

Expressions of Fandom: Findings from a Psychological Survey of Cosplay and Costume Wear

Robin S. Rosenberg and Andrea M. Letamendi

Cosplay, short for 'costume-play', is the modern practice of wearing costumes, props, and accessories to represent a character. Typically, cosplay is the extension of a person's fandom for the character or genre, such as science fiction and fantasy, anime and manga, comic books, and other creative media. The purposes of cosplaying can vary, but include the expression of adoration of the character, enjoying attention or approval from audiences/peers, and experiencing the creative process of the costume construction. Therefore, cosplay can extend to clothing design, fabrication, make-up, prop making, and other skills involved in creating costumes.

The practice of cosplay spans a vast geographical area, as can be demonstrated at large national and international fan conventions and events such as Comic-Con International, Worldcon, World Cosplay Summit, Katsu Con, and Dragon*Con. However, little is known about the psychological motivations, influences, and commonalities among cosplayers, or even whether there are any commonalities beyond the superficial ones – wearing costumes and attending conventions. The act of cosplaying and all that goes into it invites questions about the psychological motivations and experiences of cosplayers, ranging from why cosplayers choose to dress up as a character, how they feel while in costume, to whether wearing a mask makes them feel different.

In fact, previous psychological research has shown that wearing a mask can shift people's experience of themselves and their behavior. For instance, when stutterers in one experiment wore a mask, they stuttered less (Pallczek and Homefield, 1954). In another study, children who wore masks, compared to children who didn't wear masks, were more likely to take (e.g., steal) extra candy when the experimenter left the room (Miller and Rowold, 1979). In still another study, when participants wore a mask, they reported feeling less self-aware (Mullen, Migdal and Rozell, 2003). That is, they had less self-focused attention and felt less aware of themselves as individuals.

Based on the paucity of research on cosplay, we wanted to learn more about cosplayers – their demographic information, how often they cosplay, the amount of time and money they devote to preparing for cosplaying, as well as their psychological motivations and experiences. Additionally, because some cosplay includes masks, helmets, and other props that disguise the face, we were curious to understand how covering one’s face during cosplay affects the sense of self. Whereas we had no hypotheses at the outset about the demographic of cosplayers or their cosplay behavior, based on previous research on mask-wearing we hypothesized that wearing a mask while cosplaying would lead cosplayers to feel less like themselves, as have participants in previous research that didn’t involve cosplayers.

Research Project

In order to explore shared characteristics among cosplayers, we developed a survey of self-report items spanning demographic, behavioral, psychological, and social questions. The survey items were co-written by Rosenberg and Letamendi and piloted on two cosplayer participants. The final survey, posted via Google surveys¹, included 20- 25 items (depending on whether certain questions were answered 'yes' or 'no') and the results described below were analyzed from responses between 13 August 2012 and 27 August 2012; no additional respondents went to the website and completed the survey within three weeks of 27 August 2012 and so the survey was considered 'closed' at that date.

Demographic items included gender, age of respondent, and ethnicity. Behavioral questions included age of first cosplay, number of times cosplayed each year, number of hours preparing costumes, and the average amount of money spent on costumes. Psychological questions included the reasons respondent chooses to cosplay (rank order), reasons respondent chooses a particular costume/character, and the impact of mask-wearing on self-awareness. Finally, social questions about cosplay included multiple-choice items querying whether respondent cosplayed alone or with others.

Participants

Survey respondents were recruited via the internet, including social networks (Facebook), blogs (Wordpress), and micro-blogs (Twitter). Thus, participants were considered eligible if they self-labeled as a cosplayer, spoke English, and had access to the Internet. A total of 198 participants responded and were included in the analysis. Sixty-five percent of the sample identified as female. The average age of participants was 28.4 years old with an age range of 15-50. The majority of respondents identified as residents of the U.S. (n=185; 93.4%), while a small minority resided in Canada (n=9; 4.5%), Australia (n=2; 1.0%), Mexico (n=1; 0.5%) and Sweden (n=1; 0.5%). The sample was representative of U.S. Census Data in terms of ethnic group status. Caucasians represented 68% of the sample, Asians represented 12%, Latino/Hispanic represented 5% and Native American represented 0.5% of respondents. Eleven percent identified as 'Mixed' and 4% of the respondents identified as 'Other'.

Research Findings

Cosplay behaviour

The average number of years that respondents had been cosplaying was 6.77 (range of 0.5-35), based on 183 respondents. The average age of first cosplay was 21.28 years (range of 3-42), based on 194 respondents. The number of total times ever cosplayed varied widely in this sample, ranging from 1-250 times based on 159 respondents to this question ($M=25.89$). The majority of the sample cosplayed between 1-5 times per year, with 37% cosplaying 3-5 times per year and 28% percent of the sample reported cosplaying 1-2 times per year. Twenty percent of the sample reported cosplaying 6-10 times per year, 7% of the sample reported cosplaying 11-15 times per year, and 7% reported cosplaying 16 or more times per year (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Times Cosplay Annually

Number of times per year	Percent of Sample Endorsed (N=197)
1 - 2	28%
3 - 5	37%
6 - 10	20%
10 - 15	7%
16 or more	7%

Table 2 tabulates the average cost per costume in U.S. dollars. According to the survey, the majority of respondents spend between \$100.00-\$399.00 per costume

(30% reported between \$100.00-\$199.00 and 24% reported between \$200.00-\$399.00 per costume). Nine percent of respondents reported spending \$0-\$50.00, 16% of respondents reported spending \$51.00-\$99.00, and 13% of respondents reported spending over \$400.00 per costume. Eighty-two percent of respondents reported that they construct their own costumes.

Table 2: Average Cost Per Costume in U.S. Dollars

Average Cost Per Costume	Percent of Sample Endorsed (N=197)
\$0 - 50	9%
\$51 - 99	16%
\$100 - 199	30%
\$200 - 399	24%
\$400 or more	13%

The total time spent preparing costumes varied between 1 to 450 hours (based on 112 respondents). The average time spent preparing a costume was 44.16 hours. Each respondent was asked to answer questions about their 'most time-intensive costume'. According to responses, these types of costumes took an average of 133.58 hours (based on 118 respondents). The most recent time-intensive costume took 47.3 hours on average (based on 128 respondents).

Psychological Aspects of Cosplay

Respondents were asked to rank order their reasons for cosplaying. Unfortunately, the hosting software for the survey allowed respondents to rate more than one choice as #1. As noted in Table 3, 'Fun' was the most endorsed top reason why respondents cosplay, with 101 respondents rating it their top choice. Next was 'Because I like the character', with 78 'top choice' endorsements, followed in popularity by 'A vehicle for creative expression', endorsed by 73 respondents as their top choice. Additional information can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Top Reasons Why Cosplay

Reason	Number of Respondents Endorsed (N=197) in descending order
Fun	101
Because I like the character	78
A vehicle for creative/artistic expression	73
An opportunity to exhibit my creation or myself	44
The identification with the character	41

The acceptance by and friendship with like-minded people	29
The opportunity to pretend to be someone else	29
Escapism	28
The opportunity to be a “celebrity” for a brief time	26

Note: The survey allowed people to endorse more than one top choice.

Participants were also asked to rank order possible reasons for their choice of costume. Unfortunately, the survey hosting programming allowed respondents to rank as #1 more than one option. Almost a third of respondents (30%, N=60) ranked as number one “how I will look in my costume”, with the next most frequently ranked top reason as identification with “some psychological characteristic” of the character (N=53). Other reasons and the number of top choice endorsements are found in Table 4.

Table 4: Top Reasons for Choice of Costume

Reason	Number of Respondents Endorsed (N=197) in descending order
how I will look in the costume	60
some psychological characteristic	53
some aspect of the character’s history	47
some physical characteristic	37
materials I have handy or can easily obtain	23
what other members of my cosplay group are wearing	19
the amount of time I have available	15
the cost of creating the costume	13

Note: The survey allowed people to endorse more than one top choice.

One qualitative item on the survey allowed respondents to name their favorite character to cosplay and why. Characters were from a wide range of comic book, gaming, anime, historical and science fiction genres. Interestingly, responses were so varied, that only 15 characters were endorsed by more than one respondent, and the character mentioned as favorite by most respondents (N=5) was Commander Shepard of the video game *Mass Effect* and its sequels.

Below is an example of a response that demonstrates how features such as independence, self-reliance, and physical appearance inspired a cosplayer to embody that character of Wonder Woman.

It's a character I have always loved and been inspired by. Wonder Woman was a beautiful princess, but strong and independent. She took care of herself and everyone she cared about, and didn't need a prince to rescue her. Those were important qualities to me growing up in an all-woman household, just like the Amazons on Themiscrya. It didn't hurt that we were all brunettes over 5'7" either! In Wonder Woman I saw the best qualities of my mother, and the type of woman I wanted my sister and I to become. I've always idolized her from childhood and wanted to "be" her when I grew up.

Wearing a Mask. Sixty percent of respondents (N=119) reported that had previously worn a mask while cosplaying. Of these respondents who had cosplayed masked, 77% (N=92) had worn a mask that covered enough of their faces so that they couldn't be identified in a photograph. Within this group of respondents who had cosplayed completely masked, when asked whether they felt *less* like themselves when masked (compared to cosplaying when their face was fully visible), no option was endorsed significantly more frequently than another (see Table 5). That is, respondents varied about how being masked affected their sense of themselves. Among this same group of respondents, the majority of respondents (52%, N=48) reported that they neither felt more nor less self aware. Contrasting with previous research, some of participants reported feeling *more* less aware when masked (see Table 6).

Table 5: Feel Less Like Self When Wearing a Mask?

	When wore a mask, felt LESS like self than when face fully visible while cosplaying
Totally Disagree	19% (N=17)
Disagree	23% (N=21)
Neutral	21% (N=19)
Agree	20% (N=18)
Totally Agree	19% (N=17)

Note: This data based on the 92 respondents who had previously worn a costume with a mask that covered enough of their face that they couldn't be recognized in a photograph.

Table 6: Self-Awareness When Wearing a Mask

	When wore a mask, felt ____ aware of self
much less	4% (N=4)
less	17% (N=16)
neither more nor less	52% (N=48)
more	14% (N=13)
much more	12% (N=11)

Note: This data based on the 92 respondents who had previously worn a costume with a mask that covered enough of their face that they couldn't be recognized in a photograph.

Social Aspects of Cosplay

Only 7% of respondents had never cosplayed with other people, with the most frequently endorsed option begin cosplaying with others 2-5 times per year (48% of respondents, N=86; see Table 7 for additional information).

Table 7: Frequency of Cosplay With Others

Frequency	Number of times annually that cosplay with others
Never	3% (N=5)
Less than annually	14% (N=28)
Once per year	17% (N=34)
2-5 times/year	43% (N=86)
More than 5 times/year	22% (N=44)

Cosplaying can be a social activity. Practically half (48%; N=96) of respondents coordinate their costume with others between 2 and 5 times per year, and 21% coordinate with others more than 5 times per year (see Table 8 for more information).

Table 8: Frequency of Coordinating Costume With Others

Frequency	Number of times annually that coordinates costume with others
Never	7% (N=13)
Less than	18% (N=35)

annually	
Once per year	16% (N=32)
2-5 times/year	48% (N=96)
More than 5 times/year	11% (N=21)

Note: Percentages do not sum exactly to 100% because of rounding.

Conclusion

This study provides extensive demographic information on a sample of cosplayers. For the majority of our respondents, cosplay represents a significant commitment in time (cosplaying three or more times per year and spending an average of 40 hours preparing each costume), and a non-trivial outlay of money (at least \$100 per costume). Although the most popular #1 motivation for cosplaying was “fun,” the next top-ranked reason was because I liked the character’.

Responses to the question about the reasons for the choice of character illuminate the importance of the relationship between the cosplayer and the character: The top three out of four reasons (see Table 4) were identification with some aspect of the character: its psychological characteristics, some aspect of the character’s history, or the character’s physical appearance. Past psychological research indicates that similarity between one person and another often leads in increased liking (Byrne, 1971; Montoya and Horton, 2004). Perhaps that is true for cosplayers and the characters they portray: Some similarity between the cosplayer and character increases identification, which in turn increases liking and a desire to *be*—albeit it temporarily—that character. This is a possible avenue for further research.

It is noteworthy that our results about the experience of being masked contrast with those of previous research. First, we found that different respondents had different experiences of themselves when masked—there was no consistent pattern of their responses (see Table 5). One explanation for this result is that their experience of being masked may depend on the specific masked costume. This too is an avenue for further research.

In addition, whereas past research found that masked participants felt less self-aware while masked, the majority of our respondents felt no difference in self awareness when masked. Nonetheless, also in contrast to previous research, some of our respondents felt *more* aware. An equal number felt *less* aware. This disparity makes sense in that cosplayers' motivations for masking are different from that of participants in earlier studies who were asked to mask as part of a laboratory experiment. Why there is variation among cosplayers is unclear. The fact that a subset of cosplayers felt *more* self aware when masked (Table 6), and felt more like themselves (Table 5) can be explained by a paradoxical effect that masking may have for some people: The anonymity that comes with masking may, paradoxically, allow a subset of cosplayers to more feel "unmasked" and liberated from their everyday appearance, allowing their true "inner" self to feel more prominent.

Limitations

This study had limitations. Most but not all respondents answered every question. Moreover, due to the nature of the electronic survey hosting software, when questions allowed for a rank ordered answer, some respondents endorsed more than one #1 choice. The results might have differed had this option not been available.

Another limitation of the study is that we left it to each potential respondent to decide whether he or she was a cosplayer according to his or her own definition. Two different potential respondents who cosplay the same amount may have taken different courses of action based on their differing definitions. Some people may have decided not to take the survey because their cosplay activity did not reach the level required by their own definition, whereas respondents who completed the survey may cosplay at the same level.

As with any internet-based survey research available to all, it is possible that some respondents were not cosplayers at all, and merely completed the survey for their own amusement, thus adding "false" data to our data set.

Notes

The questions can be found online at:

Rosenberg, Robin S. and Andrea M .Letamendi, ***Expressions of Fandom***

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/viewform?formkey=dG5UWHk0VU94TW5XQ2ZJWmRQekd3YVE6MQ>

References

- Byrne, D. (1971) *The Attraction Paradigm*, New York: Academic Press.
- Montoya, R. M. and Horton, R. S. (2004) 'On The Importance Of Cognitive Evaluation As A Determinant Of Interpersonal Attraction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 86, 696 – 712.
- Pollaczek, P. P. and Homefield, H. D. (1954) 'The Use Of Masks As An Adjunct To Role Playing,' *Mental Hygiene* 38, 299-304.
- Miller, F. G. and Rowold, K. L. (1979) 'Halloween Masks And Deindividuation,' *Psychological Report*, 44(2), 422.
- Mullen, B., Migdal, M. J., and Rozell, D. (2003) 'Self-Awareness, Deindividuation, and Social Identity: Unraveling Theoretical Paradoxes by Filling Empirical Lacunae,' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29(9), 1071-1081.