

Identity and Community Construction in Cosplay Subculture: A Communication Studies Analysis

Zehao Lu

*College of Communication, Chengdu University of Technology, Chengdu, China
luzehao@stu.cdut.edu.cn*

Abstract. In today's youth cultural landscape, Cosplay has transformed from a niche fan pastime to a worldwide cultural event. Participants bring characters from virtual world like anime and game into real life via costume, props, body performance. This is far from being just a reproduction, it is full of cultural and communicative gravity. From the perspective of Communication studies the study mainly includes two questions first is that how people find identity from multifold identity, second is that how Cosplay-loving community form, communicate and meet internal problem. The study finds that cosplayers get "liminal spaces" by participating in cosplays, in which they can find their ideal selves and challenge social norms in terms of role-play, so that they can have different kinds of identity practices and temporary cross-dimensional identities. At the same time, Cosplay groups, via ritualistic interaction online and off, build significant cultural recognition and a feeling of homeliness. But they face hierarchies shaped by cultural capital and problems linked to commercializing, with competing for cultural capital inside showing differences in control. This study suggests that cosplaying is a kind of important culture practice that allows modern youth to express themselves in their own word and makes them have many friends.

Keywords: cosplay, community building, identity recognition, self expression

1. Introduction

Cosplay refers to the activity of portraying anime, game, and other works' characters with costumes, accessories, props, and makeup. It has transformed from a small niche community into a worldwide cultural trend as a youth subcultural phenomenon. Teenagers project their inner being through playing with a role of idealized character. It is not only an important derivative of anime, games, and other two-dimensional cultures, it is also an important contemporary way for young people to express themselves, shape and develop their identities, and interact with others. From the perspective of communication studies and society, it can use the perspective of cosplay to carry out a deep analysis of the mechanisms and significance of creating youth identity and forming social relationships. Understand the cultural logic and psychological needs of cosplay has great implications about the mental world and cultural consumption trends on contemporary youth.

Academic studies on cosplay are clearly visible as for their theoretical path. As indicated by the studies of Lamerichs and Rahman, role playing is an experience of "projective identity" — it is a shift from the "real" self to the "ideal" or "other" self. In the context of the community building,

cosplay’s communities belong to the typical “community of interest”, Jenkins’ theory of “participatory culture”, explains how this community is formed by the active text poaching and recreation. Use Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” for analysis on power structures within it. From which, in the present study, we intend to apply communication theories and some related frameworks to carry out a systematic research on the formation of identity and the building of community in cosplay, so as to gain a more profound grasp about the spiritual requirements and cultural practice logic of today’s subcultural groups.

2. Research methods

This paper used two research methods: in-depth interviews and participant observation.

2.1. In-depth interview

At the Chengdu and Qingdao comic conventions, the author randomly approached 14 people and interviewed them; The author carried out semi structured in depth interviews with 14 active cosplayers, at the interview the participants will have been of differing genders and different times involved with cosplay to create variance. Interviews included participation motives, psychology of choosing characters, personal feeling after performing, social activities taking place inside the community (see table 1).

Table 1. Respondent background information

Serial Number	Gender	Age	Years of experience in cosplay
A	Female	19	2
B	Female	24	6
C	Female	20	3
D	Male	25	6
E	Female	18	1
F	Male	17	1
G	Female	30	7
H	Male	42	15
I	Male	19	2
J	Female	16	2
K	Male	26	5
L	Male	21	3
M	Male	26	6
N	Female	23	3

2.2. Participant observation

The author has participated in multiple local conventions and offline gatherings organized by cosplay community groups within Chengdu and observed the interaction patterns, behavioral norms, and emotional expressions of cosplayers both before, during, and after the events, and recorded some important scenes.

3. Research findings

3.1. Interview results

3.1.1. Motivation for participation

In terms of participation motivations, one half is motivated by the wish to experience “who am I” and receive recognition of self and exploration. As Interviewee B said, “For me, cosplay is some sort of ‘Awakening’, It’s not just about dressing it is also about performing a part of your life.” Fans can satisfy aesthetic desires in specific contexts and roles through visual observation and role-playing, derive pleasure from the appreciation of others and gain pleasure through both spiritual and worldly means aspires to “Self-discipline” through role-playing [1]. So as well as three people want to join the community via hobbies, make friends and have a sense of belonging, which will further build up the community. For example when K says, “Inside this circle I discovered my own worth and a group of similarly minded friends.” Two more are motivated by the technical creation, as M states, “3D modeling, spray painting to age them, the creating is what I love.”

3.1.2. Psychology of character selection

In terms of the personal motivations for choosing these characters, all four of them are motivated by a desire to break free of real-life constraints and live out traits that they wish they could have. They use the character as a vessel for their “ideal self”, according to C: “I’m usually shy, but when I’m playing Anya, I can boldly do those cute things and actively take photos with others.” The other three are motivated by a deep connection to the character’s inner gender, values, or cultural identity according to B: People who find no meaning in the competition and pressure of daily work and study will turn to fandom as an activity. They will spend time and energy in the creation and interpretation process and form a sense of community and realize themselves, and at the same time get emotional satisfaction from the recognition of others [2].

3.1.3. Role play self-perception

During the experience, all five people felt very immersed, which brought them stress relief and mental freedom. As D wrote, in real life, he might have to hold back some parts of himself. But when he cosplays a character, He can be of any gender, any temperament. In the society now, which is dominated by the atmosphere of “speed”, “efficiency”, “logic”, people need to find some temporary places to rest away from their pressure and require some emotional activities to relax temporarily, in the constant tension [3]. The self-perception of these two people comes from the recognition, compliments, and photo requests from others, they seek recognition, appreciation, satisfaction.

3.1.4. Community interaction experience

As for social interactions, the positive side is having a sense of fitting in—find friends with similar ideas, resonate as a group, and get mutual understanding and acceptance that isn’t usually found in conventional social settings; these are new tribes formed by emotions and relationships, allowing people to achieve a sense of community identity [4]. Negative points can be seen compared to stress. Everyone can’t help but to compare themselves to others, which brings worries regarding appearance, costume quality, and popularity. As F said, “I sincerely admire those who can play

elaborate characters as cosplayers, whose gear seems so exquisite.” And there develop hidden hierarchies and chains of disdain, defined by one’s financial investment, skills, experience, and so on.

3.2. Results of participatory observation

3.2.1. Interaction mode

Before the event officially starts, they spend mostly time on preparation-related communication and warming up. Most online or within small groups Take place, within the small groups such as club, interest circle, etc., actively talk about the choices of characters, the progress of costume and prop making, particular itinerary plans, collaborate for planning and coordinating. At the same time, on public social media such as weibo and xiaohongshu, participants also conduct public online communication through posts like previewing close-up pictures of costumes and props, describing the process of making them, or publishing schedules of the event online to attract people’s attention and arouse their interest, actively aiming to get more interaction and responses. Peak when the events do, the offline ones reach a high too. At this point, they are usually standing in a part of the space that’s designated for cosplaying — remaining still as the audience and cameras on them as they allow their picture to be taken. As for ordinary folk, the big draw is snapping some pics with some cosplayers, generally doling out the good word. There are also some implicit etiquette in this process; we obtain permission before taking photos, addressing the cosplayer by their character name, creating an atmosphere of respect and immersion of their own accord together. The conclusion of the event doesn’t mean the end, instead it is just the beginning of another round of actions. After the event: The focus shifts to showing results online and receiving feedback: The photographers then edit and return the photos to the cosplayers, who in turn re-post them on social media platforms to be seen by fellow enthusiasts and attract a flood of likes, comments and shares. A warm and positive cycle is formed.

3.2.2. Code of conduct

Event preparations should be detailed before the event begins. Many cosplayers have planned the movement route in the venue ahead of time and may even choreograph dances for their character so as to present everything as complete as possible on-site. The event has begun and on-site interactions follow a certain unspoken etiquette — whether it is taking photos or requesting for a selfie, getting the cosplayer’s permission beforehand is always the primary principle, while addressing the performers by their character names and this unspoken mutual understanding among the audience also adds to the immersive effect of cosplay, and respecting the performer’s boundaries. After the event, after the end, the positive response of the community is very important for the overall atmosphere. On social networking sites, fans would quickly like and leave nice remarks about photos and event summaries posted by others. This is a warm and encouraging circle, it makes sure the bonds in the community are strengthened.

3.2.3. Emotional expression

Before starting, there is both expectation and anxiety, people look forward to the “transformation” of this event, but also worry that the props might break, the makeup won’t be perfect, or the end result won’t meet their standards. At the same time some respondents also pointed out that the financial investment on the costumes, wigs, props as well as the cosmetics will bring certain burden, which

subconsciously increased the participation threshold. After the event officially starts, it is the most emotionally intense moment. On-site moments of recognition and praise bring a lot of excitement and happiness, and being with many like-minded people creates a strong sense of community and identity. But it's like invisible comparisons based on the amount of investment, production skills, or influence leading to some rivalry and social distinction in the community. One thing is for certain after the event is over, those who take part in it see finishing the experience as having completed a full "project", which leaves them with a very real sense of satisfaction and self-respect. But at the same time, stepping away from the spotlight and reverting to one's normal identity brings its own low points, sometimes accompanied by emptiness and frustration.

4. Discussion

4.1. Identity: rebuilding self in liminal space

This study also discovered that the appeal of cosplay is due to the creation of a very powerful "threshold space", through which young subcultural groups created their own Deleuzian rhizomatic aesthetics of play, constantly moving and searching for new lines of escape from being controlled by power [5]. In this temporary ritual space, we set aside our everyday social rules and identity constraints for a short time so that we can explore ourselves more freely. Teenagers who are on cosplay get back their voice to talk about themselves and this helps them reach their aims for knowing who they are, being themselves, and showing themselves to others [6].

4.1.1. The projection and experience of the ideal self

And adolescents who choose to participate in cosplay among various cultural developments is also an expression of adolescents who accept the culture and values [7]. A lot of those who responded said that their choices behind portraying a character are mostly due to it having traits that they look up to in real life that they don't already have, such as courage, confidence and strength (like in the character Satoru Gojo from *jutsu Kaisen*). By using embodied performance, people not only look like the character on the outside but also psychologically feel and experience these emotions, thus having some form of alternative fulfillment and self-enlightenment, which can help relieve anxiety about one's identity in real life.

4.1.2. Gender identity's flow and training

In this paper, cross-dressing is an obvious phenomenon. Women who play men and men who play women, their acting is not just a curiosity. Cosplay as a heuristic to reconceptualize gender embodiment as a collectively manufactured labor/ artwork that requires a division of labor for production [8]. For most participants, it's a playful break and active transgression of inherent gender binary. The relatively inclusive community, they can freely try out all kinds of possibilities for gender expression and taste the sweet nectar of fluidity brought about by free identities, reflecting the actualization of a post-modern perspective on identity.

4.1.3. Acquisition of emotional energy

At comic conventions, when cosplayers' performances are recognized by people like getting pictures taken or getting compliments, they feel really good about it. This emotional energy gathered via group experience is a major portion of self-worth and identity enhancement. That intimacy created

out of those cosplays is about feelings, touching, and friendship, some people even say it's better than hanging out with their real life friends [9].

4.2. Community construction: ritual interaction & cultural capital

The construction and upkeep of the cosplay community requires continuous ritualistic communicative activities, but there is also structural tension in the community.

4.2.1. Shared interests and ritual belonging

Community Members Come Together Through Mutual Love For ACGN Culture Comic conventions are offline rituals, just like daily sharing and conversations online, which together shape the community's collective consciousness. Members create a strong sense of identity and belonging through their participation in the sharing of certain terms, aesthetics, and behaviors.

4.2.2. Cultural capital and power stratification

Communities Have an Unseen Hierarchy. such as exquisite makeup, postproduction skills, such as expensive and real costumes and props, such as winning big prizes in important competitions, all these embodied capitals, objectified capitals and institutional capitals together form a Coser's position and power in the community. Experienced Cosers usually turn into opinion leaders, but newcomers might have trouble integrating because they lack capital. This is to show that the community is not an ideal world, but there can be disparities in resources and powers among the members of the community. For any sub-cultural groups, money, age, job aren't causes of disparity in power, it is the accumulation of cultural capital that has a dominant role in the construction of discourse power for Cosplay practitioners [10].

5. Conclusion

This paper uses a communication studies lens to show that Cosplay is a complex modern cultural phenomenon. Not simply role imitation but also a way for young people to actively build self and form community. Cosplay gives its participants a space of ritual that is "on the threshold" where they can live their best self, play with the gender that they are. At the same time, ritualistic interactions both online and offline create close-knit interest groups with a sense of family.

But there are problems with this kind of subcultural practice. Power hierarchies based on cultural capital and challenge cultural logic under the main force of social structures. This reveals how hard it is to resist. Future research can focus on more new technology such as virtual reality transform the embodied of cosplay, also pay attention to how chinese cosplayers incorporate traditional culture elements such as Hanfu into cosplays to create a kind of cultural innovation that represents both local and global cultural exchange. A better vision of Cosplay, may lead us to get a clue about the hidden passion of today's youngsters looking for their own identity as well as a group to join in the ever-changing world.

Sample taken from a small number of randomly chosen interview subjects, not comprehensive, mainly focuses on presently active cosplayers, does not sufficiently cover "marginal participants" such as those who only watch and do not take part. Cultural and regional limits: This is a sample based on Chinese conventions and community culture. The results of this paper may not apply directly to the Cosplay community in other regions and countries, where the community, activities, and mainstream culture are quite different.

In addition to this, cross-cultural comparison can be made in regards to participation, aesthetic standards, community norms, etc., between different countries or regions' Cosplay Community, thus showing the influence of culture on subcultural acts.

References

- [1] Dai, R.: Power Discipline, Circle Symbols, and Body Communication: A Study on Contemporary Youth Cosplay Subculture Phenomena and Risk Issues. *Journal of Shanxi Youth Vocational College* 38(02), 28–33 (2025).
- [2] Zhang, M., Meng, F.: Constancy in Change: Identity and Meaning Construction in Fandom Subcultures. *Journal of Youth Studies* (02), 83–94 (2024).
- [3] Su, J.: Otome Game COS Commissions: The Emotional Constructive Value and Emotional Alienation in Women's Emotional Consumption. *Youth Journal* (06), 99–106 (2024).
- [4] Zhu, J., Zhang, P.: Construction of Mainstream Cultural Identity from the Perspective of Post-Subculture: Taking the Group of Young Artistic Enthusiasts as an Example. *Cultural Innovation Comparative Study* 8(06), 55–60 (2024).
- [5] Guo, D., Li, X.: The Spread of COSPLAY Subculture in Vertical Communities. *Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Sciences Edition)* 47(01), 107–113 (2019).
- [6] Zhou, Y., Liu, Z.: Interpretation of Youth Subculture Phenomena from the Perspective of Identity Mechanism Construction: A Case Study of Cosplay Subculture. *Contemporary Youth Research* (02), 5–11 (2018).
- [7] Ren, K.: Carnival in Role-Playing: A Cultural Study of the Teen Cosplay Trend. *Home of Drama* (10), 26 (2019).
- [8] Yuchen, Y.: The art worlds of gender performance: cosplay, embodiment, and the collective accomplishment of gender. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 9(1) (2022).
- [9] Chen, H., Zhang, J., Zhang, X., et al.: Quasi-virtual intimacy: An exploration of cosplay commission as a new form of virtual-reality interaction. *Computers in Human Behavior* 168, 108651–108651 (2025).
- [10] Xie, L.: Youth Subculture from the Perspective of Power: Taking Cosplay Subculture as an Example. *Contemporary Youth Studies* (01), 62–67 (2019).