of the helping out behind the stage, so helping getting people up where they're supposed to be, making certain the contestants are comfortable and having water and everything. But I'm a ham, I like going up on stage a bit too, so when one of my friends who had been doing the Anime Death Match couldn't go to the convention that year, I took over. And so last year I was the host, um, up on stage and ran it, and probably going to do that again this year.

For Li, it's not just cosplaying that gives her a chance to play around with acting skills and the theatricality of the activity, but participating in cosplay events at cons is a way to perform and get in the spotlight. People who already have the personality of liking to "ham it up" get the opportunity to have an audience and enjoy the spotlight and the sense of taking the stage.

The extent to which a cosplayer attempts to stay in character and accurately and consistently portray the character depends not only on the person and their own interests and goals, but also on what they're doing at the time and who their audience is. The same individual's efforts and attempts at a full performance can range from casually hanging out in costume to a fully in-character performance of the role. Shareece described how her own focus on staying in character shifts depending on the context:

Um, when I'm just running around the con, I'm just having fun and, you know, when people ask for pictures I'll pose and somewhat act like the character, but it's, I'm not going to be running around acting like I am the character. When it comes to competition, I almost always do a skit, or at least totally plan out a

160

performance, so then it really is a performance. I really am in character and acting like the character, and when you go to certain competition pieces, they actually score you on how well you act in character. So, um, so to me that's what I do when I'm in cosplay, and when I'm doing Bunny's Heroes, I'm in character. When I have that costume on, I am Merida, I'm not going to be anybody but Merida. So really it's environment and what my mission is, I guess.

The amount of effort that goes into putting on the character and performing the role depends on the context. For Shareece, there's a difference between just hanging out at the convention, participating in events like costume competitions, and her work with her organization, Bunny's Heroes. She experiences the full range from just hanging out and having fun to being fully in character for the entire event. It doesn't have to be one or the other, but a cosplayer can make decisions about the effort and commitment to the role that are necessary for the context.

Personal benefits of engaging in role-play. Beyond the ability to pursue an interest in performance and enjoy the limelight of role-playing a character, fans described several other benefits they experience from role-playing while in costume. Much media and fandom research utilizes uses and gratifications theory, which posits that media users actively select the media sources they will consume and choose different sources to meet their various personal needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). While uses and gratifications may be useful in understanding how fans form their fan preferences and why they choose to follow particular media genres or texts, I posit that the benefits

cosplayers describe gaining from their cosplay experiences highlight how active fan

practices like cosplay serve as equipment for living. Cosplayers' actions and choices in

the fan context are shaped by the functions that these actions satisfy for them, and these

choices influence how they think about themselves and the world around them.

Holly explained that role-playing is a way to socialize and engage in play with

others:

It always depends on who I'm with and what character I'm being. If the character

is evil or just bad, I won't be in character as much for hopefully obvious reasons.

But if there's like, one of my friends who's also with that character who plays

along, like, I'll goof off with them or I'll do little scenes or I try to be in character

a little bit more. And if I meet someone new when they're also with a character

that works out together – from the same series or something or they know the

character – I'll sometimes do a fun little thing in character with that.

Role-play is often a social interaction, done in the pursuit of fun and as a way to play

with friends and have fun interactions with other convention attendees. Engaging in role-

play through cosplaying can also be a way to deepen a fan's connection to the character

and the fan text. Natasha described her experience of fandom as having levels or

different extents to which fans engage with and express their fan interest. She talked

about how cosplaying has shaped her own experience of fandom:

It certainly heightens it…yeah, it makes me more interested in the story, more

engaged. I want to find out more about the character so I can understand them

better…So it's, it definitely makes me more excited about the character, and then sometimes about the series itself…because you do have to have an understanding of the character in order to do it in the first place, and it's, it does take time. I don't want to just give up on something half-way through, so it's just like, "Oh yeah, this person is really awesome." Like, and I'm really excited about it.

The engagement with the character through cosplay can deepen the fan's interest in the fan text or genre. For Natasha, not only is it enjoyable to make the costume and perform the character for others, but doing so also makes her more committed and engaged in her fan interest. Similarly, Nick explained that one of the things he enjoys most about cosplay is the ability to step into a character's persona and connect with the character, even if he's not making an effort to fully stay in character:

Um, even if you don't really put on the persona of the person you're cosplaying as to everyone else, sort of in your mind as you're getting ready, I don't know, you kind of like, inside you sort of have that persona, you know? It's kind of like whenever you wear a costume, like, if you're dressing up as a vampire, kind of like in the back of your mind you're like, "Ha ha, I'm a vampire right now, that's pretty cool." Even if you don't, like, act that way in front of other people.

Cosplaying, even without full-on role-playing, allows the participant to internalize the character to some extent. Taking on the persona, even just a little bit, can provide a creative outlet that fans don't get from just watching a show or playing a game.

For many fans, cosplaying is simply a great form of entertainment. Dressing up in costume and running around with friends and other fans who share your interests is fun! Li described being in awe of the costumes and the spectacle of the event during her first convention experience:

> This was, you know, it was big and fabulous and lots of costumes and people were, you know, super nice, and it was just…an event like I had never seen before. And I was just like, "Alright, we're doing this next year, we're going to get ourselves an art table. This is going to be great." And so next year we were there, and got an art table, um, and you know, again had a blast. And so the following year after that it was just, "Alright, well let's do some more cons!"

What initially attracted Li to cons and cosplaying wasn't necessarily a deep connection to a specific fandom or a need to express herself through performance, but rather the energy of the event and the fun of connecting with other fans and being part of the spectacle. She was drawn in by the fun everyone else was having, and participating herself only deepened her desire to do more and become more engaged with the fan community.

The appeal of being seen by an audience. Several participants expressed that the attention and recognition received while in costume was one of the things that they enjoy about cosplaying at conventions; when a fan is in costume, they are part of the spectacle. Ada explained the importance of the social aspect of cosplaying in her experience at conventions:

I mean certainly role-playing and interacting and – it's really fun preparing the costumes together and going around together. You also tend to get sort of exponentially more attention every additional person you have from the show. So you get five times as much attention at least if you have a pair of people from the same show than if you just have one, and if you have three of four you get lots. And so it's just much more fun because you get more people that ask to take a photo or more people commenting or more people interacting with you when you have a pair of people than when you're alone.

One of the sources of fun in cosplaying, especially within a larger group, is the attention cosplayers get when in costume, and more people cosplaying together elicits greater attention (and, hence, more fun). Dave also expressed that part of the goal of cosplaying is being noticed:

I know that I've done a couple of things where if I thought that the character was not too recognizable…you'd ham it up in order to get more attention, kind of stick out more. I don't, you know – you don't dress up in order to get ignored.

At least part of the enjoyment of cosplaying is the fun of being noticed – dressing up and acting the part, or as Dave said, "hamming it up," in order to get attention. Natasha also described the enjoyment that comes from being seen when in costume:

Sometimes I think it's just because it's fun to have people take pictures of me and, like, to have people see your work and appreciate it. Umm, that's I think probably the biggest draw for me, is to show other people, "Look, I did this

thing." And I can pull it off pretty well, or not. But, like, "Look at this thing I

did." So, I don't know what I'm trying to tell other people. Maybe that I'm

awesome, like "Look how awesome I am." [laughter]

Cosplay provides a rare outlet for adult imaginative play. Not only does

cosplay allow fans to engage in role-play and experiment with theatrical performance in a

welcoming environment, but it provides an opportunity that many adults lack in modern

society – the chance to engage in creative play and be a "big kid." Childhood is full of

make-believe play, but, with adulthood, the chances to let go and embrace this childlike

sense of fun are few and far between. As Bloustein (2002) noted, children do not

separate fantasy and play from everyday life; they are intertwined, part of a unified

whole. Fantasy becomes separate from the everyday for adults, but fandom is one way to

explore fantasy and play once again. Li described this ability to indulge in play as one of

the things she enjoys most about cosplaying:

> The getting up on stage and being part of things and acting and being in character.
>
> I've got no other outlet for that interest. None. So that is just an outlet for
>
> creativity and play that I don't get any other way…So, it's a way to play and play
>
> in character that, you know, as a 35-year-old I don't have any other outlet for that
>
> sort of thing.

Cosplaying provides an outlet for fun and play that adults often do not have anywhere

else in their lives. While adults certainly have other outlets for general entertainment,

few include the elements of creative play and make-believe that are central to cosplay. Ada noted:

> Before that, I had done renaissance costumes for going to the Ren Fair and when I was a little kid I was always one of the kids who was most enthusiastic about having an elaborate and complicated Halloween costume. I was a centaur one year, and I was a Beholder from Dungeons and Dragons when I was very small.

Holly described her own childhood love of dressing up as a foundation for her involvement with and enjoyment of cosplaying:

> Well, I've always liked dressing up. Like I said, when I was a little kid I would dress up as Link in just, like, a large green t-shirt that we had around the house and stuff like that…oh, and I also just loved Halloween, always.

For both Ada and Holly, the joy of dressing up and playing pretend is something they loved during childhood, and cosplaying gives them the chance to continue with those activities as an adult. Meghan explained why she continues to cosplay as she is getting older and establishing herself in her adult life:

> It's fun, you know? I can't trick-or-treat anymore. But I can go to a con in costume, and no one's going to judge me. They might even give me candy!...And, so, it just, like, it actually gives me an environment in which I can get dressed up, because I want to, and not feel like a total tool for dressing up even though I'm going to be 25.

167

Outside of Halloween, few contexts exist in which it is socially acceptable for adults to dress up in costume and engage in make-believe. At conventions, it is not only acceptable but also expected. In this context, adults have a chance to indulge their inner child and have fun with this kind of creative play.

Participation

Finally, throughout my interviews, fans expressed that cosplaying provides them with a way to perform the role of participant while at an event. Anyone can attend a convention and be an observer of the action, but through cosplaying fans have a chance to feel like part of the event. Social psychologist William Schutz (1958) proposed that humans have three basic interpersonal needs that shape their behaviors in relationships with others: the need for control, the need for inclusion, and the need for affection. The ability to not only engage with but also feel like a participating, integral member of a larger group comprises one way that individuals are able to satisfy their need for inclusion. For fans, cosplaying is one way to satisfy this need.

Cosplay allows fans to feel like participants rather than observers. Ada, who works as a planner and organizer for a major convention, explained the difference between attending a con in-costume versus in street clothes:

Occasionally at Anime Boston I will be off duty, I will be ordered to be off duty for a couple of hours because I'm tired, and I will change into a different costume, and I usually change into my Gundam costume which has a mask, so people actually don't recognize me. And then I will be an attendee at the convention for

a little while, and I generally feel very comfortable doing that, but I feel

uncomfortable being in street clothes, and I feel uncomfortable doing any on-duty

staff activity if I'm not in my costume, which I refer to as my staff uniform.

Ada described a comfort level to being in costume at these fan events. For many

cosplayers, feeling like they are a part of the event requires being in costume. When they

are wearing street clothes (not dressed in costume), they feel like observers or even

outsiders, as opposed to when they are in costume and feel a sense of belonging and

camaraderie. Daniel described a similar sense of comfort and belonging when in costume

at a convention:

And what was weird – or not really weird, but what was cool was that Anime

Boston is a very active cosplay community, to the point where you feel weird if

you're not in cosplay at this type of convention. And that's what kind of got me

more into this, more interested in this community, because it just was one of those

– you felt more comfortable in an unusual attire than you would just in jeans and a

t-shirt.

While costuming and role-playing are activities that would make someone stand out in

any other context, the roles are reversed at a con. Not wanting to stand out or be "weird"

in the context of a fan convention often means participating in cosplay. While several

participants expressed that they feel like part of the event when cosplaying, Molly

specifically discussed feeling less confident when attending a convention in street

clothes:

169

So I've been to cons in street clothes maybe twice, and I always, I feel like I'm back in middle school again where I'm invisible, and I hate it. I love, I'm very much an extrovert, and I love to be noticed, I love to be confident in myself and my appearance. And when I'm just walking around in street clothes, I look at the women who are wearing revealing stuff and bustier stuff that I wouldn't wear, because it's not comfortable and it's not affordable and it probably requires a wig, but I look at them and I'm like, "Wow, I look really un-sexy, I should at least be in a tank top or something," even if it's like the dead of January. But when I'm dressed up, I can be wearing 15 sweatshirts, but as long as it looks like the character, I walk around next to these beautiful women and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm with them." So I feel a lot less confident and a lot less, like, good about myself when I'm not dressed up.

Molly specifically discussed feeling less confident and making a harsher comparison between herself and others when not in costume. She feels invisible when dressed in street clothes at a convention. Regardless of her costume, she feels better about herself when she cosplays because she's on a peer level with the other cosplayers and feels like part of the group.

Cosplay fosters a deeper commitment to the event and the fan community. Not only does cosplaying help fans feel like part of the larger fan community and feel a sense of belonging at conventions, but it can also help foster a sense of commitment to

their role as part of the event and deepen their engagement with the community. Daniel

explained how being in costume changes his experience of the event at a convention:

> It's about buying in…And to me, cosplaying is the equivalent of buying in and
>
> getting more involved with your community, and also being a part of that
>
> community. And for me, that's kind of essential, because I've got a team and I've
>
> got a community of thousands of people that they're going to be looking at me
>
> and they're going to be like, "Oh, he's not really a cosplayer, he doesn't really
>
> know what he's talking about." And part of it's gaining a little bit of respect, and
>
> at the same time it's showing them that, "No, I'm here, I'm fully 100% into this,
>
> and I want to have the best experience for you guys," and show that I can also do
>
> that for them. Basically trying to be one of the – be with everyone else, but at the
>
> same time show that I want to be there for that purpose.

For Daniel, who helps organize and run events at conventions, cosplaying is also a way to

show other fans and participants at the event that he is not just an organizer, but he is also

a fan. He knows what their concerns and needs are for the convention because he is one

of them. Daniel returned to this idea when explaining how cosplaying benefits him more

than a general fan experience. Our conversation took place just after the release of the

new installation in the *Star Wars* series, and Daniel described how cosplaying could even

change the experience of viewing a film:

> I would say that, again, it goes back to that whole buy-in of things. I would argue
>
> that I get more, ahh, I feel more involved when I'm in costume. If it wasn't for all

the security concerns, the *Star Wars* – when we went to see it on Thursday night, my girlfriend and I probably would have been significantly more dressed up…So it was like, OK, so we're just going to do this in normal clothes, normal-ish clothes, and not bring in anything too crazy…I don't know, it's that kind of thing that I think would make the experience that much better, even though when you really think about it, just logically speaking, it doesn't really add anything at all, because what you're wearing doesn't change the movie experience. But it does – you still feel like it does to an extent, and I can't really put my finger on exactly why it does. It just feels cooler, if I may.

Daniel kept coming back to this idea of participation as "buying in" to the event, and explained it in the context of special showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* where people dress up, bring props, and sing along with the songs:

Ok, so, I did that many, many years ago, and I still go see it every October unless things are going crazy. But you definitely have – there's the movie experience of just sitting down and watching a movie, and then it's the whole other movie experience of being a part of the show, essentially. And even though, arguably, you can be in costume and you're not really part of the show, you still feel like you're a part of it. You feel like you're involved. And I guess that's the reason I keep on going back to this, because you get that connection, you get that level of inclusiveness that you just can't get anywhere else.

Daniel wasn't the only one who addressed the idea of cosplaying allowing a fan to become part of the event in a more complete way. The feeling that cosplaying allows for "full participation" came up repeatedly in my interviews. Holly explained how being in costume changes her experience of a convention:

> Umm, I think in some ways I feel a lot more, like, part of the con rather than just spectating it. Because if I'm walking by, some people will ask to take a picture and like to take photos of cosplayers in general…And I feel more – I feel like I'm having a lot more fun and just fully participating…I like cosplaying, and so I feel like that's what's fully participating for me, but that's different for everyone…And whenever I'm in a more casual costume or in just normal clothes, I do feel slightly out of it or, "Oh, well, I could have been cosplaying but it's Sunday morning and I'm tired and I don't want to go into full makeup and wings" or that type of stuff.

The difference in Holly's experience at a convention in cosplay versus in street clothes is feeling like a participant versus a spectator. As she noted, cosplaying isn't the only way to "fully participate" in fandom, but it's what full participation in the fan community looks like for her. Meghan described the types of interactions cosplayers engage in that other attendees at a convention might not experience:

> You get run up to a lot more. Umm, and if you're not in costume a lot of times people will ask you to take pictures for them, whereas if you're in costume people will ask you to take pictures with them…So, like, my boyfriend doesn't cosplay at

all. He'll occasionally go to the cons, but he doesn't dress up, he just goes and he'll wear, like, his *Star Wars* shirt because he loves *Star Wars*. And he'll usually be the one who ends up getting to hold the camera. Whereas I'll be in costume running around like a crazy person, trying to get him to take pictures of me with everybody else.

Meghan focused on interactions with other fans and requests for pictures, and, for her, being in costume means being in the picture as opposed to being the person holding the camera. It's not necessarily that she can't participate or interact with others when not in costume, but cosplaying makes her a part of the action rather than being an observer of it.

Li agreed that being in costume makes you a part of the event "much more than out of costume, because you are in some ways a bit of the entertainment, part of the event in such a way because you are in costume, you are a character." It is almost as if cosplayers serve as self-selected, voluntary mascots for their chosen fandom. They voluntarily attend conventions in costume, and most do not serve the event in any official capacity, but they become a focus of attention and a source of entertainment for other attendees. Through functioning as a source of entertainment for other fans, cosplaying can foster a deeper connection to the fan community and fandom itself for those who participate. T'eao addressed this connection when I asked how cosplaying has shaped her experience of fandom:

Um…you're a lot more connected to sort of the baseline. You're a lot more connected to the material and you're a lot more connected to the audience,

because you are that step up from regular participant to embodiment of the character. That whole piece that I was saying about representing the magic of it. You know, you become part of the magic. You aren't the actor, but you look like the actor. And so you're a step closer for the people around you to being that part of the magic. Um, and so it really does bring you closer to the joy of it, and make it a more interesting and connecting experience.

T'eao explained that, through cosplaying, she feels that she can become more connected to the character and the storyline. She can experience the "magic" of artistic creation while also representing that magic for others. When cosplaying, fans move beyond being just "regular" participants (which we might define as fans who simply consume the text or attend and observe at conventions); instead, they move a step closer to embodying the character and making that text more real for themselves and others.

Closing Thoughts

When examining the key elements of cosplay, it is not a stretch to understand that cosplaying is inherently performative. Fans construct and don costumes, make choices about representation and role-playing, and immerse themselves in a social context where others not only expect to view their performance but also may insert themselves into it through interactive bits of role-play or other in-character interactions. We can also understand the performative nature of cosplay by examining how it fulfills the characteristics of performance. Fans use their costuming and performance to display their creative skills and intricate fan knowledge to others. They make conscious

175

decisions about representation and behavior, and they do so with the knowledge that their representation of the character will be evaluated and judged against others' standards for excellence. However, the external judgment of excellence or achievement is not the only benefit cosplayers receive from the practice. Fans' convention experiences are both constrained and enriched by the physicality required in embodying a character. The ability to take on the persona of a fictional character and engage in role-play provides a chance for escape and exploration of the self, as well as a chance to engage in creative play. Finally, participating in cosplay allows fans to fulfill a need for social inclusion and full participation within the fan community. In all of these ways, cosplay isn't just about the technical skill necessary to pull off the performance, but also the personal and social benefits that come from an opportunity to play with identity and self-representation.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Figure 4. Saying goodbye is hard to do. (ThinkNu, 2014c).

Throughout my conversations with cosplayers, I was most struck by the repeated and intensely expressed statements from many of them about how cosplaying makes them feel. Whether cosplaying is simply a casual interest or something that has spawned a career or a "life's work," my participants reiterated that, at the end of the day, it is more than a hobby to them. Cosplaying provides an avenue for creative exploration, social engagement, and self-expression, but when translated to personal experience, across the

board fans felt a sense of belonging through cosplay. As I have stated before, nobody cosplays alone. In some way, it is always a social experience, and, by putting themselves out there in their expressions of fandom, fans also find themselves a part of a larger community that provides a sense of acceptance and camaraderie for its members. Finding that sense of community, "a tribe of one's own" as it were, is one of the broadly shared benefits of participation in cosplay that many fans did not expect when they set out to become involved but that became one of the best parts of the experience for them. As social psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) claimed, humans are social creatures, and the drive to seek out and form social attachments is an innate human need. For these fans, cosplaying serves as an important avenue through which to find and nurture those human connections.

Conducting this study and speaking with the cosplayers who generously gave of their time and insights helped me not only to understand the intricacies of the cosplaying experience, but also helped me reflect on my own experiences as a fan and think about how I have navigated fan practices within my own life. Although I am not a cosplayer, I am a fan and have participated in other fan practices, and many of the statements my participants made about the role of fandom in their lives echoed my own experiences and the way I feel about my fandom memberships. With that said, reflecting on what I could have done differently, I would have liked to be able to include a more autoethnographic element within this study, attending conventions to observe and participate in cosplay firsthand. Time limitations, family commitments, and work schedules precluded me from

travelling to attend any conventions during my data collection stage, but I think having

that experience and being able to see cosplayers engaging in the convention setting

firsthand would have added more depth to the data. I do question how my own

perceptions as an outsider (or at least a newcomer) to the cosplay scene would have been

influenced by the conversations I had already had with participants, but nonetheless, I

would have liked to include my own observations and perceptions of these events in my

analysis. Perhaps future studies will allow me to expand on my research in this way.

At this point, I will revisit my research questions in order to evaluate what was

learned through this study. How did I answer each question through my interviews with

these cosplayers, and which ones may need more exploration in order to fully understand

these issues related to fandom, performance, and identity? When I began this project, I

sought to answer the following questions:

How Do Cosplayers Communicate Their Fan Identity Through Performance?

Among individual cosplayers, the characteristics or attributes they wish to express

through their cosplays can vary quite a bit; it may be a personal expression of creativity

and artistry, a demonstration of advanced costuming skill and textual knowledge, or a

subtle "middle finger" to the social norms of adult behavior within mainstream society.

At a basic level, though, the choice of a cosplay character communicates a good amount

about fan identity and fandom membership. My participants talked about having a strong

connection to the characters they choose to cosplay. While some people do choose a

cosplay for purely aesthetic reasons or to fill out a group (if their friends are cosplaying

179

together from a series and need someone to fill a role), most expressed that the love of a character or a text is what motivates them to commit their time and resources to developing a cosplay. Cosplay costumes takes time, money, and energy to create, and the choice to commit that investment in a character usually communicates quite a bit about where a fan's interests lie.

The choice to cosplay itself also communicates something about the extent to which a fan identifies with a particular fan community. People who only claim a mild interest in a fan text (consuming it casually) generally do not cosplay; cosplayers self-identify as fans and their fandoms are a big part of their personal interests and self-concepts. During all of my interviews, when I asked the question "Do you consider yourself a fan?" not a single person said no. They envisioned themselves as fans, and they could easily list their various fandoms, how long they have considered themselves a fan, and what fandom means to them. One of the most universal things that they communicate through their cosplay performances is fan self-identification. Participating in fan events through cosplaying says to others "I'm a fan! Ask me more."

One of the unique contributions that this study provides to the literature is in the area of identity research. When examining the formation and communication of identity, scholars' focus has primarily been on the personal performance of individual identity. However, through this examination of cosplayers' uses of performance to establish and communicate identity within the fandom community, we can see how these interactions also serve as a performance of communal identity. What does it mean to be a part of a

180

specific fandom? Who are fans of a particular work or genre? What do they value and

how do they enact their fandom? Just as the performance of individual identity is done in

conjunction with other performers and an audience, through these individual

performances of identity we can also see the construction of communal identity taking

place. The social connections and formation of community through fandom were central

parts of the experience for all of my participants. This study helps us see that the choices

and actions of members of the cosplay community shape that community just as much as

the social scene shapes their options for performance.

What Role Does Performance Play in the Experience of Fandom for Cosplayers?

One of the questions I asked each cosplayer in our interviews was "How do you

think cosplaying shapes your experience of fandom?" Several participants responded

that cosplaying has deepened their interest and commitment to their fandoms. As I stated

above, casual fans generally do not cosplay, meaning that those who do are usually

already committed to their chosen fandom(s). However, the process of choosing and

developing a cosplay, performing the role at a fan convention, and connecting with other

fans at those events draws cosplayers deeper into the fan experience and motivates them

to seek out more – more knowledge and context for their cosplay, more inspiration for

future costumes, and more connection with other fans. Cosplay requires fans to put

themselves into a structured role and perform that role in a social setting, enabling them

to put themselves into the mindset of the characters that they choose and embrace their

own fan identity openly and publically in a way that might not happen with more individual and solitary fan activities.

Notably, cosplaying transcends and connects individual fan communities. Fans of all different genres throughout popular media participate in cosplay, often at the same events. Anime conventions, for example, draw fans of many anime series, but also manga (Japanese illustrated fiction), video games, science fiction, fantasy, and mainstream Hollywood films. By attending these events and interacting with other attendees, cosplayers may have an opportunity to interact with fans of other works and learn about different fandoms that they otherwise might not have encountered. Meghan talked about how part of her enjoyment in cosplaying stems from the ability to learn about and appreciate the love that other people have for works that she may not personally follow:

> I think it just makes it more, you know, interactive and fun, because you're getting to not only dress up in character as somebody that you really, like, love potentially, but you're also getting to see other people who are doing something that they love…like, let's say, I'm not the biggest fan of *Attack on Titan*, because it freaks me out…I might not be the hugest fan of it, but at the same time, you see these people who are cosplaying as the Yeagers, and you see how great their costumes are…It's like you can tell that however much you might not like it, their passion for it has caused them to be able to create potentially a working machine…and it allows me to appreciate it more.

Without cosplay as an introduction and invitation to interaction between fans, individual fandoms might remain more isolated from one another. Cosplay can broaden the horizons of individual fans and help them learn about others' interests. It might even be an avenue through which individuals gain a new appreciation for a text and join a new fandom.

What Motivates Fans to Engage with the Fan Community Through Performance?

After speaking with diverse members of the cosplay community and looking over our conversations regarding their experiences, I believe that the motivations for engaging in a performative act like cosplaying are as diverse as the people who participate in it. In the end, the benefits that they received from cosplay, which were outlined in the key themes I identified throughout my analysis, were the main motivators for participating in this performative engagement versus choosing other fan activities for their time and energies. Fans experience great personal satisfaction in the ability to refine and display their creative skills through their costuming. They enjoy the ability to engage in role-play for escapism and general entertainment. The most common motivator that my participants identified was the social aspect of the cosplay performance, allowing them to connect and interact with other fans in a social setting. As Goffman (1959) established, we perform for and with the other; performance constitutes a social act because our audience both observes and shapes the roles we present. Cosplayers make decisions in their presentation of cosplay characters with others in mind (whether that be other fans in general, their conceptions of standards that will be applied to their performance, or the

183

interactions they hope their performance will foster in the convention setting). Cosplaying was by no means the only way that my participants enacted their chosen fandoms; some created fan art, others wrote fan fiction, but cosplaying seemed to be viewed as the most social of these activities. A few participants discussed other creative fan pursuits as solitary, while describing cosplaying as inherently social. No matter what other motivations individuals might have for cosplaying, the social elements of the activity and the ability to connect with other fans in a welcoming setting seemed to be a universal draw for these individuals.

When considering the social appeal of cosplaying, I think the perceived safety of the convention setting is important. My participants described conventions as a "safe space" or a setting where they would not feel judged for their hobbies and interests. As previously discussed, fandom as a community has received substantial outside judgment over the years; outsiders might view fans as weird, childish, or "other" in a way that makes fans feel defensive of their interests (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 1992b; Jenkins, 2006; Porat, 2010). In the convention setting, though, cosplayers feel supported and accepted. They know that other fans understand cosplaying as an expression of their interests, and even fans who do not engage in cosplay share in or understand those interests. Knowing that their efforts, skills, and knowledge will be validated rather than derided may be an important part of the decision to cosplay at these fan events. Cosplayers do not have to wonder if other fans will accept and appreciate what they are doing.

How Does Participation in the Fan Community Generally and Cosplaying Specifically Shape Fans' Conceptions of Self and Identity?

Identifying as a fan seems to bring some of the broader culture's assumptions about fandom along with it. Fans in this study self-identified with terms like "geek," "nerd," or "weirdo." Yet, when discussed in the context of fandom generally and cosplaying specifically, my participants appropriated these terms and gave them a positive connotation. As Lewis (1992) discussed, fans create coherent identities for themselves through self-selection and participation in fan culture, including reframing negative associations with fan culture to more accurately represent their own experiences. Fans embraced these terms; they were clearly aware of the negative impressions that outsiders have of fan communities, but it seemed that participating in cosplay was a way for them to reaffirm that, in accepting those identifications, they also self-identified with a broader community that they loved. For most of my participants, fandom represents an important part of their lives and how they think of themselves as individuals, but it seems that cosplaying permits them to frame that aspect of their identity as something positive, social, and communal. Being a fan affirms their appreciation for a specific genre or type of popular culture text, while cosplaying involves membership in a creative and engaged community.

This framing of fandom as something positive within fans' own lives is one example of the way cosplay serves as equipment for living for fans. Although outsiders may have a negative impression of what fandom is, fans themselves see how connecting

185

with a story, internalizing its lessons, and outwardly expressing their interest in communion with others has a positive impact on their lives. Burke (1941) discussed how representative anecdotes in literature help readers think through the problems in their own lives and vicariously process and deal with difficult situations in order to see resolution within the story. Cosplayers in this study reported that they were better able to connect with a storyline and understand a character through the performance of cosplay. Physically and mentally putting oneself into the shoes of a fictional character not only helps the fan to better understand that character and the story they represent, but also helps them understand who they are and who they are not, becoming more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Moving Forward

While this study provided insight into the research questions I set out to understand, it also brought to light some additional questions that could be pursued in future work. First, how does cosplaying differ from other fan pursuits? Cosplaying was described throughout my conversations as creative and deeply social. Could fans gain the same benefits of self-expression and connection from other fan activities, or is cosplaying unique in those respects? The social aspect seemed to be especially important to the cosplaying experience, and it was also something that fans seemed to feel was lacking in other parts of fandom. In what other ways might fans engage with one another and feel like part of a broader community?

186

Second, the concept of communal identity bears further exploration and examination. While my primary focus in this study was understanding the individual's experience of utilizing performance to develop and communicate personal identity, the focus on community membership and social engagement was central to my participants' reflections on fandom and cosplay. Further studies looking at cosplayers specifically, fandom more generally, or other groups where social interaction and community membership are important could explore how individuals' choices and interactions shape the communal identity of the group and vice versa.

I think it is also important to further explore the negative experiences cosplayers face. Much of my discussions revolved around the positives – what have cosplayers gotten out of the experience, why do they continue to cosplay, and what do they enjoy about it? This line of questioning leads to rich discussions of the motivations behind and benefits of the endeavor, but I know that it is not a universally positive experience. What negative reactions have cosplayers had from those outside the fan community? Conventions are a safe space, but fans often encounter outsiders as they travel through public spaces to reach the convention space. How does interacting with the general public when they have stepped into their character and fan role make them feel? What impact do these interactions or reactions have on their choices as a cosplayer and as a fan? A few of the people I spoke with alluded to these interactions and the awkwardness they have experienced with people who are not familiar with the cosplay community, but we did not delve into these ideas in any real detail. Understanding that fandom is the

187

target of judgment and many cosplayers have experienced this judgment firsthand, I think it is important to better understand the dark side of the fan experience in this context to have a more complete, nuanced understanding of what cosplay means for fans. Similarly, my discussions with my participants about cosplay and convention experiences positioned other fans as the primary audience, but non-fans also function as an audience for fan performances. How do cosplayers (and other fans) shape their performances in consideration of the (possibly judgmental) gaze of an outsider audience?

As technology and social media have become central aspects of modern life, it makes sense that fandom has been deeply impacted by technological innovation. Future research should examine how social media and technological access have impacted the experiences, relationships, interactions, and choices within the cosplay community (and fandom more broadly). I did not directly pursue this line of questioning with my participants, but it was clear to me in recruiting participants, researching cosplay, and speaking with cosplayers that social media plays an important role in the modern fan experience. For example, I recruited participants from Facebook interest groups for major national anime conventions, and following these groups I witnessed daily discussions about cosplay inspiration, requests for feedback on costume progress, and general discussions of fan interests and convention experiences. More than ever before, fans' communities of interest are not limited by their physical location. My participants also mentioned thinking about their online audiences and making choices about how much they disclose about their cosplay participation in their social media profiles,

188

knowing that some audiences, like non-fan friends or professional colleagues, might make negative judgments about them seeing photos of them in these contexts. Future research should more thoroughly explore how fans manage their online personas and make choices to integrate and/or separate their fan world and "real world" identities.

Finally, I think it is important to compare cosplaying to other performative fan activities. While cosplaying is a broad community that includes fans from many different genres, there are other fan activities that get individuals engaged socially and experientially with one another in a performative setting. Just a few examples include fans of the *Harry Potter* series who play in real-life quidditch leagues (quidditch is the wizard sport created by J. K. Rowling and described in the *Harry Potter* books) (Jalabi, 2013; USQ, 2017), students who engage in Humans versus Zombies games on college campuses (which are based off of the zombie-horror genre specifically and take inspiration from horror and science fiction genres more generally) (Humans vs. Zombies, 2017), and throw-back baseball leagues where players dress in period uniforms and use 19th-century rules and equipment (Lemoult, 2008; Vintage Base Ball Association, 2015). How do the benefits and motivations of participants in these communities compare and contrast with those of cosplayers? What does participation in these activities communicate about an individual's self-concept and values? It would be valuable to explore these same questions in the context of other fandoms and other fan activities to better understand what roles performance and identity serve in these different contexts.

References

Abercrombie, N., & Longhurst, B. (1998). *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Aden, R. C., Borchers, T. A., Buxbaum, A. G., Cronn-Mills, K., Davis, S., Dollar, N. J., et al. (2009). Communities of Cornhuskers: The generation of place through sports fans' rituals. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 10*(1), 26-37.

Ali, S. (2002). Friendship and fandom: Ethnicity, power and gendering readings of the popular. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 23*(2), 153-165.

Alvermann, D. E., Hutchins, R. J., & McDevitt, R. (2012). Adolescents' engagement with Web 2.0 and social media: Research, theory, and practice. *Research in the Schools, 19*(1), 33-44.

Bailey, S. (2005). *Media audiences and identity: Self-Construction in the fan experience*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ballano, S., Uribe, A. C., & Munté-Ramos, R-À. (2014). Young users and the digital divide: Readers, participants or creators on Internet? *Communication & Society, 27*(4), 147-155.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 497-529.

Beck, C. S. (2012). Intersecting narratives: Enjoying daytime drama as viewers (and

    actors) experience the days of their lives. *Communication Studies, 63*(2), 152-171.

Bessel, J., & Riddell, P. (2016). Embodiment and performance. *Changing English:*

    Studies in Culture and Education, 23(4), 326-334.

Bird, S. E. (2011). Are we all produsers now? Convergence and media audience

    practices. *Cultural Studies, 25*(4/5), 502-516.

Bloustein, G. (2002). Fans with a lot at stake: Serious play and mimetic excess in *Buffy*

    the Vampire Slayer. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 5(4), 427-449.

Booth, P. (2008). Rereading fandom: MySpace character personas and narrative

    identification. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 25*(5), 514-536.

Boudreau, A. L., & Giorgi, B. (2010). The experience of self-discovery and mental

    change in female novice athletes in connection to marathon running. *Journal of*

    Phenomenological Psychology, 41(2), 234-267.

Bray, J. P. (2014). "There's too many of them!": Off-off-Broadway's performance of

    geek culture. *Theatre Symposium, 22*, 121-133.

Brehm-Heeger, P. (2007). Cosplay, gaming, and conventions: The amazing and

    unexpected places an anime club can lead unsuspecting librarians. *Young Adult*

    Library Services, 5(2), 14-16.

Brinkmann, S. (2013). *Qualitative interviewing*. New York, NY: Oxford University

    Press.

Brown, J. A. (1997). Comic book fandom and cultural capital. *Journal of Popular Culture, 30*(4), 13-31.

Brummet, B. (1991). *Rhetorical dimensions of popular culture*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Brummet, B. (1997). Burke's representative anecdote as a method in media criticism. In J. Lucaites, C. Condit, & S. Caudill (Eds.), *Contemporary rhetorical theory* (pp. 479-493). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Burke, K. (1941). *The philosophy of literary form*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Burr-Miller, A. C. (2011). What's your fantasy? Fantasy baseball as equipment for living. *Southern Communication Journal, 76*(5), 443-464.

Butler, J. (2004). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In H. Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 154-166). New York, NY: Routledge.

Carlson, M. (2004). What is performance?. In H. Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 68-73). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chen, J. (2007). A study of fan culture: Adolescent experiences with anime/manga doujenshi and cosplay in Taiwan. *Visual Arts Research, 33*(1), 14-24.

Cohan, N. (2013). Rewriting sport and self: Fan self-reflexivity and Bill Simmons's *The Book of Basketball*. *Popular Communication, 11*, 130-145.

Comic-Con International: San Diego. (2014). *About Comic-Con International*. Retrieved

from www.comic-con.org/about

Crawford, G. (2004). *Consuming sport: Fans, sport and culture*. New York, NY:

Routledge.

Davisson, A., & Booth, P. (2007). Reconceptualizing communication and agency in fan

activity: A proposal for a projected interactivity model for fan studies. *Texas

Speech Communication Journal, 32*(1), 33-43.

Dewhurst, S. (2011). Build team expertise by walking the talk. *Strategic Communication

Management, 15*(3), 15.

Dollar, N. J. (1999). "Show talk": Cultural communication within one US American

speech community, Deadheads. *Journal of the Northwest Communication

Association, 27*, 101-120.

Duffett, M. (2013). *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan

culture*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Ferris, A. L., & Hollenbaugh, E. E. (2011). Drinking and dialing: An explanatory study

of why college students make cell phone calls while intoxicated. *Ohio

Communication Journal, 49*, 103-126.

Fiske, J. (1992). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. A. Lewis (Ed), *The adoring

audience: Fan culture and popular media* (pp. 30-49). New York, NY:

Routledge.

Galbraith, P. W. (2013). Cosplay, Lolita and gender in Japan and Australia: An

    introduction. *Intersections: Gender & Sexuality in Asia & the Pacific,* (32), 2.

Gantz, W., Fingerhut, D., & Nadorff, G. (2012). The social dimension of sports fanship.

    In A. C. Earnheardt, P. M. Haridakis, & B. S. Hugenberg (Eds), *Sports fans,*

    identity, and socialization: Exploring the fandemonium (pp. 65-77). Lanham,

    MD: Lexington Books.

Gn, J. (2011). Queer simulation: The practice, performance and pleasure of cosplay.

    Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 25(4), 583-593.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY:

    Doubleday.

Gray, J., Sandvoss, C., & Harrington, C. L. (2007). Introduction: Why study fans? In J.

    Gray, C. Sandvoss, & C. L. Harrington (Eds.), *Fandom: Identities and*

    communities in a mediated world (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: New York

    University Press.

Gunnels, J. (2009). 'A Jedi like my father before me': Social identity and the New York

    Comic Con. *Transformative Works and Cultures* (3). Retrieved from

    http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/161/110

Haen, C., & Weil, M. (2010). Group therapy on the edge: Adolescence, creativity, and

    group work. *Mental Health Resources, 34*(1), 37-52.

Harbaugh, W. T., Mayr, U., & Burghart, D. R. (2007). Neural responses to taxation and

    voluntary giving reveal motives for charitable donations. *Science, 316*, 1622-5.

Harris, C., & Alexander, A. (Eds.). (1998). *Theorizing fandom: Fans, subculture and identity.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Harrington, C. L., & Bielby, D. D. (1995). *Soap fans: Pursuing pleasure and making meaning in everyday life*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Harrington, C. L., & Bielby, D. D. (Eds.). (2001). *Popular culture: Production and consumption.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Harrington, C. L., Bielby, D., & Bardo, A. (2011). Life course transitions and the future of fandom. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 14*, 567-590.

Hills, M. (2002). *Fan cultures*. New York: NY: Routledge.

Hjorth, L. (2009a). Game girl: Re-imagining Japanese gender and gaming via Melbourne female cosplayers. *Intersections: Gender & Sexuality in Asia & the Pacific,* (20), 5-14.

Hjorth, L. (2009b). Playing the gender game: The performance of Japan, gender, and gaming via Melbourne female cosplayers. In L. Hjorth & D. Chan (Eds.), *Gaming cultures and place in Asia-Pacific* (pp. 273-288). New York, NY: Routledge.

Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry, 19*, 215-229.

Huizinga, J. (2004). The nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon. In H. Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 117-120). New York, NY: Routledge.

Humans vs. Zombies. (2017). Retrieved May 16, 2016 from https://humansvszombies.org

Jalabi, R. (April 12, 2013). The surprisingly serious quest to make muggle quidditch a

    real sport. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved May 16, 2017 from

    https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/the-surprisingly-

    serious-quest-to-make-muggle-quidditch-a-real-sport/274958/

Jenkins, H. (1992a). 'Strangers no more, we sing': Filking and the social construction of

    the science fiction community. In L. A. Lewis (Ed), *The adoring audience: Fan*

    culture and popular media (pp. 208-236). New York, NY: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (1992b). *Textual poachers: Television fans & participatory culture*. New

    York, NY: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New

    York, NY: New York University Press.

Jenson, J. (1992). Fandom as pathology: The consequences of characterization. In L. A.

    Lewis (Ed), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media* (pp. 9-29).

    New York, NY: Routledge.

Joseph-Witham, H. R. (1996). *Star Trek fans and costume art*. Jackson, MS: University

    Press of Mississippi.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Uses and gratifications research. *The*

    Public Opinion Quarterly, 37(4), 509-523.

King, E. (2013). Girls who are boys who like girls to be boys: BL and the Australian

    cosplay community. *Intersections: Gender & Sexuality in Asia & the Pacific,*

    (32), 5.

Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (Eds.). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Lamerichs, N. (2011). Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay. *Transformative Works & Cultures, 7*(21).

Lemoult, C. (April 23, 2008). Throwback baseball leagues catch on. *NPR Morning Edition*. Retrieved May 16, 2017 from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89762406

Lewis, L. A. (Ed.). (1992). *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2010). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

McCain, J., Gentile, B., & Campbell, W. K. (2015). A psychological exploration of engagement in geek culture. *PLoS One, 10*(11), 1-38.

McKenzie, J. (2004). The liminal-norm. In H. Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 26-31). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, & society from the standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Monahan, J. L., & Lannutti, P. J. (2000). Alcohol as a social lubricant. *Human Communication Research, 26*(2), 175-202.

Mount, J. (1996). Why donors give. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership, 7*(2), 3-13.

197

Murray, S. (2004). 'Celebrating the story the way it is': Cultural studies, corporate media and the contested utility of fandom. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 18*(1), 7-25.

Norris, C., & Bainbridge, J. (2009). Selling Otaku?: Mapping the relationship between industry and fandom in the Australian cosplay scene. *Intersections: Gender & Sexuality in Asia & the Pacific*, (20).

Oh, D. C. (2013). Mediating diasporas and fandom: Second-generation Korean American adolescent diasporas, identification, and transnational popular culture. *The Communication Review, 16*, 230-250.

Palfrey, J. & Gasser, U. (2008). *Born digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Popat, S. (2016). Missing in action: embodied experience and virtual reality. *Theatre Journal, 68*(3), 357-378.

Porat, A. (2010). Football fandom: A bounded identification. *Soccer & Society*, *11*, 277-290.

Rowe, D. (2014). New screen action and its memories: The "live" performance of mediated sport fandom. *Television & New Media, 15*(8), 752-759.

San Diego Comic Convention. (2013). *About Comic-Con International*. Retrieved from http://www.comic-con.org/about

Sandvoss, C. (2005). *Fans: The mirror of consumption.* Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Schechner, R. (2002). *Performance studies: An introduction*. London: Routledge.

198

Schechner, R. (2004). Performance studies: The broad spectrum approach. In H. Bial (Ed.), *The performance studies reader* (pp. 7-9). New York, NY: Routledge.

Schiappa, E. (2008). *Beyond representational correctness: Rethinking criticism of popular media*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Schutz, W. C. (1958). *FIRO: A three dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior*. New York, NO: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Sekimoto, S. (2012). A multimodal approach to identity: Theorizing the self through embodiment, spatiality, and temporality. *Journal of International & Intercultural Communication, 5*(3), 226-243.

Shefrin, E. (2004). *Lord of the Rings, Star Wars*, and participatory fandom: Mapping new congruencies between the Internet and media entertainment culture. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 21*(3), 261-281.

Stanfill, M. (2013). "They're losers, but I know better": Intra-fandom stereotyping and the normalization of the fan subject. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 30*(2), 117-134.

Stevens, C. (2010). You are what you buy: Postmodern consumption and fandom of Japanese popular culture. *Japanese Studies*, *30*, 199-214.

Stevens, R. & Spears, E. H. (2009). Incorporating photography as a therapeutic tool in counseling. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 4*(1), 3-16.

Striff, E. (Ed.). (2003). *Performance studies*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Taussig, M. (1993). *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Théberge, P. (2005). Everyday fandom: Fan clubs, blogging, and the quotidian rhythms of the Internet. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 30*, 485-502.

ThinkNu. (2014a). Cosplay is…magical! [Online image]. Retrieved May 8, 2017 from https://www.facebook.com/pg/thinknuofficial/photos/

ThinkNu. (2014b). Cosplay is…making new friends! [Online image]. Retrieved April 26, 2017 from https://www.facebook.com/pg/thinknuofficial/photos/

ThinkNu. (2014c). That cosplay feeling…when the convention ends! [Online image]. Retrieved April 26, 2017 from https://www.facebook.com/pg/thinknuofficial/photos/

ThinkNu. (2014d). That cosplay feeling…when you find a character that you were born to cosplay! [Online image]. Retrieved April 26, 2017 from https://www.facebook.com/pg/thinknuofficial/photos/

Tshivhase, M. (2015). On the possibility of authentic self-expression. *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory & Research, 41*(3), 374-387.

USQ. (2017). About US quidditch. Retrieved May 16, 2017 from https://www.usquidditch.org/about/mission/

Vintage Base Ball Association. (2015). What is vintage base ball? Retrieved May 16, 2017 from www.vbba.org

Wang, M., Tran, K. K., Nyutu, P. N., & Fleming, E. (2014). Doing the right thing: A mixed-methods study focused on generosity and positive well-being. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 9*(3), 318-331.

Williams, R. (2011). "This is the night TV died": Television post-object fandom and the demise of *The West Wing. Popular Communication, 9*, 266-279.

Wood, M. M., & Baughman, L. (2012). *Glee* fandom and Twitter: Something new, or more of the same old thing? *Communication Studies, 63*(3), 328-344.

Young, H. (2014). Race in online fantasy fandom: Whiteness on Westeros.org. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 28*(5), 737-747.

Ziff, K., Pierce, L., Johnason, S., & King, M. (2012). ArtBreak: A creative group counseling program for children. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 7*(1), 108-121.

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Welcome and study information:

- Thank you for taking time out of your day to talk to me. I really appreciate your time and insights about your experiences.

- Purpose of study:

- For this study, I'm interested in hearing about your experience as a cosplayer and your views on fandom and who you are as a fan.

- As we talk today, I want to hear about your opinions and experiences. There isn't such a thing as a wrong answer; your personal experiences and ideas are what are valuable to me.

- If you have any questions for me while we're talking, please feel free to ask. You can also stop the interview at any time if you don't feel comfortable continuing. Simply let me know if you'd like to stop.

- Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

I'm interested in how you became introduced to and involved in cosplaying. Tell me about your introduction to cons and cosplaying.

- What was the major draw for you? (social, creative, connection to a series, etc.)

- What was your first cosplay? How did you decide what to do?

How long have you been involved in cosplaying? How many cons have you attended?

Tell me about your process in preparing for a cosplay.

- What are your main considerations as you prep a costume?

- How do you choose a character?

- Does your own personality play a part in selecting a character? (Do you feel a personal connection to characters you choose, or is this unimportant?)

When you're in costume, what are you trying to project or portray to others?

- Do you attempt to stay in character when you're in costume?

- How do you express this character to others when you're in costume?

- How do you present yourself differently in costume than you do in street clothes at similar events?

When you're at a con, how does being in costume change your experience?

- What interactions do you have in costume that you don't have when you're not cosplaying?

Do you think of yourself as a fan?

- Of what genres or works do you consider yourself a fan?

- What activities have you participated in as a fan?

- Are you involved in larger fan communities?

- If so, which communities? Tell me about your involvement with them. What do you do together? How did you get involved with the community?

- What does it mean to you to be a fan?

How do you think cosplaying shapes your experience of fandom?

Is cosplaying a social activity for you?

- If yes, in what ways is it social?

- If not, why is this only a personal/individual activity for you?

Why do you continue to cosplay? What benefits do you get from the experience?

- What do you uniquely enjoy about cosplaying that you don't get from a more general fan experience?

How do you think cosplaying has influenced other parts of your life?

- Has cosplaying changed the way you see yourself?

- Do you think it affects the way others see you?

Closing:

- Loose-ends/follow-up questions

- Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't talked about?

- Do you have any additional questions for me?

- Provide contact information – if you have any questions or think of anything you'd like to add to what we talked about today, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.